

shall not be in the way of any genuine success in this department, until the results of modern philological research shall give us a *wholly new kind of text-book really adapted for instruction in our English speech*. The living waters of the new learning, which are still confined to the upper reservoirs, must be brought down to the lower levels where our children stand open-mouthed and athirst.

I do not propose to enter into any denunciation of our existing English grammars, though to any one who has made a study of English philology, or who has even cast an arrow into its domain (you remember the Parthians used to shoot a preliminary shaft into the territories they proposed afterwards to possess), our grammatical horn-hooks are pitiable enough. You say that their syntax consists of a mass of utterly unintelligible abstractions: and the cause of this is not far to seek. What do our grammars represent? They represent the scholarship of the last century, and I need not tell you that this was before the *science* of language was in existence, for it was before comparative philology, by setting the English tongue in its just historic affiliations with the elder types of speech out of which it grew, had given us the law of its growth; the logic of its forms, and the key to the soul of its grammar.

Our old grammarians were acquainted with one type of tongue—the classical. To them Latin was the ideal of human speech, Latin grammar the archetype on which all other grammars should be constructed. They accordingly addressed themselves, with a painstaking but perverse ingenuity, to the task of adjusting the phenomena of our Saxon speech to the ready-made rules of the classic syntax.

Now, there was one very considerable difficulty inherent in this undertaking, if the grammar-makers had only realized it. Latin is what our modern philologists call a highly “inflected” language that is, it exhibits the syntactical relations of words in a sentence by the agreement of their forms or *inflections*, while the very peculiarity of English is, that it is all but devoid of inflections: hence it is that while the grammatical relations of the parts of speech in a Latin period are quite independent of their position, the fact of position is the very essence of English syntax. However, your Murrys and Harrises were above any trifles of this sort. If English would not exactly fit into the Latin mould, so much the worse for English—it should be made to fit, in the manner of Procrustes’ bed. I think I could show you by an analysis of the syntactical rules in our existing grammars (said grammars being essentially Murray after all) that three-fourths of those rules have no application whatever to English, and are simply the result of the attempt to strain our language into compliance with classic forms. I ask, then, if it is any wonder that you find these rules unintelligible to youth, when, in fact, they are the *laws of relations which do not exist*?

Perhaps it would not be amiss to remark in passing (for the point bears directly on what we are considering), that another lamentable evil resulting from the usurped primacy of the classical languages in our scheme of education, has been the banishment, until lately, from our higher institutions of learning, of the study of English. If our professors have not exactly owned to the theory, they have at any rate acted on the theory that there would be a sort of lapse from dignity if they whose lips have been wont to con the resounding polysyllables in which the Athenian *demoi* talked politics and scandal in the market-place were brought down to the drill and drudgery of mastering our own home-like speech. As might have been expected, the retribution for this aristocratic pedantry, if I may so call it, has overtaken the scholarly class; for plain people can throw it up to us (and with justice, which is the worst of it) that students make bulls in native syntax who would blush to misconstrue Thucydides, that collegians strong in all the paradigms write English after the manner of their washerwomen!

Do not understand me as wishing to underrate Greek and Latin scholarship. I hope I properly value the fine mental discipline to be attained in studying the two noblest languages of antiquity—tongues so rich and plastic in their verbal forms, so ornate in the architecture of their swelling periods. But we may surely divide and discriminate; and if, without crying up one branch of learning for the sake of crying down another, we can readjust our scholastic studies to better accordance with our modern needs,

we shall be doing no more than is our right and duty as thinking men. In this spirit we may justly claim for English philology a place in the scheme of the higher education as honorable as that traditionally accorded to Latin and Greek,—a station on the scholar’s Olympus not lower than that on which the classic muse sits with her garlands and singing-ropes about her.

Happily, this claim is beginning, though but late, to be generously recognized. It is within our own times that a chair of Saxon has been established in venerable Oxford, founded by the Saxon Alfred’s royal love of learning a thousand years ago. In our own country that pregnant movement which we are getting to call the “New Education” has put forth no finer fruit than it has in stimulating a quickened attention to the wealth and worth of our native speech. I rejoice that the study of English has been advanced from the school bench to the auditorium of our universities; and I ask if there could be any more significant expression of the newly realized conviction that English philology is of a value not inferior to the classical philology as an instrument of mental discipline and culture?

The study of English as a science, the study of English in the light of modern linguistics, has already produced, in the United States, results of recognized worth. Thus, Professor March, of Lafayette College, Pennsylvania, has published an admirable Anglo-Saxon Grammar and Anglo-Saxon Reader; and the time is not far off when every freshman class of every American college will be made to go through both. Professor Corson, of Cornell, has rendered the elder monuments of English lore easily and cheaply accessible to all students in his lately issued “Early English Literature.” In his “Science of Language,” Prof. Whitney, of Yale, has brought the philology of the entire range of Indo-European languages to bear on the illustration of the organism of English. And without attempting to enumerate all that has been done, I shall merely recall to your mind the post-graduate course of lectures on the English language, delivered by the Hon. George P. Marsh some years ago, under the auspices of Columbia College, and preserved in permanent form in two volumes octavo, as quite the most valuable contribution made on either side of the Atlantic to the philosophical study of our mother tongue.

“Well, now, I swing back to the thought with which I set out, and if it was not very clear then, I hope it is now sufficiently manifest that we are to seek the renovation and remodeling of our common school of English study, in the extension of the new scholarship down to our elementary text-books, and down to the training received by our teachers in the Normal schools.

What is needed is not, primarily, tinkering at our old-type grammars—why, the ambition of our text-book makers seems to be limited to little flourishes of originality in the way of terminology,—but a thorough reconstruction of the course of English study that shall make THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE itself, and not the abstractions of parsing and analysis the subject of school-drill.

If you ask me for the particulars of such a *magna instauratio* as I have in my mind, I can only answer in the most general way. I believe:

First, that pupils of the lowest grammar school grades (they will have been grounded in the rudiments by means of oral lessons in the English language in the primary grades) shall be introduced to the systematic study of English through a kind of class-book especially adapted to the wants of the scholar during the two lower years of the grammar school course. Such a text-book should be as little as possible like our ordinary formal grammar. It should, in fact, be a series of practical lessons in the English language, omitting sedulously all those purely *theoretical* rules—the invention of our grammarians—that cover points on which there can be no possible mistakes, and concentrating the attention of the pupil on the actual business of writing and speaking English, and so developing, inductively, and from the practical use of English, whatever of formal grammar may be seen to be applicable and of value. For the two upper years of our grammar school course, it is easier to find guides: any of our better grammars will serve, though we are much behind the later English grammarians (as instance, Bain or Adams or Thring) who have been wise enough to draw from the new mines of English opened up through the historical researches into the growth and structure of our tongue.