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THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH.

By ALEXANDER F. CHAMBERLAIN.

English is probably both the least-taught and the worst-taught subject in the whole educational field. It is bad in the grade schools, worse in the high schools, worst in the college, while the university reaps the full benefit of this evil *crescendo*. The "English" of the modern curriculum varies from a silly combination of "Mother Goose" and the jargon of science or the shibboleths of religion to a disingenuous synthesis of antique philology and emasculated literature. No wonder some of the men and women who speak and write their language well would extend to prose the judgment passed upon poetry: English untaught is taught best. A teacher of English is so often a spoiler of English. Sometimes the only advice to a young man (less often a young woman) contemplating a serious composition in his mother-tongue is that of *Punch* in the case of marriage: Don't. How does it happen that a man like John Bright, who never had the advantages of a classical or a college education, spoke and wrote perfect English, while our well-trained men of science can often do neither?

In the present brief essay the writer, from his own experience and investigation, desires to discuss some of the causes of this state of affairs and to suggest some common-sense remedies.

A New Orientation. Before we can expect good English both teachers and pupils, together with the public interested in educational affairs, must orient themselves anew concerning the origin and development of their mother-tongue. The study of English seems about the last place to feel the full effect of the Darwinian revolution. With wonderful obstinacy it keeps its face towards the setting instead of the rising sun, towards the past rather than the future. It would be a decided advantage were every teacher compelled to take a course in modern Chinese instead of in ancient Greek, for then he would possess some useful knowledge about the form of human speech most akin, psychologically, to his own and not so much useless lumber concerning that one most remote from it. Herein lies the essence of the new orientation. Let us study English in its relation to the only tongues that can ever compete with

it for the mastery of the world,—Russian, Chinese, Japanese. The recognition of the psychological kinship of English and Chinese in particular may be of more moment to the race than was the discovery of the linguistic unity of the Aryan of the Indus and of the Thames. The Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit aspects of English have been fearfully overdone. We must exorcise the ghost of Max Müller and hold our *tête-à-tête* with the living yellow man who clings to his speech and propagates his kind so well. We can be very sure he will still be numerous and interesting when the last English grammar has been written. A course in Chinese will reveal to the teacher in convincing fashion that his language is a vehicle of thought and not a museum of grammar, and that, in matters of speech, the brains of 400,000,000 Mongolians and 100,000,000 Anglo-Saxons have moved upon remarkably similar lines representing, psychologically, the high-water mark of human achievement. This is the best antidote for the classical nostrum,—to be taken *quant. suff.* The study of English must be keyed to the *future* not to the *past*.

A Broader Field of Comparison. Some of the poor character of English teaching is certainly due to limitation of the field of comparison. The individuality of the mother-tongue has been lost sight of and its special virtues underestimated by the long-continued over-valuation of the merely formal qualities of Greek and Latin. A like effect has been produced by what Lenz calls the “deification” of Sanskrit. Under the pernicious influence of the classicists, the so-called “modern languages” of continental Europe have been simply pitied or despised, until the crying needs of commerce and world-politics forced them into the educational field. The neglect of the other living languages of mankind has been absolute,—the new facts gained from the investigation of Asiatic and American Indian families of speech have not yet come into the ken of the “expert” in English, who is woefully ignorant of the general principles of linguistic evolution and often the exponent of some artificial system of instruction in which the grammar, the dictionary and the text-book take the place of living thought and its genial expression. A good waking up of the teacher along this line is absolutely necessary. Some up-to-date discussion of the essentials of comparative philology should find a place in every normal school, and as much of it as can be readily understood be given to the pupils in every high school. Then we will not find a graduate of one of the best high schools in Massachusetts leaving its halls under the impression that English is a descendant of modern High German, or believing that *all* new words in the language *must* be derived

from Greek or Latin. The calamitous effect of such ideas upon the use of English as a tool of thought is only too apparent.

No Language a Model for Another. It is an idea born of methods of monks and pedants that the Latins and the Hellenes in laying the foundations of their own languages were intent upon improving the style of modern English. Every tongue is *sui generis* as a factor in human evolution. English in this respect is absolutely independent of Greek and Latin, whose contributions were in no way foreordained or predestined for the purpose of eking out the time of the grade-school and teaching young Americans how to read, write and speak their mother-tongue. For the ordinary boy and girl the inflections and conjugations of the classical languages are simply a millstone around the neck,—English has decreed that they be “cast as rubbish to the void,” and our language should be taught as it is and not as if it were a Greek or Latin dialect. Its progress as a form of speech practically without inflection should be the important thing, not the minute dissection of the skins it has sloughed off, the organs it has reduced to innocuous desuetude. What makes English English outweighs the relics of its earlier days. Not the fossil grammar, but the living speech, is matter for education. One will write and speak his language better when his attention is given to that towards which it is moving rather than to that from which it has broken away. Some information about the bed-fellow in the next lodging-house is better than a plethora of detail about the one in the last.

Latin not the Basis of English. Latin has no more shaped the English tongue than Rome has built the Saxon heart or made the Saxon arm. English grammar is soundly Anglo-Saxon run through the sieve of a mind that never had a Latin bent. The good red blood of the vocabulary is Saxon too. After 1,500 years of subjection to Latin influence English is still English. Soldier, churchman, *littérateur*, statesman, scientist, have in succession been the advocates of Latin, but in vain. It has always been Mrs. Partington engaged in the same old attempt to turn the tide with a broom. From the unfathomable depths of the Teutonic ocean has come the mighty rush of waters overwhelming the Latin shallows and treating them to a bath of good Saxon brine. All the Latin in modern English is thus pretty well pickled. Before it went into the brine, too, every bit of Latin had the Anglo-Saxon meat-inspector's mark put on it. And a good many carcasses went to the soap-factory. The teacher of English needs to know that Latin has no skeleton-key by which to open the doors of English at will. To-day Latin can enter English speech only by the same door through which come Russian, Persian, Ameri-

can Indian, Chinese and Malay. It is quite useless for Latin to try to steal a march while the long line is waiting, for the heart and soul of English are very democratic, and, when competitors, Latin counts for no more than Choctaw. It is the English thought, not the Latin garb, that is master of the situation. The test is service to a living tongue of the twentieth century, not homage or shelter to the wandering manes of dead vocabularies, or unquiet ghosts of languages wearying of the linguistic Hades and seeking for some real live incarnation among the thoughts of man. Latin, like every other tongue, is clay in the hands of the English potter. And he has more than one wheel to shape it upon. Spelling, pronunciation, form, meaning, etc., all these turn beneath his skillful hand. Who would recognize in *jill* the descendant of *Juliana*, or in *cab* the offspring of *caper* ("he goat")? Why if Latin be so indispensable to modern English, has it (or Greek) not furnished substitutes for words like these: *Boycott, tariff, gong, caucus, taboo, totem, tattoo, cannibal, Tammany, bazaar, boomerang, hammock, hurricane, curari, guano, shampoo, cabal, mammon*, etc.? For the simple reason that the Roman and the Greek mind never saw or felt some of these things as we see and feel them, and our language is strong enough to pick and choose from the living, not borrow perforce from the dead tongues of earth. The classicists are shocked at the ease with which English *Sprachgefühl* discovers these words and at the difficulty they meet in getting their own book-made terms adopted. They forget that English has no grammar wherewith to shackle any word. No armor to protect it, no ornament to deck it out with save thought only. To English the Latin and Greek arsenal of gender, case, inflection, conjugation, etc., is a sort of Nuremberg torture-chamber representing the Dark Ages of language when pious and bigoted literary inquisitioners sought to convert all words, all languages, into some sort of orthodox Latinity. But speech no less than faith, had its Luther. What a wail went up from the classicists, who claimed to be the guardians of "pure English," when the word *sociology* was coined and successfully floated. Their loud protests against hybridism in compound terms only emphasized the fact that neither of their boasted model-languages could alone furnish the needed expression, so English, scorning the grammarian's limitations, took part from each and the new word appeared to designate a new and important branch of the science of man. The heart of English is still English. John-sonese is dead. Macaulayesque is moribund even in our high schools where it has so long found shelter. Paragraphing may occasionally galvanize the ghost and make it walk a little, but, save where the English manufactured by teachers of English

and written by men of science whom they have taught still lags superfluous on the stage, the English born of Latin imitation is on the way to decent interment. The greatest English of any century was written by one who knew "small Latin and less Greek," and the best English of our day by some who knew still less of both. If the teacher wants to see how English English can be, let him look at this little poem by F. W. Bourdillon:

"The night has a thousand eyes,
And the day but one;
Yet the light of the bright world dies
With the dying sun.

"The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one;
Yet the light of a whole life dies
When love is done."

Not a single word of Latin or Greek origin does this poem contain, and yet it seems to be pretty good English. And if the teachers would read the English Bible more and the Sunday newspaper less they would discover plenty more good English in which the Latin and Greek words are few and far between. The teacher needs to recognize that while Latin and Greek may add to the dictionary words that are there only by the mistaken efforts of men of science, who bury in such ceremonies the knowledge they have so laboriously acquired, they are but the "painted show," the real drama of life goes on in English,—it is the Saxon heart of English that is given "life more abundantly." Latin and Greek are incidents or accidents, not necessities, of our mother-tongue.

Full Use should be Made of the Evolutionary Aspect of English. No language in the world illustrates so well the development of human speech in harmony with the evolution of a great individual civilization. It has more than a thousand years of documented history from King Alfred to Goldwin Smith, from Caedmon to Kipling, from the oldest Saxon to the newest American. Here we have the whole progress of a language from the inflectional wealth of the Old English to the half dozen or more endings to which this has shrunk in the speech of to-day. And the verb has gained like the noun. Modern English believes in the preposition and the small particle against the long ending and the Latin verb. On every hand it has sought correlation with the world of thought, not with the form-land of the school-men. Language and literature alike are evolving to this end. Touched by Celt, Roman, Norman, and Frenchman, the spoken word and the written have progressed along paths peculiarly their own, and the giant figure of Shakespeare, no less than the speech of his people, is unique

among men. With the Celt and the Saxon English has sounded the depth of inter-racial conflict, with Englishman and Norman it has fought the battles of democracy and aristocracy, with the Tudors it has felt the emancipation of religion; later still it was with the evolution of the modern parliamentary system, as before it was present at its birth; and in the wake of New World discovery it has builded a Greater England over-sea, and circled the globe with its commerce, while multitudes in every continent and sea make it more and more *the* living language of mankind. All this the teacher of English should know, and as much of it as he can, he ought to teach. English as an object-lesson in human evolution is better than English shackled to the grammar and the dictionary.

The Democracy of English must be Recognized. Hitherto English has been taught as if it were an aristocracy for which youth (always so democratic) needed to be prepared. The core of a language is common to its men, women, and children,—children at play, women at work, men at their ordinary tasks, these are the makers and keepers of the speech that lives. Women, the guardians of the child, were the first shapers and transmitters of language. A few words sufficed the hunter, cunningly tracking the wild beast to his lair, or stealthily seeking the scalp of his foe. Woman, over the cradle, where life, not death, was inspiring her, caught innumerable sounds from the lips of infancy, and gave them place in the *mother-tongue*, which the laconic father was only too ready to accept. Of all things it ill becomes women-teachers to Latinize English; the Saxon heart of it is theirs by an inalienable birth-right. Since the very beginnings of our language the mother and her child have been together, and English is Saxon still. Take out of English but a single series of words (all woman's own by genial labor in the past),—*sow, sew, sweep, spin, weave, grind, wind, wash, bake*, etc.,—and what a void there is! And how many of the slang terms that ultimately find lodgment in the best dictionaries were coined by the child of the street! The teacher must cease to look upon English as something to be shaped and regulated for an aristocracy of men, and come to see that it is the tool of the democracy of men, women, and children, whose title to its use is far sounder than the decree of any pedagogic college of heraldry.

King Grammar must be Dethroned. By some strange accident the democracy of English is still subject to a king, whose tottering authority the great body of teachers, unable to break away from old traditions, chivalrously uphold. And this king is no Saxon monarch, but a tyrant of the books tracing his dynasty back to the days when the Latin school-men ruled supreme. What is needed is a good, healthy declaration of

independence and the relegation to the lumber-yard of the Latin grammars and their imitations. The teacher must see that English is to be taught as English, and not as if it were a Latin dialect. He must wake up to the real meaning of the fact that only by a supreme effort is Latin now used in the city of Rome itself, while a score of cities as important as the one by Tiber's side have sprung up in all parts of the world whose common speech is the once despised English. England once supplied oysters and slaves for the Roman emperors, now she has girdled the globe with a tongue, the record of whose thoughts and dreams requires a lexicon nearly fifty times as large as that which interprets all there is left of the prose and verse of her would-be Latin masters. It is to this larger democracy of the future, and not to the limited aristocracy of the past, that the teacher should swear allegiance. When, at the Council of Constance in 1414, the Emperor Sigismund was rebuked by the Cardinal Placentius for using a neuter noun as feminine he replied, "I am King of the Romans, and above grammar." And the way in which the various Romance languages have treated the neuter nouns they borrowed from Latin showed that they too were "above grammar," and indicates what they would have done further in this matter had not the school-men interfered. Four hundred years later a president of the United States (no less a man than Jefferson) went on record in these words "Where strictness of grammar does not weaken expression it should be attended to. But where, by small grammatical negligence the energy of an idea is condensed, or a word stands for a sentence, I hold grammatical rigor in contempt." But the users of English must be prepared to go farther than the Emperor and the President. And their poets point the way. Whitman in rude and Browning in more artistic fashion are the poets of democracy whose deliberate violations of grammar ask and need no excuse. The school-men may cavil and murmur as they please, but these prophets represent the future democracy foresworn of its allegiance to king grammar and speaking free men's thoughts as free men should. With such, the language shall come to its own, and thought, not form, be master of its destinies. The teacher should remember that while poets are akin to the gods, the grammarian is least among the sons of men. The poet thinks the thought of God after Him, the grammarian shackles the thought of man with fetters he has made himself.

Poetry must not be Made into Prose. Poetry is the greatest possession of man. All language was once poetry, and most of it would be now if it were not for the petty dissections of the modern grammalogue. In spite of the ancient philosopher who wanted to exclude them from his ideal republic the poets still

live, and the little children love them as of old. Poetry is as eternal as childhood itself. It will never die out as long as generation after generation continues to produce fathers and mothers and the never-ending chain of children links past, present and future into one. President Eliot would teach all,—religion, morals, civics,—by poetry. Men of science like President Hall are of like opinion. So, too, students of nature, like Burroughs, who hold that poetry itself is sufficient without the brand of the teacher upon it. They are right. Give the children poetry fresh from the hands of genius and of God. Let there be no tampering with it. Hands off grammarian and re-toucher! Of all criminals the worst is the teacher who wants the child-like thoughts of genius transmuted into his own adult commonplaceness. Paraphrasing is a sin against the Holy Ghost. It has done more than any other single thing to kill the instinct for good English. Its very name should be anathema. We have barrels of sermons, bushels of orations, and books innumerable treating of the birth of American liberty, but who does not turn to the poet for the best word of all? And yet a teacher will set a pupil to paraphrasing this holy scripture, for such it is. Such action is utter sacrilege. A teacher who demands this is worse than any savage or barbarian. Emerson's immortal hymn ought at least to be freed from the Cossacks of the school. Over Shakespeare's grave we read:

“ Good Friend, for Jesus sake forbear
To digg the dust enclosed heare;
Bleste be the man that spares thes stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.”

This of the dead body of the poet. What words shall frame the blessing and the curse for those who have to do with the living body of the poet, the part of him that can never die?

The teacher of English ought above all to know good English when he sees it, and to be wise enough to let it alone. It will sing itself into the hearts of the young without his organ of adulteration.