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Mental Gymnastic

W. H. D. Rouse

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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTIONS

MENTAL GYMNASTIC.

IN Mr. Lyttelton's paper on Latin Composition (*C.R.* p. 161) I was delighted once more to see our old friend Mental Gymnastic re-appear. I have myself made him show his paces on occasion, have even ridden him over a course; and it gave me real pleasure to see how well he kept his form with another jockey up. In the same stable are other animals no less useful: the Blank Sheet of Paper is one, Intellectual Digestion is another, and others are named from agricultural processes. The advantage of having a good choice in the stable is, that if one horse turns out a roarer, or grunts at the stick, or refuses his fences, hey presto with the skip of a circus rider you are on another.

I am afraid that this riot of metaphor will seem flippant to some; but it has beneath it a motive as solemn as anyone could wish, the desire to be free from the tyranny of metaphor. When I see how confidently metaphors are brought forward as if they were arguments, it makes me very solemn. Our language is full of dead metaphors which mean nothing at all, and only serve to obscure facts; and if one metaphor happens to have a little life in it, someone is sure to produce it in place of an argument.

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Take for instance this metaphor of Gymnastic, and translate into it the other terms of the comparison. Mental Gymnastic in Latin is assumed to be useful if 33 per cent. of the Latin—or let us be generous and say half—be correct. Now the Latin is the medium of the gymnastic. Let us see what would happen if the Gymnastic were physical. Take, for example, the gymnast's exercise on the horizontal bar: what would be the value of the gymnast, if in circling round the bar, every other time he should fall off on his head? True, he must often come short in learning, and even fall sometimes perhaps; but we are concerned with the finished product, the practised gymnast on the one hand, and the Latinist in examination on the other.

Now I think it will be agreed that gymnastic exercises which are found to be useful are so graduated that each step is quite possible for the learner to take, that few save trifling mistakes are made in practice, and that the average learner after practice can do these exercises without serious mistakes. Far otherwise is it with the accepted Mental Gymnastic: the steps are too difficult for the average learner, mistakes are generally inevitable, and the average learner (with

luck) gets 33 per cent. In physical gymnastic perfection is the aim, and up to varying standards is possible for all except the deformed or deficient; in mental gymnastic why should the rule be different? If it is different, the metaphor is misleading; for it is not like that to which it is compared.

But I do not base my argument on metaphor at all. Let us get down to facts. Instead of saying gymnastic, suppose we say practice: my idea is that practice runs through the whole work; only some think, or at least assume, that practice in making mistakes is in itself a desirable thing. Mistakes must be made, of course; but they are wholly bad, and only to be tolerated if they cannot be avoided. Now the aim of the teacher should be, I think, to make the mistakes as few as possible, and if he can, to do away with them altogether. What good there can be in any work which consists of 67 per cent. of mistakes I cannot see. How can it 'stimulate clearness of thought' to use expressions habitually that do not express thought clearly? A sentence which uses the nominative case where the accusative is right does not express thought clearly; and one that shows a gap where a word ought to stand does not express thought at all. The scheme that I sketched was meant to avoid such mistakes; and if through the weakness of human nature mistakes should be made, it ensured that these should be open to instant correction, in such a manner and with such a tone that the correction should produce a stronger impression than the mistake; whilst the writing should be kept for fixing the correct impression. Moreover, by use of question and answer,

the attention is kept upon one point at a time, the correct expression being supplied for the rest; now it may be the order of words, again it may be the change of person or number, and by degrees more and more may be expected, until the learner is able to understand and to express a wide range of thought without mistake. This is what I hold to be the true mental gymnastic, which by a constant succession of exercises, each demanding a distinct mental effort, yet each within the powers of the learner if he makes the effort, makes him day by day better able to express his thoughts clearly and accurately.

And the power to do this is what I mean by power to use a language; but the practice by which we get it is surely not an end, but only a means. Having then by this means of graduated practice gained this power, we are in a position to appreciate the literary qualities of the language, but not before. To have literary feeling, intellectual understanding is first necessary. The foundations have indeed been laid already; when it became clear, as it did almost in the first lesson of Latin, that the order of words must be changed in each answer to suit the point of the question, the main principle of Latin style was thereby taught; but there remain the distinction of synonyms, and the infinite connotations and suggestions of words: these only become clear with much knowledge, and knowledge of a kind that cannot be got from the misuse of words. The two objects which I assumed in my paper are thus seen to be two steps in one process; mental gymnastic, a permanent condition of both.

W. H. D. ROUSE.

A PORTRAIT OF THE REX NEMORENSIS.

DURING the excavations which the late Lord Savile carried on at Nemi in 1885, a double head was found. The original fell to the share of Prince Orsini upon whose land the excavations were made. There is a cast, however, in the Nemi collection which Lord Savile presented to the Castle Museum, Nottingham; and the illustrations are taken from

photographs of the cast.¹ Up to the present time, the two heads have been taken to represent two water-spirits, perhaps the personifications of the neighbouring lakes of Nemi and Albano. This was the view of

¹ These photographs I owe to the courtesy of Mr. G. H. Wallis, Curator of the Castle Museum, Nottingham.