

For the Review.]

## Notes on English.

## MISUNDERSTANDING AND SOME OTHER THINGS.

Here's a bit of Ruskin I have just been reading:

"A man who uses accurate language is always more liable to misinterpretation than one who is careless in his expressions. We may assume that the latter means very nearly what we at first suppose him to mean, for words which have been uttered without thought may be received without examination. But when a writer or speaker may be fairly supposed to have considered his expressions carefully, and, after having revolved a number of terms in his mind, to have chosen the one which *exactly* means the thing he intends to say, we may be assured that what costs him time to select will require from us time to understand, and that we shall do him wrong, unless we pause to reflect how the word which he has actually employed differs from other words which he *might* have employed. It thus constantly happens that persons themselves unaccustomed to think clearly, or speak correctly, misunderstand a logical and careful writer, and are actually in more danger of being misled by language which is measured and precise than by that which is loose and inaccurate."

I hope my readers will agree with me that this passage is well worth printing in the REVIEW, and I hope, also, that they will be so pleased with me for affording them an opportunity to read it that they will pardon the use I am going to make of it.

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I gather from certain questions that I have been asked that there are some things in the *Notes on English* in the December REVIEW which have been misunderstood by some readers. I was rather surprised at this, for I had taken pains (at least I thought so) to select for the misunderstood passages the very words which I thought would leave least doubt as to what exactly I meant to say. But that extract from Ruskin removes my surprise, and I see now that misunderstanding is the very thing I should have expected from a certain order of minds.

Let me assure these misunderstanding readers that if I had meant to say "I don't know how to give instruction that will produce (certain specified results)," I would have said this instead of the quite different thing which I did say in the first column of page 129. And in the last note—on Gray's use of "has broke," I certainly did not mean to convey the impression that I considered "has broke" good correct English of to-day when I wrote "Perhaps (the editor) only means that 'has broke' is not the form in general use to-day, but surely those that buy the books did not need to be told that."

And so with the other misunderstood matters.

I am afraid that the misunderstanding of what I said on "has broke" rests at bottom on a lack of appreciation of the fact that English is a living language, and that like all living things it is undergoing perpetual change. And I am afraid that many of our teachers have never been taught themselves the importance of this fact. They have been able to pass their own examination in English, and they have succeeded in passing their pupils, without any other knowledge of the language than is to be got from the dogmatic and pedantic school grammars. As a general rule that kind of knowledge does not enable them to understand that what is quite proper in the language of one century may become improper in the language of the next. It was quite proper to say and to write "has broke" in the middle of the eighteenth century because the best writers and speakers of that time spoke so and wrote so. It is not proper to say "has broke" now because our best writers and speakers do not now speak and write so. Usage was in favor of it then, and usage is against it now. That's all there is about the matter, and the thing is perfectly plain to anyone who has given even a week to the *historical* study of his mother-tongue, however hard a saying it may be to those whose knowledge of the subject does not go beyond that of the *dogmatic* school grammar and the *dogmatic* pocket dictionary.

It seems strange that many people who admit readily enough the supremacy of *usage* in determining what is proper in other matters are so adverse to admitting its supremacy in the matter of language. Of course by "usage" I don't mean the usage of Tom or Dick or Harry, or even of all three of them. I mean, for the current language, the usage of the best educated and most cultured Englishmen of to-day; and, for the historical language, the usage of our classic writers of all ages—the makers and markers of our language. Against this usage as the supreme arbiter of what is or what was "good English," there is often set up a something which its advocates like to call "authority." If this something be examined it will be found to be made up of the dicta of grammarians and censors and critics, based—always professedly and often really—on arguments drawn from etymology and analogy and the principles of language.

Of "the principles of language," I have no wish to say anything disrespectful, but, so far as I am acquainted with the things so-called by anti-usage controversialists, they are generally some nebulous or nonsensical generalities, behind which their advocates strive to conceal what is nothing more exalted than mere dislike of the usage they happen to be fighting against.