

The Musical Element in the Teaching of English During the Classteacher Period

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IN the art of teaching the subject matter is less important than the way in which it is given. Head knowledge is not enough ; for factual information often falls out of date but in the effort of learning new faculties are born. We all know that the arts of swimming, skating and riding, once learned, are never forgotten, for the skill required is taken up into the habit-life of the whole body. We need to teach so that knowledge becomes not merely information but the capacity to think in a living way.

During the early life of the child there are two main powers at work in the forming of the human body. These, if rightly understood, are the greatest allies of the teacher.

For the first seven years inner plastic forces are building the child's own physical frame and after the change of teeth these become free for other purposes, for the forming of imaginative thinking and for remembering. We are then able to call them into play in the teaching of writing and the drawing of forms.

But there are other influences at work which come from the outer world. These we many call 'musical powers'. In its first years of life the little child has to learn to adapt itself to earthly rhythms ; the movements of day and night, of sleeping and waking, of joy and sorrow and of living and dying. Some time has to pass before it can form the habit of regular breathing ; its breath is a sort of fluttering. Neither can it sleep and wake in rhythmic alternation ; its round of life is a hovering between dreaming sleep and waking dreams. The harmonious working together of the breath with the beat of the heart is only gradually attained.

During the second seven years from the change of teeth to the coming of puberty, the child is especially susceptible to all the influences from the rhythms of the outer world and these work into the forming of its body. Thus it lives more fully in its sense of rhythm at this stage than at any other period of life.

During the classteacher period the plastic forces can be used more consciously but the musical ones are working in a way that is more difficult to recognise. Not only the bodily structure but also the harmony of the soul-life is affected by all that reverberates through the child's being, and what is experienced in the realm of speech during this time is especially important.

Today in education we tend to use the plastic much more than the musical element. It has become the custom to appeal almost entirely to the sense of sight and to use rigid diagrams rather than

forms capable of movement. This is not only one-sided but is a definite mis-use of the plastic activity for the pupil is given fixed ideas and the power to create inner imaginations is neglected.

Rudolf Steiner has shown in the Four Educational Lectures given in Stuttgart between Sept. 15th-22nd, 1920, how these plastic and musical forces work in the human being.

When we perceive through the eye, our perception depends on the optic nerve and the brain ; but what we perceive can be understood only because we have a feeling life centred in the rhythmic system of the heart and lungs. In order that what we have perceived and understood may be imprinted in the memory, it must be taken up into the whole system of the metabolism and the limbs. Thus when we teach through the sense of sight, we need to awaken feeling and lead over the whole experience into some kind of inner or outer activity so that it may become experience and the foundation of future capacities.

When we perceive musically the process is reversed. Our whole body responds to the sound and rhythm, understanding is again awakened through feeling, but memory is an affair of the head.

The Greeks knew very well that what was learned through bodily movement in youth became the capacity for thinking mathematically in later life. What is acquired through the body is a sure foundation for a later abstract knowledge which is no longer theoretical but genuine experience. Hence in the class-teacher period the firm basis for Arithmetic, Algebra and Geometry should be made by moving through the rhythm of numbers, the dimensions of space and the forms of Geometrical figures.

Even a teacher who is not a skilled musician can work with the musical forces of the child in the Kindergarten and in the classteacher period. From an early age the child can be helped to find its balance in the interweaving rhythms of life. When we celebrate the festivals of the seasons, children are brought to feel the rhythmic life of the year. The morning and evening verse give the contrasting moods of the wide awake life of day and soothing spell of sleep.

These feelings are further developed in nature stories in the first class. Then we can speak of the sun and the moon. We can show how the sun is for ever pouring forth his light and warmth to create life on earth and how he never grows weary. At the end of the day we are tired out and need to sleep but the sun passes on to other countries to bestow its blessing still further. Then we can speak of the moon who, though she has no light of her own, so loves the sun that her whole endeavour is to reflect his radiance into the darkness of earthly night. The poems of Blake describing the sunrise and the sunset most beautifully illustrate these themes.

Blake also provides many other examples of telling contrasts such as "The Tiger" and "The Lamb", "The Laughing Song" and

“On Another’s Sorrow”; and sometimes the effect is gained within one poem as in “The Little Black Boy”.

All poems in the early years should be taught for their mood or their musical quality and not for their thought content. Whatever appeals to the sense of sight should have nothing of the photographic element. Pictures should float and change so that the life behind the picture forms can shine through. Shakespeare’s fairy poems are beautiful in this way. They are often almost purely movement and music as,

‘Come unto these yellow sands,
And then take hands :
Curtsied when you have, and kiss’d,—
The wild waves whist,’—

or the pictures pass over into one another, as,

‘Full fathom five thy father lies ;
Of his bones are coral made :
Those are pearls that were his eyes :
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell :
(Burden : ding-dong.)
Hark ! now I hear them,—ding-dong, bell.’

In the later years children will come to realise the wonderful truth of the transformation from the bones to coral and from the eyes to pearls ; but in Class II they feel the music and the magic without fully understanding the pictures.

Shakespeare himself has shown how reliance on the outer picture cannot bring a living understanding. In the Merchant of Venice when Bassanio is led before the casket of gold, silver and lead, Portia is under a vow not to reveal their secret. But a song is sung and Bassanio is able to interpret it.

‘Tell me, where is Fancy bred,
Or in the heart or in the head?’

The word ‘Fancy’ is here used to describe the state of being fascinated by the outer appearance. Fancy is engendered in the eyes and and is fed with gazing but it cannot penetrate to the inner reality and so it dies where it was born in the cradle of the skull. The perception which leads to understanding depends upon the heart not upon the head.

There is an annotated edition of the Merchant of Venice, used for examination purposes, which states that this song has no particular relevance to the scene in which it is sung. But the words of Bassanio which immediately follow reveal the implication.

‘So may the outward shows be least themselves :
The world is still deceived with ornament.’

And he is able to choose the 'meagre lead,
Which rather threatenest than dost promise aught.'
And he receives the scroll which says, 'You that choose not by the
view,
Chance as fair and choose as true.'

We must not of course be too fanatical in selecting poems which have movement rather than pictures. A great deal depends on the real content of the poem. For instance some of A.A. Milne's poems have a good swing.

'Christopher Robin goes hoppity, hoppity,
Hoppity, hoppity, hop.
Whenever I ask him politely to stop it,
He says he can't possibly stop.'

Such a verse may suit a special occasion but we cannot possibly consider it as art in the sense of the true nursery rhymes or the Elizabethan lyrics which move the heart. Children should always feel that the poem expresses more than they can understand. Hence many of Shelley's poems are suitable even at times when they are not fully intelligible. Shelley so lives with the inner life and the changing appearances of Nature that stanzas from 'The Cloud', 'The West Wind' or even lyrics from 'Prometheus Unbound' seem magical to quite young children. They will very often repeat words and phrases, even though they do not know the meaning, because the sound and the flow of the language appeal to them.

Speech exercises can be taken with children at a very young age as long as they can fall in love with the sounds and do not turn too much attention to the meaning.

The strong alternation between joy and sorrow which is introduced into the Eurhythmy lessons of Class III is further developed through the themes of Myth and Saga in Classes IV and V. Children can then be brought to an important experience. For those who are sensitive the tragedy of Sigurd is hard to bear but the teacher can show that what is sad for the earth is often joy for the spirit world. When heroes died on earth their death brought joy to Odin who was gathering round him the souls of the heroic slain to help him against the powers of evil in the coming fight of Ragnarok. When Brynhilde had to leave her rank as a Valkyrie and live as a human being on earth, it was sorrow for the world of the gods. Thus birth and death can be looked upon from another point of view.

It is only possible to indicate very briefly the many lines of development through the different classes. In Classes V and VI when the themes of subject and object, active and passive, question and answer, direct and indirect speech are followed, the ballad form is especially suitable. Particularly in the Scottish Border ballads we meet a type of poetry which depends very little on the pictorial element but relies almost entirely on dramatic tension. For instance 'Lord Randall' is a drama in miniature. The whole setting is left to

the hearer to create. We are given only the words exchanged between the mother and son, and the repetition of the last line, in which the only variation is the final note of doom, has a very powerful effect. We feel very strongly in this kind of poem how the inner conflict creates the outer form.

During the entire classteacher period the different poetic rhythms should be taken into account. It is noteworthy that almost all the best-known Nursery Rhymes and the fairy poems of Shakespeare are composed in meters with a rising movement, either trochee or dactyl. In lyric poems both these meters give a quality of lightness. On the other hand dramatic themes are far better expressed in meters with a falling cadence. Thus the iambic meter is most suitable in English for story-telling and the anapaest is most effective for rapid movement, as in Flecker's 'War Song of the Saracens' or Byron's 'The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold'. Only a few passages from Longfellow's *Evangeline* can convince us that the dactyl, which was used with such grand effect in the Greek Epics, is not fitted for modern narrative. Nevertheless Greek hexameters should be taken very strongly in Classes V and VI; for more than any other rhythm, the lines of Homer are based on the harmonious pulsing together of the blood and breath. The effect of long passages from the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* is like that of waves on the shore, an endless ebbing and flowing suggestive of cosmic movements. This suits the themes of Gods and heroes but not stories of the modern world.

When in Class IV the curriculum recommends the awakening of a feeling for forms of expression, the Bible can be used as a valuable source. For instance children can be led to feel the difference between a question asked out of curiosity and a question asked of one's own soul, like David's words, 'The Lord is my light and salvation, whom shall I fear?' Although the imperative is used in each case, there is a contrast between the command of Eli, 'Lie down again', and Samuel's prayer, 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth'. In reporting the death of Absalom there is an entirely different inner motive in the statements of Joab, 'The King's son is dead;' of Cush, 'The enemies of my Lord the King, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is'; and of Daird's heartbroken cry, 'O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would God that I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son.' Children should be led to compose expressions of strong feelings; blessings and curses, heartfelt wishes and reverential awe.

Later in their school life in the tenth class pupils become more conscious of what has lived with them during the classteacher period. When they study the course of Literature as Art they find in the great works of the ancient poets the contrast between those who experienced their surroundings more through the sense of sight and those who were more aware of the musical powers.

With our eyes we behold a world which has been created out of wisdom and thus an understanding of the forms of the outer world awakens in us a mood of tranquil veneration. This is to be found in the great epics of Homer with their strong pictorial element and joy in the beauty of the world. In spite of the many dramatic conflicts, the varying themes are always brought to a harmonious close.

On the other hand musical experiences tend to rouse enthusiasm and creative activity. This can be illustrated from the Norse sagas, such as the Volsunga Saga or Beowulf. In these poems the pictorial element is very slight and there is little joy in the beauty of the outer world, but the struggle of the hero to test his strength against overwhelming odds is the central theme. The Norse characters glory in defeat for only when they are overpowered can they feel that they have exerted their strength to the utmost.

In the eleventh class pupils come to realise how these two different impulses can be brought into harmony. In the Christian theme of Parsifal we see the character who through the power of compassion was able both to receive the wisdom revealed in the outer world of nature and raise his own inner creative activity into a deed of healing.

But at the end of the school course a teacher cannot be satisfied unless he has done something more than arouse the children's interest. In one respect most of us are sadly failing in our thought life. It is alarming how very few of us are able to remember accurately. So many sense impressions batter us that we cannot in a healthy way take them up through the realm of understanding into memory. Our recollections are broken and distorted fragments. This symptom is becoming more and more serious in modern life and it grows increasingly difficult to trust reports given from personal experience.

The teacher needs to sense how children take up into their life of understanding and memory what is introduced to them in class. We know ourselves how the tasks we do during the day can sometimes haunt us after we have retired to bed. If we have overdone some activity we can at times feel our body, though lying in bed, still performing physical movements. Sometimes when we have struggled with a problem and failed to solve it, we wake up in the middle of the night and suddenly know the solution. During sleep we continue to elaborate the experiences of the day. The teacher must learn to sense how this is taking place with his children.

In old stories warning and admonitions were always given three times. This was not merely arbitrary; the first time was a call to the senses, the second to the understanding and the third for the confirmation in memory. Learning in the true sense takes three times longer than learning with the head alone and parents and teachers of children in Rudolf Steiner schools need to take this into account. Learning will be slower but the results will be lasting.

Not only will the memory become healthy but thinking itself will be more alive. Pupils can acquire the faculty to think in advance, to grasp situations, to understand character and to come to the right decisions and actions. Factual knowledge can be forgotten but this way of thinking is a permanent source of strength.