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ABSTRACT

A course in advanced composition and analytical reading designed for elementary school teachers is proposed. Stressing the importance of literary appreciation of works of exceptional merit, the author returns to the systematic study of English composition using literature as the basis of the composition course. Some of the authors mentioned are Shapespeare, Dostoevsky, Tennyson, Twain, Stevenson, Herrick, and Wordsworth. (RL)

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Composition and the Elementary Teacher

THOMAS F. PARKINSON

DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH are already heavily burdened with composition courses, and most professors are rightly dubious of their utility. It was therefore with some misgivings that I undertook the first offering at our university of a course in composition for elementary teachers. The course, which I will describe fully later, could be given by any professor of English, even one who has little knowledge of or concern with the problems of teaching in the elementary school. It is a course in advanced composition and analytical reading. The burden of this paper is that this is precisely what English professors can offer to prospective teachers in elementary schools, and that it is precisely what those young people need.

First, however, I should like to define a ground of common sense where we can all meet, that is, our general knowledge of the elementary teacher. These young people—and they are practically all young women—are asked to treat the whole child from age five through age thirteen, and they are asked to treat the whole of knowledge necessary and appropriate to those children. They are assumed to be expert in the various arts and sciences to so great an extent that they can offer careful and thorough instruction in subjects ranging from language, music, and the visual arts through basic science and social studies to hygiene, physical education, and whatever else seems to the local school system indispensable. Above all, she is expected to have a clear and loving understanding of the pupils in her custody, a deep working knowledge of the psychological and social strains that afflict the growth of the very young.

The task is clearly impossible, as we all know. When I consider my acquaintances, only three could conceivably be fully successful. One is a Nobel Laureate, another a distinguished physician, the third one of the most versatile and imaginative poets in the country. All of them are males in the prime of life with vast commitments that far transcend the demands of even so compelling a group as thirty eager and receptive ten year old children.

What happens, then, to the young

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woman who enters elementary teaching, equipped at best with a bachelor's degree and a year of training in the specific problems of elementary schools? She becomes a conveyor of cultural indoctrination, using cultural in the fullest and widest sense of the term. She is passive rather than active. Her programs are set by statewide interests in the processes of acculturation, and since she is asked to know and control so much information, she is often doomed to superficial and uninventive work. Even in the field of her major concern, she does not have impetus to deepen and enrich her control of data appropriate to the needs of her charges, for she is much too busy trying to discover how she is to do even adequate work in the vast areas of her ignorance. Conscientious majors in English who become elementary teachers find themselves atuomatically forced to abandon any pretense of increasing their grasp of the wide field of the arts, where they have at least a start, and turn their concentration on the problem of teaching fields where their knowledge is superficial. Hence, whether we like it or not, the conscientious elementary teacher is driven toward specialized study, when her summers and evenings permit it, of educational techniques for communicating and gathering knowledge over which her control is vague and weak. And, justifiably, she supplements those studies with courses that will illuminate to her reeling mind some of the problems in child development that face her daily not as statistics but as raw, often very raw, human data.

This process we have all observed, all of us who have taught for some years and follow the careers of former students with affectionate concern. What is the reward that keeps so many young women at work in the elementary schools, immediately on graduation from college, or some years later, when they return to teaching as the maturity of their children permits? It is certainly not the opportunity for continued educational development that compels so many of us toward university teaching, but something very simple. That "something" is love. Not merely the love that children arouse in all but the most hardened hearts but the love that flows back from the children. Most human beings in this country sneak to their daily work. The successful elementary teacher goes every day to work in a room where thirty people, young people, love her. This is a powerful attraction.

But the elementary teacher, if she is to merit that great gift, has the need for continued development, not merely in the understanding of children and of techniques of teaching, but in her development as a person in the world outside the classroom, this development in turn enriching the world of her work. Children survive, but a larger and more important question is whether the elementary teacher can survive on the fare that is offered to her, both in her college training and in her summer and evening study.

What, then, if conditions were ideal, should we want the elementary teacher to know of composition? More, certainly, than any of us: She should know something of the composition of artifacts, how books, poems, sentences are put together, what principles of order and effect are at stake in *King Lear*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Yeats's "Crazy Jane" poems. Deliberately in shaping this epitomizing list, I have excluded from consideration the books and poems that are taught in even the most advanced elementary schools. The elementary teacher who is equipped with a genuine understanding of composition at its most complex and dense is better able to understand the questions of composition that affect her own writing, her own presentation of material, her selection of works that should be treated in full by her pupils.

The person who can understand *King Lear* can follow and analyze the structure of a simple expository paragraph. If she cannot follow the movement of thought in "Tintern Abbey," she will have so much less a chance to present simpler verse to her charges.

As a liberally educated person she has claims on us. It is our responsibility to see that she controls some of the great human articulations, and that she can respond to them in a manner clear and accurate. She should be able to read and construe, clarify, summarize, and present. She should also have some idea of what the creative process is about, what goes into the composition of verse especially so that verse will not seem to her and to her pupils the inexplicable confusion of a lunatic who abjures prose for reasons that are probably suspect. She should write, shape some verse lines into a sensible pattern, learn the continuities of thought that make a paragraph a unit of thought rather than a typographical accident, learn to define a problem and within reasonable limits construct a clear expository answer to the problem. She should know the criteria of sentence structure and have rational answers at her command to questions of usage, diction, grammar generally.

We all know how difficult it is to effect these aims with English majors who spend approximately a third of their college study with English departments, and we should certainly despair of effecting those aims for students who are not concentrators in the enormous rich field of English study. Difficulty should not stop us. In my own department we have for years taught courses in advanced composition for secondary teachers, one course for our own majors, another for those minors in English who do such substantial and useful work in teaching English in the secondary schools. The extension beyond this point to elementary teachers, we believe, is logical and certainly necessary. The strain on our already heavily burdened staff is one more cost exerted on us by the total educational demands of our society, and we have found it worthwhile.

What then is the course in advanced composition for elementary teachers at the University of California at Berkeley? It is primarily a course in advanced composition, and like all our courses of that type, it is a course that teaches writing in relation to the reading of important books. We try in these courses to use only works of such importance that we should use them in our regular literary courses. We do not make a fine distinction between composition and literature but use them to buttress one another, the literature serving as both model and subject matter for the student, who writes approximately eight to ten thousand words in a fifteen week semester. We try to keep the classes small; the course given last spring for prospective elementary teachers had eighteen students. Only six of them were majors in English, and the majority of the class had had no concentrated course in literature and composition since the freshman year. This is, I suspect, true of about two-thirds of the people training for elementary credentials in the state of California. To give the most general idea of their literary training, half of the students had never read *Huckleberry Finn*, and two-thirds of them had studied no plays by Shakespear since their brief brush with two plays in their freshman year (they were all seniors). I take this to be symptomatic.

They were, however, bright and interested students. Their first papers, written on *Midsummer Night's Dream*, were not up to the standard of freshman English, but as all teachers of advanced composition know, a certain low cunning prompts students to try to see just how stringent grading practices will be, so that initial papers are uniformly disastrous. Their second papers, comparing Theseus with

Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night*, were respectable freshman themes, and as their terror increased, the quality of their work surged upward. They were, in fact, capable of writing decent expository prose, *if* they were given a clearly defined and limited topic. I experimented with a very loosely stated topic merely in order to demonstrate the folly of such assignments, and called it off on the next meeting of the class after they had agonized on the matter over a week-end. And indeed, the main points in the course where attention was turned toward the problems of teaching elementary students came when our problems as teacher and students in college prompted discussion. What are the responsibilities of a teacher in giving assignments? Clarity and limitation, first, and second an interdiction of plagiarism not by precept but by giving assignments that defeat any move toward merely copying from some standard text.

We read Shakespeare slowly and carefully, our major text being *Measure for Measure*, which we studied after reviewing the main tragedies quickly and reading *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* at a more leisurely pace. But *Measure for Measure* we read methodically and analytically, following syntax and metaphor with the kind of care that one would use in a course primarily in Shakespeare. While we were studying this play so closely in class, I assigned an exercise in writing blank verse (with ghastly results) and repeated the assignment until it was clear that the class had at least a mechanical sense of what blank verse was and, hopefully, some organic sense of what demands it made on a writer. I also assigned a paper asking them to compare the relation between Huck and Jim with that between a boy and an older man in either *Treasure Island* or *Kidnapped*, this paper to cover about two thousand words. We also did exercises in precis and paraphrase, using *Measure for Measure* as our text, and in extra office hours I met with students and discussed their problems in organizing their papers on the works of fiction.

Their papers on fiction were quite good, and when we finished *Measure for Measure*, we turned to lyric poetry. The text we used was the Johnson, Sickles, and Sayers *Anthology of Children's Literature*, a work which I admire. But I now question the use of such a text in this course. The *Oxford Book of English Verse* or Richard Aldington's anthology of *Poetry of the English Speaking World* would, to my sense of things, be more appropriate. For it is absurd to treat even so distinguished a book as Johnson, Sickles, and Sayer with students who have never read "I Have a Gentil Cok" or "The Maidens Came" or "Lycidas" or Gray's "Elegy" or "Tintern Abbey" or "The Ode on a Grecian Urn" or "Among School Children." We had studied *Measure for Measure* because of my persuasion that any one who can read it can probably read and understand the syntax and metaphor of any Shakespearean play. And if I teach the course again, I shall try to fill the minds of the students with the wittiest, noblest, most passionate, and richest of the poems in English. Being able to read those poems, being able to apprehend aesthetic and moral value in its most dignified and amusing form—this is what those eighteen young women needed. With that ability, they would develop their sensibilities to a point where they might be able to distinguish qualities in literature designed for children.

Generally too, as in discussing the novels by Twain and Stevenson, I tried to give some sense of what a children's classic is, and my answer is simply that a children's classic is a work that a mature adult can read aloud to a child to their mutual delight. Let me concede that there are, then, not many children's classics, that the bulk of literature read

by children and written for them is formulaic junk—so be it. But the business of the schools is not to encourage junk but to give some residue of value that will develop a sense for the valuable and save our culture from its multiple time-destroying activities. If their teachers do not embody those qualities that make literature a repository of value, they cannot communicate them.

Turning to poetry, the class not only read widely in poetry but wrote both analytical essays (on Herrick's "Daffodils" and Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud") and verse of their own in emulation of these and other poems. By this point, we were relatively far along in the course, and during that period one of the experienced linguists on the staff very courteously took over the class and explained the rationale of modern linguistic study and explored its relevance to problems of usage and composition. He provided also a bibliography of possibly useful future reading and attempted in brief to introduce the students to the study of English as a linguistic system. During the last three weeks of the course, we reviewed principles of composition and the students prepared a long paper on a sizable body of work by an author who could be considered a possible children's classic: Hilaire Belloc, Lewis Carroll, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Mark Twain, considering them not from a posited child's viewpoint but from that of a literate and imaginative reader.

And this, indeed, is the way in which we thought of the children, as imaginative and thoughtful beings whose control over language could be extended perhaps more fully than we at first believe. All of us, I suspect, have had surprising experiences with the capacity of children for responding to literature of some complexity. One great revelation came to me from a ten year old boy who was spending the summer with us. For a week we had spent the evenings in reading aloud the great legends—stories of Roland, Siegfried, Beowulf, Achilles—and on the last night he said to me, "Tom, why are all these heroes so stupid?" For, in fact, they are stupid, and their stupidity is their downfall. All I could say in defense of primitive heroism was, "What of Odysseus and Huck Finn?" And, after we had read *Huckleberry Finn* aloud, the children clamored for another book like it, and I had to say in melancholy tones, "There is no other book like *Huckleberry Finn*."

Thinking as we are in this course of prospective teachers for the grades four through nine, we can—as our colleagues in mathematics do—think of their pupils not as young adults but as receptive and open minds with their preconceptions not yet solidified into the thickness that rejects a world of imaginative construction and play. One reason that I insisted that my students at least attempt to write verse is that it is a sure method for increasing their appreciation of the triumphs of our massive poetic literature. But beyond that, I wanted them to see language not as a received settled body of propriety but as the raw material for works of art, the substance of imagination. For the ambiguity of the elementary teacher's chore resides in the fact that she must keep the pupil alert to the possibilities of language as play, as fun, as something to be diversely and liberally cast in rich and strange forms. The stress on mere propriety—acculturation—kills language at the source, turns it to a method of social agreement rather than human revelation, imposes convention in the place of tradition, decorum in the role of life.

The elementary teacher has then two problems in teaching composition to her charges. She has as I have already said, to be alert to the nature of composition both in works established as permanent forms (the received body of writing) and in her own writing. She has also to

retain for her pupils some sense of linguistic play, some feeling for language as malleable and free, capable of surprises and capable of expressing experience and reveries and prayers that do not immediately fit the categories of the decorous and rationally ordered. She has, as we stress I sometimes believe too firmly, to teach the rational and agreed orders of language, the conventions of sentence structure, the dictionary standards for usage and denotation, the nature of paraphrase and precis and summary and outline. For one purpose, that of play, she has her imaginative models; for the second purpose, she has certainly what we think of as the literary but she has also the matter of social studies and general science. And here, too, the course in advanced composition has a significant role to play, if only in giving some idea of the morality involved in treating knowledge.

Without some advanced training in the principles of composition, elementary teachers are likely to forget or ignore certain of the basic necessities for training their own pupils. To give two examples of faulty assignments, first, one elementary teacher gave her class as a large-scale project the writing of a paper on Mexico. The papers could not be limited in their focus but had to treat seriatim Mexican history, geography, economics, politics, art, and social life. The results were of course predictable, and the papers were composed of glossy illustrations that reflected primarily their parents' preferences in magazines, ranging from *National Geographic* and *Fortune* to *Time*, *Look*, and *True*. These were accompanied by texts lifted from what reference books were available at home or in public libraries, copied in neat but grudging hands. The assignment elicited no individual interest, endowed no child with a particular area to contribute to the general store, and encouraged superficial blatant plagiarism. Assignments of this sort are more typical than one cares to believe.

Another assignment was to describe an animal, and this time the children were given a list of possibly interesting animals from which they might choose a particular pet. But no instructions were given about methods for assimilating material, no effort was made to show the children how to outline and then to phrase in something like the language they commanded the material that they were tempted to lift bodily from the most convenient encyclopedia. The point is not that the children did not learn something from this process; but they did not get even the scantiest aid toward achieving what is the most significant knowledge that a student of language can give to the world, that is, the knowledge of what it is to compose.

The burdens placed on a course in advanced composition are extraordinary. If I were to phrase what our course tries to do, with its heterogeneous student population, I should say that for students trained in English it attempts to consolidate their knowledge of their field; for students not trained in English it attempts to give them both a sense of what the field is and of ways in which they might extend their knowledge of the field so that they will be better persons and therefore better teachers. Courses in English departments should never lose sight of the liberalizing motive that should be always primary, and a course for elementary teachers that dissolved into a course in techniques of teaching would be, as our department feels, a waste of substance. But the principles of composition, evident in the masterworks of our grandly endowed language, and evident in our own faltering efforts toward articulation, these are the matter of such a course and the matter our elementary teachers need. A course presenting a reminder and intro-

duction to Shakespeare, a body of significant fiction that does not insult the adult and the free child intelligence, a body of rich and compelling poetry, and an introduction to the systematic study of our lovely noble language—this is what our elementary teachers not only need but want.