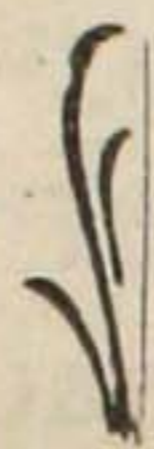


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Contributions on Educational matters are invited from Members of the Union, which, if deemed advisable, will be published as space permits. All contributions should be addressed to the Managing Editor, at the Headquarters of the S.A. Public Teachers' Union, Liverpool Building, 49 Flinders St. Phone—Central 4398.

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THE EXAMINERS EXAMINED.

By C. M. Ward.

In the University Examination Manual, recently published, the examiners in English have contributed twenty dreary pages to the section headed "Notes by Examiners". They roundly condemn the standard of the work submitted, criticize frankly, not to say offensively, the capabilities and morals of teachers, and in fine public-spirited style rebuke the Educational Authorities for their alleged neglect to provide proper facilities for the teaching of English.

I had hoped that those actively concerned in the teaching of this subject would come forward and say something from the teachers' view-point, but they have, no doubt, considered it more dignified to suffer in silence. It seems to me, however, that the valiant effort made by the examiners, despite the oracular tone, does no more than open up a vital problem, and my sole object in submitting this criticism is that others, more competent, may be drawn into a discussion.

At the outset, I would assure the examiners that teachers are well aware of the genuine faults pointed out by the Examiners, and are continually striving to correct them. The Educational Authorities, moreover, not only see that their teachers are, in the main, well qualified, but take care that English receives its fair share of time on school programmes, always bearing in mind, of course, that very few of the pupils are being prepared for a literary career.

The teaching profession, nevertheless, have an uneasy feeling that all is not well with the literary side of school work, and are quite ready to shoulder their portion of the blame. The prevailing opinion, however, is that University Examiners are by no means faultless either in their interpretation of the syllabus, or their criticism of candidates' work.

The purveyors of literary criticism, with its hackneyed terms and threadbare conventions, should, we feel, periodically take stock of their wares. After all, despite the examiners' glib assurance that they require the pupil merely to "read his books intelligently and write naturally and sincerely", the pupil must, in order to satisfy the examiners, learn the stock tricks of this spurious art of criticism. What would examiners say, if, for instance, a pupil who hated a poem or a book were to write naturally and sincerely about it? Or again, how can a boy or girl with little experience of life, give naturally an analysis of a "character" from Shakespeare? No, the unfortunate pupil is compelled to discard his own views and assimilate a lot of humbug. A typical example of this humbug can

be found in the examiners' comments on the sonnet. The candidates, asked to write about a type of poem, which conforms to a complicated and artificial pattern, naturally analysed the pattern. The examiners, however, complain that "very few thought it worth while to mention that the restrictions of the sonnet form make for conciseness of expression and the use of effective imagery". Surely this is nothing but high-brow jargon. Why should a poem of fourteen lines be distinguished for conciseness when one of two lines can be seven times as concise? Why should this form "make for" (sic) the use of effective imagery in a sonnet, which may be predominantly contemplative or philosophic? Has any of Wordsworth's sonnets more "effective imagery" than "The Daffodils" which is not in sonnet form? Is there not more effective imagery in a scene of "Midsummer Night's Dream" than in all Shakespeare's sonnets together? Surely a pupil may "naturally and sincerely"—nay, even truthfully—write, "There is nothing distinctive in sonnets except their conventional form. The restraint imposed by this form has been responsible for some inferior poetry, but the ingenious way in which some poets make fine poetry conform to the pattern calls for admiration. I shall, in answering this question, concentrate on describing the form."

The examiners are on safe ground when they condemn faults of grammar, syntax, punctuation and spelling. It is possible that, in recent years, many teachers, have been unduly influenced by the doctrines of modern educational reformers, with their cries for the abolition of restraint and formalism. Practical teachers have been disappointed in the results of such methods, judged not merely by examination, but by general development. It is not improbable that we have, to some extent, lost our grip on the substance of formal training, in such subjects as grammar, and vainly striven to grasp the shadow of emotionalism. I agree with the examiners that more thorough formal teaching in grammar and syntax is essential. One would not like to see, however, a return to the old rigid grammar course. Careful revision and pruning are necessary and I suggest that the examiners give the teaching profession a lead in drawing up a suitable course. I should certainly protest against the revival (as suggested by the examiners) of the old "correction of sentences". It is an affront and a menace to an intelligent pupil to put before him for correction a lot of errors which may never have crossed his mind. I feel sure, however, that a useful and interesting course could be outlined.

In their references to style the examiners are on more debatable ground. They have, no doubt, in the back of