ON READING FOR FUN

ONE of the many stories told by Harvard men of a certain professor, as famous for his brusque and eccentric humor as for his scholarship, relates to an interview between him and a student. The professor had announced a course in Browning, admission to which was to depend on a personal interview. One young man, attracted more by the fame of the professor than by his own interest in the subject, had crammed up on the titles of Browning and on abstracts and opinions, and presented himself for the interview.

“So you want to enter this course?”
“Yes, sir.”
“And do you read Browning for fun?”
The young man’s answer ended the interview.

Well, do we teachers do enough reading “for fun”? And what do we read “for fun”? And what kind of “fun” do we get out of it? And, as teachers, in what kind of thing do we help our pupils to find “fun” in good reading? Are we too serious? Or merely too solemn—that is, too heavy?

The present fashion in educational writing seems to emphasize the serious side. Scientific exactness, minuteness of measuring, counting noses for statistical tables, focusing attention on details—all these hardly help in that free play of mind and spirit which make for “fun” in reading. They remind one, rather, of the meticulousness of the solemn mediaeval dialecticians. Probably the fault is not in the scientific method so much as in the people who apply it. Not every one is deft enough to use edged tools: it takes a skillful hand and an exact eye to make a surgeon. But, whatever the reason, it is certain that there is a good deal of heavy-handed, plodding, uninspired educational discussion, and of dull teaching of literature in our schools. There are many teachers who can not cut loose from the formulae of methods and make their teaching a pleasure to themselves and their pupils, who can not create in the classroom that atmosphere of enjoyment of good things that is common among enlightened people who have learned the high art of light and cheerful conversation, of sharing and spreading and deepening enjoyment of good things—in brief, who are socially crude or stodgy.

I have used the word “fun,” borrowed from the story with which I began. By “fun,” we mean in this connection something more, that is pleasure, intellectual and esthetic enjoyment, reaching sometimes the very highest levels. We recognize pleasure as one of the essential elements in all that is great in art and intellectual achievement. It becomes, indeed, one of the main tests of great work—the ability to give pleasure. What else—or, at any rate, what so much—has determined whether a story, a poem, or a drama would be read or listened to by one generation after another? The test applies to Mother Goose, to the fairy tales, to the great myths passed on from mouth to ear; to the epics of Homer, to the novels of Scott, to the plays of Shakespeare and Moliere. No one believes for a moment that succeeding generations read these classics because they are told by their elders that they “ought to.” Each new generation has a way (irritating enough sometimes, but in the long run wise) of deciding for itself what it “ought” to know. If it finds Keats flat or Chaucer
It was like Carlyle’s pounding on the table in delight at young Tennyson’s reading, and exclaiming, “Alfred’s got it! Alfred’s got it!” May Heaven forgive the teacher who reads poetry like prose, or lets her children do so. I can’t; I haven’t the magnanimity.

I must mention the pleasure of memory: of having a gallery of portraits and scenes gathered from reading: Alice with the pig-baby; Tom among the creatures in the cool, green sea; Crusoe and his parrot on the island; Mowgli with his animal friends in the jungle:—how large and how interesting the list is even in juvenile books. And the memory of great passages of poetry, what pleasure it can give! Not long passages; I said great. For these are often only a line or two.

“Jewels five-words-long, That on the stretch’d forefinger of all Time Sparkle forever.”

Said a fourteen-year-old boy once, in my hearing, when some one spoke of a certain dogmatic, cock-sure acquaintance, “The twilight of dubiety never falls upon him.”

“Where did you get that, son?” said some one.

“Oh, we read that in Charles Lamb yesterday.”

I have not treated the pleasure of humor. What need? We admit its place in school as in life. I did hear not long ago of a principal who reproved a teacher because she let her pupils laugh at the description of Ichabod Crane. But this type of principal is, happily, almost extinct. He should be drowned in the flood of good things now written for children; in which humor is the predominating element. This has, indeed, been the tendency ever since Lewis Carroll founded a new type in Alice.

How can a teacher learn to give this sort of pleasure? Well, in the first place, I rather think she has to be born right:—not, I mean, in the genealogical sense, but with the right fairies at hand to bestow the right gifts of mind and temperament. And then she must improve these gifts by using them for her own pleasure. If she has to labor and groan over it, her case is hopeless, though pathetic. If she doesn’t carry work easily, gaily (“with bells on,” the youngster put it), she will never really teach literature.

FRANKLIN T. BAKER

THE WRITING OF DESCRIPTION

THE philosophy underlying the writing of description is tersely summarized by Professor H. R. Shipherd: “Description is clear, accurate seeing followed by vivid, faithful reporting. Faithfulness is almost the whole story.”

The seeing may be a gift of heaven—maybe not—but the reporting can surely be cultivated. How? Through reading and listening and practicing.

In our first lesson in description we endeavored to get at the fundamental difference between exposition and description by reading Shipherd’s two selections on the Sight-Seeing Bus in which a good comparison is made. The class then listed characteristics of each style.

EXPOSITORY

Facts stated
Generalizations made
Result: Information about a certain kind of vehicle

DESCRIPTIVE

Facts suggested by selection of details
People
Action
Unity given by final sentence
Result: A picture of a particular vehicle

Following the class discussion and the reading of a paragraph of exposition on the express train, we wrote in class one or two sentences on the description of a train.

Example 1. “The train came puffing and blowing into the station. The brakes