

THE WRITING OF ENGLISH

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The Writing of English by P. J. Hartog

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WRITING OF ENGLISH

BY

P. J. HARTOG

ACADEMIC REGISTRAR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON
SOMETIME BISHOP BERKELEY FELLOW OF THE OWENS COLLEGE
AND LECTURER IN THE VICTORIA UNIVERSITY, MANCHESTER

WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF

MRS. AMY H. LANGDON

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Why not all in English, a tongue of itself both deep in conceit and frank in deliverie? I do not think that any language be it whatsoever is better able to utter all arguments either with more pith or greater plainesse then our English tongue is if the English utterer be as skillfull in the matter, which he is to utter, as the foren utterer is.

R. MULCASTER, *Elementarie*, London, 1582, p. 258.

. . . . Education is the greatest problem and the hardest that can be given to man to solve. For insight depends on education, and education again on insight. Hence education can only advance slowly, step by step; and it is only through the continued handing down by one generation of its experience and knowledge to the next, each adding something in turn to the common stock, that a right idea of educational method can be formed.

KANT, *Ueber Pädagogik*, ed. Willmann, p. 66.

PREFACE

1. The plan of this book, as it was originally conceived, may be briefly summed up as follows :—

- (1) The English boy cannot write English.
- (2) The English boy is not taught to write English.
- (3) The French boy can write French.
- (4) The French boy can write French because he is taught how to write.
- (5) Historical reasons for the foregoing facts.
- (6) How the French boy is taught to write.
- (7) How the English boy may be taught to write.

To this plan I have kept fairly close; but the whole substance of my essay has been modified by the conclusions arrived at in working it out.

In dealing with the 'writing of English' it is the practical aspect of the question that strikes one first. The scandalous incapacity of the English boy to write clear English carries with it such obvious disabilities that we look at once for a practical remedy. Chapter I (together with other parts of the book) is intended to bring home the bare facts to those head masters, Governing Bodies of Schools, and public authorities generally who still ignore them, and to help in the fight for the introduction of English into the curriculum of our Secondary Schools for boys.

It will not unreasonably be asked how the opportunity for teaching the mother tongue is to be used when once it

has been gained. The answer to this question at first seemed to be simple: we have only to follow the methods by which the French attain such conspicuous success. But the deeper I got into the problem, the more complex and elusive and far-reaching I found it to be; and I soon realized that it could not be properly attacked without doing two things:—

- (1) Investigating the French method not only from the practical point of view, but also from the historical, so as to distinguish, if possible, the meaningless or even harmful survivals of tradition from the elements that are not only effective but good.
- (2) Experimenting *de novo* with English children.

The results of my investigation and experiments, carried on in the intervals that could be spared from work necessarily devoted to other subjects, are recorded in Chapters II-IV.

The historical part might no doubt have been extended very greatly. But it was my object to write a directly practical rather than a historical essay; and, while I hope that nothing of real importance since the seventeenth century has been omitted, I have attempted to sketch only such of the facts as seemed more immediately necessary for an understanding of present practice and tradition in the teaching of writing in the French schools. Further information with regard to the classical and mediaeval history of the teaching of rhetoric will naturally be sought elsewhere.

I regard as the chief conclusions arising out of my work (1) that English children seem to have no less aptitude than French for writing well; and (2) that in the teaching of the mother tongue, properly conceived, we have the most powerful instrument in the whole range of intellectual education, as it has been in this country the most neglected.

The Socratic question and answer (and the text-book) lead the pupil, as it were, by the hand. In the silent dialogue of the person trying to express himself in writing, in the advance of the imagination and the making sure of each step by question and answer of the intellectual conscience, we have the method of the master put into use by the pupil himself.

This subtle and delicate process, half-conscious, half-unconscious, I take to be the essential process of all composition. It is, I believe, capable of influencing more deeply than any other the whole working of the adolescent mind for good or for evil. A striking example of its deforming power when misapplied is shown by the influence on style of examinations. But the radical defect as it appears to me, of nearly all methods of teaching composition, from the earliest days to our own, lies in this—that for the exact fitting of the written words to an ideal conceived by the pupil, the teacher is apt to substitute an imperfect matching of the written production with a literary model; quite oblivious that the model, admirable as it might have been for its purpose, had in fact a purpose altogether different from that of the schoolboy exercise. Cicero in ancient times, Burke in modern, spoke or wrote in dead earnest to bring home a particular conviction to a particular audience; the schoolboy only tries feebly to imitate a Cicero or a Burke; he has no object and no audience in view. To ask a pupil to imitate the results of a great master without providing him with the definite stimulus and aim which made those results possible, is indeed to set him to make bricks without straw. And so it has gone on for centuries. Hence the futilities of the rhetoric denounced by Locke, the futilities still living in