

Recitation: The Children's Art.

Les enfants sont d'admirables maîtres de diction. Quelle justesse d'intonations. Quelle vérité.—Ernest Legouvé

Will you kindly read my motto before reading my paper?

Now if I had the slightest hope that the reader would take the trouble to translate a page of French, I should have copied a page, ruthlessly, from the only good book on reading which I know. But you would skip it, and if you will allow me, I will translate the page for you.

"Children are admirable masters of what we call style in speech. Their intonation is so true, so exact. The organs of the mouth lend themselves to the changing feelings of the child, and the voice attains a bold flexibility which clever actors often strive after in vain. Did you ever listen to a youngster telling another a secret, or recounting some mysterious scene at which he has assisted? All the voices of the actors in the scene are copied; every tone is there; you have them before you. Well, put the same youngster on immediately afterwards to read for you a bit of poetry, and you will get the silly monotone of the reading child. These great professors of the art of reading cannot read."

So writes M Legouvé in his book on reading (*L'art de la Lecture*); and never did a man say a wiser word. Children know how to read, but they cannot read.

What a beautiful thing is a child's voice. That thin pipe can express for you, and does express for you, everyday, pathos, tragedy, comedy, and all the combination of the three which you find enumerated for you in Hamlet. But the child does not know this, and herein consists the charm, and herein is contained the success. Those who watch children will tell you the same as M. Legouvé does. Ask a little girl of four to give you the history of the one-eyed doll; or if you are fortunate

[p 93]

enough to be able to do so, listen to a little boy preaching a sermon to himself when he is in bed; or stand outside a nursery door, and hear a plaintive tale of nursery wrong told to a mother. You will get a lesson in accent, intonation, expression, and even in gesture, which will do you more good than any half dozen chapters on that mysterious subject "elocution." The unstudied movement of the tiny hand, the rounding of the little lips, the flooding of the eyes, the stamp of the shoe, the earnest belief that the audience sympathises, are all there, just as they are all conspicuously absent when the governess or other "teachers" appear upon the scene, and ask for the repetition of a nursery rhyme or a childish hymn. I am not afraid of putting down on paper what may seem to be an irreverent dictum, and I put it down in italics: *When children come to school they can read and speak; when they leave school they can do neither the one nor the other.*

And why? First, they are not taught; or, if they are taught, the teaching is bad. Next, they learn to be nervous, monotonous, bumpy, careless: they rapidly develop (under the excellent guidance and example of the teacher) the feeling that it is a bad thing to read well, and it is a correct thing to gabble; their pronunciation is left uncared for; their sympathies are dulled, checked, or, at the best, not asked for; their childish feelings are passed through the mill

of home lessons and strict discipline; they are children at home and, as far as reading goes, machines at school. On Sundays, as a rule, they are compelled to listen to bad reading (sometimes to vulgar reading, and provincial mispronunciation) while at home they hear no reading, except that of the servants, or that of a father or elder brother—all equally bad.

But I would not be misunderstood. My words do not apply to all children, nor to all schools. Very often the teacher does accomplish what the home has left undone, and sometimes the teacher cannot, with all his efforts, spoil the lessons learnt from a mother who is a cultivated lady. Yet, on the whole, the influence of the class upon individual reading is distinctly bad. It need not be so; it should not be so; but it is so.

My only apology for the boldness of these words is that I have always watched my child-friends very carefully; that I have had for many years to teach reading to children of all ages, from the youngster who has just forgotten his natural tones to

[p 94]

the boy of eighteen who speaks through his teeth and runs all his words together; and that I have been appealed to as the writer of some suggestions in the January number of *Atalanta*, to put into type my own impressions upon reading and recitation as arts in which children do naturally excel.

It is not necessary, I hope, for me to point out the usefulness of these arts. Without them the best pieces of English writing lose half their value; the best paper read before a cultivated audience misses its aim; the best lecture is only half a lecture, and the best sermon is an opiate. With them all is changed; the light from the writer's soul is handed down from one generation to another. For good authors cannot die; the human voice is for ever conferring immortality upon them. So magical is the power of a good reader that he can convey to an audience shades of meaning in his author which he himself does not suspect. Again and again a face in a hall will light up at some touch conveyed by a tone or a glance, and the very speaker will thank his hearers for lessons. As it would be with a picture, if by some unknown mechanism it could absorb the fancies of the faces that read its meaning, so it may be with the owner of a voice. More receptive than the mere canvas, the reciter watches the approving and disapproving glance; he *sees* the sympathy and he feels the silence; his audience may be receiving a lesson, but they are assuredly giving one.

And if such appreciation can be born when a good reader and a good audience meet, is it not worse than madness for us to look on English literature as mere work for the study, mere dictionary stuff? It was meant to be interpreted by the voice of life; there is only half the passion in the printed page. If there were more good reading round English firesides, do you suppose that the masterpieces of English thought would be studied, as they often are, merely with an eye to the examiner's certificate?

It is allowed by all that we much teach reading, if we can: and we must teach it with the greatest care during the most receptive years of life.

My purpose is to make this paper intensely practical. I shall not indulge in any more highflying words of praise or condemnation. I shall give lists, and I mean to be clear, even if I am wrong.

[p 95]

To begin with books. Books on the subject there are none. The good reader may pick up hints from Plumptre's *Lectures on Elocution* (fifteen shillings), from Garcia's *Art of Acting*, and

from Mr. Harrison's two papers in *Murray's Magazine* for July and August, 1889. Mr. Brandram and a host of minor authorities have given useful advise again and again; but with the exception of the French book from which my motto is taken, the writings on the subject are very inadequate. And it is, perhaps, well that they are so; for you cannot teach reading by printed rules: personality must play its part: you want to get the good reading *out of* a child, not to drum it into him. In every case you need a good reader to teach good reading.

At the outset, I may admit that good readers, and therefore good teachers of reading, are few: that, until we teach reading carefully, they will remain few; and that your best teacher will, in one or two cases, be foiled by strong disinclination or moral weakness on the part of the pupil.

Now my first list is formidable, and I do not hope that it will be accepted by all. It is a collection of "don'ts."

- (1) You are not to allow any imitation of the Stage.
- (2) You are not even to encourage exaggeration in voice or gesture.
- (3) You are not to allow recitation before a company of admiring friends.
- (4) You are not to let a child think that Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, and Josh Billings are the only writers of comedy.
- (5) You are not to let your child to learn Browning.
- (6) You are not to choose tragic or sentimental pieces.
- (7) You are not, as a rule, to give lessons in presence of a third person.
- (8) You are not to tell your child that he or she can recite well.

We will examine these "don'ts." You must avoid the stage and all exaggeration, because the charm of good recitation consists in its simplicity. A pointed finger is as good as an uplifted arm; the quiet voice can express every shade of feeling (haven't you often done so yourself in a whispered conversation?). The stage, whether first-rate, second, or third, *is* the stage, and you cannot make your dining-room into one—God forbid you should desire to do so—for we are guiding children to be natural, not to ape men and women who are aping other men and women. You are to avoid tragedy, Mark Twain, and Browning; because tragedy is unsuitable [p 96]

to the child of ten; because Mark Twain's comedy is comedy of a low class, and you have to foster good taste; because Browning is very rarely intelligible to children, and is nearly always harsh to a musical ear. You are not, as a rule, to give your lessons in the presence of a third person, nor to allow recitation before company, nor to praise your child excessively; because you must be alone with the child, that you may sympathise with failure, and allow occasional tear and the constant flush; because your are now and then to see glimpses of the child-soul, for without these glimpses you cannot draw out the latent powers. No unpopular master has ever taught reading satisfactorily.

It is because we teach reading in classes that we so often fail. Correct pronunciation and clear reading may be gained in class—good reading will never be taught there. Indeed, there is no such thing as *teaching* good reading; the process is one of guidance and example, and every pupil must be treated differently. By all means begin with classes if it be necessary; but don't fancy that they will carry you very far. You and your pupil need private study if you are to do

your work well; and how can you practise and re-practise tones when there are twenty child-critics about? You might as well rehearse the words of your proposed proposal of marriage aloud, in the billiard-room of your club, after lunch; you might as well print in the local newspaper your real opinions about your mother, or your thoughts upon the death of that child of yours. I suppose I make myself clear in this; if I do not, listen to this story: —When once a famous actress had gone through a famous scene in a voice trembling with tears as a small boat trembles on a gusty day, her friends crowded round her to congratulate her on her realisation of the picture. She answered, “It was not the picture that made me cry; it was not the words of the poet. It was my voice, my voice.” Very often a good reader can read with a dry eye pages which, if he means to read them aloud, will require a dozen rehearsals. Is this pathos of the human voice to be trotted out for the admiration or contempt of a class?

If you would like to know what the results are when all these “don’ts” are disregarded, let me give you an unexaggerated picture of a recitation by a child of eleven.

[p 97]

First of all the mother of the child leads up to the recitation, a piece from Macaulay. The child is put on a small platform, and begins with an arm pointed to heaven. Every one looks up. The first lines are far too fast—at the first speech in the piece out burst shrill tones—just ten times too loud for the room. The tones subside because the next line is forgotten. An old gentleman prompts ineffectually. The book is sent for. The child stays there; there is no blush—the governess has conquered that bad habit of blushing—and, in time, the piece goes on. Action is used to excess; and the child, the mooning housemaid (who chooses this time for walking about), and the prompting mother have the rest of the piece to themselves. The audience applaud, and privately condemn every one but the housemaid. If this is what you want, train your child to do it. He can do it, and do it well. But it isn’t recitation; it isn’t good taste; it isn’t fostering a love of literature. On the other hand, it is utterly false and frigid; no one respects you for it, and if your child becomes a prig and a bore, he has you to thank for it. He may thank you for it in after years; other people certainly will; but luckily you will not hear the words in which their thanks are expressed.

So much for the “don’ts.” The fault finding is over, and we may begin. Your first difficulty will be a great one—you can find no suitable pieces (I am assuming, of course, that you are a competent guide, and that you will take any amount of trouble).

Now, there is only one way out of this difficulty. Go and buy a note-book, very strongly bound (I am obliged to get mine made for me), containing some three hundred pages. Index it, and whenever you come across a suitable piece, long or short, write it down at once. Bell’s Elocutionist, and all sorts of “reciters,” are useful—to copy from; all English and French literature is useful—to copy from; children’s hymn books and the Bible are very useful—to copy from; but if you try to keep to one book, your child’s chances are gone. By purchasing a few books by examining the libraries in your town, by borrowing freely from your friends, you may get together in a year an excellent collection of suitable pieces; and that I may not seem to be merely giving counsels of perfection, let me suggest to you the

[p 98]

names of one or two books or pieces which you may find useful:—

1. “O, sweet content” (Song in Dekker’s “Patient Grissil”).

2. "Midnight" ("Foliorum Silvulæ," Part I., 1201).
3. "Oh, hush thee, my baby" (Scott).
4. "Fair Daffodils" (Herrick).
5. "The Land of Counterpane (Stevenson's "Child's Garland").
6. "Nature's Gentleman" (W.J. Linton).
7. "The Yearl [sic] of Quarter-deck" (Macdonald).
8. "The Wind" (Procter).
9. "A Changeling" (Procter).
10. "My Picture" (Procter).
11. "Last Words of Chaucer."
12. "Arthur's appeal to Hubert."
13. "The Children's Hour" (Longfellow).
14. "Monk Felix" (Longfellow).
15. "Faerie Queene," I., Canto i., verses 1–4.
 " " " " 40, 41.
 " " "Una and the Lion," Canto ii., verses 1–9.
 " " Part of the "Bower of Bliss," Book II., Canto ii., versus 70, 71.
 " " "The Seasons," Book VII., Canto vii., verses 28–43.
16. "The Legend Beautiful" (Longfellow).
17. "The Bells" (Poe).
18. "Flight of the War-horse" (Macaulay—"Regillus").
19. "Henry V.'s Prayer before Agincourt."
20. "The Cloud-capped Towers" ("Tempest").
21. "Chevy Chase."
22. "Evenen in the Village" (Barnes).
23. "Ode to the West Wind" (Shelley).
24. "The Birds of Killingworth" (Longfellow).
25. Certain verses at the end of "Miss Kilmansegg" (Hood).
26. "Sweet and Low" (The Princess).
27. Parts of Chaucer—"Poor Parson"—"Knight"—"Clerk of Oxenforde."
28. Shakspeare's [sic] Songs (some).
29. Amantium Irae ("Children of Poets," "Canterbery Poets.")
30. "Bell of Atri" (Longfellow).
31. "Kathleen" (Whittier).
32. "Battle of the Baltic" (Campbell).
33. "Sir Hildebrand" (from "Chess," by Taylor).
34. "Lady Clare"—*not* "Vere de Vere" (Tennyson).
35. "Sir Galahad" (Tennyson).
36. Parts of "Locksley Hall."

Here are just one or two pieces from long lists which I have by me; and I would add that if you hunt through the following books you will find hundreds more:—"Foliorum Silvulæ," [p 99]

Whittier, A. M. Robinson's poems, "Early English Poetry" (1s.), "Children of the Poets" (1s.), Barnes's "Dorset Poems," Mrs. Alexander's hymns, Dorenwell's "Die Welt der Kinder," Palgrave's "Golden Treasury." And for prose pieces (do not omit the prose) I would recommend you to look through Defoe's books, Scott's novels, Stockson's and Cable's stories, Andersen's "Märchen," Fuller's works, "Utopia," Kingsley's "Prose Idylls" and "Glaucus," Mrs. Gatty's "Parables from Nature," &c.

Nor do I shrink from adding the Bible, translations from Homer and Virgil, "The Song of Roland," "The Niebelungenlied," and even some bits from Lamartine and Béranger. I assume, of course, that you will lay our old ballads, and our own great literatures of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, under heavy contribution.

You may say you cannot get at all these books. You are right, but you do not know how many you can get at by borrowing and by examining the catalogues of libraries to which you have access. If your friends find you return books punctually, they will lend you any number.

Is this asking too much? Is it not worth while to copy out the best-known pieces from the Bible, some of the Collects, the old-fashioned Christmas Carols, the great speeches from Shakspeare's plays, the best among foreign nursery rhymes? If the labour is too great, then try some other method. I doubt if you will find a satisfactory one. Indeed, without this Common-place Book you cannot get on. Suitable pieces exist by the score, but you will never find them if you do not look for them; and you will never make them part of your child's literary possessions unless you copy them out. The method takes time and trouble, and mothers and governesses shirk it, concluding, because they are lazy, that no suitable children's poetry has ever been written.

Well, you have got your book—a large one, well bound, and able to resist the energies of many generations. But all your work is still before you.

And now I will trouble you with a second list. This time it is "do," not "don't."

(1). Be very careful about pronunciation.

(2). Let pieces be learnt bit by bit, after a careful explanation has been given.

[p 100]

(3). The child must stand to read. Other positive rules come in here.

(4). A piece once learnt must be occasionally repeated.

We will take this in order.

(1). Be very careful about pronunciation.

A child's is generally clear; but you cannot begin too soon with what I may call "oral gymnastics." If there is a difficulty about s, r, th, l, or any other letter or sound, write out lists of words containing these sounds and letters; show where the tongue should be laid, and do not be satisfied till the difficulty is overcome. [Melville Bell's "Visible Speech" (Clarendon Press) is a useful book.] If there is no malformation of the mouth any child may be taught to speak clearly. German boys can get hold of the English "r"; you will not have any worse enemy than that. [Provincialisms require very careful treatment. I cannot touch on them in this paper.]

Then take all manner of curious combinations, and go on giving your pupil sentences which are difficult to utter, encouraging the child to hold the mouth awry, to open it wide, to screw up the face, to purse the lips, and to make all kinds of grimaces in order to render the muscles of the mouth flexible. If I had to work with a child that pronounced badly and carelessly, I should not allow any words in the first lesson—we should spend an hour grimacing

before a glass; in the second lesson we *might* go on to vowels and consonants. I need not write down lists of difficult sentences; “Peter Piper,” “twelfthly and fifthly,” “mixed biscuits,” “stump oratory will oust statesmanship,” show you what is meant. Above all things let your pupil go slowly; let the d in and, the g in ing, the k in asked, the t in listen, the double t in little, be heard (not obtrusively); you must not allow, “Shlike you to low Geraldni tgo an playn gardn” for “I should like you to allow Gerald and me to go and play in the garden.” Stop this sort of thing on every occasion.

(2). Let pieces be learnt bit by bit.

First read your piece and explain it, pointing out in a quiet sort of way, as if you were speaking to yourself, the noticeable parts. Don’t drum taste in. Guide by your own reading and example. Let the child read it over to himself once or twice.

[p 101]

If he doesn’t take to the piece try another; as far as is consistent with discipline and taste, let the *child* choose.

Then divide the piece up into bits. Let each bit be learnt separately, and pay no attention to anything but distinctness till half the piece is learnt. Then correct, or rather suggest. Do not harp too long on any lines requiring pathos or energy; if the child cannot get it at once, return to it on another occasion.

Never teach a piece in one sitting, however short your piece be.

(3). Some positive rules.

Let the child stand while reading, holding the book away from the face. Never seem to be looking at the pupil, unless you yourself are saying the piece.

Let the child sit to recite (not in an arm-chair). Sitting down discourages all excessive action.

Action you must have—in moderation; but a waved hand, or a moved finger, a lifted eyebrow, a closed eye, a slight shiver, this is all the action you should allow. If you read Legouvé carefully you will find that the greatest actresses can play the most tragic parts with very little action, and with still less voice. Teach your pupil not to raise the voice much, but to learn its tones. In tone, not in noise, good recitation consists.

Always have a glass in the room to see if your own little bits of action look natural; for remember this,—that as soon as you or your pupil cease to be natural your recitation ceases to be good.

May I add here a short specimen lesson which illustrate very imperfectly what I mean? I will choose a single verse:—

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd winds slowly o’er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Or, as I write it in view of the lesson:—

The curfew—tolls—the knell—of parting day,
The lowing—herd—winds—slo-w-ly—o’er·the·lea,

The ploughman—homeward—plods—his we-a-ry way,
And leaves the world—to darkness—and to me.

1.—You first explain the pictures, and note that the speaker feels the dusk coming on. Don't leave "lea" unexplained.

[p 102]

2.—Now let your pupil read. You will have a dead stop at day, lea, way, me; but no stops elsewhere. This is utterly wrong. There are in this verse fifteen "speech-commas."

3.—Your pupil will be too fast. I do not know how you can remedy this fault, except by keeping a metronome at work. Talking about the fault won't remedy it. Example does a great deal; but then your own example will fail you sometimes. All people read and recite too fast for the comprehension of their audiences.

4.—Your pupil will emphasize day, lea, way, me; whereas the last two have the grave accent, and the last is almost whispered; there are twelve other words that need the acute accent.

5.—Your pupil will fail to give the music in the words "slowly" and "weary"; he will join winds-slowly and plods-his together. This you must not allow for an instant.

6.—He will almost sing the piece. You must keep him between the sing-song (the university method of slandering our literature) and the natural narrative tone (the illiterate method of doing the same thing). You may refer to Mr. Harrison's papers for more on this subject.

7.—Of course there is no action.

Gray's *Elegy* is a good piece: it encourages musical delivery of really musical lines; it discourages action; it requires very careful and distinct work; it is a poem of rest.

Of course we could multiply these hints, but let me end with a few practical suggestions for recitation—suggestions meant for men and women (older children) who wish to guide others and themselves to a true appreciation of what is real and good in literature; for recitation is ought to be the exponent of what is best in books.

1.—If you know your room, speak at the person furthest from you. You can tell if you are heard. If not, don't get loud, but go more slowly. You may look all about the room quite easily, and yet keep your voice at this angle with your body.

2.—If you don't know your room, try it before your performance, and put a friend or two down in different parts of the room, to tell you whether you are audible.

3.—If your room is a good one, save your voice; this makes people listen.

[p 103]

4.—If your room is a bad one, get a long piece of bunting fixed on the wall opposite to your face. It deadens the echo.

5.—Save yourself. Only once or twice in a whole evening will you want to shout or toss your arms about. *Tout artiste qui se fatigue est un artiste médiocre.*

6.—Begin quietly. Wait during noise, coughs, and interruptions of all kinds. This is only polite to the people who *are* listening.

7.—Practise standing still. Never run about the stage.

8.—Have a table in front of you, about three feet high.

9.—Never be so impertinent to your audience as to try to recite without having gone over every intonation, gesture, and look before your own glass, and before a friend.

10.—Mark whether or no telling passages fail; if they do, find out why afterwards.

11.—Wait till the laugh has quite subsided.

12.—If you see you have got hold of any particular part of the house, keep your eye on that part. This will encourage you.

13.—Remember, finally, that the most telling parts in good pieces are those in which you interpret the best thoughts in the best and quietest way; the whisper teaches more than the shout; the steady glance tells more than a badly-imitated maniac's glare. You must always be in a state of repression, as if you could do more, but will not.

To return from our men and women to the little ones. Parents should put aside one hour a month (only an hour), when all the family can gather round the fire, and you can hear some of the pieces that have been learnt. Why should not the father and elder brothers take an interest in such things? Is it all to be left to the mother's taste and care? You do not know the pleasure that you give, the lessons you will learn, the lessons you may teach, the talents you foster, by a word or two of quiet discriminating praise, or by a sympathetic silence.

I end as I began, "Les enfants sont d'admirables maîtres de diction. Quelle justesse d'intonations; quelle vérité." See you to it, that you do not let the powers given to them go to rack and ruin through your carelessness.

ARTHUR BURRELL.