

## Charlotte Mason on Recitation

Excerpted from *Home Education*, pp. 222-226

Taken from the original text.

### 'The Children's Art'

On this subject I cannot do better than refer the reader to Mr. Arthur Burrell's *Recitation*. This book purports to be a handbook for teachers in elementary schools. I wish that it may be very largely used by such teachers, and may also become a family hand-book; though many of the lessons will not be called for in educated homes. There is hardly any 'subject' so educative and so elevating as that which Mr. Burrell has happily described as 'The Children's Art.' All children have it in them to recite; it is an imprisoned gift waiting to be delivered, like Ariel from the pine. In this most thoughtful and methodical volume we are possessed of the fit incantations. Use them duly, and out of the woodenness of even the most commonplace child steps forth the child-artist, a delicate sprite, who shall make you laugh and make you weep. Did not the great Sir Walter "sway to and fro, sobbing his fill," to his little 'Pet's' speaking of—

- "For I am sick, and capable of fears,
- Oppressed with wrong, and therefore full of fears;
- A widow, husbandless, subject to fears;
- A woman, naturally born to fears"?

Marjorie Fleming was, to be sure, a child-genius; but in this book we learn by what carefully graduated steps a child who is not a genius, is not even born of cultivated parents, may be taught the fine art of beautiful and perfect speaking; but that is only the first step in the acquisition of 'The Children's Art.' The child should speak beautiful thoughts so beautifully, with such delicate rendering of each nuance of meaning, that he becomes to the listener the interpreter of the author's thought. Now, consider what appreciation, sympathy, power of expression this implies, and you will grant that 'The Children's Art' is, as Steele said of the society of his wife, "a liberal education in itself." It is objected—'Children are such parrots! They say a thing as they hear it said; as for troubling themselves to 'appreciate' and 'interpret,' not a bit of it!' Most true of the 'My name is Norval' style of recitation; but throughout this volume the child is led to find the just expression of thought for himself; never is the poor teacher allowed to set a pattern—'say this as I say it.' The ideas are kept well within the child's range, and the expression is his own. He is caught with guile, his very naughtiness is pressed into service, he finds a dozen ways of saying 'I shan't,' is led cunningly up to the point of expressing himself, and—he does it, to his own surprise and delight. The pieces given here for recitation are a treasure-trove of new joys. 'Winken, Blinken, and Nod,' "Miss Lilywhite's Party," and 'The Two Kittens,' would compel any child to recite. Try a single piece over with the author's markings and suggestions, and you will find there is as much difference between the result and ordinary reading aloud as there is in a

musical composition played with and without the composer's expression marks. I hope that my readers will train their children in the art of recitation; in the coming days, more even than in our own will it behove every educated man and woman to be able to speak effectively in public; and, in learning to recite you learn to speak.

### **Memorising.**

Recitation and committing to memory are not necessarily the same thing, and it is well to store a child's memory with a good deal of poetry, learnt without labour. Some years ago I chanced to visit a house, the mistress of which had educational notions of her own, upon which she was bringing up a niece. She presented me with a large foolscap sheet written all over with the titles of poems, some of them long and difficult: *Tintern Abbey*, for example. She told me that her niece could repeat to me any of those poems that I liked to ask for, and that she had never learnt a single verse by heart in her life. The girl did repeat several of the poems on the list, quite beautifully and without hesitation; and then the lady unfolded her secret. She thought she had made a discovery, and I thought so too. She read a poem through to E.; then the next day, while the little girl was making a doll's frock, perhaps, she read it again; once again the next day, while E.'s hair was being brushed. She got in about six or more readings, according to the length of the poem, at odd and unexpected times, and in the end E. could say the poem which she had not learned.

I have tried the plan often since, and found it effectual. The child must not try to recollect or to say the verse over to himself, but, as far as may be, present an open mind to receive an impression of interest. Half a dozen repetitions should give children possession of such poems as 'Dolly and Dick,' 'Do you ask what the birds say?' *Little lamb, who made thee?* and the like. The gains of such a method of learning are, that the edge of the child's enjoyment is not taken off by weariful verse by verse repetitions, and, also, that the habit of making mental images is unconsciously formed.

I remember once discussing this subject with the late Miss Anna Swanwick in some connection with Browning of which I do not recall, but in the course of talk an extremely curious incident transpired. A lady, a niece of Miss Swanwick's, said that after a long illness, during which she had not been allowed to do anything, she read 'Lycidas' through, by way of a first treat to herself as a convalescent. She was surprised to find herself then next day repeating to herself long passages. Then she tried the whole poem and found she could say it off, the result of this single reading, for she had not learned the poem before her illness, nor read it with particular attention. She was much elated by the treasure-trove she had chanced upon, and to test her powers, she read the whole of 'Paradise Lost,' book by book, and with the same result,—she could repeat it book by book after a single reading! She enriched herself by acquiring other treasures during her convalescence; but as health returned, and her mind became preoccupied with many interests,

she found she no longer had this astonishing power. It is possible that the disengaged mind of a child is as free to take and as strong to hold beautiful images clothed in beautiful words as was that of this lady during her convalescence. But, let me again say, every effort of the kind, however unconscious, means wear and tear of brain substance. Let the child lie fallow till he is six, and then, in this matter of memorising, as in others, attempt only a little, and let the poems the child learns be simple and within the range of his own thought and imagination. At the same time, when there is so much noble poetry within a child's compass, the pity of it, that he should be allowed to learn twaddle!