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"MY HEART LEAPS UP when I behold a Rainbow in the Sky"

by W. WALDMAN

"YOUR knowledge of English grammar is abysmal. You are ignorant of its most fundamental principles. You fail to realise that the verb in the protasis of our adverbial clause of erudition must be in the past perfect if the verb in the apodosis is in the pluperfect subjunctive. Tomorrow you will bring me, written out a hundred times in your best handwriting: "If I had worked harder, I would have passed."

The pupil wrote out the lines which were duly torn up by his teacher and thrown into the waste-paper basket, and less than a month later, in the Standard VIII June examination, he wrote: "If Macbeth did not contact the witches, he would have lived a blessed time."

I realised that I had done nothing for my pupil's grammar, that, as a teacher, I had failed. A brief period of introspection followed. Clearly, one could not eliminate an error by the repetition of its correction. Antagonism to an imposition became antagonism to the principle it was designed to establish.

How to make the writing of lines a pleasure to the writer began as a facetious proposition and ended by indicating the solution to the problem: it was to avoid repetition because repetition was uninteresting, to avoid the obvious because the obvious was even more uninteresting.

Though this was not an original thought, it came with sufficient force to impel me to eliminate forever from the teaching of language repetition and sentences pedestrian in meaning. The flat, stale and unprofitable "If I had done my homework I would not have been kept in" was replaced by "If I had lit the candle, I would have seen the trap-door in the floor"; it was repeated, not ten times, but said once only in circumstances created to increase its inherent appeal to the pupils.

A series of tests showed that the interesting topic for composition produced better results than the one that was uninteresting. The class wrote ten sentences, each involving a difficult grammatical structure, on such topics as "Getting up in the morning", "Catching the bus", and "Buying the Groceries". The average mark for the class was fifty per cent (fifty-five per cent for grammatical correctness and forty-five per cent for content). It next wrote ten sentences, each again involving a different grammatical structure, on such topics as "Alone in an empty house", "Lost in the forest", and "Down the hollow tree." The average mark was sixty-five per cent (sixty per cent for grammatical structure and forty per cent for content).

The Stimulus of Interest

Clearly, my pupils wrote better and more meaningful English when they wrote about interesting experiences, real or imagined, than when they wrote about real experiences that not even a three-decker bus could make interesting. A cave fired their imagination; it excited them. Breakfast left them as cold as cornflakes on a winter's morning.

In these standard VIII pupils there was an urgency to express themselves because the topics given them for composition filled them with excitement. There was a door that had to be opened in the empty house; and if the grammar they used to open it was not the key that fitted the lock, they used an axe, an instrument of which purists will not approve and one which the pupils themselves will not make use of when they outgrow their grammatical delinquency.

Language and the Realities of Life

If a pupil finds that he must say something, he will find a way of saying it, clumsily at first, less clumsily after that. The important thing is that he must want to say it, and he will want to say it if he can be made excited about it.

> "So was it when my life began,
> So is it now I am a man",

said Wordsworth about youth in the first line and only about himself and a few like himself in the second. He was writing about excitement or, to be metaphorical, about enchantment.

The ancient Greeks cherished youth because they cherished innocence, the sort of innocence that enabled Wordsworth to find delight in the sight of a rainbow in the sky. They crushed the semi-precious amethyst and gave it to their young people in wine, believing that the drink would keep them young and innocent of Freud in the Parthenon and phallic symbolism in the Medusa.

Yet, in spite of the ancient Greeks and Wordsworth, we would have our matriculants and first year University and College of Education students men and women in their evaluation of a book or a poem.

Unreasonable Demands of English Teachers

Our demand is unreasonable. We cannot expect them to explain why a character or an image is significant if "significant" means, as Dr. Daiches has it, "connected with that part of emotional life common to all men." They are not men, and are, as yet, unacquainted with the emotional life of a Becky Sharpe.

Our demand is unethical. We should not expect them to show why D. H. Lawrence is an effective writer of "effective" means, as Dr. Daiches again has it, "bringing undimmed to the consciousness of the reader those ideas and emotions which inspired the writer." They have had, as yet, no experience of several of Lawrence's ideas and emotions. To expect them to be honest in their evaluation of Perkins as a character might be to imply the necessity of their becoming gamekeepers.

Our demand is unrealistic, for in our preoccupation with such astringents as sense, intention, feeling, tone, they forfeit their capacity for being enchanted and we our power to enchant. We break the staff that enables us to let our students lose themselves in some forest of our choosing where the trees would not be those that harbour nests of robins in their hair, but

> "Those enchanted four of Borrowdale
> Joined in one solemn and capacious grove."

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