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Haphazard Studies in the English Language

Young Filipino readers, whom, among its patrons, this magazine greatly appreciates, are likely to get little aid from this occasional department in preparing themselves to pass any particular test in English literature. They may, on the other hand, discover in the department what is intended to be there—some genuine assistance in devising a technique of their own for the acquisition of English forms. To this end poetry is valuable, and what follows will contain suggestions based upon a study of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. This is chosen somewhat at random, but also because many readers are likely to have it at hand for convenient reference. In *English Poems from Chaucer to Kipling* it opens on page 209.

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partaking of the gruesome and likely to provoke, in ordinary literature, the wrath of the editorial blue pencil. Do ghosts flee from an enchanter, or has the poet got the cart before the horse in this? This is not to dare a criticism, but to bear in mind the preciseness of diction we are after. There may be a hundred examples to rebuke his ignorance, but it has been the present scribe's impression that enchanters raise ghosts rather than quiet them, at least more commonly; but since they are enchanters, perhaps they can raise and quiet ghosts at will—perhaps sometimes they give way to sudden pique and drive their ghostly ranks back to the tombs whence they've called them forth. The point here is, it is never essential to take an author,

those fleeting times when she felt nearest heaven, and so revives her longing, while his words kindle her hope of early favors from divinity, companionship with the angels: while the student of a composition has more practical ends in view and wishes merely to know the virtues and defects of the model he is examining. In short, while one is studying a piece is not the time to rhapsodize over it; if he really like the piece, then he can memorize it—pocket it in his mind forever.

Which is a good thing to do; easy in our green years, hard in later ones.

Why *ode*? What is an ode? Turn to an authority. Zeitlin and Rinaker's *Types of Poetry* is a good one; some such text as this should be a part of the library equipment of all secondary schools and colleges.

"An ode," says this authority, "is a lyric in which a serious and dignified theme is built up in a succession of elaborate stanzas in a style of special stateliness. It is the form employed when the occasion appears to the poet highly momentous, arousing feelings and ideas of unusual solemnity and impressiveness." This fits with the piece at hand. Let us see how. What is Shelley's *serious and dignified* theme? His denunciation of an ambitious European military alliance: Shelley was, of course, a liberal. And has he *built up his theme in a succession of elaborate stanzas in a style of special stateliness*? The scribe's judgment concedes as much. Does yours? For that's the question: exercise *your own judgment*, though you constantly seek to refine it, about literature; refrain from being nonplussed by another's seeming erudition. Do you think Shelley chose nobly, longing to ally himself with the conquering winds of autumn, that his thoughts (for the welfare of mankind) might be driven "over the universe like withered leaves to quicken a new birth" of freedom?

He addressed the wind as a spirit kindred with his own; he had to envy it its free and boundless power, and to lament the "heavy weight of hours" that chained and bound him: though his soul would have vaulted worldwide with the west wind of autumn, and tumbled Europe's wintered imperial institutions down, as dead leaves, that their decay should nurture the seeds of a fresh civilization, yet this aspiring soul was pent within his physical being: he had to watch the west wind stream on, and leave him, a wretched figure, in the little woods on the banks of the Arno, his coat tails swishing like a coachman's, his thoughts in verses never read, save in derisive mockery, at the royal courts berated by his ire. He turns from the wind, momentarily even shields himself from it—he who would in youth have been the comrade of its wanderings!—and muses eloquently on the lines of his poem. For there it was composed, in the woods that skirt the Arno nearby Flo-

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One benefits his vocabulary in the study of poems, by going at them forceps and scalpel and laying their anatomy bare; that workmanlike method is the sole one which makes any piece of literature, selected for study, worth while. If it is good, why is it good? What parts are good? Let's see them. Let's examine them and familiarize ourselves with them. In what is it like what we already know of, and in what is it unlike and novel? Commencing with the very title, dissect the piece without mercy; after all, your object is to get out of it what the author put into it.

Scan it for imagery. Do you like these metaphors:

Breath of Autumn's being; pestilence-stricken multitudes; wild spirit; tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean; angels of rain and lightning; dirge of the dying year; night, . . . dome of a vast sepulcher; the thorns of life; be thou me, impetuous one! and the trumpet of a prophecy?

Not bad, some of them? No, indeed; and yet, one would never notice it in the context, perhaps—one of them is commonplace, *the thorns of life*. See if you, some time, concentrating on some inspiring subject, are able to contrive some novel metaphors in English which are pat to this country.

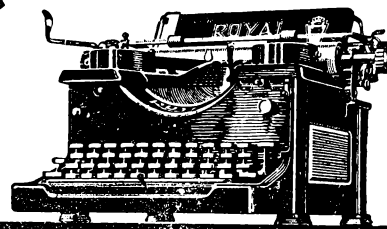
Now for downright similes:

Like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing; each like a corpse within its grave; loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed; like the bright hair uplifted from the head of some fierce Maenad; if even I were as in my boyhood; lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud; make me thy lyre, even as the forest is; what if my leaves are falling like its own; drive my dead thoughts over the universe like withered leaves to quicken a new birth; scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth ashes and sparks, my words among mankind.

There are the ten similes in the piece, and all fine expressions; but one, the second, somewhat

even the most eminent, at his word: question all things, especially all things written. The attitude of the elderly lady listening to the vigorous young curate's sermon on immortality, is the opposite of that with which one should harken to a language lesson: her rapt attention is her salvation, the curate's vigor recalls to her

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rence, while the trees bent before the autumn storm, busy at whipping off their frosted leaves and scattering them into beds beneath which seeds could winter through until the clarion of the winds of spring awakened them to growth.

So fell Shelley on the thorns of life. So bled his wistful heart. Is it not a subject for the sculptor, the painter? Has anyone ever done it on canvas or in bronze or marble, this poet, bent-shouldered, under the bereft and moaning trees, dead wind-shot leaves sticking to his garments? There he kneels, in torturing hope to jot down words that will "scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth ashes and sparks, . . . among mankind"!

So they have been scattered, too; but our concern here is only technical, to ascertain that what we read is really a classic English ode. Persuade yourself. Which calls for the reminder that pieces such as this ode are properly read over several times to make their general sense familiar, before they are cut up to find what they are made of. This ode is a month's study, even for partial mastery of its intricacies and decent benefit from its phraseology. *Thou on whose stream*; this word *stream* is so commonly applied to currents of water as to connote them when used alone, but it applies quite as correctly to a current of air—in the extremity of verse making. *The winged seed*; this device of nature needs no explanation in the Philippines, where the wind outstrips birds and all other agencies, including the agriculture bureau, in distributing seeds. There are also desiduous trees here, whose leaves, though unaided by frost and ice-cold atmosphere, do acquire the hectic hues of dead foliage and fall off; so the lines about this phenomenon in the Arno forest are comprehensible. It is only important to note contrasts, which the student's intelligence must detect for him. Wind up a study of the piece with a glossary of all the unfamiliar words, for they are all of current repute in the language; round this out with lists of synonyms and antonyms.

Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams, in reference to the Mediterranean's swirling lazily about the isles off the Florentine coast, may mean, we know in these islands, just what it says and not necessarily what the note in the textbook says it means. That is, the sea is normally coiling and circling about, turned here and there by the shore, and its waves broken down to gentle rhythmic undulations. There is no compelling reason to assume that Shelley uses *coil* in its obsolete sense meaning *noise* or *tumult*; and especially is this so since there is no lulling effect in noises and tumults. Nor would the sea be asleep amid them and dreaming of the buried cities in its depths.

Personification of the Mediterranean, a sea, as masculine is a unique privilege forbidden us in ordinary speech; while we remain unable to write odes, we must correctly keep our seas feminine and our oceans masculine.

What was currently transpiring in Europe when Shelley wrote the ode will, if looked up, throw the lurid light of half a dozen intriguing chancelleries upon the theme. Times have changed since, and the poet's words are less in vain. Then not a statesman harkened to Shelley or cared a rap about an eloquent minstrel's critical lays. That intransigence persists today, but strikingly modified; and there are no statesmen, perhaps, entirely ignorant of or unmoved by the lines Shelley addressed to the destroying and preserving autumn wind.

It is the persistency, however, of the evil the ode rebukes, that assures the piece its immortality. Human affairs are imperfectly managed now as then, and often, now as then, disingenuously administered while the people are indifferent to encroaching dangers. As rascality will ever seek advantage, so the ode will ever retain its place in universal literature. But this is *obiter dicta* here. Another may profit as much in vocabulary and diction in reducing the ode to its primary elements, and reach an entirely different conclusion concerning its underlying philosophy; or remain, as is his right, wholly indifferent to it.

The rhetoric of the piece this paper does not take up; but it would pass a test like that; it is concise, trenchant—always to the point. It flows along in a manner emphatically free, makes its point with no extraneous dissertation, and then stops. One should learn from it to say things, even rather important things, in a simple unrepentant manner. The first vulgarity of speech to overcome is repetition. When one has learned not to repeat, but to express a thought once and have done, he has gone a long way toward command of his vocabulary and will thenceforth need most of all to acquire a vocabulary adequate to his thoughts.—W. R.

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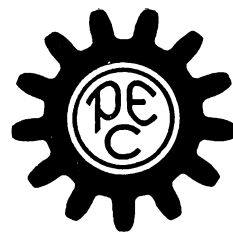
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—C. R. Hugins, Editor.

The address is, The Brookings Institution, 26 Jackson Place, Washington, D.C.

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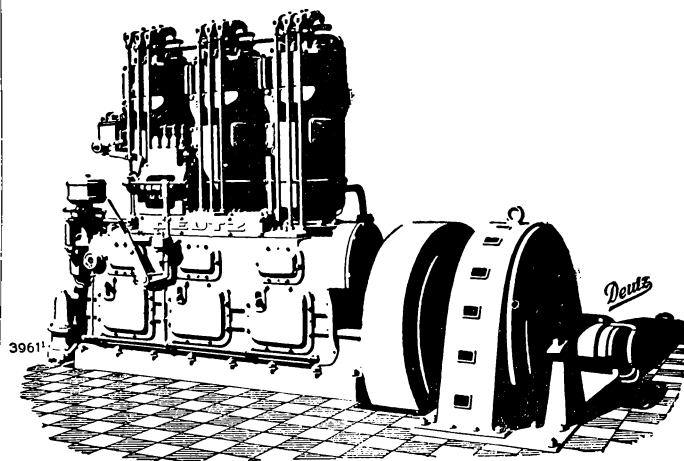
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