

## ON TEACHING ENGLISH.

BY FRANCIS W. NEWMAN.

IT is fifty years since the University of London was planned. Already the complaint was heard among the reformers of education, that the English language did not receive due attention; that it ought to be practised and studied as a substantive object, and with this view a Professor of English ought to be appointed. The actual result has been, a Professor of both the English language and the English literature: but as regards the cultivation of the language there is little to boast of. When at length, some ten years later, the present University arose, and the earlier University took the surname of College, the London examination papers in English were far more learned than beneficial; inasmuch as to call forth the remark from an eminent scholar, that to answer the questions in English, a student ought to be familiar with *Mæso-Gothic*. Practical power over the language was not cultivated, nor delicate appreciation of the distinctions of words and force of composition; but mere theory and historical erudition.

The older doctrine, upheld by such accomplished men as Dr. Coplestone, afterwards Bishop of Landaff, and Dr. Arnold, head of Rugby School, was, that English grammar is best understood by *contrast* with some other language whose grammar is more complex; and that English composition has its best exercise in careful translation from such a language. For this very purpose, it was urged, the Latin, which is our ordinary school-basis, is admirably suited; because, first, as used by its best writers, it is signally concise; next, it is nobly free from that vice imported by the Middle Age schoolmen into our mo-

dern tongues—the excessive use of abstract terms. Latin loves concrete expression, and works by the finite verb rather than by the infinitive and by verbal nouns: hence simplicity and energy. Further, its power of transposition enables it so to arrange words that the emphasis of a sentence shall fall just where it ought. This excellence we can but imperfectly attain in English; but by the practice of translation the student learns to aim at it so far as our language allows. On the contrary, the French naturally subsides into the true logical order. Whately, intimate friend and almost co-adjutor of Coplestone, illustrates this well in his *Rhetoric*, by observing that our ‘Great is Diana of the Ephesians,’ becomes in a French version, ‘Diana of the Ephesians is a great goddess.’ To place the negative particle where it will have its full energy, is in our idiom thoroughly native, as, ‘Never shall I believe,’ which the half-educated would explode, and use only, ‘I shall never believe.’ If it be true, as some say, that familiarity with French saps the energy of English, and that few writers attain our best style without some cultivation of Latin, a good case is made out for the old Oxford doctrine.

But the doctrine, true or false, has no place in our primary schools. No one now contends that Latin should be taught universally, that Grammar Schools ought still to mean Latin schools, or indeed that into the most elementary teaching some foreign language ought to enter. Thus we are driven back into the necessity of either not teaching English at all, but taking for granted that it will be sufficiently picked up out of school, or

else teaching it on a purely English basis. Must we thence infer that to teach the theory of its grammar—simple and meagre as it is—or to teach the irregularities of spelling, is our main business? We might answer this from the case of the old Athenians. Greeks learnt no language but their own in the ordinary course of high education. That before the time of Pericles the theory of their own grammar was unknown to the Athenians, may be safely inferred from the fact of which Aristotle informs us, that Protagoras was the first to teach them that Greek had three genders, masculine, feminine, and neuter. To recite poetry to the lyre, and pronounce every word distinctly and accurately, was the accomplishment first coveted. The noblest poetry was selected—especially that of Solon, Simonides, and Theognis—for moral culture, besides Homer and Hesiod. Pindar and Æschylus were probably rarer, by reason of their greater difficulty. Thus far it is evident at what they aimed; which surely ought to be our aim also:—to impart a correct pronunciation and a practical knowledge of their high poetry:—to cultivate the taste, the moral sentiment, and an ample knowledge of noble words:—to extirpate plebeian utterance, coarse, obscure, or inaccurate, and awake the power of relishing and even criticising high compositions. The common Athenian citizens are said to have attained the last-named power to a remarkable extent, though it is far from certain that they could read fluently, and almost certain that they were void of grammatical theory. Grammar was a practical art, not a philosophy. It aimed at correct speaking as its end, not in accounting for the forms of words through historical erudition. The first great prose writer, Thucydides (who with Protagoras was about co-oval with Pericles), is a very clumsy com-

poser; but in the next generation, Euripides and Xenophon show signally the improvement from the new grammatical training: and Aristotle's allusions hardly let us doubt, that it included a sedulous instruction in the precise meaning of words, in the distinction of poetical and ordinary phrase, also of high style and low, so as to avoid alike bombast, affectation, and meanness. Surely nothing short of learning these things is to learn a language. To the vast mass of a nation,—even now, when print is so voluminous and letter writing so common,—to understand the sense of words well, and the delicate shades of meaning, and to have them at hand for use in *speech*, is vastly more important than to be able to *write* them down with the received orthography. Of course a right knowledge of irregular verbs is essential: and the contrast of *I* and *me*, *thou* and *thee*, *he* and *him*, *she* and *her*, *we* and *us*, *they* and *them*, if due advantage be taken of these pronouns, easily leads the pupil to understand the contrast of nominative and accusative in nouns also. A wrong use of the pronouns being a prevalent error, it ought to receive primary attention for itself, as well as for its utility in giving aid beyond itself. To *speak* rightly is the first accomplishment at which we ought to aim.

May it not appear that in our paper-examinations (whether for the Civil Service or in our primary schools) we are proceeding as though the main effort were to train everyone to become an essay-writer or penny-a-line scribbler? Those who desire to revolutionise our spelling, and to write *nashum* for *nation*, appear totally to misunderstand *why* bad spelling is thought disgraceful. They ridicule severity against it as absurd; and at the same time themselves make it out to be so great an evil, that we ought to consent to a total

change of writing in order to enable our millions to avoid it. Manifestly (though they overlook this) it is held for certain by the public that one who spells common words *ill has read very little English*. This is why they are severe on the error. Next, it is urged on us that Sir Walter Scott perpetrated several false spellings in a few lines of MS. If this be ever so true, it is nothing to the point; for we have abundant proof that Sir Walter was peculiarly learned, not only in modern literature, but in numberless old ballads and legends. His very erudition may have so familiarised him (as other antiquaries) with spellings which we now reject, that his eye was (what one may call) vitiated. At the same time, until the words said to be misspelt are produced, we cannot tell but that he wrote deliberately, and held a different judgment from certain dictionaries which have been set up as a standard.<sup>1</sup> But this is to digress. The thing now urged, is, that to know English aright is a far greater and nobler acquirement than these gentlemen (English or American) seem to be aware. They set up the miserably low standard of spelling aright, as though to attain it were to attain a high result; and next, think to win that high result by altering our spelling. But the children thus accommodated would not hereby learn the English language in any worthy sense: at best they would, from mere *hearing* of a word, write it down more easily. But (it is calculated) not one-third of our written language is familiarly spoken. The children would thus only learn (what in the East is called) the language of the bazaar; and in the endeavour to enlarge their vocabulary by reading our printed literature

they would be more embarrassed than now.

I insist, that one who teaches English has primarily to teach—  
 1. A pure pronunciation, according to the most correct standard; 2. An ample vocabulary; 3. An accurate knowledge of the distinction of words which approach in sense; 4. A delicate sense of the suitability of words for different styles; 5 (what is most arduous of all because it implies a general cultivation of the mind, and therefore cannot be taught to children, nor indeed to any but advanced pupils). A rapid choice of fitting words, and an arrangement of them in well-measured sentences, without complexity and without monotony.

The first topic, a pure and correct pronunciation, can be imparted up to a certain point; and even so, while imperfect, it is of great value. It cannot be *perfect* until we come to some compromise and agreement between North, Middle, and South England, also between England, Scotland, and Ireland. This is a very considerable and difficult work, which must be done *before* it can be worth while to adopt any wide reorganising of our spelling. Nevertheless, it would be a very great gain to teach in every primary school the elements of *clear articulation*. In Derbyshire *water* may be heard sounded as *waiter*. Ludicrous as this seems, it is but an isolated oddity. To correct it, is less important than to tune the ear to distinguish, and the tongue to utter rightly, the pure English sounds of *au* and *ai*: to insist on a due opening of the lips, and a smooth utterance of vowels, a full enunciation also of consonants opposed to all mumbling, and without any provincial coarseness or

<sup>1</sup> The present writer frequently has much difficulty in getting printers to print *tiro*, *Sybil*, *indispensable*, *Nicolas*, which they wrongly change into *tyro*, *Sybil*, *indispensible*, *Nicholas*. Other words might be added.

superfluity and peculiarity of sound suitable only to utterances of passion. This first aim of the teacher belongs properly to elocution, cultivating the ear and the tongue: those which have been recounted after it are purely mental; but all strictly belong to a knowledge and power over our language, all are more valuable than the correct spelling, especially of words foreign in origin and little used by children and simple people. If inspectors of schools pick out words not current with young people and demand that they be spelt correctly, no one need wonder at their reporting very poor success. To require children to spell words which they do not familiarly hear and read, is an error akin to that of expecting them to reduce a puzzling complication of fractions—a problem which does not meet them in the market. Inspection and examinations are intended to guide judicious teaching, but if the questions proposed be injudicious, they may hurtfully misdirect teaching. Children ought to have access to pleasant story books which they will read voluntarily, then those who read much will not go far wrong in the spelling of familiar words. An immense range is open for contrasting and discriminating words so as to fix distinctions in the mind. Simple, well-chosen poetry, not too philosophical or abstract, will refine the taste, while it extends knowledge of the language and imparts a sense of rhythm and emphasis. Failure marks the present schools, and will not be removed if the right spelling of unfamiliar words is made a substantive object; because it is dry, repulsive, and cannot interest children. To kindle a love of learning is the only way to elicit from them active effort. They

above all need popular teaching, as little scholastic as may be.

In the last fifty years a great change (which to the present writer seems lamentable) has been made in the teaching of Latin; namely, *learning by heart*, which used to be most extensively imposed, is all but given up; boys are taught less orally, more by book; far more *writing* is exacted of them; and the aim has less been to insure a wide and correct knowledge of the vocabulary and a practical mastery of the syntax, than to gain insight how it has been built up; concerning which our scholars know much more than did Cicero and Virgil. Especially zeal for examinations, and the idea that all excellencies and all mistakes can be valued numerically (a bright idea which has come from Cambridge), has led to a supreme trust in paper work, and has all but exploded oral examination. This system now spreads as a leprosy over the country, and is even said to impair the sight of young pupils. There is reason for much jealousy lest the primary schools be infected by it, so far as the different circumstances admit. One might be glad to know how much of popular and valuable English poetry the children learn by heart; whether as much as Athenian boys learnt of Solon's: how much pains is taken to make them pronounce every word correctly, without a confused plebeian squeak or drawl: how far the teacher aims at leading them to choose simple words and use them rightly, and to avoid vulgar slang. On this whole subject it is easier to conjecture than to know; but the very unsatisfactory reports of inspectors justify a suspicion that the teaching is conducted on unwise principles.

