

DISCUSSION.

To the Editor of THE EDUCATIONAL MONTHLY:

SIR,—“Master” will be interested in the following clipping from the *Critic*:

“If there is one peculiarity of expression that I dislike more than another, it is (as I have said before) the omission of the preposition from the phrases ‘sleep at night,’ ‘work by day,’ etc. I recently offered to lay a wager with a cultivated young woman who defended their use, that she could not find higher authority than a certain charming American writer of ‘to-day’ for the monstrosities ‘sleep nights,’ ‘open evenings,’ etc. She did not venture to take me up. If she had done so, I should not have referred to the subject just now; for I have seen, within a few weeks, an extract from a letter of Sir Walter Scott’s, in which the great romancer and good poet remarks that he ‘often *slept nights*’ at Melrose! It is comforting to know that Sir Walter is famous on far other grounds than the purity of his English. It was significant that, during the holidays, the most literary of New York publishers and booksellers called attention to the fact that his shop was ‘Open in the Evening.’”

The reaction against excessive purism as set forth in unscholarly works, like Ayre’s “Verbalist,” has been felt for five years or more. Genung’s list was probably prepared before this reaction set in. There is no doubt that rhetoricians as well as catch-penny book-makers have condemned phrases which are sanctioned by authors of unassailed purity. It is just a trifle ludicrous to find so kindly and sensible a writer as “Lounger” in the *Critic* disgusted by an expression which a poet used without distaste. Recently in

some critical review I noticed a discussion of the question, Is it good English to write an adverb between the parts of a *to*-infinitive? For example, may one say, “to patiently await”? After a few letters it appeared by abundant evidence that nearly all the best prose writers use construction freely.

What I write to suggest is, that questions of usage should be settled by *extensive inductions*. What better work could be done in the great universities than original investigation of the best English prose of the last two centuries for the purpose of settling whether or not the hundred of words and phrases attacked by the purists are or are not stamped with the seal of good taste and good sense by great, broadminded and discriminating authors. Much of this work has been done pretty satisfactorily by the writers of the “Century Dictionary;” but much remains to be done. It would be interesting to know what that scholarly work says concerning the dozen expressions mentioned by “Master.” There is, *me judice*, no authority on such questions more generally satisfactory, or congenial rather, than the *Century*.

In conclusion, may I say that even an excess of purism is good for Canadian pupils. Purism is an excess anyway in men and women, but not in pupils: let them be as critical as you please, they will lose enough of the critical faculty in ten years to leave them merely pure, not puristic. This I venture to hold in spite of the reaction, and in spite of the fact that most of my wisest friends assure me that the opinion is fallacious.

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