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IMPENETRABILITY

OR

THE PROPER HABIT OF ENGLISH

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IMPENETRABILITY

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THE PROPER HABIT OF ENGLISH

Synopsis.—National and international use of languages.—" Fixed English " arranged on the " label system," that is, on a system of logically generalised preconceptions, as opposed to " English proper," which is more a language of " conceits " or pictorial images.—English a *lingua franca* of later development than most other European languages.—Advantages of this development: grammatic flexibility and copiousness of vocabulary.—Drawbacks: the inconsistency of English spelling (but there are certain compensations even here) and a temptation to slovenliness of expression and thought.—The differentiation of words in English.—Examples of the development of words by associative use.—The fluidity of English in the coining, borrowing, and interchange of words still maintained: the tacit consent of one's fellows as the only test of correctness.—The occasional falsification of thought that a " logical " language causes.—Attempted reformations of English helpful but

never final; the expanding process continues in spite of authority.—The associative method analogous to sympathetic magic, the label system to rationalism.—The whimsical element in English.—Concentration of many senses in a single conceit.—Recent grammatic and syntactic novelties.—Why there is no standard English prose, but only prose of a certain style and period.—The limitations of an international language.

For the choice of IMPENETRABILITY as a title for the book, see page 53.

THE original occasion of this paper —a course of public lectures at the Egyptian University at Cairo—is plainly recalled by the home-thoughts-from-abroad sentiment that pervades it. The audience was largely Oriental, but contained many energetic Francophiles whose assumptions about the English language were known to be both uncritical and unflattering. This atmosphere prompted a review of those classroom commonplaces on the peculiar nature of English, which, mostly in the form of comparisons with French and German, have for years been copied from one blackboard to another with-

out due inquiry into their truth. It is usually accepted, for example, that French is a more exact, more philosophic language than English, but that English is an easier language to learn than French: both of these views can be questioned, except in a very limited sense. And that "French is the language for love but English for science: but, on the other hand, French is the prosaic, English the poetic language" is a paradox in need of very careful defence. At the same time such unfriendly charges occur as "English is chaotic and utterly unsuited for clear thought," and have to be met by showing that this chaos is only the apparent disorder of a workshop in which a great deal of repair and other work is in progress: the benches are crowded, the corners piled with lumber, but the old hand knows just where to find any spare part or accessory needed, or at any rate can lay his hand on the tools and materials needed for making whatever is wanting.

In considering any language, a careful distinction must be made and kept

between its popular native form and the form to which it is adapted for official and educative routine and for international trade in goods and ideas, between its unrestrained idiomatic use and a controlled, sterilised, cut-and-dried form which has been lightened as far as possible of all the complexities, subtleties, and distortions which might confuse a fool or a foreigner. A few languages only, of which French and Italian as spoken by the educated classes are the readiest examples, pass almost unchanged into international currency and show no obvious cleavage between their official and literary phrasing. English is not one of these. Foreigners are often unaware that the English which they have studied in schools or privately with the help of grammars and dictionaries—let us call it "fixed English"—though at first sight similar, is a very different language from the more fluid form—let us call it English proper—which they meet in imaginative literature, and in which the more English of the English make jokes, poems, and sometimes love. It is a

frequent cause of exasperation, for where the Englishman claims intricacy, concord, and beauty, the foreigner, who is not admitted to the secret, finds only muddle, contradiction, and madness.

French, Italian, and to a lesser extent Modern German, are what are known as logical languages: they are reasonable codifications of as much of human experience as can be translated into speech. They give each separate object, process, or quality a permanent label duly docketed, and ever afterwards recognise this object, process, or quality by its label rather than by itself; forbidding it to appear unless with the label correctly attached. These languages are therefore also the rhetorical languages, rhetoric being the poetry of labels and not the poetry of the things themselves. English proper has always been very much a language of "conceits"; that is, except for the purely grammatic parts of speech, which are in general colourless enough, the vocabulary is not fully dissociated from the imagery from which it developed: words still tend to be pictorial and not typo-

graphic. The word "conceit" originally meant an image or pictorial idea contained in a word or juxtaposition of words, but the neo-Classical influence in criticism eventually gave it the sense of "unnecessary and exhibitory ornament" and so "vanity"; at best now, the same critical influence surviving, it will mean "imaginative concepts beautifying but not essential to logical thought on the label system." Fortunately in English one is permitted to restore a word to its original sense, if notice is given; and so resisting the alien critical standards since imposed, let us firmly agree that English proper is a language not of labels but rather of "conceits" or "pictorial images."

Matthew Arnold, who as a critic did not do sufficient justice to the peculiarly English habit of thought, points out in his essay on the "Influence of Literary Academies" that: "The power of French Literature is in its prose-writers, the power of English Literature in its poets. While the fame of many celebrated poets of France depends on the qualities of intelligence they ex-

hibit, qualities which are the distinctive support of prose, many of the celebrated prose-writers of England depend wholly for their fame on the imaginative qualities they exhibit, which are the distinctive support of Poetry." The truth is, that for French prose-writers and many celebrated French verse-writers the conceits of the words they use are dulled and show no rebellious tendency to form illicit assemblies that might affect the argument. For English writers of prose or verse, so soon as a gust of natural feeling snatches away the typographical disguise in which their words are dressed, the conceits appear in all freedom: at first they enliven and enforce the argument, but after a while, if the author is not wary, they desert it and begin a digressive dance of their own. It is a commonplace that the English have no feeling for purity of literary form in the Classical sense: it is their strength and weakness that native imaginative exuberance breaks down all literary restraint. Serious critical writing is frequently punctuated—as this very paper may prove to be—

by mild jokes and sometimes effective, sometimes strained analogy; the broadest farce may develop sudden periods of poetic beauty, and so also may the most formal theology; philosophy in England often hesitates between satire, practical psychology, ejaculatory descriptive passages, and philosophy proper. Tragi-comedy is the clearest instance of this peculiarity in English literature: it is a form almost unknown on the Continent: at its worst it is an absurd episodic carnival, but at its best, where a constructive intelligence is present to reconcile the apparently incompatible elements, a greater integrity and clarity results than is possible within the limitations of pure Classical form. Tragi-comedy is the hit-or-miss dramatic form, and English proper is the hit-or-miss language.

Fixed English, which dates perhaps from Dr Johnson's *Dictionary*, completed in 1755, fulfils the need of a safer, less ambitious language arranged on the same system and dedicated to the same uses as French; it is a language of agreed preconceptions. Fixed English makes

possible a French-English, English-French, or a German-English, English-German dictionary. Each foreign label can find its English fellow. For example, "glory" is matched with "la gloire," and "mâtelot" with "sailor." Fixed English compares very well with other languages: but is often more mechanically, and therefore more properly employed by foreigners than by Englishmen, who are always inclined to slip back into English proper. Fixed English is an easy language to learn, like colloquial Arabic: but of English proper, as of Arabic proper, no wise man will ever claim final mastery: there is no discovered end to either language.

English, whether fixed or free, has certain unusual advantages in structure. In the first place it is almost uninflected and has no genders. The Romance languages and German—but let us treat more particularly of French, because the French are nearer the English in geography, and farther removed in mental habit than any other European nation: France is historically

the sweet enemy of England—these languages, then, though in other respects more logical, have not had occasion to simplify themselves similarly, have clung without question to their genders and inflections.

Now in any logical sense there is no justification for genders. They are a survival from a mythological time when the supposed sex of any object—trees, diseases, cooking implements—had to be considered for the sake of religious convention or taboo. The religious sense disappeared in prehistoric times: the genders remain as a decoration or frill without which the languages that keep them would feel undressed. Even new words have to decide, so soon as coined, on their hypothetical sex, concretes and abstractions alike. This sense of lingual modesty must of course be reckoned with: the Romance languages and German have what amounts to an æsthetic objection to an English sentence like: "The boy, the man, and the woman had the same feelings." They prefer the decorative variety of "Le garçon, l'homme, et la femme

avaient les mêmes sentiments." But when a language is used for international exchange the practical disadvantages of gender are generally admitted to outweigh its decorative qualities. Gender is illogical, in being partly used to express actual sex, *e.g. Le garçon, la femme*, and partly used without thought of sex, *e.g. la masculinité, le feminisme, le festin, la fête*, so that if one does wish to give sex-characteristics to concrete objects or abstractions, as, for example, masculinity to "sword" and "pen" and femininity to "Parliament," the fixed gender is an actual hindrance to any such renewal of mythology. An inflected tense, also, has a beauty from which these languages rightly refuse to be parted. But for merely practical uses an inflected tense such as *je serai, tu seras, il sera, nous serons, vous serez, ils seront* seems unnecessary to an Englishman, content with *I will be, you will be, he will be, we will be, they will be*, particularly since the French have dropped noun and adjective inflections almost as completely as English. The only possible

variation in English of the future tense is the alternation of "shall" and "will" as auxiliaries: but this is an alternation that shows varying attitudes to the future (intention, compulsion, and direction), it is not merely decorative. English is a language of later development than other European languages: it is more copious and less inflected. The gradual tendency of language since the beginning of modern civilisation has been continuously towards the simplification of grammar. The most ancient languages of which we have record, such as Sanscrit and Eskimo, are not, as one would expect, rude in structure, but on the contrary so elaborate in tense, case, mood, and gender that to learn the elements of any such will take as long a time as to become fluent in any four unrelated civilised languages. The present tendency to simplify grammar is due to the enormous number of new ideas, objects, and aspects of things which the speeding-up of civilisation brings. Breadth of vocabulary is given in exchange for depth of grammar: so all recent inventors of new languages,

such as Ido, Volapuk, and Esperanto, have agreed in reducing grammar to its bare bones. English began after the Norman Conquest as a *lingua franca* between the French-speaking invaders, who assumed the entire government and religious control of the country, and the mixed Anglo-Saxon-Danish population on whom they depended for labour and supplies. It was natural for the minority to make the language of the majority the base of the *lingua franca* rather than the other way about: and the dignity of French-speaking could be thus maintained. French was the language of the court and the law for a century or two after English had established itself for all ordinary purposes and become the accepted literary language, but the eventual disappearance of French was never in doubt once the grammar of Saxon, already weakened by the Danish invasions, was further simplified by the requirements of the French-speaking invaders. The *lingua franca* was at first deficient in words to fit the new methods of trade and government, and these had to be

supplied from the French which was culturally in advance of Anglo-Saxon because of its closer connection with Rome, the source of all contemporary culture. So passing the stage of Broken Saxon, English developed a free and easy grammar and syntax, a modification of Anglo-Saxon, but with French turns wherever a legal or literary subtlety was needed: the vocabulary, remaining Anglo-Saxon in foundation, was enormously enriched with Norman-French and Latin words of advanced cultural history. So it is that while there are at least twice as many Romance words in English as native ones, these native words are used five times as often as the Romance words. One of the happiest features of this development of English was that the parts of speech ceased to be strictly used: adjectives were made to do service for nouns, and nouns were turned into verbs, until it could be said that all parts of speech in English can be interchanged. We can use a pronoun for a noun: "That not impossible she." Or a conjunction for a verb, or for a noun: "But me no buts."

Or a verb for noun: "To go on strike." Or a noun for a verb: "Foot it neatly on the green." In the sentence "A briar pipe has no equal," "briar," a noun, does duty for an adjective; "equal," an adjective, does duty for a noun. This interchange is a great help to meaning where the adjective formed in the usual way from a noun, or the verb formed from the noun, has divagated slightly from its original sense. For instance, if one wished to write of the inflections of a verb and did not wish to write "verbal inflections" because "verbal" means "of a word" rather than "of a verb," one would be free to speak of "verb-inflections," using a noun for an adjective.

Further gains to English at this early period were the wide choice of prefixes and suffixes which the pooling of the wealth of both languages gave, the use of auxiliary words to help out the verb-tenses, and new freedoms won by prepositions. There is a greater richness of prepositions in English than in most other civilised languages: for instance, in French *de* has to bear the whole

burden of the English prepositions "*of*," "*from*," "*out*," and *d* of "*at*," "*to*," "*till*," and German has no separation between "of" and "from"; "into" and "out of" are double prepositions with no equivalent in either French or German. But it is not merely the greater choice of prepositions that gives English a greater subtlety in their use. For example, James Clarence Mangan, in his humorous essay, "My Bugle and how I blow it," published in the early 1830's, makes a good point about one use of the preposition "in." He writes:—

> I am the Man in the Cloak. In other words, I am by no manner of means the Man *of* the Cloak or the Man *under* the Cloak. The Germans call me "*Der Mensch mit dem Mantel*," the Man *with* the Cloak. This is a deplorable error in the nomenclature of that otherwise intelligent people: because my cloak is not part and parcel of myself. The cloak is outside and the man is inside, but each is a distinct entity. I admit you may say, "The Man with the Greasy Countenance," thus also Slawken-Bergius (*vide Tristram Shandy*) calls his hero "The Stranger with the

Nose," for . . . however long . . . the nose was an integral part of the individual. With me the case is a horse of another colour. I do not put my cloak on and off, I grant, but I can do so when I please: and therefore it is obvious to the meanest capacity that I am the Man *in* the Cloak and no mistake.

Mangan's objection to the German idiom could have been strengthened by an opposite objection to the French "L'homme à la redingote," where the greater emphasis is laid on the cloak than on the man: Mangan, as he says, is not "the Man *of* the Cloak"; yet "L'homme dans la redingote" is no more French than "Der Mensch in dem Mantel" is German.

It is of this flexibility of English that Sir Philip Sidney writes in his *Apologie for Poetry*.

English giveth us great occasion to the right use of matter and manner, being indeed capable of any excellent exercising of it. I know some will say that it is a mingled language. And why not so much the better, taking the best of both the other? Another will say it wanteth Grammar. Nay, truly it hath that praise, that it wanteth not

Grammar, for Grammar it might have, but it needs it not; being so easy of itself and so void of those cumbersome differences of Cases, Genders, Moods, and Tenses, which I think was a piece of the Tower of Babylon's curse, that a man should be put to school to learn his mother tongue. But for the uttering sweetly and properly the conceits of the mind, which is the end of speech, that it hath it equally with any other tongue in the world: and is particularly happy in compositions of two or three words together, near the Greek, far beyond the Latin: which is one of the greatest beauties can be in a language.

The admirable growth of English as a common language of conqueror and conquered had one great disadvantage: the slowness with which it arrived at a common convention for the pronunciation and spelling of words. Neither the French nor the Anglo-Saxons could form their mouths properly for the management of the others' language, particularly of the vowels, yet the French scribes had to write Saxon words in their legal records, and the Saxon scribes in submitting accounts in writing

had to adopt a convention of spelling which their masters would understand. English spelling therefore hardened before a common vowel-pronunciation had been arrived at: or it would be truer to say that a local convention hardened in each district according to the dialect spoken. East Midland was the English dialect that finally triumphed, but words were introduced from other dialects where a slightly different spelling had been in vogue; and when at last a general convention of spelling and pronunciation was reached, it was, and remains, a tissue of inconsistencies: the one serious handicap to English as an official or international language.

The termination *-ough*, for instance, occurs in words as differently sounded as "rough," "bough," "cough," "thorough," "though," "through," and "hiccough": the *gh* representing what was once an Anglo-Saxon guttural which corresponds with the Greek χ. This guttural the Norman-French either could not or would not pronounce: either they made an *f* sound of it or

they sounded the vowel and left out the consonant altogether. It is probable that this habit became fashionable among those natives who wished to pass as members of the ruling caste, and except in the North, where it lasted much later and still survives in many dialect words, the *gh* passed out of the spoken language, and remains in the written merely as an historic note.

To the different pronunciation of vowels in different parts of the country, these -ough words are sufficient witnesses; and to the inconsistency of the spelling convention, the "ch" in "church," "Christian," "chivalry," and "pibroch." The trouble is that in English there are only twenty-three letters (three others—x, k, and q—being redundant) to express forty-three sounds: and this was always too much for the scribes. They tried various methods, such as the doubling of the consonant to show that the vowel which comes before is short, *e.g. batter*, and the final *e* after a consonant to show that the vowel is long, *e.g. bone*. But

none of these methods could be used consistently while the pronunciation was still so various; and the scribes did as well as could be expected short of making a new alphabet.

The spelling of a word is often, however, valuable in suggesting the date and origin of its appearance in the language. The case of Romance words in "-on" is typical. "Mutton" is an early borrowing, and therefore kept its original terminal spelling. Three centuries or so later, when the French *on* sound had been Englished as "-on," new *-on* words imported, such as *balon*, *marron*, *musqueton*, *salon*, were spelt "balloon," "marroon," "musquetoon," "saloon." This "oo," which also represented the narrow vowel in the word "good," later got confused with the broader sound as in "food" and "moon." But "mutton" was still pronounced as before. In more recent times the English have either spelt and pronounced the newly borrowed words in *-on* in the proper French way, if they are educated words, such as *soupçon* and *raison d'être*, or, if they are words

capable of popular use, they have Englished them much as they did the words first borrowed. So *bâton*, as in "conductor's baton," is made to rhyme with *fatten*, and on the barrack-square *échelon* has come to rhyme with *stretch along*. On the whole, we are more willing to pronounce and spell foreign words as they are spelt and pronounced in their country of origin. And this new respect for accuracy of pronunciation, which, as has been noticed, does not extend to the masses, has made things rather worse than before. For instance the Irish word "lough," not long borrowed, has added one more pitfall to the pronunciation of words in "-ough." Conscientious travellers to Ireland try to compass the sound, but the dictionaries compromise by directing that it shall be pronounced "lok"; holding that "k" is at any rate a guttural and nearer to the sound than "f."

Yet we have sucked certain advantages even from our most indefensible confusions. Where there has been more than one pronunciation of a word, it has

very often been split into two words, each devoted to a different sense and usually spelt differently. "Through" and "thorough" provide an instance of differentiation both of spelling and pronunciation; "flower" and "flour," "gest," and "jest" of differentiation in spelling only. And it sometimes happens that the same word is borrowed more than once from the same language, the first borrowing having already changed in sense. So that the second borrowing becomes a new word in English and, the spelling convention having meanwhile also changed, is easily distinguished from the early borrowing. The word "saloon" was a Tudor borrowing from the French, and, manners and appetites being what they then were, now usually means a "public eating-room." *Salon*, the later borrowing, is a room where wits and men and women of distinction assemble for mutual admiration, and where refreshments are of the lightest. In a "saloon" one may eat beefsteak-and-onions; in a *salon* hardly more than a caviare sandwich. "Antick," with its more modern

"antic," and "antique" enshrine very different views of things antiquated.

In accepting English one must accept the inconsistent spelling cheerfully, not only for the practical services it has rendered in the differentiation of meaning, but on its own account, as one learns to accept and even admire the trifling irregularities of a friend's face. There is to the English eye something distasteful in the idea of phonetic spelling. Attempts to force it upon the language, though supported by all the logic in the world, are unavailing; "because of the ugly look the words have," the popular reason will be, but there is something stronger behind, even, than an æsthetic objection. Though the use of phonetic spelling can be defended so far as fixed English is concerned, because one merely typographic convention is as good as another in the label system, it is an act of hostility to English proper. If conceits are to take their usual prominent part, the use of a simplified spelling convention stands in the way of their natural emergence. This is clearest in the case of poetry. Poetry

in phonetic spelling is not only grotesque in appearance because of its over-use of k's, z's, and ay's: it is actually meaningless, as poetry, because the images get entangled in the net of the spelling. One would have less objection to phonetic or "simplified" spelling if it could be introduced retrospectively in our grandfather's days: but we do not intend to make sacrifices for the sake of our grandchildren. We will only change our spelling, be sure, when the Frenchman drops his "le, la, les," and agrees to a conjugation like "je serai, il serai, nous serai, vous serai, ils serai," and that will not be to-morrow or next year even. In any case, simplified spelling is useless without an unsimplification of pronunciation. Homophones such as "pier" and "peer"; "pear," "pare," and "pair" owe a great deal to their various spelling: and if spelling is made phonetic they must decide each on a new pronunciation—"peer" may remain "peer," but "pier" must rhyme with "higher." If "pair" is to remain "pair," "pear" must be "pee-ar," and "pare" must be "parë."

And the rights of "pyre," "par," and "pa" must not be infringed upon. As the regularising of our spelling and pronunciation on a rational basis has never succeeded, partly because there is no cultural centre in England, and never has been, of such commanding influence as, for example, Paris, and partly because an Englishman's choice of words is as much his own peculiar dialect as his home is his castle—so for the same reasons the permanent dedication of particular words to particular senses, the fixing of English, has never, we have already seen, come to much. There have been occasional literary panjandrums who have undertaken the reformation of the language from a professorial or editorial chair, and have been supported by others of the same missionary spirit. There have even been short periods, usually after a time of civil disturbance, when the cultured classes have had what may be called "fits of tidiness" and, always under direct continental influence, have begun putting the dictionary into better order. The "Society for Pure English," re-

cently formed by the Poet Laureate, is getting a great deal of support at this moment, and is the literary equivalent of political Fascism. But at no period have the cultured classes been able to force the habit of tidiness on the nation as a whole. Ben Jonsons, John Drydens, Alexander Popes, Joseph Addisons, Samuel Johnsons, and Matthew Arnolds have only succeeded in civilising the outer crust of the national hasty-pudding. The imaginative genius of the uneducated and half-educated masses will not be denied expression.

Joseph Conrad is the most striking recent example of a writer bent on reforming English. He was a Pole who was completely ignorant of the language until he joined the British merchant service as a young man. When after taking a master's certificate he eventually settled down as a novelist, he had learned English so correctly and fixed it so carefully in his own mind that native Englishmen are more flattered and astonished at his literary excellence than in love with his writing. "The style that was the man" is the

publishers' choice of an epitaph for him. His are library-shelf novels rather than books to put under the pillow. Conrad was always disturbed by the untidiness of English. He complains in one of his essays of a specific word, I believe it is "oaken." In a Romance language, he points out, the equivalent of "oaken" could only mean one thing; that is, "made of oak-wood." In English "oaken" can mean both this and many other things, according to the context. An "oaken chaplet" is a chaplet of oak-leaves; an "oaken glade" is a glade composed of oaks; and further, the qualities with which oak is popularly credited, such as uprightness, strength, venerability, hardness, its growth from an acorn, its refusal to bend even though it be uprooted; all these qualities are latent in the word "oaken" and are called up by the requirements of the context in which it occurs. In a poem, "The Moment of Weakness," by a contemporary who signs himself John Doyle, the established conceit "hearts of oak" and the improvised conceit "heads of oak" are contrasted.

Two sailors, after an exhausting storm in which most of their comrades have perished, decide to sit quietly on the deck of their vessel and recover their strength:—

> . . . content
> To set no damage straight,
> To toss the dice and bait
> Fish-hooks: to smoke and joke
> With heads, not hearts of oak.

This is untranslatable into French except by a long periphrasis defeating the necessary quality of conciseness which the context demands. French has, of course, many vivid idioms but far less readily coined, and when coined far more slowly accepted as literary currency than in England: and when accepted more ready to lose their imaginative vigour: so that one can say, "Il vient de sortir" without any "coming" sense in "vient." For "hearts of oak" the nearest literary equivalent in French is perhaps "le courage inébranlable de nos mâtelots." Now, even supposing that there was a correct French idiom "cœurs de chêne,"

that would establish no right to the coining of a complementary phrase "têtes de chêne." "Têtes de bois" is perhaps the nearest suitable idiom, but "Heads of oak" is a more particular phrase because "oak-wood" has a particular character distinguishing it from mere "wood."

French is a language of fixed models: it has none of the workshop untidiness and power of improvisation which characterise English. In French one chooses the finished phrase nearest to one's purpose, and if there is nothing that can be "made to do," a long time is spent getting the Works to approve a new model. Both methods have their own disadvantages. The English method tends to slovenliness and obscurity in any but the most careful hands, the French to a circumscription of thought, because the codification, however carefully considered in the days of Cardinal Richelieu, is no longer capable of meeting all the demands put upon it by modern thought. It is, for example, impossible in French to give as a section-heading to an article

"L'échappé de la contrôle," that is, "Escape from Control." The French mind asks "The escape of what from the control of what?" Now in nine cases out of ten that question does demand an answer, and the Englishman may be thinking slovenly in merely saying or writing "Escape from Control." But in the tenth case "Escape from Control" may be a pure conception, unforeseen in the age of limited logic, which will be spoilt by adding particularities to it. An English psychologist of my acquaintance was once preparing an address to a learned society in Paris. He wrote it in what he hoped was French, but took the precaution of asking a French professor to see that it was correctly phrased. The manuscript was returned marked in several places: "Pas français, pas français, pas français": with suggested alterations. But almost in every case the alterations sapped the strength of the argument, and each "pas français" could be matched with a "pas vrai." As in science, so in poetry. A poem of Laura Gottschalk's begins:

All creatures who wake enjoy the sun,
All but one,
The sun, because the sun.

The French of the last line would have to be "Le soleil, parce que c'est le soleil," and this "c'est le" destroys the absoluteness of the English, in which the sun is not in any way circumscribed with the particular thought of being. These are very fine points and most unusual occasions, and it is probably true to say with Matthew Arnold that, in general, French is a more convenient language to use for the conveyance of intelligence, that is, agreed facts. Thus it comes about that French is the most suitable language for love-making: in telling the familiar story of passion, rhetorical French may be a safer vehicle of the emotions than the poetically ambitious English. And the other part of the paradox that "English is a language fittest for science" is also illuminated when we use science in a deeper sense than "encyclopedical arrangement of empiric discovery." A new scientific idea in a less circumscribed region of knowledge, necessitating new

words and even new grammatic constructions, will certainly find English the more complaisant language.

"Sailor" was given as an example of a fixed-English word which would serve as a counterpart of "mâtelot." "Sailor" is the most general, least highly coloured of the many words which roughly mean "a man whose life is the sea," such as "seaman," "boatman," "mariner," "seafarer," "shipman," "voyager." But even "sailor" has its peculiar senses: for instance a "good sailor" is not a "skilled seaman," but a traveller who in his periodic voyages is not troubled by sea-sickness. "Glory" was also instanced as a fixed English counterpart of "la gloire." But in English proper "glory" can mean almost anything according to the context. It can mean "heroic fame" in the emotional sense. "Through deadly Russian shot and Cossack spears, We carved our way to glory" is the theme of an old-fashioned barrack-room ballad. But "heroic fame" is an idea that, though it may survive in Italy and France, is almost extinct in modern

England. "Glory" is far more often used in a satiric sense. "He was in his glory," we might say, "taking his motor cycle to pieces and getting smothered with oil"; meaning by this, that he was whole-heartedly absorbed, regardless of consequences. Or "glory" can be used poetically. "Do not forget," writes A. E., the Irish mystical poet, "to leave a glory on the air when the red Gaelic sun has set." Here "glory" is almost a colour.

> The long light shakes across the lakes,
> And the wild cataract leaps in glory

are lines of Tennyson's, where "glory" means a "wild freedom." And then by a whimsical trick of language "glory" can come to mean death and utter annihilation. "He dropped a cigarette-end into the powder-barrel and was blown to glory." The case of the "Hand of Glory" (the severed hand of a hanged man soaked in oil and used as a magic torch by thieves) is rather more difficult. Hand of Glory is a translation of the French "main de gloire," a popular corruption of "mandragore," the plant mandragora, whose

roots had a similar magic value to thieves. The word "glory" is here understood in a double or triple sense: as the glory or shining of the torch, as the death from which the hand has been snatched, and as the glorious success which the charm is expected to bring. The word "glory-hole," meaning a cell where condemned prisoners are put, has the "death" sense; but the hopelessness and confusion of the glory-hole has applied the word to any receptacle in which possessions are put away in disorder.

A word like "brazen" is perhaps easier to follow in its changes than "glory." "Brazen" means "of brass" or "like brass." All the qualities therefore which the imagination can give to brass are latent in the word. "Brazen" may mean "shining with a metallic glare," as in the phrase, "There was a brazen gleam in the sky." Or it may mean "strident," by recollection of the noise that a brazen trumpet or bugle makes; as in "The brazen-throated bull." Or it may mean "cased with brass," and therefore "shameless and

insolent"; as in "You brazen-faced impostor." It may mean "of less worth than gold"; so Sir Philip Sidney writes in the essay already quoted: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapestry as divers poets have done. Her world is brazen: the poets only deliver a golden."

It is the persistent use of this method of "*thought by association of images*" as opposed to "*thought by generalised preconceptions*" that distinguishes English proper from the more logical languages. Of course not even French started logical: its early employment of the imaginative method shows still in the number of fixed meanings a word like "jeu" or "siège" still keeps. But "jeu" or "siège" have come to this, that they are no longer single words with several meanings, but groups of several distinct words that happen to coincide in the same verbal form. Except in *argot*, which is only rarely allowed to refresh literary French, the language is steady enough and secure enough against imaginative interruption.

The logical objection to this method

of thought by association of images is that not only do the images tend to falsify the argument, but actual confusion is caused when a literal and not a figurative statement is intended, or when there may be a choice between two figurative senses of the word employed. Even in poetry, it will be maintained by some, there must be no possibility of confusion: and if by "glory" is meant the "glamour of bonfires after victory," or "utter absorption in triumph," or "wild freedom," or "death, the too frequent accompaniment of glory," or anything else, then the sense should be clearly expressed in these actual terms. The English answer to this is, that the use of a less vivid word will always be a blunting of the sense intended, and in practice, once the principle is recognised, mistakes are not as frequent as would appear. For instance, "morning, noon, and night" is a phrase meaning "unwearyingly," or more than that, "wearisomely." Therefore the English medical man would not instruct his patients to take certain arsenic pills "morning,

noon, and night"; he would choose the phrase, "To be taken three times a day"; and no lives would be lost. But he would prefer the phrase, "That patient gives me no peace: he rings me up morning, noon, and night to inquire about his treatment" to "He rang me up three times to-day," which would not express the annoyance that he felt.

The fits of tidiness that come over the educated classes occasionally, and the efforts of the individual scholars who work in a missionary spirit to remodel the language, have been mentioned. But the scholars are unfortunately not always in agreement: against those who wish to Latinise or neo-Gallicise English are ranged enthusiasts for words of Anglo-Saxon or Norman-French origin, like Charles Doughty, whose travels in Arabia Deserta were undertaken mainly "to redeem English from the slough into which it has fallen since the time of Spenser," and like Gill who wrote in 1619 in his *Logonomia* to complain of the "new mange in speaking and writing":

O harsh lips! I now hear all around me such words as *common*, *vices*, *envy*, *malice*; even *virtue*, *study*, *justice*, *pity*, *mercy*, *compassion*, *profit*, *commodity*, *colour*, *grace*, *favour*, *acceptance*. But whither, I pray in all the world, have you banished those words which our forefathers used for these new-fangled ones? Are our words to be exiled like our citizens? Is the new barbaric invasion to extirpate the English tongue? O ye Englishmen, on you, I say, I call in whose veins that blood flows, retain, retain what yet remains of our native speech, and whatever vestiges of our forefathers are yet to be seen, on these plant your footsteps.

There is a pretty irony which must not be missed in "exiled," "barbaric," "invasion," "extirpate," "vestiges." Against the "abundance of polysyllables introduced by the late war, *speculations*, *operations*, *preliminaries*, *ambassadors*, *communication*, *circumvallation*, *battalions*," we find Swift humorously protesting in his "Bickerstaff Papers": and at the same time against such slang words as *banter*, *uppish*, *bamboozle*, *kidney*, *mob*, *sham*, *bully*, *shuffling*, and *palming*, but vainly enough despite his great literary reputation. Perhaps

the most important service done to English is by writers or public speakers who, without making linguistics their special study, turn aside occasionally to put a wobbling word firmly on its feet. One of these will, for instance, make a formal distinction between two divergent senses of the same word, and will find a new word to take over the newer of these senses. When the word "chalky" came to be used chiefly in the sense of "dull white in colour," another word was needed by geologists to mean simply "composed of chalk," and some early writer coined the word "cretaceous" for this particular purpose, borrowing from the Latin. Again, a modern psychologist finding that the word "unconscious" was ambiguous, as meaning either "having the senses completely dulled" or "being unaware of some particular event," decided to revive the somewhat old-fashioned word "unwitting" in this second sense. So, also, a word like "soul" is supplemented by secular coinages referring to the same essential life-principle in man but without theological encum-

brances. By a particular declaration of this sort, or by tacit consent without, apparently, particular record, assistance is given to the words most overworked. The word "can" now merely means to be able or permitted to do something: its sense of "knowing" has been handed over to "ken": and of "getting to know" to "con." "Brazen" is relieved of a good deal of its pressure by other forms such as "brassy," "brass-like," or "brass," and by the nouns "brass-work" and "brass" used as adjectives. Each form has its own slightly different character. This explains the paradox that a language which will loosely use the same word in many different senses has a tendency to become more copious than the logical languages which devote one word as far as possible to one sense.

For the coining of a new idiom, for a new distinction between allied forms of the same word, for the importation of a word from a foreign language with or without alteration of spelling, an Englishman has great liberty. He must only satisfy his neighbours or colleagues that the coining, the definition, the

importation, the spelling have a strict necessity. The only proof of necessity will be that the new form is generally adopted. A friend of mine needing to sum up aptly for my benefit the quality in film-acting that Harold Lloyd has borrowed from Charles Chaplin, described it at first by saying that they both are professional "poor devils," and exploit the tragi-comic sympathy of the audience for their "poor-devilment." "Poor-devilment" seemed a somewhat awkward phrase, and my friend on second thoughts substituted the Yiddish word "Nebishkeit": it had exactly the required sense. Then, if writing to some reputable journal or speaking in a public lecture-hall my friend were now to declare with sufficient assurance "The quality that Messrs Harold Lloyd and Buster Keaton have lately rather unsuccessfully borrowed from Charles Chaplin is his *Nebishkeit*," the word would, likely enough, find its way into the jargon of professional film-critics and into the dictionary.

This practice of making new words

by declaration is of long standing. For example the word "mumpsimus," meaning "an erroneous doctrinal view obstinately adhered to," was put into currency first by Henry VIII in a speech from the Throne in 1545. He remarked, "Some be too stiff in their old mumpsimus, others be too busy and curious in their sumpsimus." He referred to a familiar story in the jest-books of a priest who on being corrected for reading in the Mass "quod in ore mumpsimus" instead of "quod in ore sumpsimus," his Missal being mis-copied, replied that he had read it with an *m* for forty years, "*and I will not change my old mumpsimus for your new sumpsimus.*" The word has held its own since, but the doctrinal sense has lost its importance compared with the scholastic sense: it now means "an established manuscript-reading that, though obviously incorrect, is retained blindly by old-fashioned scholars."

In other countries the declaration of an individual is not enough to settle a word, even though this is built up regularly from native material or cor-

rectly formed from Latin or Greek. The declaration has to be endorsed by government decree or the recommendation of a university committee or learned society. The French Dictionary is a formal code: the English Dictionary, though in part a code (for science, law, and education make certain strong demands), is very largely a catalogue of precedents not yet distinctly codified.

The growth of the label system of language, with its objection to the associative method, is parallel and contemporary with the growth of the rationalistic system of thought as opposed to that of sympathetic magic. In places where sympathetic magic survives in superstition the associative method of language will be found strongest. The peasantry, children, and other superstitious sections of a civilised community are the most prolific makers of words by the associative method; the rationalistic section, the academic and bureaucratic classes, borrow words from the superstitious sections and give them a fixed value, but, as we have seen, more

readily in England than elsewhere; or "form" words from combinations of existing words in their own or a dead language; or they import foreign words, but, again, more readily in England than elsewhere. In England the rationalistic class is less powerful than in France and Germany: and this seems to be the reason for the failure of fixed English to make more ground than it has done. It is possible that what is called a "good education" will eventually be the fate of every member of the English civilised community, and that rationalism will stop up the accustomed wells of language. When this happens, there is an end of English proper, and a great shrinking in the annual increase of the dictionary. But at the present time even the "best educations," as given at the Public Schools, are still strongly coloured with mediæval superstition and primitive taboo, and though a violent reaction from such education produces a small number of very independent minds, clear thinking on rational lines by individuals is not a national habit. Perhaps national

Foote's *panjandrum*, Carroll's *jabberwocky* and *chortle*, Lear's *runcible* and *scroobious*, and Samuel Butler's *yknarc*.

Carroll was an Oxford professor of mathematics, whose whimsicality was more than a mere relief from his professional functions. The *Alices* are rich in disguised philosophic speculation, and active if often unwitting criticism of contemporary thought and manners. The passage of which this digression on whimsicality interrupted the quotation, is a dialogue between Humpty-Dumpty, a character representing the poetic tragi-comic element in English, and Alice, the matter-of-fact reasoning child:—

> Humpty-Dumpty said: "There's glory for you." "I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said. Humpty-Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant, 'There's a nice knock-down argument for you!'" "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected. "When *I* use a word," Humpty-Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less." "The

question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty-Dumpty, "which is to be Master—that's all." Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty-Dumpty began again. "They've a temper, some of them—particularly verbs, they're the proudest—adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs—however, *I* can manage the whole lot of them! IMPENETRABILITY! That's what I say!"

"Would you tell me, please," said Alice, "what that means?" "Now you talk like a reasonable child," said Humpty-Dumpty, looking very much pleased. "I meant by 'impenetrability' that we've had enough of that subject, and it would be just as well if you'd mention what you mean to do next, as I don't suppose you mean to stop here the rest of your life." "That's a great deal to make one word mean," Alice said in a thoughtful tone. "When I make a word do a lot of work like that," said Humpty-Dumpty, "I always pay it extra." "Oh!" said Alice. She was too much puzzled to make any other remark. "Ah, you should see 'em come round me of a Saturday night," Humpty-Dumpty went on, wagging his head gravely from side to side, "for to get their wages, you know."

The first part of this passage needs little explanation in the light of what has already been said of the fluidity of English proper, but it adds two important points. The first is the suggestion that verbs are less subject to imaginative changes than nouns and adjectives: this is a sound one, as the dictionary shows: yet even verbs are tamed of much of their pride by being coupled with prepositions; for instance, *to get at*, *to get out*, *to get through*, *to get along*, *to get along with*, *to get out of*, *to get round*, *to get up*, *to get down*, *to get over*, *to get with*, *to get in* have such different senses as to seduce, to dismiss, to complete, to succeed, to suit, to evade, to deceive, to learn by heart, to reduce, to be recovered, to impregnate, to store, and most of these combinations have two quite different meanings according as their use is transitive or intransitive. Nor are verb-terminations secure against imaginative use. Mr E. B. Osborn records a popular gem: "In Cardiff when it rains, indeed it raineth," where "raineth" implies a Biblical and therefore a very heavy rain;

a deluge. The other point is raised by "impenetrability": even scholarly words formed from Latin or Greek for exact technical use have a tendency to take queer popular turns. Often—as, for instance, the words "sanguine," "quintessence," "jovial," "omen," "mystery"—they survive by centuries the philosophic or religious system on which they began. We must expect Freudian psychology when scientifically exploded to leave its clear mark on the language.

But the last sentence of the Humpty-Dumpty passage—Carroll admits that it reads nonsensically to a practical mind—must be commented on at greater length. When particular words very highly charged with meaning in their context occur in English literature, this is counted a great virtue. In logical literatures it is a vice, by the rule of "one word, one meaning." For instance, in Keats' *Eve of St Agnes*, Madeline is described in "her soft and chilly nest," "Clasped like a missal when swart Paynims pray," where "clasped" means "fastened with a

clasp of holiness" or "held lovingly in the hands," if the Paynims are held to be converted; but also, without prejudice, "shut and coldly neglected," if the Paynims are held to be unconverted. A simpler phrase, met somewhere recently, is "Beauty's temporal rose," and can be examined in the same way. "Temporal" is a word first meaning "lasting for a time," then meaning, like "temporary," "lasting only for a time." But "temporary" and "temporal" are instances of what has already been said about similar words becoming by public declaration or tacit consent distinguished from each other and given separate functions to perform. The contrary of "temporary" is "permanent," in a finite sense of "permanent." The contrary of "temporal" is "eternal." "Temporal joys" are not to be compared with the "joys of eternity," or so religion advises us, nor are "temporal powers" deserving of reverence in comparison with "eternal powers." So to call Beauty's rose temporal is in a somewhat archaistic style to call it "fleeting" or "short

lived"; but also to compare the vanities of the flesh with the assured joys of the spirit.

This, then, is the constant practice of those English poets who achieve the most admired phrases. The reader is not rationally aware of the principle underlying such phrases: he knows that they delight him but does not in the act of reading poetry dissect them. In prose a similar method of concentrated meaning is used and known as "wit," but in this case the reader gets pleasure from a clear rational analysis of the different senses in which the witty phrase is to be read. Here is a passage from a superior society novel:

> On departure our hero clicked his heels politely and acknowledged the salty hospitality of his host: for the old marquis had enjoyed the youth's discomfiture hugely, and had been thus lavish in heaping him with all manner of delicacies and honours only because he knew that they afforded his guest no enjoyment at all.

This word "salty" is the point where

opposing senses unite in wit. To "acknowledge salty hospitality" is in one sense to acknowledge the social obligation of good manners which eating a host's salt implies in most countries. But it is also to comment on the absence of goodwill, in the sense that "salty" means "sterile." In a third sense it is to comment on the host's dry humour in recognising and making fun of the guest's discomfiture, for "Attic salt" is a well-known synonym for wit itself. When such a concentration of forces can be exerted at a single point in literature, then, in Humpty-Dumpty's words, "there's glory for you!"—using "glory" in yet another sense than the many we have defined. The word "habit" that heads this paper is serving three senses. It refers to the habiliments or dress of English, that is the actual word-forms; to the general behaviour or carriage of the language; and to the habitual processes of thought which govern it. "Proper," the adjective qualifying "habit," has also three senses. It means "fitting," it means "peculiar,"

it means "distinguished." It has even a fourth meaning, for all who know the language of heraldry, and that is "blazoned in more than a single colour," which is very appropriate here.

I recently heard it charged against an American poet that she "puts more on English than it will bear." That is not a properly worded charge. English is strong enough to bear any weight so long as the load is properly packed and adjusted. Its greatest virtue as a literary language is its readiness to absorb foreign and technical words, and words from the better sort of slang, and to extemporise not only new imaginative phrases but distinguishable varieties of any overworked or ambiguous word, drawing on four languages for the body of the word or the termination. It can accomplish these feats and the greater feat of improvising new grammatic constructions, new suffixes and prefixes, and remain all the more stubbornly English. Among recent anomalies that have appeared in the language may be mentioned the em-

phasised "some"[1]; as in "some fool," meaning "what a great fool"; the threat "Which would you rather or get your ears boxed?", meaning "I intend to box your ears without alternative"; and the scornful apposition of "Philosophy nothing" or "Philosophy my aunt," giving a purer sense of scorn than "Philosophy, I account it nothing" or "Philosophy, it is the hobby of my aunt."

The logical languages usually have a high protective tariff against new importations. The result is that English under linguistic Free Trade has a more frequent turn-over of its current wealth. It shows period more easily: it adopts and discards. Partly as a result of this rapid turn-over of language, partly because of the individual's claim to his own peculiar vocabulary, partly because of the wide distribution of the English language in all climates and among many races, there is nowhere to be

[1] It is possible that this is, however, an old usage—Congreve seems to have used it once—that lay dormant in dialect until accidentally revived.

found a reputable standard English prose: never more than the literary prose of a given group of writers or of a particular writer at any given period. One may, if desired, write like a Euphuist of early Elizabethan times, or like a Civil War pamphleteer, or in the Defoe manner, or like an eighteenth-century divine, or like an Early Victorian romance-writer, or in the style of Pater or of Doughty or the leader-writer of the *Egyptian Gazette*. Conrad did no more in fixing English than Addison did two centuries before him. English proper moves on with fixed English reluctantly following, and Conrad is left merely as another "personal style"; each of which styles (many as they are and only bound to each other by the weakest of ties) is recognised as good English.

The best English is attained not by a faithful approximation to a discovered and acknowledged standard of excellence but by the formation of a personal style and vocabulary which, while avoiding offence to precedent and tradition, is fittest for the writer's immediate needs.

This is far from being a free pass to literary licence, as one soon discovers: few writers contrive to form their own style beyond making it a patchwork of the styles of other writers. And Precedent is a very severe custodian to the gate of Reputation and only appeased by constant observation and study. Such is the habit of English. Its muddled origin must be accepted in Shakespeare's words:—

> I would not wish the fault undone: the issue of it being so proper.

But this without disrespect to French and other languages, each of which, to air a final commonplace, is the necessary and peculiar expression of the national habit of mind. An international language in the present nationalistic civilisation cannot hope to be a very subtle or personal vehicle, and as a literary language is a thousand years off.

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