

FOR FREEDOM OF SPELLING

THE DISCOVERY OF AN ART

It is curious that people do not grumble more at having to spell correctly. Yet one may ask, Do we not a little over-estimate the value of orthography? This is a natural reflection enough when the maker of artless happy phrases has been ransacking the dictionary for some elusive wretch of a word which in the end proves to be not yet naturalised, or technical, or a mere local vulgarity; yet one does not often hear the idea canvassed in polite conversation. Dealers in small talk, of the less prolific kind, are continually falling back upon the silk hat or dress suit, or some rule of etiquette or other convention as a theme, but spelling seems to escape them. The suspicion seems quaint, but one may almost fancy that an allusion to spelling savoured a little of indelicacy. It must be admitted, though where the scruples come from would be hard to say, that there is a certain diffidence even here in broaching my doubts in the matter. For some inexplicable reason spelling has become mixed up with moral feeling. One cannot pretend to explain things in a little paper of this kind; the fact is so. Spelling is not appropriate or inappropriate, elegant or inelegant; it is right or wrong. We do not greatly blame a man for turn-down collars when the vogue is erect; nor, in these liberal days, for theological eccentricity; but we esteem him "Nothing" and an outcast if he but drop a "p" from opportunity. It is not an anecdote, but a scandal, if we say

a man cannot spell his own name. There is only one thing esteemed worse before we come to the deadly crimes, and that is the softening of language by dropping the aspirate.

After all, it is an unorthodox age. We are all horribly afraid of being bourgeois, and unconventionality is the ideal of every respectable person. It is strange that we should cling so steadfastly to correct spelling. Yet again, one can partly understand the business, if one thinks of the little ways of your schoolmaster and schoolmistress. This sanctity of spelling is stamped upon us in our earliest years. The writer recalls a period of youth wherein six hours a week were given to the study of spelling, and four hours to all other religious instruction. So important is it, that a writer who cannot spell is almost driven to abandon his calling, however urgent the thing he may have to say, or his need of the incidentals of fame. Yet in the crisis of such a struggle rebellious thoughts may arise. Even this: Why, after all, should correct spelling be the one absolutely essential literary merit? For it is less fatal for an ambitious scribe to be as dull as Hoxton than to spell in diverse ways.

Yet correct spelling of English has not been traced to revelation; there was no grammatical Sinai, with a dictionary instead of tables of stone. Indeed, we do not even know certainly when correct spelling began, which word in the language was first spelt the right way, and by whom. Correct spelling may have been evolved, or it may be the creation of some master mind. Its inventor, if it had an inventor, is absolutely forgotten.

Thomas Cobbett would have invented it, but that he was born more than two centuries too late, poor man. All that we certainly know is that, contemporaneously with the rise of extreme Puritanism, the belief in orthography first spread among Elizabethan printers, and with the Hanoverian succession the new doctrine possessed the whole length and breadth of the land. At that time the world passed through what extension lecturers call, for no particular reason, the classical epoch. Nature--as, indeed, all the literature manuals testify--was in the remotest background then of human thought. The human mind, in a mood of the severest logic, brought everything to the touchstone of an orderly reason; the conception of "correctness" dominated all mortal affairs. For instance, one's natural hair with its vagaries of rat's tails, duck's tails, errant curls, and baldness, gave place to an orderly wig, or was at least decently powdered. The hoop remedied the deficiencies of the feminine form, and the gardener clipped his yews into respectability. All poetry was written to one measure in those days, and a Royal Academy with a lady member was inaugurated that art might become at least decent. Dictionaries began. The crowning glory of Hanoverian literature was a Great Lexicographer.

In those days it was believed that the spelling of every English word had been settled for all time. Thence to the present day, though the severities then inaugurated, so far as metre and artistic composition are concerned, been generously relaxed--though we have had a Whistler, a Walt Whitman, and a Wagner--the rigours of spelling have continued unabated. There is just one right way of spelling, and all others are

held to be not simply inelegant or undesirable, but wrong; and unorthodox spelling, like original morality, goes hand in hand with shame.

Yet even at the risk of shocking the religious convictions of some, may not one ask whether spelling is in truth a matter of right and wrong at all? Might it not rather be an art? It is too much to advocate the indiscriminate sacking of the alphabet, but yet it seems plausible that there is a happy medium between a reckless debauch of errant letters and our present dead rigidity. For some words at anyrate may there not be sometimes one way of spelling a little happier, sometimes another? We do something of this sort even now with our "phantasy" and "fantasie," and we might do more. How one would spell this word or that would become, if this latitude were conceded, a subtle anxiety of the literary exquisite. People are scarcely prepared to realise what shades of meaning may be got by such a simple device. Let us take a simple instance. You write, let us say, to all your cousins, many of your friends, and even, it may be, to this indifferent intimate and that familiar enemy, "My dear So-and-so." But at times you feel even as you write, sometimes, that there is something too much and sometimes something lacking. You may even get so far in the right way occasionally as to write, "My dr. So-and-so," when your heart is chill. And people versed in the arts of social intercourse know the subtle insult of misspelling a person's name, or flicking it off flippantly with a mere waggling wipe of the pen. But these are mere beginnings.

Let the reader take a pen in hand and sit down and write, "My very dear wife." Clean, cold, and correct this is, speaking of orderly affection, settled and stereotyped long ago. In such letters is butcher's meat also "very dear." Try now, "Migh verrie deare Wyfe." Is it not immediately infinitely more soft and tender? Is there not something exquisitely pleasant in lingering over those redundant letters, leaving each word, as it were, with a reluctant caress? Such spelling is a soft, domestic, lovingly wasteful use of material. Or, again, if you have no wife, or object to an old-fashioned conjugal tenderness, try "Mye owne sweete dearest Marrie." There is the tremble of a tenderness no mere arrangement of trim everyday letters can express in those double r's. "Sweete" my ladie must be; sweet! why pump-water and inferior champagne, spirits of nitrous ether and pancreatic juice are "sweet." For my own part I always spell so, with lots of f's and g's and such like tailey, twirley, loopey things, when my heart is in the tender vein. And I hold that a man who will not do so, now he has been shown how to do it, is, in plain English, neither more nor less than a prig. The advantages of a varied spelling of names are very great. Industrious, rather than intelligent, people have given not a little time, and such minds as they have, to the discussion of the right spelling of our great poet's name. But he himself never dreamt of tying himself down to one presentation of himself, and was--we have his hand for it--Shakespeare, Shakspear, Shakespear, Shakspeare, and so forth, as the mood might be. It would be almost as reasonable to debate whether Shakespeare smiled or frowned. My dear friend Simmongues is the same. He is "Sims," a mere slash of the pen, to those he scorns, Simmonds or

Simmons to his familiars, and Simmons, A.T. Simmons, Esq., to all Europe.

From such mere introductory departures from precision, such petty escapades as these, we would we might seduce the reader into an utter debauch of spelling. But a sudden Mænad dance of the letters on the page, gleeful and iridescent spelling, a wild rush and procession of howling vowels and clattering consonants, might startle the half-won reader back into orthodoxy. Besides, there is another reader--the printer's reader--to consider. For if an author let his wit run to these matters, he must write elaborate marginal exhortations to this authority, begging his mercy, to let the little flowers of spelling alone. Else the plough of that Philistine's uniformity will utterly root them out.

Such high art of spelling as is thus hinted at is an art that has still to gather confidence and brave the light of publicity. A few, indeed, practise it secretly for love--in letters and on spare bits of paper. But, for the most part, people do not know that there is so much as an art of spelling possible; the tyranny of orthography lies so heavily on the land. Your common editors and their printers are a mere orthodox spelling police, and at the least they rigorously blot out all the delightful frolics of your artist in spelling before his writings reach the public eye. But commonly, as I have proved again and again, the slightest lapse into rococo spelling is sufficient to secure the rejection of a manuscript without further ado.

And to end,--a word about Phonographers. It may be that my title has led the reader to anticipate some mention of these before. They are a kind of religious sect, a heresy from the orthodox spelling. They bind one another by their mysteries and a five-shilling subscription in a "soseiti to introduis an impruvd method of spelinj." They come across the artistic vision, they and their Soseiti, with an altogether indefinable offence. Perhaps the essence of it is the indescribable meanness of their motive. For this phonography really amounts to a study of the cheapest way of spelling words. These phonographers are sweaters of the Queen's English, living meanly on the selvage of honest mental commerce by clipping the coin of thought. But enough of them. They are mentioned here only to be disavowed. They would substitute one narrow orthodoxy for another, and I would unfold the banner of freedom. Spell, my brethren, as you will! Awake, arise, O language living in chains; let Butter's spelling be our Bastille! So with a prophetic vision of liberated words pouring out of the dungeons of a spelling-book, this plea for freedom concludes. What trivial arguments there are for a uniform spelling I must leave the reader to discover. This is no place to carp against the liberation I foresee, with the glow of the dawn in my eyes.