

For the REVIEW]

Notes on English.

Last month a few words on grammatical analysis happened to stray into these notes. In the same number of the REVIEW there was an article on the analysis of a passage from Gray's Elegy, and I gather from it that it may sometimes be necessary to consider the meaning of a passage before proceeding to chop it up and stick labels on the bits. So far, so good, and I'm very glad that even of grammatical analysis it may be said:

"There is some soul of goodness in things evil."

But surely Gray's Elegy is worth studying for the sake of its meaning — to say nothing of its poetry — as the primary object of study. It may not matter much whether the poet meant that "all the air holds a solemn stillness," or that "a solemn stillness holds all the air." But if the question is worth discussing at all, let us do it for its own sake and as a lesson in language and criticism, not for the purpose of determining whether we shall label this part of the sentence "Tweedle-dee," and that part "Tweedle-de-dum," or *vice versa*.

The line is,

"And all the air a solemn stillness holds."

It is a grand line. The dullest ear must feel the music of its rhythm and alliteration and assonance, and the most careless eye and brain readily takes in the general meaning. To determine the precise meaning there are two points that chiefly need examining. One is as to how far the members of the sentence are out of their usual prose places. Is it "all the air" that has been moved from rear to front, or is it only "holds" that has been displaced? The latter is a kind of inversion common in English poetry of all ages. The former is not so common. But perhaps investigation might show that it is not uncommon in our older poetry, and a careful study of Gray might bring out the fact that he was rather fond of it.

Then there is the meaning of "holds." How does Gray use the word in other passages? How do other writers of the same period use it? How do English poets of any period use it? When these questions have been settled by the literature class the line will no longer be much of a puzzle to any one with soul so dead as to wish to commit grammatical analysis upon it.

As a small contribution towards the suggested method of tackling the line, I beg to drop the following two mites into the collection bag:

"The star that bids the shepherd fold,
Now the top of heaven doth hold."

Milton — *Comus*.

"For now the noon-day quiet holds the hill."

Tennyson — *Enone*.

And this reminds me of some questions that have lain neglected too long. One of them is on a passage in Gray's Progress of Poesy.

To him the Mighty Mother did unveil
Her awful face.

"Does the Mighty Mother mean 'Nature' or 'Poetry'?"

Two lines above this the poet has called Shakespeare "Nature's Darling," and so I suppose the Mighty Mother is Nature. I think I would vote for Nature in any case, and yet the speech just below seems rather more appropriate to the lips of the Muse of Poetry. What Shakespeare saw in the awful face of the Mighty Mother was probably much like what Tennyson's Poet was given the power to see.

"He saw thro' life and death, thro' good and ill,
He saw thro' his own soul
The marvel of the everlasting will,
An open scroll,
Before him lay."

Two other of these belated queries refer to Tennyson's Poems.

The throne of Indian Cama slowly sailed,
A summer fann'd with spice.

"Who was Indian Cama?"

Almost any of the ordinary books of reference will supply the usual few scraps of information about the Hindu Cupid, but he had better be looked for under the letter K. The K fashion was not so much to the fore when The Palace of Art was written as it is now. By and by when we want to learn something about the great stoic, or the great dictator, or the great orator, we shall probably have to look up Kato or Kasar or Kikero.

"Every hour is saved
From that eternal silence — something more,
A bringer of new things."

—Ulysses.

"What is the subject of 'is saved?' And the prose rendering of the sense of the passage?"

The subject of "is saved?" Isn't it "every hour?" In the slang of the analysis books there used to be — and perhaps there is yet — a "logical subject" and a "grammatical subject." Which of these "every hour" is I'm not sure that I know, and as this is written at home I have no present means of finding out, but for its own sake I hope it is the "logical" one. As to a prose rendering, altho' I often ask for such things I have a decided dislike to giving them, but here is one ready-made from an edition with notes. "Each hour spent in activity is something saved from the silence of the grave; nay, it is something more than that, since it brings with it new experiences." If a pupil of mine