



THE JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

Devoted to Education, Literature, Science, and the Arts.

Volume XVI

Quebec, Province of Quebec, August, 1872.

No. 8.

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ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

LECTURE II.

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WHENEVER any new study claims to be introduced into schools, a very natural question at once suggests itself to every practical teacher—"Will this new study give our pupils systematic work to do?" If the answer is in the negative, the intrusive study stands a poor chance of being welcomed. Latin and Greek are eminently working subjects in which, perhaps, the work is often disproportionately large compared with the results. But the undoubted fact that Latin and Greek do make a boy work—or, at the worst, shew that a boy has not worked—is a great point in their favour. Naturally, in the eyes of teachers, this virtue covers a multitude of faults, and the virtue is undeniable. In the first place, the mere turning of dictionaries and thumbing of grammars gives a boy something to do. Regarded as a mere athletic exercise, it is not contemptible. Then the words or inflections and anomalies keep the memory at work, and the concordances and rules of syntax appeal more or less to the boy's intelligence. There is also a kind of reasoning in the simplest Latin sentence. Take any sentence containing the Latin word "*ago*." The boy looks it out in the dictionary, and he finds that it means "give" before "thanks," "wag" before "tail," "plead" before "a cause," "drive" before "sheep," and that it has some dozen or so more different meanings before a dozen other different words. Out of

these sixteen meanings, or more, the boy has, by some process, to reject the wrong and select the right. The process is too often mere guess-work, and guessing wrong; but it may be an intellectual process of elimination. And emphatically the writing of good Latin prose composition is a severe intellectual test, and the attempt to acquire the power of writing it is a good intellectual training. It cannot be denied, then, that Latin, if well taught, does exercise the thinking faculties in us, as well as the mere digging and hunting faculties, which are tasked in the disinterment of words, with their derivations and inflections, from the dark recesses of a dictionary. Can the same be asserted of English? Is it a working subject? What can the pupil prepare in the way of an English home-lesson? How is the clever idler to be distinguished from the laborious boy of average ability, and to be prevented from getting to the top? I prefer to look upon the subject from this very plain and practical stand-point, because I think no one will deny that, if these practical difficulties in the way of the introduction of English can be surmounted, there are no others in the way. If English teaching can stimulate boys to work, and if idleness and industry as well as cleverness and dulness can be tested by an English lesson, few will be disposed to deny that the subject is one of peculiar interest and value; and even the most austere advocate of severe training, and opponent of useful information, will scarcely assert that, *ceteris paribus*, a subject of peculiar interest and value should, for the very reason that it is interesting and valuable, be rejected from our schools.

The practical way of answering the question—"What is to be taught in English?" is to open an English book, and, imagining ourselves in a class-room, to ask what would our boys require to be taught in order that they might understand the passage before us. Take, then, the first Scene in the first Act of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, where Bolingbroke and Mowbray are accusing one another in the presence of the king. We will read a few consecutive lines, from the 18th to the 27th:—

"*K. Rich.* High-stomach'd are they both, and full or ire,
In rage deaf as the sea, hasty as fire.

Enter Bolingbroke and Mowbray.

Boling. Many years of happy days befall
My gracious sovereign, and most loving liege!