

THE STUDY OF WORDS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649715732

The Study of Words by Richard Chenevix Trench

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

RICHARD CHENEVIX TRENCH

**THE STUDY
OF WORDS**

THE STUDY OF WORDS

BY

RICHARD CHENEVIX TRENCH



NEW YORK
HOWARD WILFORD BELL

1904

1515 14
T8
1904
MAIN

THE STUDY OF WORDS

Introductory Lecture

There are few who would not readily acknowledge that mainly in worthy books are preserved and hoarded the treasures of wisdom and knowledge which the world has accumulated; and that chiefly by aid of books they are handed down from one generation to another. I shall urge on you in these lectures something different from this; namely, that not in books only, which all acknowledge, nor yet in connected oral discourse, but often also in words contemplated singly, there are boundless stores of moral and historic truth, and no less of passion and imagination, laid up—that from these, lessons of infinite worth may be derived, if only our attention is roused to their existence. I shall urge on you how well it will repay you to study the words which you are in the habit of using or of meeting, be they such as relate to highest spiritual things, or our common words of the shop and the market, and of all the familiar intercourse of daily life. It will indeed repay you far better than you can easily believe. I am sure, at least, that for many a young man his first discovery of the fact that words are living powers, are the vesture, yea, even the body, which thoughts weave for themselves, has been like the dropping of scales from his eyes, like the acquiring of another sense, or the introduction into a new world; he is never able to cease wondering at the moral marvels that surround him on every side, and ever reveal themselves more and more to his gaze.

We indeed hear it not seldom said that ignorance is the

THE STUDY OF WORDS

mother of admiration. No falser word was ever spoken, and hardly a more mischievous one; implying, as it does, that this healthiest exercise of the mind rests, for the most part, on a deceit and a delusion, and that with larger knowledge it would cease; while, in truth, for once that ignorance leads us to admire that which with fuller insight we should perceive to be a common thing, one demanding no such tribute from us, a hundred, nay, a thousand times, it prevents us from admiring that which is admirable indeed. And this is so, whether we are moving in the region of nature, which is the region of God's wonders, or in the region of art, which is the region of man's wonders; and nowhere truer than in this sphere and region of language, which is about to claim us now. Oftentimes here we walk up and down in the midst of intellectual and moral marvels with a vacant eye and a careless mind; even as some traveler passes unmoved over fields of fame, or through cities of ancient renown—unmoved, because utterly unconscious of the lofty deeds which there have been wrought, of the great hearts which spent themselves there. We, like him, wanting the knowledge and insight which would have served to kindle admiration in us, are oftentimes deprived of this pure and elevating excitement of the mind, and miss no less that manifold instruction which ever lies about our path, and nowhere more largely than in our daily words, if only we knew how to put forth our hands and make it our own. 'What riches,' one exclaims, 'lie hidden in the vulgar tongue of our poorest and most ignorant. What flowers of paradise lie under our feet, with their beauties and their parts undistinguished and undiscerned, from having been daily trodden on.'

And this subject upon which we are thus entering ought not to be a dull or uninteresting one in the handling, or one to which only by an effort you will yield the attention which

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE

I shall claim. If it shall prove so, this I fear must be through the fault of my manner of treating it; for certainly in itself there is no study which *may* be made at once more instructive and entertaining than the study of the use and abuse, the origin and distinction of words, with an investigation, slight though it may be, of the treasures contained in them; which is exactly that which I now propose to myself and to you. I remember a very learned scholar, to whom we owe one of our best Greek lexicons, a book which must have cost him years, speaking in the preface of his completed work with a just disdain of some, who complained of the irksome drudgery of such toils as those which had engaged him so long,—toils irksome, forsooth, because they only had to do with words. He disclaims any part with those who asked pity for themselves, as so many galley-slaves chained to the oar, or martyrs who had offered themselves for the good of the literary world. He declares that the task of classing, sorting, grouping, comparing, tracing the derivation and usage of words, had been to him no drudgery, but a delight and labour of love.¹

And if this may be true in regard of a foreign tongue, how much truer ought it to be in regard of our own, of our 'mother tongue,' as we affectionately call it. A great writer not very long departed from us has borne witness at once to the pleasantness and profit of this study. 'In a language,' he says, 'like ours, where so many words are derived from other languages, there are few modes of instruction more useful or more amusing than that of accustoming young people to seek for the etymology or primary meaning of the words they use. There are cases in which more knowledge of more value may be conveyed by the history of a word than by the history of a campaign.' So writes Coleridge; and impressing the same truth, Emerson has somewhere characterized language as 'fossil poetry.'

THE STUDY OF WORDS

He evidently means that just as in some fossil, curious and beautiful shapes of vegetable or animal life, the graceful fern or the finely vertebrated lizard, such as now, it may be, have been extinct for thousands of years, are permanently bound up with the stone, and rescued from that perishing which would else have been their portion,—so in words are beautiful thoughts and images, the imagination and the feeling of past ages, of men long since in their graves, of men whose very names have perished, there are these, which might so easily have perished too, preserved and made safe for ever. The phrase is a striking one; the only fault one can find with it is that it is too narrow. Language may be, and indeed is, this 'fossil poetry'; but it may be affirmed of it with exactly the same truth that it is fossil ethics, or fossil history. Words quite as often and as effectually embody facts of history, or convictions of the moral sense, as of the imagination or passion of men; even as, so far as that moral sense may be perverted, they will bear witness and keep a record of that perversion. On all these points I shall enter at full in after lectures; but I may give by anticipation a specimen or two of what I mean, to make from the first my purpose and plan more fully intelligible to all.

Language then is 'fossil poetry'; in other words, we are not to look for the poetry which a people may possess only in its poems, or its poetical customs, traditions, and beliefs. Many a single word also is itself a concentrated poem, having stores of poetical thought and imagery laid up in it. Examine it, and it will be found to rest on some deep analogy of things natural and things spiritual; bringing those to illustrate and to give an abiding form and body to these. The image may have grown trite and ordinary now: perhaps through the help of this very word may have become so entirely the heritage of all, as to seem little better

INTRODUCTORY LECTURE

than a commonplace; yet not the less he who first discerned the relation, and devised the new word which should express it, or gave to an old, never before but literally used, this new and figurative sense, this man was in his degree a poet—a maker, that is, of things which were not before, which would not have existed but for him, or for some other gifted with equal powers. He who spoke first of a 'dilapidated' fortune, what an image must have risen up before his mind's eye of some falling house or palace, stone detaching itself from stone, till all had gradually sunk into desolation and ruin. Or he who to that Greek word *ελακρυνής*, which signified originally 'the winnowed, the unmingled,' gave first its ethical signification of 'sincere,' 'truthful,' or as we might say, 'unadulterated,' can we deny to him the poet's feeling and eye? Many a man had gazed, we are sure, at the jagged and indented mountain ridges of Spain, before one called them 'sierras' or 'saws,' the name by which now they are known, as *Sierra Morena*, *Sierra Nevada*; but that man coined his imagination into a word which will endure as long as the everlasting hills which he named.

But it was said just now that words often contain a witness for great moral truths—God having pressed such a seal of truth upon language, that men are continually uttering deeper things than they know, asserting mighty principles, it may be asserting them against themselves, in words that to them may seem nothing more than the current coin of society. Thus to what grand moral purposes Bishop Butler turns the word 'pastime'; how solemn the testimony which he compels the world, out of its own use of this word, to render against itself—obliging it to own that its amusements and pleasures do not really satisfy the mind and fill it with the sense of an abiding and satisfying joy: "they are only 'pastime'; they serve only, as this word

THE STUDY OF WORDS

confesses, to *pass* away the *time*, to prevent it from hanging, an intolerable burden, on men's hands: all which they can do at the best is to prevent men from discovering and attending to their own internal poverty and dissatisfaction and want. He might have added that there is the same acknowledgment in the word 'diversion,' which means no more than that which *diverts* or turns us aside from ourselves, and in this way helps us to forget ourselves for a little. And thus it would appear that, even according to the world's own confession, all which it proposes is—not to make us happy, but a little to prevent us from remembering that we are unhappy, to *pass* away our time, to *divert* us from ourselves. While, on the other hand, we declare that the good which will really fill our souls and satisfy them to the uttermost, is not in us, but without us and above us, in the words which we use to set forth any transcending delight. Take three or four of these words—'transport,' 'rapture,' 'ravishment,' 'ecstasy,'—'transport,' that which *carries* us, as 'rapture,' or 'ravishment,' that which *snatches* us out of and above ourselves; and 'ecstasy' is very nearly the same, only drawn from the Greek.

And not less, where a perversion of the moral sense has found place, words preserve oftentimes a record of this perversion. We have a signal example of this in the use, or rather misuse, of the words 'religion' and 'religious' during the Middle Ages, and indeed in many parts of Christendom still. A 'religious' person did not then mean any one who felt and owned the bonds that bound him to God and to his fellow-men, but one who had taken peculiar vows upon him, the member of a monastic Order, of a 'religion' as it was called. As little did a 'religious' house then mean, nor does it now mean in the Church of Rome, a Christian household, ordered in the fear of God, but a house in which these persons were gathered together according to the rule