

A VOCABULARY

BY AGNES REPPLIER

SOME years ago I wrote to a friendly author — who also chanced to be a stylist — a protest against one of the wanton assertions in which his soul delighted: 'It is n't true, and, what is more, you knew it was n't true when you said it.' To which the answer came back prompt and clear: 'Must I explain even to you that it is not a question of what I say, but how I say it?'

Yet that man was an American, and should have felt with the rest of his countrymen that what he said was a matter of vital import to a listening — or an inattentive — world; but that the fashion of the saying was negligible provided he made his meaning plain. 'A language long employed by a delicate and critical society,' says Walter Bagehot, 'is a treasure of dextrous felicities.' To ask from it nothing but intelligibility is to rob ourselves of delight as well as of distinction. It is to narrow our magnificent heritage of English speech to a bare subsistence, the only form of voluntary poverty which has nothing to recommend it. It is to live our intellectual life, if we have one, and the social life we must all have, upon a rather shabby assortment of necessary words, when we are rich in our own right, and can draw at will upon the inexhaustible funds of our inheritance.

A professor at the University of Chicago, who recently published an 'American translation' of the New Testament, turning it into language 'intelligible to the American ear,' surrendered in the name of scholarship (for

he is a scholar), and in the names of his readers, all claim to this inheritance. When he substituted a bald simplicity for a rich and masterful idiom, he signified his assent to the impoverishment of our national speech. There are some among us who think that if Americans cannot read the King James Bible, they had better learn to read it. Men and women without the tenth part of their schooling have succeeded in doing this. Its heroic wealth of monosyllables, which exceed those of any other English masterpiece, should lighten the reader's task. To understand the precise significance of every word is not essential. To love the sight and the sound and the glory of them is part of a liberal education.

There is no liberal education for the under-languaged. They lack the avenue of approach to the best that has been known and thought in the world, and they lack the means of accurate self-interpretation. A heedless clumsiness of speech denies the proprieties and surrenders the charm of intercourse. Chesterton says that Saint Francis of Assisi clung through all the naked simplicities of his life to one rag of luxury — the manners of a court. 'The great attainable amenities' lent grace to his mistress, Poverty, and robbed her of no spiritual significance. The attainable amenities of manner and of speech, the delicacy of the chosen word, the subordinated richness of tone and accent — these gifts have been bequeathed us by the civilizations of the world.

With a 'treasure of dextrous felicities' always within reach, frugality is misplaced and unbecoming.

Nineteen years ago Mr. Henry James gave as the Commencement address at Bryn Mawr College a matchless paper on 'The Question of our Speech.' He did not approach this many-sided subject from all its angles. He did not link the limitations of the ordinary American vocabulary with the slovenliness of the ordinary American pronunciation, and the shrill or nasal sound of the ordinary American voice. He did not seem to be deeply troubled by the fundamental unconcern which makes possible this brutalization of language. If he regretted the contentment of too many American parents with the 'vocal noises,' unmoderated and uncontrolled, of their offspring, he laid no emphasis upon the contentment of the same parents with the fewness and commonness of the words at their command.

But for the *vox Americana*, 'the poor dear distracted organ itself,' and for 'formed and finished utterance,' he pleaded earnestly with the Bryn Mawr students, and, through them, with the nation at large. It was to him incomprehensible that a people 'abundantly schooled and newspapered, abundantly housed, fed, clothed, salaried and taxed,' should have, in the matter of speech, so little to show for its money. The substitution of 'limp, slack, passive tone for clear, clean, active, tidy tone,' was typical of a general limpness and slackness which nullified the best results of education. 'The note of cheapness — of the cheap and easy — is especially fatal to any effect of security of intention in the speech of a society; for it is scarce necessary to remind you that there are two very different kinds of ease: the ease that comes from the conquest of a difficulty, and the ease that comes from the vague dodging of

it. In the one case you gain facility, in the other case you get mere looseness.'

The phrase 'security of intention' has the shining quality of a searchlight. It clarifies and intensifies Mr. James's argument in behalf of the coherent culture of speech. He probably never heard the American language at its worst. He was by force of circumstance aloof from the more furious assaults upon its dignity and integrity. 'Amurrica' he did hear of course. It is universal. Also 'Philadulphia.' He says he heard 'Cubar,' 'sofar,' 'idear,' 'tullegram,' and 'twuddy,' — for the deciphering of which last word he gives himself much credit. But the compound flowers of speech which bloom on every side of us were lost to him because of his limited acquaintance with the product of our public schools, and with the cultural processes of street, workshop, and office. From this rich array we can cull many blossoms which he must have been happy enough to miss. 'Whaja got?' 'Wherya goin'?' 'Waja say?' 'Hadjer lunch?' 'Don' leggo of it!' 'Sall I can say.' 'Na less'n fifty cents.' 'I yusta know 'im.' 'Wanna g'wout?' All of which blendings suggest the fatal 'Dom-scum' of the greedy chaplain in Daudet's story of the *Three Christmas Masses*.

The overworked American *r* has intruded itself upon all observers; but some have failed to notice the whimsicalities of the letter *g*, which absents itself from its post at the end of certain words, as 'goin' and 'talkin,' only to force an entrance into the middle of others, as 'ongvelope.' An Amherst professor has informed us that the word *girl* may be rendered — according to locality — as *gal*, *göl*, *gûl*, *göil*, *geöl*, *gyurl*, *gurrel*, *girrel* and *gûrl*. All of these variants he heard on the tongues of the native-born. The No Man's Land of the immigrant he has not ventured to invade. That the child of the

immigrant corrupts the already unbraced speech of the child of the native-born is a fact so undeniable that educators have recognized the danger, and have striven to counteract it. The youthful Pole and the youthful Serb forget their own tongues without acquiring ours. I have listened for ten minutes to the voluble utterances of half a dozen young Jews in a Fifth Avenue bus before it dawned on me that they were not speaking Yiddish, but what was meant to be, and thought to be, English. 'We have among us, multiplied a thousandfold,' says a despairing philologist, 'the man without a language.'

Ten years ago the first Good Speech Week was started as a protest against this careless corruption of our tongue. Its object was to awaken in the alert American mind some conception of what language means, and what advantages may accrue from its preservation. Unfortunately, the wave of sentiment which popularized Old Home Week, and Boy Scout Week, and Mother's Day, and No More War Day, was necessarily lacking when so abstract a thing as speech came under consideration. People saw the point, but could not dilate with any emotion over it.

Moreover, incidental diversions, like wearing a white carnation, or revisiting one's birthplace, are easy and pleasant, while fundamental reforms are admittedly laborious. Therefore the promoters of the movement were compelled to overemphasize its practical utility. Pupils in the public schools were told that clear convincing speech in a pleasant well-modulated voice was a financial as well as a social asset. 'Invest in Good Speech. It pays daily dividends,' was a slogan which might have startled Mr. James, but which was expected to carry weight with the great American public.

And 'American' is a word of wondrous import to its hearers. The educators who were striving to persuade the youth of this country to speak with correctness a language which they were obliged to admit had been imported from England, eliminated, as far as possible, the unpopular adjective 'English.' There were rare and bold allusions to the 'English tongue'; but for the most part the appeal was made for 'pure, forceful, American speech.' Schoolchildren were asked to pledge themselves not to dishonor the 'American language' by lopping off syllables, or using base substitutes for yes and no. One school had an 'ain'tless week.' Another put up a poster, 'Remember the final G.' Shops inserted the more familiar Good Speech apostrophes in their advertisements. Moving-picture producers screened them with 'Topics of the Times.' A few enterprising clergymen preached sermons on 'The Integrity of Language,' and 'The Sanctity of Words.' A Detroit club registered a heroic resolution to avoid the cheaper forms of slang—such expressions as 'Say, lissen'; 'You said something'; 'I'll say so,' and 'What do you know about that?' It was felt that when men dispensed with these familiar and beloved phrases, they would have to think up other phrases to replace them; and that *any* thinking about the words they used every day could not fail to be a novel and stimulating process.

That we are a phrase-ridden nation is apparent to every newspaper reader. A few of the cheapest combinations—'red-blooded men,' 'great open spaces,' 'battle of the sexes,'—have been drained dry of substance in moving-picture halls. It is the exclusive privilege of the film to 'send the red corpuscles tingling through the veins' of the stolid audience which sits motionless and soporific as though asphyxiated

by the foul air. But 'God's out-of-doors' still lingers on the printed page; and so does the misappropriated word, 'colorful,' and 'tang' — a bit of educated slang worse than the slang of the gutters. A purist has recently protested against the substitution of 'home' for 'house' in the notices of real-estate agents; and the daily advertisements of American women's clothing as designed for 'milady's wear' is an intolerable affectation. 'Correctness, that humble merit of prose,' is not out of place in the walks of commercial life.

An American critic has called our attention to the fact that Henry James habitually conveys his elusive and somewhat complicated conceptions in the simplest terms at his command. The sentences are involved; 'his concern is to be precise, not to be clear'; the words are plain, unpretentious and well-bred. 'It is the speech of cultivated England. It is the speech of England, cultivated or not.'

This instinctive preference for the tried and tested, for the blazed trail of language, is held to indicate a lack of intellectual curiosity; but Mr. James was intellectually so curious that common human curiosity, which is part of our normal make-up, was frozen out of his consciousness. It was intellectual curiosity which interested him profoundly in British speech, carried by fate to an alien continent, and forced at the bayonet's point upon an incredible array of alien populations.

'Keep in sight the interesting truth that no language, so far back as our acquaintance with history goes, has known any such ordeal, any such stress and strain, as was to await the English in this new community. It came over, as the phrase is, without fear and without guile, to find itself transplanted to spaces it had never dreamed, in its comparative humility, of covering, to conditions it had never dreamed, in its

comparative innocence, of meeting; to find itself grafted on a social and political order that was without precedent, and incalculably expansive.'

It was a mighty experience for a tongue which had been guarded with some tenderness at home, and which had grown in excellence with every generation of Englishmen. I know of no single line which expresses the perfection of language as it is expressed in Dr. Johnson's analysis of Dryden's prose: 'What is little is gay; what is great is splendid.' The whole duty of the educated writer, the whole enjoyment of the educated reader, are compressed into those ten words.

Mr. James is not the only critic who has pondered upon the mutual reactions of men and speech, upon the phrases which have been forged by human emotions, and upon the human emotions which have been in turn swayed by the traditional force of phrases.

'If reason may be trusted,' says Mr. Henry Sedgwick, 'nevertheless its processes must be expressed in words; and words are full of prejudices, inheritors of old partisanships, most fitful in their elusive and subtle metamorphoses.'

The richness of allusion in our everyday language escapes notice, but it is not without its influence on our subconscious conceptions. The careless cruelty of the phrase, 'Hanging is too good for him,' echoes the conscious cruelty of the persecutor, as he lives, hating and hateful, in *Pilgrim's Progress*. The solemn swing of 'From now to Doomsday,' is heavy with the weight of mediævalism. The great traditions of Christianity have powerfully affected the languages of the Western world, and have lent them incomparable splendor and sweetness. The Spanish tongue is so full of religious derivatives that it has been called the language of

prayer. Just as the Italian who cannot read sees his Bible on the walls of church and cloister and campo santo, so the Spaniard who cannot read hears the echoes of his creed in the words he uses all his life, and responds instinctively to their dominion.

Strange and interesting links in the story of the human race are revealed in the study of phraseology. Strange and interesting influences — national, religious, and industrial — are at work on our speech to-day. Linguistic idiosyncrasies are social idiosyncrasies. I thought of this when I heard an American prelate — a man of learning and piety — allude in a sermon to 'the most important and influential of the saints and martyrs.' It sounded aggressively modern. 'Powerful' is a word well-fitted to the Church Triumphant. 'Virgo potens' is as significant and as satisfying as 'Virgo clemens.' But 'important' has a bustling accent, and an 'influential' martyr suggests a heavenly banking-house.

I have read in the reports of far-traveled adventurers that the most convincing example of language reflecting social conditions may be found in the speech of certain African tribes who have a separate word for the killing of each and every undesired relative; one word for the killing of an uncle and another for the killing of an aunt; one word for the killing of a grandfather and another for the killing of a grandson. A rich and precise vocabulary to properly express the recurrent incidents of life.

Educated Englishmen and Americans have generously admired the careful art with which the educated Frenchman uses his incomparable tongue. Santayana says that this precision is part of the 'profound research and perfect lucidity which has made French scholarship one of the glories of European culture.' Henry James compared

the vowel-cutting of the French actor and orator to the gem-cutting of the French lapidary. Lord Morley sorrowfully confessed that the French have more regard for their language, whether they are writing it or speaking it, than the English have for theirs.

It is a severe and conscientious, as well as a tender and a proud regard. It is part of the intellectual discipline of the nation.

For France, ever on the alert to guard this high inheritance, is far from the danger of complacency. She watches sharply for any indication of slackness on the part of her educators. It is not enough that a young engineer should be accurately informed unless he can accurately voice his information; unless he can write a clear, concise, intelligent, and well-ordered report. A schoolboy is expected to be what Mr. James calls 'tidy' in his speech. An actress is required to be articulate, pleasing and precise, to give to every word she utters its meaning and its charm.

The high-pitched, artificial, and eminently ill-bred voices of many American actresses unfit them for their profession. They can act intelligently, but they cannot speak agreeably. The stage has always been the exponent of correct vocalization, of that delicacy, finality, and finish which sets high the standard of speech. It was left for an American dramatist to complain that he was compelled to rewrite his play in order to eliminate all the words which his leading lady mispronounced.

If some Americans can speak superlatively well, why cannot more Americans speak pleasingly? Nature is not to blame for our deficiencies. The fault is ours. The good American voice is very good indeed. Subtle and sweet inheritances linger in its shaded vowels. Propriety and a sense of distinction control its cadences. It has more ani-

mation than the English voice, and a richer emotional range. The American is less embarrassed by his emotions than is the Englishman, and when he feels strongly the truth, or the shame, or the sorrow his words convey, his voice grows vibrant and appealing. He senses his mastery over a diction 'nobly robust and tenderly vulnerable.' The formed and finished utterances of an older civilization entrance his attentive ear.

Next to the conquest of the world by the Latin tongue through the power and sovereignty of Rome comes the conquest of the world by the English tongue through the colonizing genius of England. In the second year of the Great War, when the vision of 'der Tag' still illuminated German hearts, and Lissauer had expressed with animation his distaste for English interlopers, there were sanguine schoolmen in Germany who prophesied that a conquering Fatherland would drive 'the bastard tongue of canting island-pirates' back to the British shores, and replace it elsewhere with the blessing of the German speech, 'which comes direct from the hand of God.'

This reform has been temporarily sidetracked; and, for the present, one hundred and sixty million people are

making shift to converse in such English as they can master. If the mastery be imperfect, the responsiveness of these multiplying multitudes to images evoked by a world-wide tongue is the most stupendous fact in modern history. Dr. Arnold Schröder has emphasized a blessed truth when he says that the cultural connection between England and the United States has never been broken, and that their common language, as represented by their common literature, gives them a common purpose and a common delight in life. In so far as this language is the expression of jurisprudence, of democracy, of mercantile adventure, it is a strong link between nations that have builded on the same foundations. In so far as it is the medium of social and intellectual pleasures, it is an indissoluble bond. Our conversation with our friends in Boston or New York ties us up with English men and women conversing with their friends in remote quarters of the globe. The treasures of the 'island-pirates' are our treasures. The heaped-up gold of Shakespeare and Wordsworth and Keats is part of our spending money.

With truth has it been said that reading and writing constitute a liberal education if one is taught what to read and how to write.

THE HOLY ONE OF BENARES

BY DHAN GOPAL MUKERJI

I

BENARES again! The bend of the Ganges that first came to view glittered and flashed like a scimitar held under the sun. It was three o'clock in the afternoon when we entered the Holy City. From the distant bridge over which we walked, the turrets and towers of the thronging temples rose to the sky that burned like a turquoise shell. Stone upon stone, — yellow, gray and brown, — houses upon houses, rose tier upon tier; some had blue doors and windows, and some red; but each and all breathed only one spirit: it was the city of holiness raised above the world on the trident of Shiva. Even the monkeys in the temple of the Mother seemed holy to me.

Benares cannot be described. It is held aloft on the trident of holiness — no description can come near it. I can only set down a few impressions as background to my experiences there. I expected to be disappointed, for I had come to it after a long sojourn in an utterly alien world; and instead of disappointment — I felt its overwhelming majesty. It was Brahmanism incarnate; for no matter what new sect rises amongst us, in Benares it will find a temple and worshipers. In truth, the long arm of the Eternal Religion that abides here reaches out and sustains any new religious experience that utters itself in any form of worship. Thousands of years, thousands of religious teachers — Buddha, Shankara, Ramanuj, Nanak, Kabir, and Vive-

kananda — all have their place here. It is the vast banyan tree which gives shelter to any spirit that wishes to come to it. Here every arch is a soul story and every roof the footstool of God. There is no other city in the world, unless it be Rome, to which one can point suggesting an image of what Benares means to us.

Color on color beat upon us like a changing sea. The tawny minarets of the Beni Madhav rose clear against the intense red of the large gaunt temple-towers next to it; the latter in turn stood against the pure white domes of lesser houses of worship. And over them all danced the gleaming turquoise sky, on fire with the sun. Men and animals jostled one another as we walked the ancient flagstone, while beside us paced the multitude of pilgrims clad in robes of ochre, yellow, white, and red. The large Shiva bulls, their humps throbbing with heat and fat, rubbed their sleepy gray sides against us.

That July afternoon was not a day, but a revelation. No sooner had we entered the city than we felt that the veil of delusions had been torn asunder, giving us a glimpse of the road that we were destined to travel in order to reach the Holy One. It seemed quite natural that every one we met should point out to us the way. In Benares the streets have no names, and houses are not numbered; yet everyone whom we asked for direction told us which