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The Study of the English Language

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For the Schoolmaster.

The Study of the English Language.

In the first of this series of articles it was urged that something more than the "*dry forms of grammar*" should be insisted on.

Words are the symbols of ideas. They should be studied, not to prove or illustrate some ingenious system or theory by which a school-book may be sold; nor yet as an *ultimatum*, as though the benefit were in the simple knowledge of the methodical and stereotype parsing or analyzing. Words should be studied for a double purpose — primarily and chiefly to gain a tolerably full and correct knowledge of the *uses and power* of our language, in order that we may use it with success both orally and in writing in our daily intercourse with the world; and secondly and secondarily to discipline the mind by the careful and critical examination and comparison necessary to a full understanding of the words under consideration. For either of these purposes it is necessary to keep constantly in mind the important fact that the *words are not the things*. They are only the *sign* of the things.

When the definition of a noun is given as "The *name* of any thing," it must be constantly borne in mind — and teachers need this admonition as well as pupils — that it is only the *name*. If it be otherwise, — and we much mistake if it be not often, *very* often otherwise, — if it be otherwise, you will hear it said: "Clock is a noun." "John is a noun." "Boston is a noun." The truth is clock is a *clock*, an instrument used for marking time; John is a pupil at school, a little flaxen headed urchin, who studies grammar, recites the conjugations and *parses*, — and understands none of the *reasons* for doing it; Boston is a city, the famous metropolis of yankee land; and neither of them are nouns at all. The *word* clock, the *name* by

which we call the time-keeping instrument, the *word* John, the *nomen* by which we designate the light-haired boy on the front seat from his seat-mate; the *word* Boston, which is applied to distinguish the tri-mountain city from other and more provincial towns, all these *words*, and all other *names* of things are *nouns*.

Now of these *names*, whether of things (nouns), or of actions (verbs), or of qualities (adjectives and adverbs), or of simple connectives, or of relation-words, we wish to get a distinct and definite knowledge.

We need to know the full force and meaning of the words, their ordinary use and most frequent and correct application. We must necessarily be familiar with the different shades of meaning of different words nearly synonymous. We should be able to choose the proper words at the proper instant to express exactly the idea we wish to convey. Otherwise our talking or our writing is not only in vein, but positively an injury. If we use words which do not convey the meaning we intended, they convey a meaning which we did *not* intend, and therefore their use is worse than silence.

In order to this full knowledge of words and their power we must make more prominent the study of their derivation. We shall never fully understand words in their meaning and use, until we have turned back the pages of time, learned the circumstances of their origin, and traced their history to the present period. We must arrange, group, classify them, marking both their similarity and their contrast, and then, constantly on our guard in respect to the too frequent ill-treatment of these faithful servants, we shall be able to employ words as trustworthy knights, esquires, and pages to do our bidding.

In the previous papers upon this subject,

we have put various questions relating to the orthography, derivation, uses, historical associations, rhetorical figures, et cetera, of the words in the first and sixth stanzas of the ELEGY. We propose in the remaining space allowed us in the present number of THE SCHOOLMASTER to offer some thoughts relative to the derivation, history, and uses of words in the eleventh stanza of the same poem.

“Can storied urn, or animated bust,  
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?  
Can honor’s voice provoke the silent dust,  
Or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of death?”

The two questions which compose this stanza indicate the utter worthlessness and emptiness of posthumous praise.

The subject of the first of these interrogative propositions is compound.

“*Storied urn or animated bust.*”

In *urn* is found an allusion to the Roman custom of preserving the ashes of the deceased in what was called the *urna*. The root of this Latin word furnishes us *urn*. “*Storied urn.*” This custom of using a participle adjectively gives compactness and force to our language. It is sometimes well to call upon the class to change the construction, *e. g.* “The storied urn” is equivalent to *the urn which has a story for us*; or *the urn with its story*. In such an exercise, let the pupil analyze the sentence or clause thus substituted, and point out the difference of signification, if any, between this and the author’s rendering.

The noun *story* is derived from the Latin *historia*, and that from the same in Greek. It was therefore originally the same as *history*. Indeed *history* only tells us a *story*.

This Greek *historia*, is from *histor*, which means science, knowledge, from *histasthai*, to know.

So here we have the old Greek word, which means absolute knowledge, certainty of information, transferred to our word *history*, and that corrupted both in spelling and sig-

nification to *story* — a mere tale! What a change from the present custom is necessary before the writers of history shall *all* write from absolute knowledge of the facts they record!

From the Greek word *Ανεμος, anemos*, breath, spirit, through the Latin *animus*, and perhaps the Fr. *animer*, we have a large number of words very nearly related in signification, to each other and to their primitive.

Richardson gives us

Animate, v.	Animality,
Animate, adj.	Animalize,
Animal, n.	Animant,
Animal, adj.	Animated,
Animalish,	Animalion,
	Animator.

Then we have from from *Animus* and *Ad-vert*, — to turn to ;

Animadvert,
Animadversal,
Animadversion,
Animadversive,
Animadvertor.

Animosity, warmth of spirit, vehemence of passion, from the same root.

The mere naming of this class of Latin derivatives is enough to suggest to an earnest schoolmaster a very proper and interesting course of investigation and teaching.

*Bust* is from the French *buste*. *Back* is from the Anglo-Saxon *bac, bæc*. *Manse* and *mansion* are from the Latin *mansio*, from *manere*, to stay or abide. Hence *mansion* is a habitation, an abiding place.

The origin of *call* may be either the Anglo-Saxon *gyllan*, to yell; or the Greek *καλεω, kalein*, to call. The word *fleet*, or *fitting*,

Fleet, v.	Fleet adj.	Fleetness, n.
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is from the Anglo-Saxon *Fleohtan*, fluctuate, to float, to swim, to wave up and down, or to and fro.

Breathe, v.	Breathing,
Breath, n.	Breathfull,
Breather,	Breathless,
	Breathlessness,

are from the Anglo-Saxon *Bræthe, breth*. To breathe is to draw in or drive out from the breast the air by the action of the lungs; to inspire or inhale, to expire or exhale.

Honor, v.	Honorance, (rare,)
Honor, n.	Honorary,
Honorable,	Honoror,
Honorably,	Honoring,
Honorableness,	Honorless,

are derived from the Latin *honor*.

*Honor* is nearly allied in derivation to *honest* and *honesty*. The latter are directly from *honestus*, Latin, — full of honor, honorable, — which again is directly from *honor* or *honos*, — honor, repute, esteem. From this first meaning of *honestus* came the secondary use of the word, viz: bringing or deserving of honor; worthy, virtuous, becoming, proper.

The following quotations will serve to illustrate the use of these two words:

1. "Goodness is that which makes men prefer their duty and their promise before their passions or their interest; and is properly the object of trust. In our language it goes rather by the name of *honesty*; though what we call an *honest* man, the Romans called a good man; and *honesty* in their language, as well as in French, rather signifies a composition of those qualities which generally acquire honor and esteem to those who possess them,"—*Sir W. Temple, Essay on Government*.

2. "The law of *honor* is a system of rules constructed by people of fashion and calculated to facilitate their intercourse with one another, and for no other purpose."—*Paley's Moral Philosophy*.

3. "But what is this *honor*, I mean *honor* indeed, and that which ought to be so dear unto us, other than a kind of history, or fame

following actions of virtue, actions accompanied with difficulty or danger, and undertaken for the public good."—*Raleigh's History of the World*.

Here we see recognized among the ancient Romans the principle that what was *honest* was *honorable*, or, in other words, that to be *honorable* one must prove himself *honest*. In the normal condition of society this will readily be received as an axiom. As society becomes more refined, however, and temptations to hypocrisy multiply, and wealth and station are considered the standard of *honor* and respectability; then commences the divergence of *honor* and *honesty*. The history of these two words certainly presents no flattering picture of the progress of human society.

The personification of *honor* gives it a voice. This word, from the Latin equivalent *vox*, which in turn is from the verb, *vocare*, to call, is allied to

Vocable,	Vocation,
Vocabulary,	Vocative,
Vocal,	Vociferate,
Vocally,	Vociferation,
Vocalize,	Vociferous,

and is applied to the sounds uttered by the organs of speech. The voice utters words, or *vocables*, which are distinct and articulate sounds used to express thought.

The use of the word *provoke* demands especial notice. It is directly from the Latin *provocare*, to call forth, that is, by metonymy, the passions. This is the ordinary significance of the word. But from its derivation we see that it may be used in its primary sense as simply to call forth, to arouse, to raise. This is the use of the word here. "Can honor's voice raise, or arouse the silent dust?" Many words whose original signification of a like general nature have been restricted in their meaning to a more specific use.

*Silent* comes through the Fr. from the Lat.

*Silens*, and the fundamental idea of its signification is absence of sound. The verb *silere* from which *silens* comes is to be distinguished, says Richardson, from *tacere*, to abstain from speaking. *Dust* from the Anglo-Saxon *dust* or *dyste* means powder. This word seems to have undergone no change since the origin of the English language.

*Flattery*, Menage considers to be from *flatare*, a frequentative of *flo, flare*, to blow. Junius supposes it formed from *flat*, "because it is peculiar to flatterers to *smoothen down* those into whose favor they would insinuate themselves." According to the former derivation the idea would be "to breathe or whisper praise or pleasing words into the ear;" according to the latter origin, "to smoothe or soften down, to soothe or lull, to please or gratify by praise or pleasing words or actions."

*Soothe* is perhaps from the Anglo-Saxon *soth*, true — to receive as true. Richardson thinks, however, it may be from the Gothic *sothyan*, to satisfy. It is allied to *sooth*.

We have only space for a brief notice of the last word of the stanza, *death*. *Dead* and its derivatives are undoubtedly from the Anglo-Saxon *A-dead-an*, to fail or decay, to lay waste, to destroy. *Death* is derived by a contraction from *dead*. *Death* is that which *deadeth*, or makes dead.

The picture presented by this double question is peculiarly graphic. Honor, dust, flattery, and death, are all personified.

"Can flattery soothe the dull, cold ear of death?"

Whatever the soothing power of flattery may do to the living, it can have no effect upon the *dull, cold ear* of "that which *deadeth*."

Of the sixteen words, which we have considered in this stanza, *eleven* of them are from the Latin, and the remaining five from the Anglo-Saxon. This shows a larger proportion of Latin origin and a smaller proportion of Anglo-Saxon derivation, than the average

of the poem, or of the language. It may well be called a stanza of Latin words.

Fitness of words, aptness in the choice of them, harmony of parts, and picturesque description, mark this stanza as one of great power and beauty. There is a force, an argumentative power in the modest interrogative form of the propositions, which is heightened by this harmony and fitness, and together with the striking personification forms one of the most beautiful and expressive stanzas in our language.

#### Rhode Island Teachers.

FROM THE COMMISSIONER'S REPORT.

#### GOOD AND POOR TEACHERS.

"It is of the utmost importance that good teachers be provided for our schools. A good teacher in a poor school house is a far better blessing than a good house with a poor teacher. In fact, a poor teacher is no blessing at all. He is always directly in the way of the employment of a good one. My visitation has brought me into contact with many teachers. I have seen them under a great variety of circumstances, and have verified the truth, that a good teacher will reveal his superiority, in whatever situation he may be placed. There will be something, not always easily definable, which will show that superiority. On the other hand, want of knowledge or of skill, will be apparent in spite of excuses, apologies or concealment. In speaking of teachers, I know that great care and discrimination are necessary. They are required to perform a most difficult work in the most difficult circumstances. The public expect them to have talents and attainments of the highest order, and to be satisfied with a remuneration which persons of inferior talents and attainments, in other avocations, would despise. A considerable change for the better has taken place in the last fifteen years, yet the compensa-