II

IS THE ABILITY TO USE AND ENJOY GOOD ENGLISH ONE OF YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS?

Whatever your attitude towards Coueism may be, you are probably normal enough to make some sort of self-analysis at times. If you have had even very modest educational advantages, you are no doubt ambitious to be classed among the American intelligentsia. As, however, not only your native intelligence, but your educational achievement and consequent vocational fitness are capable of very exact measurement, has it ever occurred to you to determine your rating in the greatest and rarest of all accomplishments, the fine art of joy-giving expression and delicate appreciation of finished literary products? Have the years you have spent in a more or less painstaking study of your own language brought you the satisfaction of the use and enjoyment of good English? Whether you will ever understand just what is meant by this or not, it is the consensus of the critically-equipped that you cannot comfort yourself with the consolation of the weak, that this, like many other attributes you may have once aspired to, is a gift for the favored few; it is, on the contrary, an accomplishment admittedly within the reach of any one of average intelligence.

It has ever been a source of extreme irritation to people with only the mildest pretense to culture, that the more exquisite literary productions, the really great poems, the splendid specimens of oratory, and the masterpieces of prose description, are rarely popular; the words “classic” and “standard” are interpreted quite generally as “beware!” The discussion of that nebulous and variously interpreted quality known as “style,” moreover, is not current even among “would-be intellectuals,” except as an occasional and indefinite reflection of some critic’s printed estimate of a work. Yet, as sad a commentary upon our schools as is the failure to teach the use and enjoyment of good English, the apparently inevitable lack, to which we become so easily reconciled, is a matter which can be remedied, in the first instance, by the development of a penetrative appreciation of words. The unnecessary handicap of a limited vocabulary, with only the shallowest surface meanings attached to the comparatively few words having at all definite meanings, the slight suggestiveness, or connotative value of language, and a positive fear of new words—all make reading, writing, or speaking more of an effort than a pleasure. Hence the idea in the popular mind that these be mysteries beyond my ken, when in reality the same principles applied to any other art will bring the mastery so essential to the highest enjoyment of so many of life’s best relationships.

The venerable art critic, John Ruskin, in trying to put into the lives of the working people of his day something more than the daily routine of the household and the shop, was accustomed to emphasize in his addresses the values of reading. He told an audience of young people on one occasion, however, that they might read all the books in the British Museum and yet remain utterly illiterate; but that, if they read ten pages of a good book in the right way, they would forever afterwards be in some sense educated men and women. In this “right way” he stressed the need of getting into the habit of looking closely at words, of becoming “learned in the peerage of words.”

Among the more deplorable consequences of an evergrowing freedom of election in studies, the loss of sensitiveness to the fineness and accord of thought and expression, resulting from a neglect of language studies, is forcibly impressed upon the observer of current English usage. Despite such warnings as that of the historian Mommsen, to the effect that “language lies at the root of all mental cultivation,” and Percival Chubb’s anything but mild suggestion that what we need is more “linguistic pride” and a better developed “linguistic conscience,” those in charge of our pre-university courses of study have yielded more and more to the clamor of the educational get-rich-quick advocates; and all time-consuming subjects have been replaced with such as can lay claim to immediately practical values. Thus, the exquisite Greek; the Latin, without which no literary scholarship is possible; the Anglo-Saxon, the fountain-head of our every-day speech and the sine qua non of appreciation of the grammar of our language; and finally the
German, the modern synthetic representative of the classics, under the urge of immediacy have been dropped. An advocate of a return to these alone as the source of educational material would be properly classed with the anti-evolutionists and be correctly dubbed a medievalist. But it seems equally true that the extremes to which educators are so prone to go in their acclaim of anything new that promises to lead them to their poorly defined ideal have now carried them too far away from some of the best educational possibilities, and those, too, that have stood better tests than many of our recent educational aggravations. The French and the Spanish, it is true, are retained as electives, but for reasons that are educationally fantastic, inasmuch as they are of the same analytic type as our own language and furnish a minimum of language training. There is little wonder, in consequence of such chaos of inexpert opinion as to the educationally worth-while, that the sprachgefühl and the klangfarbe, real sensings of linguistic values, are as completely lost as the charm of these once significant terms.

Pleas for the classics are falling more and more upon minds made up as to the merits of the so-called "cultural training": the demand for an education that will enable students to "get somewhere" is more insistent than the desire to be something when they arrive. Except for occasional survivals, resulting from forceful enthusiasts or the die-hard spirit of those whose life-work is being taken from them, the classics have lost their once honorable position in the curriculum of preparatory schools. Whether or not this extreme attitude is an educational folly, it is just as well for us to adjust ourselves to the inevitable and to seek a substitute that will save as much of the old values as possible. The claims of the classics as language training can be, to a very surprising extent, met by the right sort of study of our own language.

The essential principle of language study consists in finding out what words say. Every word has, besides its dictionary meanings,—its mere denotation,—its own life history, and enshrines customs and habits of thought; it may contain a poem, an emotion of splendid worth, and frequently indicates a morality of a clearness that is beyond gainsaying. When a language hides the ugliness of facts with a striking beauty of terminology, as is an occasional occurrence even among twentieth century peoples, a prominent characteristic of the nation finds its expression; and when a language lacks words for certain virtues, it is because the nation speaking the language lacks those virtues. The soul of an individual or of a nation finds, despite itself, sooner or later an expression of its true being. Words really mean what they say; but, as was the case with Shelley's musical instrument,

(A word) .............will not tell
To those who can not question well
The spirit that inhabits it;
It talks according to the wit
Of its companions; and no more
Is heard than has been felt before.”

Language, in reality, is a veritable storehouse of knowledge; and when words speak to the master of language, with complete and exact meaning, they bring him the rich offerings of their varied history, with their connotations, suggestive not only of their direct associations with his past, but also of their own life history. When the special shade of meaning of a particularly significant word is grasped, with the exact import of its delicate blending of root and affixes, then it becomes apparent that language is indeed the most artistic creation of the mind of man. The word “fate,” as the irrevocable word, or thing spoken, as its Latin original denotes, represents no accidental association, but rather a justified notion based on the experience of the race. Our own Anglo-Saxon word comes to us from the name and function of the great over-brooding deity, Wyrd, whose decrees bind both gods and men.

The mastery of English is not only the mastery of a fine art, with its consequent disciplinary values; it has a decidedly practical advantage; and whatever may be one's vocation, the power to appreciate and express will largely determine the individual's success in his calling. Language is, moreover, not merely an instrument that we find useful in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge: a value of tremendous weight lies in language as an effective mind-trainer—little else, indeed, furnishing the same opportunities for the development of analytical powers and logical procedure found here. Gaining facility in the use of language in-
volves the development of the language sense; and language power is related directly to mind power, constituting, in reality, the latter's outward and visible sign. Language is always distinctly and immediately indicative of thought; and the moral and mental life of a man, as truly as is the case with the race, is limited by his language; this paradox, however, is reversible. The development of the language sense, always possible, despite the intellectual predestinarianism advocated by the psychologists, is always accompanied by a development of literary judgment. Literary criticism resolves itself, in its last analysis, into an appreciation of words.

It takes no great stretch of the imagination, therefore, to conceive of language as the highest form of human expression; no other art contains so much of the best thought and the deep realities of life. Archbishop Trench pointed out in his pioneer work in this field that the language of an individual, as well as that of the nation, becomes an index to the social, intellectual, and moral standing of that individual or nation. Assuredly, no better way could be found to judge us than by our words, for our language unmistakably reflects us, as individuals and groups, in every way. "Style is the man" is more nearly the truth when spoken of the dress of one's thoughts than of the dress of one's person. It is particularly unfortunate, therefore, that the value of the study of one's native tongue as a means of bringing about the ends of education should be obscured by the spectacular claims of the educational fads, fancies, and fallacies foisted upon a non-resisting public by obliquely trained school men. No one has yet successfully disputed the dictum, that language is the supreme instrument of education.

The philosophy of effective expression by means of languages resolves itself into finding the right word for the right place; the "how" in speaking and writing is primarily an intelligent choice of words. One sometimes possesses this fine sense of word-values largely as a result of environment and early training; but whether this is true or not, one may accomplish the result desired by schooling himself to it by deliberate effort. However the results may be obtained, good English is born of familiarity; and unmistakably the intellectual, moral, and esthetic qualities of style reflect similar characteristics of mind in the user. The rare quality of scholarly discrimination in the use of synonyms is much to be desired and implies fine analytical powers; but there is a danger of allowing the pursuit of this accomplishment to carry one into purism and pedantry. If ease and graciousness of style must needs be sacrificed for an exquisite precision, we would be better off without the precision. As well as decency, as Cicero would term it, there is also a "what" and a "why" of words, as there is of all other living things; and we may learn to know the various aspects of words as we may learn to know anything else in life. Our method of study should be the same as that applied to any other living organism.

Stripped of the schoolmaster's formalized treatment, effective expression, with its groundwork in a genuine appreciation of words as the vital element of speech, may be reduced to the mastery of three essential principles: namely, making one's self understood, making an impression, and being pleasing. The rhetoricians call these principles clearness, force, and elegance, and gather around them the details that constitute the usual course in rhetoric. As learning to use and appreciate English is a matter of self-cultivation, any one who has the will power may accomplish what he chooses. Guidance is helpful, but not necessary; and not even the best guidance can claim anything like uniform results. But that such an acquirement takes times and effort may be inferred from the fact that the language development of the individual marks the intellectual growth of the man; the compensation comes from the thought that it involves the acquisition of a power, and as such lasts for all time.

That we shall be judged by every word that proceeds out of our mouths has a larger significance than the moral interpretation usually given to it. If your chance acquaintance uses "seen" for "saw," to you it is not merely a bit of bad grammar; an inevitable loss of respect follows; and from that moment on the value of what your acquaintance has to say is measurably discounted by the unfortunate revelation in that little slip. He is an unusually strong personality, if he has not put himself, in your estimation, on the defensive. Why should this be the penalty for exchanging one small word for another, when such an exchange might have been an historical happening and few been the wiser?
The answer lies in the suggestions of the reasons that may be behind the bad English. Refined, cultured people do not make such errors in speech. Though you may try not to let the "little accident" influence you, nevertheless you are conscious that such slips are associated with unfortunate early environment, lack of proper breeding, and even lamentable ignorance; in itself, at any rate, it is an evidence of mental slovenliness and indifference towards the good opinion of others—and possibly it may mean all these things! This is not overstating the case for any one who has developed a susceptibility to good English. Is there any wonder that so much stress should be put upon the correct use of the mother tongue, when one can show himself so completely to his disadvantage by failing to use certain established forms? But one can reveal what he is, as well as what he is not, by the matter and manner of his speech, no less than by the form of it.

School advantages are, unfortunately, by no means a guarantee of pleasing standards of usage; and many who have not had opportunities of suitable training are quite superior to those who have had them. The ability to use and enjoy good English is, we repeat, an accomplishment, and one that rests largely upon self-cultivation. Whether, therefore, the inspiration of intelligent guidance is had or not, the accomplishment rests, first, upon the desire to be effective in speech; then, with the realization that what one gets he must get for himself, the student must become actively interested in the notion of authority. With the use of such opportunities for practice, both in writing and speaking, as are likely to arise, and the constant and critical observation of the usage of the best writers and speakers of our land at the present time, systematic attention to words will inevitably result in the acquirement of a large vocabulary and a consequent power to use it. But it should never be forgotten that "eternal vigilance is the price of good English."

A nation's life, be it remembered, is written in its words. As language is an organism, development is to be assumed; but in no other institution do we feel that a knowledge of its antecedents is unnecessary for a proper appreciation of its present status and relationships. The evolution of the English language, nevertheless, has kept exactly the pace of the development of the nation in all other respects; and the determining influences in the race's intellectual, moral, and physical growth are clearly and definitely indicated in its language from period to period; and, as is the case with other institutions, knowing the present involves an appreciation of its past. The characteristics of the hero of Beowulf, with his consuming desire for individual freedom, his love of glory, his instinctive turning towards nature, his respect for woman, and his deep religious sense, are still the dominant traits of the true descendants of the Anglo-Saxons; and those ideals, enshrined for all time in the language of our forefathers, are present, whether we realize the facts or not, on our lips today. Words have been termed "fossil poetry;" and indeed the rich experiences of some past age are contained in most of the words that we so lightly bandy about, with only a shallow, current meaning for us. The logos, the thought and the word, in all its rich suggestiveness, is preserved for us, and we can know it if we but take the trouble to find out.

The sole impetus of interest will undoubtedly lead us far, but, above all, it will assuredly develop in us the habit of observation and analysis that will eventually result in a subtle appreciation of language, and the power to put exactly what we wish to say in spoken or written language, to the end that others may share our pleasures, understand us, and get our impressions. The use and enjoyment of good English, expressed either as a problem or as a result, is a matter of deliberate self-cultivation, commensurate, not so much with the opportunities one may have had for formal language training, but with the interest and zeal with which one may steadily pursue his aim.

James C. Johnston

Without Plutarch, no library were complete. Can we marvel at his fame, or overestimate the surpassing merits of his writings? It seems as I read as if none before, none since, had written lives, as if he alone were entitled to the name of biographer.—A. Bronson Alcott.