

## THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

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De Quincey's authorship of the essay is established by letters to John Wilson (see also *M*, XIV, p. 146n.). He wrote in December 1838 that he had composed all but two pages of an article, '*half a sheet*'; entitled "*English Language*"; taking for its suggestion, rather than its text, Guest's *Hist. of English Rhythms*', and requested Wilson to look it over with a view to persuading Blackwood to print it (Edwin Guest, *A History of English Rhythms* (1838); letter to Wilson, 21 December 1838, NLS, MS 21240, ff. 157–8). The remaining pages were sent to Wilson the next day and Blackwood received the article on 24 December (letter to Wilson, 22 December [1838], NLS, MS 21241, f. 136; letter from Blackwood to De Quincey, 24 December 1838, NLS, MS 30006).

FRENCH and English literature, which have now been in a high state of activity for two entire centuries, and perhaps as nearly as possible have been subject to the same allowance for lulls arising out of civil agitations, cannot reasonably be supposed to have left any nook or shy recess in the broad field of national interest at this day unvisited. Long after the main highway of waters has felt the full power of the tide, channels running far inland, with thousands of little collateral creeks, may be still under the very process of filling; for two powers are required to those final effects of the tide; the general hydrostatic power for maintaining the equilibrium, and also hydraulic power for searching narrow conduits. On the same analogy many human interests, less obvious or less general, may long linger unnoticed, and survive for a time the widest expansion of intellectual activity. Possibly the aspects of society must shift materially before even the human consciousness, far less a human interest of curiosity, settles upon them with steadiness enough to light up and vivify their relations. For example, odd as it may seem to us, it is certain – that in the Elizabethan age, Political Economy was not yet viewed by any mind, no, not by Lord Bacon's,<sup>1</sup> as even a *possible* mode of speculation. The whole accidents of value and its functions were not as yet separated into a distinct conscious object; nor, if they had been, would it have been supposed possible to trace laws and fixed relations amongst forms apparently so impalpable, and combinations so fleeting. With the growth of society, gradually the same phenomena revolved more and more frequently; something like order

and connexion was dimly descried; philosophic suspicion began to stir; observation was steadily applied; reasoning and disputation ran their circle; and at last a science was matured – definite as mechanics, though (like *that*) narrow in its elementary laws.

Thus it is with *all* topics of general interest. Through several generations they may escape notice; for there must be an interest of social necessity visibly connected with them, before a mere vagrant curiosity will attract culture to their laws. And this interest may fail to arise until society has been made to move through various changes, and human needs have assumed attitudes too commanding and too permanent to be neglected. The laws of the drama, that is, of the dramatic fable, how subtle are they! How imperceptible – how absolutely non-existences – in any rude state of society! But let a national theatre arise, let the mighty artist come forward to shake men's hearts with scenic agitations, how inevitably are these laws brightened to the apprehension, searched, probed, analysed. *Sint Maecenates*, it has been said, *non deerunt (Flacce) Marones*.<sup>2</sup> That may be doubted; and nearer to the probabilities it would be to invert the order of succession. But, however this may be, it is certain from manifold experience, that invariably there will follow on the very traces and fresh footing of the mighty agent (mighty, but possibly blind) – the sagacious theorist of his functions – in the very wake and visible path of the awful OEschylus, or the tear-compelling Euripides, producing their colossal effects in alliance with dark forces slumbering in human nature, will step forth the torch-bearing Aristotle, that pure starry intelligence,\* bent upon searching into those effects, and measuring (when possible) those forces.<sup>4</sup> The same age accordingly beheld the first pompous exhibitions of dramatic power, which beheld also the great speculator arise to trace its limits, proportions, and the parts of its shadowy empire. 'I came, I saw, I conquered'<sup>5</sup> – such might have been Aristotle's vaunt in reviewing his own analysis of the Athenian drama;<sup>6</sup> one generation or nearly so, having witnessed the creation of the Grecian theatre as a fact, and the finest contemplative survey which has yet been taken of the same fact viewed as a problem; of the dramatic laws, functions, powers, and limits.

No great number of generations, therefore, is requisite for the exhaustion of all capital interests in their capital aspects. And it may be presumed, with tolerable certainty, that by this time the plough has turned up every angle of soil, properly national, alike in England or in France. Not that many parts will not need to be tilled over again, and often absolutely *de novo*.<sup>7</sup> Much of what has been done, has been done so ill, that it is as if it had not been done at all. For instance, the history of neither kingdom has yet been written in a way to last, or in a way worthy of the subject. Either it has been slightly written as to

\* *That pure starry intelligence*. Aristotle was sometimes called ὁ νοῦς, *the intellect*; and elsewhere, as Suidas<sup>3</sup> records, he was said to dip his pen into the very intellect and its fountains.

research, witness Hume and Mézerai, Smollet and Père Daniel (not but some of these writers lay claim to antiquarian merits); or written inartificially and feebly as regards effect; or written without knowledge as regards the political forces which moved underground at the great aeras of our national developement.<sup>8</sup>

Still, after one fashion or another, almost every great theme has received its treatment in both English literature and French; though many are those on which, in the words of the German adage upon psychology, we may truly affirm that 'the first sensible word is yet to be spoken.' The soil is not absolutely a virgin soil; the mine is not absolutely unworked; although the main body of the precious ore is yet to be extracted.

Mean-time, one capital subject there is, and a domestic subject besides, on which, strange to say, neither nation has thought fit to raise any monument of learning and patriotism. Rich, at several eras, in all kinds of learning, neither England nor France has any great work to show upon her own vernacular language. *Res est in integro*:<sup>9</sup> no Hickee in England, no Malesherbes or Menage in France, has chosen to connect his own glory with the investigation and history of his native tongue.<sup>10</sup> And yet each language has brilliant merits of a very different order; and we speak thoughtfully when we say, that, confining ourselves to our own, the most learned work which the circumstances of any known or obvious case allow, the work which presupposes the amplest accomplishments of judgment and enormous erudition, would be a History of the English Language from its earliest rudiments, through all the periods of its growth, to its stationary condition. Great rivers, as they advance and receive vast tributary influxes, change their direction, their character, their very name; and the pompous inland sea bearing navies on its bosom, has had leisure through a thousand leagues of meandering utterly to forget and disown the rocky mountain bed and the violent rapids which made its infant state unfitted to bear even the light canoe. The analogy is striking between this case and that of the English language. In its elementary period, it takes a different name – the name of Anglo-Saxon; and so rude was it and barren at one stage of this rudimental form, that in the *Saxon Chronicle*<sup>11</sup> we find not more than a few hundred words, perhaps from six to eight hundred words, perpetually revolving, and most of which express some idea in close relation to the state of war. The narrow purposes of the *Chronicler* may, in part, it is true, have determined the narrow choice of words; but it is certain, on the other hand, that the scanty vocabulary which then existed, mainly determined the limited range of his purposes. It is remarkable, also, that the idiomatic forms and phrases are as scanty in this ancient *Chronicle*, as the ideas, the images, and the logical forms of connexion or transition. Such is the shallow brook or rivulet of our language in its infant stage. Thence it devolves a stream continually enlarging, down to the Norman aera; through five centuries (commencing with the century of Bede),<sup>12</sup> used as the vernacular idiom for the intercourse

of life by a nation expanding gradually under the ripening influence of a pure religion and a wise jurisprudence; benefiting, besides, by the culture it received from a large succession of learned ecclesiastics, who too often adopted the Latin for the vehicle of their literary commerce with the Continent, but also in cases past all numbering\* wrote (like the great patriot Alfred)<sup>13</sup> for popular purposes in Saxon, – even this rude dialect grew and widened its foundations, until it became adequate to general intellectual purposes. Still, even in this improved state, it would have been found incommensurate to its great destiny. It could not have been an organ corresponding to the grandeur of those intellects, which, in the fulness of time, were to communicate with mankind in oracles of truth or of power. It could not have offered moulds ample enough for receiving that vast literature, which, in less than another five hundred years, was beginning to well forth from the national genius.

Hence, at the very first entrance upon this interesting theme, we stumble upon what we may now understand to have been the blindest of human follies – the peculiar, and, without exaggeration, we may say the providential felicity of the English language has been made its capital reproach – that, whilst yet ductile and capable of new impressions, it received a fresh and large infusion of alien wealth. It is, say the imbecile, a ‘bastard’ language – a ‘hybrid’ language, and so forth. And thus, for a metaphor, for a name, for a sound, they overlook, as far as depends on *their* will, they sign away the main prerogative and dowry of their mother tongue. It is time to have done with these follies. Let us open our eyes to our own advantages. Let us recognise with thankfulness that fortunate inheritance of collateral wealth, which, by inoculating our Anglo-Saxon stem with the mixed dialect of Neustria,<sup>14</sup> laid open an avenue mediately through which the whole opulence of Roman, and, ultimately, of Grecian thought, play freely through the pulses of our native English. Most fortunately the Saxon language was yet plastic and unfrozen at the era of the Norman invasion. The language was thrown again into the crucible, and new elements were intermingled with its own when brought into a state of fusion.† And this final process it was, making the language at once rich in matter and malleable in form, which created that composite and multiform speech – fitted, like a mirror, to reflect the thoughts of the myriad-minded Shakspeare [ὁ ἄνθρωπος μυστιόνους],<sup>15</sup> and yet at the same time with enough remaining of its old forest stamina for imparting a masculine depth to the sublimities of

\* *In cases past all numbering.* To go no further than the one branch of religious literature, vast masses of sacred poetry in the Saxon language are yet slumbering unused, unstudied, almost unknown to the student, amongst our manuscript treasures.

† *When brought into a state of fusion.* Let not the reader look upon this image, when applied to an unsettled language, as pure fanciful metaphor: were there nothing more due to a superinduction of one language upon another, merely the confusion of inflexional forms between the two orders of declensions, conjugations, &c., would tend to recast a language, and virtually to throw it anew into a furnace of secondary formation, by unsettling the old familiar forms.

Milton, or the Hebrew prophets, and a patriarchal simplicity to the Historic Scriptures.

Such being the value, such the slow developement of our noble language, through a period of more than twice six hundred years, how strange it must be thought, that not only we possess at this day no history, no circumstantial annals, of its growth and condition at different eras, a defect which even the German literature of our language has partially supplied; but that, with one solitary exception, no eminent scholar has applied himself even to a single function of this elaborate service. The solitary exception, we need scarcely say, points to Dr Johnson – whose merits and whose demerits, whose qualifications and disqualifications, for a task of this nature, are now too notorious to require any illustration from us. The slenderness of Dr Johnson's philological attainments, and his blank ignorance of that particular philology which the case particularly required – the philology of the northern languages, are as much matters of record, and as undeniable as, in the opposite scale, are his logical skill, his curious felicity of distinction, and his masculine vigour of definition. Working under, or over, a commission of men more learned than himself, he would have been the ablest of agents for digesting and organising their materials. To *inform*, or invest with *form*, in the sense of logicians – in other words, to impress the sense and trace the presence of principles – that was Dr Johnson's peculiar province; but to assign the *matter*, whether that consisted in originating the elements of thought, or in gathering the affinities of languages, was suited neither to his nature nor to his habits of study. And, of necessity, therefore, his famous dictionary is a monument of powers unequally yoked together in one task – skill in one function of his duty 'full ten times as much as there needs;'<sup>16</sup> skill in others – sometimes feeble, sometimes none at all.

Of inferior attempts to illustrate the language, we have Ben Jonson's Grammar, early in the seventeenth century; Wallis, the mathematician's, Grammar (written in Latin, and patriotically designed as a polemic grammar against the errors of foreigners), towards the end of the same century; Bishop Lowth's little School-Grammar in the eighteenth century; Archdeacon Nares's Orthoepy; Dr Crombie's Etymology and Syntax; Noah Webster's various essays on the same subject, followed by his elaborate Dictionary, all written and first published in America.<sup>17</sup> We have also, and we mention it on account of its great but most unmerited popularity, the grammar of Lindley Murray<sup>18</sup> – an American, by the way, as, well as the eccentric Noah. This book, full of atrocious blunders (some of which, but with little systematic learning, were exposed in a work of the late Mr Hazlitt's),<sup>19</sup> reigns despotically through the young ladies' schools, from the Orkneys to the Cornish Scillys. And of the other critical grammars, such as the huge 4to of Green, the smaller one of Dr Priestley, many little abstracts prefixed to portable dictionaries, &c., there may be gathered, since the year 1680, from 250 to 300; not

one of which is absolutely\* without value – some raising new and curious questions, others showing their talent in solving old ones.<sup>21</sup> Add to these the occasional notices of grammatical niceties in the critical editions of our old poets, and there we have the total amount of what has hitherto been contributed towards the investigation of our English language in its grammatical theory. As to the investigation of its history, of its gradual rise and progress, and its relations to neighbouring languages, *that* is a total blank; a title pointing to a duty absolutely in arrear, rather than to any performance ever undertaken as yet, even by way of tentative essay. At least, any fractional attempt in that direction is such as would barely form a single section, or subsection, in a general history. For instance, we have critical essays of some value on the successive translations, into English, of the Bible. But these rather express, *in modulo parvo*,<sup>22</sup> the burden of laborious research which awaits such a task pursued comprehensively, than materially diminish it. Even the history of *Slang*, whether of domestic or foreign growth, and the record of the capricious influxes, at particular epochs, from the Spanish, the French,<sup>†</sup> &c., would furnish materials for a separate work. But we forbear to enter upon the long list of parts, chapters, and sections, which must compose the architectural system of so elaborate a work, seeing that the whole edifice itself is hitherto a great idea, *in nubibus*,<sup>24</sup> as regards our own language. The French, as we have observed, have little more to boast of. And, in fact, the Germans and the Italians, of all nations the two who most cordially hate and despise each other, in this point agree – that they only have constructed many preparatory works, have reared something more than mere scaffolding towards such a systematic and national monument.

\* So little is the absolute value and learning of such books to be measured by the critical pretensions of the class in which they rank themselves, or by the promises of their title-pages, that we remember to have seen some very acute remarks on pronunciation, on the value of letters, &c., in a little Edinburgh book of rudiments, meant only for children of four or five years old. It was called, we think, *The Child's Ladder*.<sup>20</sup>

† By the way, it has long been customary (and partly in compliance with foreign criticism, unlearned in our elder literature, and quite incompetent to understand it), to style the period of Queen Anne, and the succeeding decade of years, our Augustan age. The graver errors of thought in such a doctrine are no present concern of ours. But, as respects the purity of our language, and its dignity, never did either suffer so long and gloomy an eclipse as in that period of our annals. The German language, as written at that time in books, is positively so disfigured by French and Latin embroideries – that it becomes difficult at times to say which language is meant for the ground, and which for the decoration. Our English is never so bad as that; but the ludicrous introduction of foreign forms, such, for example, as '*bis Intimados*,' '*bis Privados*,' goes far to denationalize the tone of the diction. Even the familiar allusions and abbreviations of that age, some of which became indispensable to the evasion of what was deemed pedantry, such as '*'tis*' and '*'twas*,' are rank with meanness. In Shakspeare's age the diction of books was far more pure, more compatible with simplicity, and more dignified. Amongst our many national blessings, never let us forget to be thankful that in that age was made our final translation of the Bible, under the State authority. How ignoble, how unscriptural, would have been a translation made in the age of Pope!<sup>23</sup>

1. It is painful and humiliating to an Englishman, that, whilst all other nations show their patriotism severally in connexion with their own separate mother tongues, claiming for them often merits which they have not, and overlooking none of those which they have, his own countrymen show themselves ever ready, with a dishonourable levity, to undervalue the English language, and always upon no fixed principles. Nothing to ourselves seems so remarkable – as that men should dogmatise upon the pretensions of this and that language in particular, without having any general notions previously of what it is that constitutes the value of a language universally. Without some preliminary notice, abstractedly, of the precise qualities to be sought for in a language, how are we to know whether the main object of our question is found, or not found, in any given language offered for examination? The Castilian is pronounced fine, the Italian effeminate, the English harsh, by many a man who has no shadow of a reason for his opinions beyond some vague association of chivalresque qualities with the personal bearing of Spaniards; or, again, of special adaptation to operatic music in the Italian; or (as regards the English), because he has heard, perhaps, that the letter *s*, and crowded clusters of consonants and monosyllabic words prevail in it.

Such random and fantastic notions would be entitled to little attention; but, unfortunately, we find that men of distinguished genius – men who have contributed to sustain and extend the glory of this very English language, are sometimes amongst its notorious depreciators. Addison, in a well-known passage of his critical essays, calls the English, in competition with the Greek language, brick against marble.<sup>25</sup> Now, that there is a vocal\* beauty in the Greek, which raises it in that particular point above all modern languages, and not exclusively above the English, cannot be denied; but this is the lowest merit of a language – being merely its *sensuous* merit (to borrow a word of Milton's);<sup>26</sup> and, beyond all doubt, as respects the higher or intellectual qualities of a language, the English greatly excels the Greek, and especially in that very case which provoked the remark of Addison; for it happens, that some leading ideas in the *Paradise Lost* – ideas essential to the very integrity of the fable, cannot be expressed in Greek; or not so expressed as to convey the same thought impregnated with the same weight of passion. But let not our reverence for the exquisite humour of Addison, and his admirable delicacy of pencil in delineating the traits of character, hide from us the fact that he was a very

\* *A vocal beauty in the Greek language.* This arises partly from the musical effect of the mere inflexions of the verbs and participles, in which so many dactylic successions of accent are interchanged with spondaic arrangements, and partly also from the remarkable variety of the vowel sounds which run through the whole gamut of possible varieties in that point, and give more luxury of sound to the ear than in any other known language; for the fact is, that these varieties of vowel or diphthong sounds, succeed to each other more immediately and more constantly than in any other Southern dialect of Europe, which universally have a distinction in mere vocal or audible beauty, not approached by any Northern language, unless (as some people allege) by the Russian; and this, with the other dialects of the Sclavonian family, is to be classed as belonging to Eastern, rather than to Northern Europe.

thoughtless and irreflective critic; that his criticisms, when just, rested not upon principles, but upon mere fineness of tact; that he was an absolute ignoramus as regarded the literature of his own country; and that he was a mere bigot as regarded the antique literature of Pagan Greece or Rome. In fact, the eternal and inevitable schism between the *Romanticists* and the *Classicists*, though not in name, had already commenced in substance; and where Milton was not free from grievous error and consequent injustice, both to the writers of his country and to the language, how could it be expected that the far feebler mind of Addison, should work itself clear of a bigotry and a narrowness of sympathy as regards the antique, which the discipline and training of his whole life had established? Even the merit of Addison is not sufficient to waive his liability to one plain retort from an offended Englishman – viz. that, before he sighed away with such flagrant levity the pretensions of his native language, at all events, it was incumbent upon him to show that he had fathomed the powers of that language, had exhausted its capacity, and had wielded it with commanding effect. Whereas, we all know that Addison was a master of the humble and unpretending English, demanded, or indeed suffered by his themes; but for that very reason little familiar with its higher or impassioned movements.

2. But Addison, like most other critics on languages, overlooked one great truth, which should have made such sweeping undervaluations impossible as applied to any language; this truth is – that every language, every language at least in a state of culture and developement, has its own separate and incommunicable qualities of superiority. The French itself, which, in some weighty respects, is amongst the poorest of languages, had yet its own peculiar merits – not attainable or approachable by any other. For the whole purposes of what the French understand by the word *causer*,<sup>27</sup> for all the delicacies of social intercourse, and the *nuances* of manners, no language *but* the French possesses the requisite vocabulary. The word *causer* itself is an illustration. Marivaux<sup>28</sup> and other novelists, tedious enough otherwise, are mere repertoires of phrases untranslatable – irrepresentable by equivalents in any European language. And some of our own fashionable English novels, which have been fiercely arraigned for their French embroidery as well as for other supposed faults, are thus far justifiable – that, in a majority of instances, the English could not have furnished a corresponding phrase with equal point or piquancy – sometimes not at all.

3. If even the French has its function of superiority, so, and in a higher sense, have the English and other languages more decidedly northern. But the English, in particular, has a special dowry of power in its double-headed origin. The Saxon part of the language fulfils one set of functions, the Latin another. Mean-time, it is a great error on the part of Lord Brougham (and we remember the same error in others) to direct the student in his choice of words towards the Saxon part of the language by preference.<sup>29</sup> Nothing can be more unphilosophic, or built on more thorough misconception of the case.



Neither part of the language is good or bad absolutely, but in its relation to the subject, and according to the treatment which the subject is meant to receive. It is an error even to say that the Saxon part is more advantageously used for cases of passion. Even that requires further limitation. Simple narration, and a pathos resting upon artless circumstances, – elementary feelings, – homely and household affections, – these are most suitably managed by the old indigenous Saxon vocabulary. But a passion which rises into grandeur, which is complex, elaborate, and interveined with high meditative feelings, would languish or absolutely halt, without aid from the Latin moiety of our language. Mr Coleridge remarks – that the writings of all reflective or highly subjective poets, overflow with Latin and Greek polysyllables, or what the uneducated term ‘dictionary words.’<sup>30</sup>

4. Again, if there is no such thing in *rerum natura*<sup>31</sup> as a language radically and universally without specific powers; if every language, in short, is and must be, according to the circumstances under which it is moulded, an organ *sui generis*, and fitted to sustain with effect some function or other of the human intellect, – so, on the other hand, the very advantages of a language, those which are most vaunted, become defects under opposite relations. The power of running easily into composition, for instance, on which the Germans show so much *fierté*, when stating the pretensions of their own mother tongue, is in itself injurious to the simplicity and natural power of their poetry, besides being a snare, in many cases, to the ordinary narrator or describer, and tempting him aside into efforts of display which mar the effect of his composition. In the early stages of every literature, not simplicity (as it is thought) but elaboration and complexity, and tumid artifice in the structure of the diction, are the besetting vices of the poet: witness the Roman fragments of poetry anterior to Ennius.<sup>32</sup> Now the fusile capacity of a language for running into ready coalitions of polysyllables aids this tendency, and almost of itself creates such a tendency.

5. The process by which languages grow is worthy of deep attention. So profound is the error of some men on this subject, that they talk familiarly of language as of a thing deliberately and consciously ‘invented’ by the people who use it. A language never was invented\* by any people; that part which is

\* Mean-time, a few insulated words have been continually nourished by authors; that is, transferred to other uses, or formed by thoughtful composition and decomposition, or by skilful alterations of form and inflexion. Thus Mr Coleridge introduced the fine word *ancestral*, in lieu of the lumbering word *ancestrial*, about the year 1798.<sup>33</sup> Milton introduced the indispensable word *sensuous*. Daniel, the truly philosophic poet and historian, introduced the splendid *class* of words with the affix of *inter*, to denote reciprocation, *e. g.* *interpenetrate*, to express mutual or interchangeable penetration; a form of composition which is deeply beneficial to the language, and has been extensively adopted by Coleridge.<sup>34</sup> We ourselves may boast to have introduced the word *orchestric*, which we regard with parental pride, as a word expressive of that artificial and pompous music which attends, for instance, the elaborate hexameter verse of Rome and Greece, in comparison with the simpler rhyme of the more exclusively accentual metres in modern languages; or expressive of any organised music, in opposition to the natural warbling of the woods.

not borrowed from adjacent nations arises under instincts of necessity and convenience. We will illustrate the matter by mentioning three such modes of instinct in which has lain the parentage of at least three words out of four in every language. First, the instinct of abbreviation, prompted continually by hurry or by impatience. Secondly, the instinct of *onomatopoeia*, or more generally, the instinct of imitation applied directly to sounds, indirectly to motion, and by the aid of analogies more or less obvious applied to many other classes of objects. Thirdly, the instinct of distinction – sometimes for purposes of necessity, sometimes of convenience. This process claims by far the largest application of words in every language. Thus, from *propriety* (or the abstract idea of annexation between two things by means of fitness or adaptation), was struck off by a more rapid pronunciation and a throwing-back of the accent, the modern word, *property*, in which the same general idea is limited to appropriations of pecuniary value; which, however, was long expressed by the original word *propriety*, under a modified enunciation. So again, *major* as a military designation, and *mayor* as a civil one, have split off from the very same original word by varied pronunciations. And these divergencies into multiplied derivatives from some single radix, are, in fact, the great source of opulence to one language by preference to another. And it is clear that the difference in this respect between nation and nation will be in a compound ratio of the complexity and variety of situations into which men are thrown (whence the necessity of a complex condition of society to the growth of a truly fine language) – in the ratio, we say, of this complexity on the one hand; and, on the other, of the intellectual activity put forth to seize and apprehend these fleeting relations of things and persons. Whence, according to the vast inequalities of national minds, the vast disparity of languages.

6. Hence we see the monstrosity of claiming a fine or copious language, for any rude or uncultivated, much more for any savage people, or even for a people of mountaineers, or for a nation subsisting chiefly by hunting, or by agriculture and rural life exclusively, or in any way sequestered and monotonous in their habits. It is philosophically impossible that the Gaelic, or the Hebrew, or the Welsh, or the Manx, or the Armoric, could, at any stage, have been languages of compass or general poetic power. In relation to a few objects peculiar to their own climates, or habits, or superstitions, any of these languages may have been occasionally gifted with a peculiar power of expression; what language is *not* with regard to some class of objects? But a language of power and compass cannot arise except amongst cities and the habits of luxurious people. ‘They talked,’ says John Paul, speaking of two rustic characters, in one of his sketches, – ‘they talked, as country people are apt to talk, concerning – nothing.’<sup>35</sup> And the fact is, universally, that rural occupations and habits, unless counteracted determinately by intellectual pursuits, tend violently to torpor. Social gatherings, social activity, social pleasure – these are the parents of language. And there is but the one following exception to the rule – That such as is the activity of the national intellect in

arresting fugitive relations, such will be the language resulting; and this exception lies in the *mechanical* advantages offered by some inflexions compared with others for generating and educing the possible modifications of each primitive idea. Some modes of inflexions easily lend themselves, by their very mechanism, to the adjuncts expressing degrees, expressing the relations of time, past, present, and future; expressing the modes of will, desire, intention, &c. For instance, the Italians have terminal forms, *ino, ello, acchio*, &c., expressing all gradations of size above or below the ordinary standard. The Romans, again, had frequentative forms, inceptive forms, forms expressing futurity and desire, &c. These short-hand expressions performed the office of natural symbols, or hieroglyphics, which custom had made universally intelligible. Now, in some cases this machinery is large, and therefore extensively auxiliary to the popular intellect in building up the towering pile of a language; in others it is meagre, and so far it is possible that, from want of concurrency in the mechanic aids, the language may, in some respects, not be strictly commensurate to the fineness of the national genius.

7. Another question, which arises upon all languages, respects their degrees of fitness for poetic and imaginative purposes. The mere question of fact is interesting; and the question as to the causal agency which has led to such a result is still more so. In this place we shall content ourselves with drawing the reader's attention to a general phenomenon which comes forward in all non-poetic languages – viz. that the separation of the two great fields, prose and poetry, or of the mind, impassioned or unimpassioned, is never perfectly accomplished. This phenomenon is most striking in the Oriental languages, where the common edicts of government or provincial regulations of police assume a ridiculous masquerade dress of rhetorical or even of poetic animation. But amongst European languages this capital defect is most noticeable in the French, which has no resources for elevating its diction when applied to cases and situations the most lofty or the most affecting. The single misfortune of having no neuter gender, by compelling the mind to distribute the colouring of life universally; and by sexualising in all cases, neutralises the effect, as a special effect, for any case. To this one capital deformity, which presents itself in every line, many others have concurred. And it might be shown convincingly, that the very power of the French language, as a language for social intercourse, is built on its impotence for purposes of passion, grandeur, and native simplicity. The English, on the other hand, besides its double fountains of words, which furnishes at once two separate keys of feeling, and the ready means of obtaining distinct movements for the same general passion, enjoys the great advantage above southern languages of having a neuter gender, which, from the very first establishing a mode of shade, establishes, by a natural consequence, the means of creating light, and a more potent vitality.