

THE STRAIT GATE.

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In the Spanish chapel attached to the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence is the fresco of The Descent of the Holy Spirit, painted by the two painters Simone Memmi and Taddeo Gaddi. This fresco forms the subject of two wonderful chapters in Ruskin's *Mornings in Florence*, and several times in her books Miss Mason calls it her "creed." Why? Because it manifests the Great Recognition that *all* knowledge (undebased), religious and so-called secular, comes from God. Miss Mason speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Great Educator.

In the apex of the triangular fresco is depicted the Pentecostal Descent of the Holy Ghost on the Madonna and the disciples gathered in the upper chamber. Then to use Ruskin's own words:—

"In the point of the arch beneath are the three Evangelical Virtues. 'Without these,' says Florence, 'you can have no science—without Love, Faith and Hope, no intelligence.' Under these are the four Cardinal Virtues—Temperance, Prudence, Justice, Fortitude. Under these are the great Prophets and Apostles . . . Under the line of Prophets, as powers summoned by their voices are the mythic figures of the seven theological or spiritual and the seven geological or natural sciences; and under the feet of each of them the figure of its Captain-teacher to the world."

Grammar is the first of these natural sciences, and Priscian, its Captain-teacher, sits at the feet of the symbolical figure who is represented as directing three children to enter a narrow red portal. Ruskin calls this narrow portal the "Strait Gate." Two years ago I spent some time in the Spanish chapel looking at this fresco, and the thought came to me that in some real way Ruskin's idea of the Strait Gate is a corollary to the Great Recognition. It recognises the medium, the material side of knowledge, through which ideas are conveyed, and it indicates the response through this medium of the Spirit in man to the Spirit of God, the necessary condition of growth and the forming of relationships.

Miss Mason asks, "On what does the Fulness of Living depend?" and answers the question herself in the phrase,
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Education is the Science of Relations. She says: in *School Education* "What we are concerned with is the fact that we personally have relations with all that there is in the present, all that there has been in the past, and all that there will be in the future—with all above us and all about us—and that fulness of living, expansion, expression, and serviceableness, for each of us, depend upon how far we apprehend these relationships and how many of them we lay hold of." It is our business as educators to see that every child, that is, every person, shall come into his inheritance. Later on in the chapter Miss Mason says that in order to establish a relationship *real knowledge* is necessary and that every person must realise that "no relation . . . can be maintained without strenuous effort." The Strait Gate must be entered before a relationship is formed and afterwards the Strait Way never lost sight of in order that the relationship may be maintained. Is this sometimes forgotten? Is the criticism that in the P.U.S. the children learn a "smattering of everything" *always* unjustified? Are not we sometimes in our eagerness apt to

lay more stress on the extensiveness of relations than on the intensiveness, on quantity than quality? Both sides are essential, intensiveness is strengthened by extensiveness; in some wonderful and very real way progress in one relationship depends upon progress in another, in many other relationships, although necessarily some go further in one relationship than in another. Those who put into practice Miss Mason's philosophy and use the P.U.S. programmes faithfully, fully realise this truth and the children prove it, therefore we cannot sit down and say that after all the educationalists are right who advocate concentration on one or two subjects only. This creates narrowness of mind in direct contrast to fulness of living. No, the purpose of this paper is to remind myself and any others who also need the reminder, that in the joy and enthusiasm of seeing a relationship before us, we should not allow the children or ourselves to tumble anyhow over the fence in our eagerness to meet and greet it. The Strait Gate has to be entered because otherwise the Strait Way will not be found and therefore no progress will be possible, nor even can the relationship be maintained. One can get through the fence and explore the enticing fringe (or "smattering") of the relationship, but intensive progress will not be made unless the way is found. Perhaps some who crawl through the fence may eventually light upon the way, but even then they

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will have to go back to the Strait Gate and start afresh if they are to gain the real *knowledge* necessary for the *establishing* of the relationship.

Simone Memmi and Taddeo Gaddi make the children enter the realms of knowledge by the Strait Gate of Grammar which Ruskin calls "Grammatic Art, the Art of *Letters* or Literature, or . . . 'Scripture' and its use. The Art of faithfully reading what has been written for our learning; and of clearly writing what we would make immortal of our thoughts." These words, "faithfully reading and clearly writing," have a literal and a further meaning. Do not we sometimes allow ourselves and the children to think that the recognition of words is sufficient, that all that matters is that we should grasp the substance of what we read and that the vehicles can be left to take care of themselves? The substance is of course the chief thing, but the point is, the substance can only be duly apprehended when due attention is paid to the vehicles. We cannot deny that we are a nation of bad readers and speakers and that there are more bad spellers than there should be, in fact some people are quite proud of the fact that they cannot spell and speak of it as an ingrained family trait! The prevalence of bad and illegible handwriting is obvious to all as is shown by the recent correspondence in *The Times*. English Grammar is almost a forgotten study and thereby much real knowledge and valuable mental training are lost. We are apt to think these things do not matter, but they form the threshold of the Strait Gate, the threshold of real knowledge. This threshold may be jumped, but ever to the loss of the person who jumps it. How can anyone form a real intimacy with great literature if he does not know the joy of giving each word its exact and perfect value, if he does not realise the beauty of the sound of words perfectly pronounced?

Clear reading and speaking are two of the means of communicating ideas to other persons and therefore it also forms part of the threshold of the Strait Gate of human relationships.

This does not mean that children must learn to read, write and spell perfectly before they are allowed to get into touch with living books. Far from it, the inspiration must always come first. The spirit educates through ideas and at the entrance to every relationship stands a

Captain Idea (of which Coleridge speaks). But as words convey ideas, so the recognition of these symbols and the forming of them must interact

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closely with ideas, especially in early childhood, in order that a lasting relationship may be formed. If we remember that Education is a Discipline as well as a Life, these minor matters will be given their proper and essential due as part of the medium through which man responds and reaches forth towards further inspiration.

Let us consider again the phrase "faithfully reading." In order to read faithfully, attention, "the act of bringing the whole mind to bear upon the subject in hand" is essential, and therefore the *habit of attention* must be formed. But attention is only the first step, assimilation must follow. The mind passively receives the ideas which the Will has chosen and then actively weaves them into its very substance. This is a natural process, but time must be given for it. That which the long gaze of attention has looked upon, must be recalled by the mind, pondered on and considered before a real relationship is established and maintained. Children in the P.U.S. do this by oral or written narration. Teachers do not interrupt the narration for fear of destroying the train of thought, but this must not be used as an excuse for countenancing slipshod and careless narration. Narration entails real mind effort and lazy children if not kept up to the mark are apt to think that vague statements couched in slovenly language will suffice, but such bad mental habits must be strenuously overcome by substituting the contrary good habits of accuracy and conciseness. Young children (from six upwards) narrate in detail all they can recall, but it is most important that we should encourage them as they grow older to seize the essential points of a passage and discard the padding. If narration is to mean assimilation it must imply more than just "telling back" the details in chronological order. Miss Mason says in *School Education*, ". . . the labour of thought is what his book must induce in the child. He must generalise, classify, infer, judge, visualise, discriminate, labour in one way or another with that capable mind of his, until the substance of his book is assimilated or rejected, according as he shall determine."

By thus faithfully reading great books it is possible to get into relationship with the great persons of the past and the present, and when these relationships are formed they increase the value and the intensiveness of the human relationships we form with those around us.

We desire to express our thoughts to others, and this can

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only be done by entering the strait gates of 'clearly speaking' and 'clearly writing.' No doubt persons who are in intimate communion and relationship with each other have, besides speech, other and perhaps higher means of communication, but we will not deny that we all might progress much further in our human relationships if we could express our thoughts more clearly in speech or writing. This naturally depends on much reading of good literature, but again we must remember that no slipshod written work must be allowed. Loosely constructed sentences, grammatical faults, vague generalisations, indicate vague thoughts and a slovenly mind. The choice of words, the elimination of unnecessary words, punctuation, legible writing, correct spelling, grammatical correctness, distinct articulation, etc., must not be considered as matters of comparatively no importance, but as strait gates to eternal relationships.

The Strait Gates of Dynamic relationships are more obvious, there is no way of getting round them. They are some of the first relationships which children are called upon to form.

The baby learning first to crawl and then to walk; and later every new feat of bicycling, jumping, riding, swimming, playing tennis, etc., are all dynamic relationships, and in each case the Strait Gate has to be entered. Some hover round and think they have entered, but the real relationship is only established and maintained by strenuous effort.

We all recognise also the Strait Gate of the relationship between the maker and the material. How impatient we are to escape it! We all want to sew well, to carve in wood and stone, to make all manner of beautiful things without the trouble of entering, and that is why so many of us never do enter. The relationship is only established by patient, sure and scrupulously accurate work, although never forgetting the vital character of the inspiration behind it.

The relationship or "intimacy" with Nature is one of the absorbing joys of this life. Here we have to guard against the temptation of thinking that other people can enter the strait gate for us. It is right to use knowledge discovered by others, but that must not suffice. It may be interesting and instructive to read a description of a flower or moss in a book, but the true relationship with that flower or moss is only established by finding the one or the other growing year by year in its special place. Minute and careful observation of its form, special [p 229]

characteristics and family traits are necessary to be on friendly recognising terms. The relationship with Nature opens up such wide and far reaching vistas that there is a temptation to wander joyfully and admiringly but rather aimlessly in the meadows just inside the Strait Gate and to forget that there is a Strait Way, and that the intimacy can only be maintained by keeping this way in sight and that intensive progress in the relationship can only be made by means of that way.

Some of the keenest and most delightful intimacies are those with living creatures, great and small. Bird lovers know full well the Strait Gate of their intimate and absorbing relationship. The writings of Fabre and Gilbert White would not be as precious to us as they are, if they had not each travelled far along the Strait Way of the relationship with living creatures.

Science is the great Strait Gate to the phenomena of the universe, and from this gate branch out many strait ways all leading to Truth. Progress is slow and difficult and the eyes have to be intent on each step, but the joy of each step gained more than compensates for the difficulty. It is possible to form a simple and perfect intimacy with the forms of Nature without science, but there is a special scientific intimacy which comes from the study of the causes of things and which perceives the relations between things, and therefore the intimacy with Nature eventually converges with the Strait Way of science. Has science its place as part of the strait way of every relationship? In its widest sense perhaps it has; analysis, synthesis and criticism have their place, if only a small one, in the deepest human intimacies. The highest relationship of all between God and man can be established without the aid of science, but can it be complete if Theology, the "queen of the Sciences," does not have its place in the Strait Way?

Children must enter the Strait Gate of science early, but although their eyes must be trained to search for the next foothold they must pause awhile occasionally in order that they may recollect the Source of all Truth. Here again we see that progress in one relationship depends upon progress in another.

Mathematics is one of the Sciences, but it is such an important one it must be considered separately. It is the straightest gate and the straightest way of all. Pure mathematics is the relationship with number in the abstract. Few follow far along this path, but all must go a certain distance if they

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wish to progress in the other paths of science. In this case the Strait Gate is so recognisable and the human effort to pass through it and pursue its path so obvious that the Spirit's inspiration is apt to be forgotten. Our "creed" tells us that the Spirit educates us through arithmetic and geometry as through other relationships. If children find mathematics a strait gate leading to nowhere it is because the ideas behind number have been forgotten.

It is hardly necessary to point out the Strait Gate of Art. Unfortunately in the creation of art it is sometimes allowed to loom too large, and in emphasising the importance of technique the Captain Idea is lost and therefore no true creation is possible. But it is in the appreciation of art that the Strait Gate is sometimes forgotten. A real intimacy with Music, for example, can only be formed by listening with the mind as well as with the soul, otherwise the interpretation may never rise above the level of sentiment. Analysis is an aid to this intimacy so long as the spirit and the idea behind the whole is grasped.

The deepest and most lasting friendships are those where the Strait Gate of human intimacies has been entered and the Strait Way of self abnegation and self giving followed. "Strenuous effort and reverence" is necessary in order to get to know and understand a person, and when the relationship is established it has to be maintained. Do not some friendships cease to be because time cannot be spared for letter writing? Why as a race are we so insular? Is it not because we shut out from our lives many human relationships by lazily refusing to study foreign languages. Most of us can pass the time of day in another language, but few get so far as to be able to converse intimately with people of other races.

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life." One does not have to go further than the gospels to discover the Strait Gate and the Strait Way of the Highest Relationship.

Lastly, let us consider Vocation, the special "high" intimacy which each person has to form. Miss Mason traces in *School Education* how Ruskin and Wordsworth found and followed their vocation. It is not necessary nowadays to urge vocational training; in their eagerness to prepare children for their future careers some consider that special training cannot

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begin too early, forgetting the truth that progress in one relationship must depend upon progress in others. The general all-round preparation of the first sixteen or seventeen years of life (sometimes longer) form the threshold of the Strait Gate of vocation, then the children must pass through the Strait Gate and follow the Strait Way of special training for whatever they have decided is their work in life.

The vocation of many of those who will read these words is that of teaching and bringing up children according to Miss Mason's philosophy and method. The very word method implies "a way to an end," a way consisting of principles, not a system bounded by hard and fast rules and regulations. A real and deep intimacy with this vocation can only be established and maintained by a close study of Miss Mason's philosophy. She sought for a unifying principle

and found it in the Science of Relations. The method starts from this great Strait Gate, the curriculum closely follows this way. All Miss Mason's principles spring from this Captain Idea, and therefore it will clearly be seen that those who avoid the Strait Gate and choose from Miss Mason's philosophy merely those principles which appeal to them, and discard the rest as unsuited to their requirements, may be forming their own strait gate and way, but it is not Miss Mason's, and it is untrue and unfair to call it so. Those who wish to make real progress in that way must accept and apply to its fullest extent the unifying principle. This is the only true freedom; it is bondage to be without a unifying principle as it then becomes necessary to build up artificial defences of rules and explanations to suit special cases and occasions which do not happen to fit in with the principles that have been selected. R. L. Stevenson says: "To be a true disciple is to think of the same things as our prophet, and to think of different things in the same order. To be of the same mind with another is to see all things in the same perspective; it is not to agree in a few indifferent matters near at hand and not much debated; it is to follow him in his farthest flights, to see the force of his hyperboles, to stand so exactly in the centre of his vision that whatever he may express, your eye will light at once on the original, that whatever he may see to declare, your mind will at once accept."

In this short space it has only been possible to indicate a few of the strait gates to relationships, but others will be recognised by those who look for them. By my insistence on [p 232]

this aspect of Miss Mason's unifying principle I hope none will be led to think that I am emphasising the importance of the hard facts and "dry bones" of knowledge. I only want to remind myself and others that this material knowledge, although useless by itself, has its essential use and purpose in man's co-operation with the Spirit. We should lose our way in the realm of ideas if there were no gates or paths to guide us. These seeming obstacles must be overcome and used rather than avoided. The law of self-discipline and self-sacrifice which runs through all life must be worked out in detail in every relationship. For example, we lose ourselves in the irksome study of French grammar and find life in the infinite relationships it opens to us. Self-sacrifice seems to be a condition of progress, it is our response to the Captain Ideas of the Great Educator. As teachers it is our duty to give children ample mental food through which they may receive the ideas of the Spirit, and then to guide them through the Strait Gates and set their feet on the Strait Ways of many relationships.

Some may cry: "Life is so short there is no time for all this thorough apprehension and slow progress, let the children grasp the essential ideas and leave the dry bones;" may they not be responsible then for allowing children to lose life by trying to find it? Others may grasp the importance of the intensiveness of the relationship and say, "There is no time in this life to form more than one or two intimacies, so why begin many?" By this means they may cramp the children's progress in these very relationships, besides robbing them of joys which are their due. Time need not, should not worry us, for the foundations of every relationship are set in Eternity, and the Strait Way may go through Time, but only as Time is in Eternity. May we not think of the Strait Ways as parallel lines meeting in Eternal Infinity, in God?