









THE STANDARD OF  
USAGE IN ENGLISH

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GENERAL



## PREFACE

THE essays which are contained in this volume appeared originally at irregular intervals as articles in Harper's Magazine. In several instances much of the matter prepared had necessarily to be discarded from the limited pages of a periodical. In the reprint of these articles in book form, not only have the omitted portions been restored, but many new disputed points of usage have been taken up, and many new illustrations have been added to those originally given.

The leading idea which the whole series of essays is designed to illustrate and enforce is contained in the second one. To bring this out distinctly these articles are now placed here in an order entirely different from that in which they were originally published. Not only have they been to some extent rewritten, but they have been rearranged so as to present, as far as possible, a continuous and logical sequence of thought. Though each of them is in one sense

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entirely independent of the others, all of them have for their common aim the maintenance of the doctrine that the best, and indeed the only proper, usage is the usage of the best, and that any rules or injunctions not based upon the practice of the best speakers and writers neither require nor deserve attention, no matter how loudly they are proclaimed or how generally taught. Those who take the trouble to read the work through will discover that the essays following the second either develop or modify the operation of the principles laid down in it, or embody the results of investigation based upon these principles. Even the first essay, which seems most remote from the common subject, is little more than a preliminary to the doctrine set forth in the one it precedes. I have, therefore, given the whole work the title of the second essay.

This treatise, like all productions of a similar character, has necessitated the consideration of no small number of disputed points of usage. But the discussion of these has not been the main object of its preparation. This has been the establishment of certain general principles, by the observance of which the reader, if willing to put forth the requisite exertion, will be enabled to test for himself the correctness of the

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injunctions imposed upon him, or sought to be imposed, by those, including myself, who set out to decide upon propriety of usage. The aim throughout has been to make as clear as possible what seem to me the only rational and safe grounds upon which to base any trustworthy conclusions as to the propriety or impropriety of words and phrases and constructions, independent of the personal likes and dislikes in which all of us share. This means, above all, the substitution of the authority of the great writers of our speech for the confident assertions of the more or less imperfectly trained and even more imperfectly informed persons who profess to show us what we are to do and what we are to refrain from doing. It further involves the acceptance of the doctrine that rules of grammar are of no value save as they are based upon the practice of these great writers, and that the grammarian who does not make such practice his guide proclaims by that one fact his own incompetence and the worthlessness of the results he reaches.

In laying, as I have done, constant stress upon these points, I have justly made myself liable to the charge of insisting upon commonplaces, of announcing as if it were something novel the principle determining the correctness of usage which has been accepted every-

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where from the earliest times, and that as a consequence I have done no more than give renewed utterance to ideas which have been expressed, and better expressed, a thousand times before. The charge is undeniably true. There is nothing new in the views here set forth. They are precisely the same as those proclaimed by all the great authorities who from remotest antiquity have treated this subject. None the less has it seemed to me worth while to call attention to these principles; for, however well accepted in theory, they are constantly disregarded in the current criticisms of usage.

They are even more than disregarded. At times, indeed, they have been actually denied, and denied, too, in works which are spoken of by some as authoritative. However commonplace, therefore, these principles may seem to scholars, they are anything but commonplace to large numbers who accept meekly and blindly pronouncements based not only upon a total disregard of them, but sometimes proclaimed in actual defiance of them. It is no uncommon statement that there are usages which can be justified by no consensus of authorities, however commanding these may be. This carries to the point of absurdity the doctrine opposed to that herein set forth. It is giving to the

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limited knowledge and less taste and judgment of the verbal critic the power to decide upon the correctness of the usage of the great writers, from whose practice alone we derive our conception of what correctness is. While, therefore, there is nothing really novel in the views here expressed, the contrary views have been so frequently maintained in recent times that it seems more than worth while to reaffirm the ancient principles. They need to be restated and acted upon, if we are ever to be rescued from the slough of linguistic anarchy in which we are now largely floundering. That result, indeed, can never be fully secured until a systematic and thorough examination of the usage of the best writers has been made, so as to bring order out of chaos, and substitute in numerous cases certainty for the present doubtfulness.

One thing further I may be permitted to say. In many of the criticisms to which these articles were subjected as they appeared, the position of the author has been misjudged. In pointing out tendencies that are manifesting themselves in the present speech or changes that are going on, I have certainly striven to act as an historian and not as an advocate. When expressions have been ignorantly condemned be-

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cause they have been misunderstood, I have felt no hesitation in pointing out the error which underlay the censure. In defending the purity of certain long-established idioms against the attack of those who have found fault with them without knowing anything whatever of their origin, nature, or history, one at times can hardly help giving very decided expression to his opinions. But in the treatment of many of the disputed questions of usage, all that has been done is to state the facts as they actually are and to indicate, so far as it can be done, the direction in which the language is moving. To point out the fallacy of objections raised against particular usages does not imply the advocacy of their employment. My whole aim has been on the one hand to make the reader acquainted with the principles regulating correctness of usage in general, and with the proper methods of their application; on the other hand, in the case of particular usages under consideration, to put him in the possession of facts and arguments sufficient to enable him to decide for himself upon the propriety of their employment. In either case I may not have succeeded in carrying out my intentions; but these were the intentions I aimed to carry out.

THE STANDARD OF USAGE IN ENGLISH







# THE STANDARD OF USAGE IN ENGLISH

## I

### IS ENGLISH BECOMING CORRUPT?

#### I

NO one who is interested in the subject of language can have failed to be struck with the prevalence of complaints about the corruption which is overtaking our own speech. The subject comes up for consideration constantly. Reference to it turns up not infrequently in books: discussion of it forms the staple of articles contributed to magazines, and of numerous letters written to newspapers. Lists of objectionable words and phrases and constructions are carefully drawn up. The frequency of their use is made the subject sometimes of reprobation, sometimes of lamentation. There exists, it appears, a class of persons who,

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either through ignorance or indifference, or often through both combined, are doing all in their power to corrupt the English tongue. Their efforts are too largely successful. There is accordingly no salvation for the speech unless heroic measures are taken to guard it from the perils threatening its purity. Sleepless vigilance is required. Grammatical sentinels must always be on the watch-towers, ready to raise the cry of warning or alarm the moment they discern the approach of the least of these linguistic foes.

About this state of things, it is to be added, there is nothing new. There seems to have been in every period of the past, as there is now, a distinct apprehension in the minds of very many worthy persons that the English tongue is always in the condition of approaching collapse, and that arduous efforts must be put forth, and put forth persistently, in order to save it from destruction. The study of our literature—perhaps it would be better to say the study of views about our literature—shows that from an early period there has existed a vague fear that the language is on the road to ruin. Signs are remarked that indicate plainly to the unhappy observer that it is moving unmistakably on the downward path. These foretellers of calamity we have always had with us; it is in

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every way probable that we shall always have them. A certain uniformity is to be found in the attitude they exhibit towards the speech, no matter what period it is to which they belong. They keep in view—at least they profess to keep in view—the duty of refining and purifying it. They are filled with profoundest anxiety for its future. They view with concern or with alarm its decline. An undertone of melancholy, indeed, pervades most of the utterances of those who devote themselves to the care of the language. Though precautions of every sort may be taken, it is implied that in all probability they will turn out to be ineffectual.

Now and then the view has been expressed that the golden age of the speech is in the present, though it is almost invariably accompanied with the assertion that it has already begun to degenerate. But this is far from being the opinion usually held. There is one particular, indeed, in which the prophets of woe bear to one another the closest resemblance in the lamentations to which they give utterance. They are always pointing to the past with pride. In some preceding period, frequently not very remote, they tell us that the language was spoken and written with the greatest purity. It had then attained the acme of per-

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fection at which it is capable of arriving. But since that happy time it has been degenerating. The old unpolluted speech is gone or at any rate is going. Corruptions of all kinds are not merely stealing in, they are pouring in with the violence of a tidal wave. Slang, unnecessary words, ungrammatical locutions, phrases borrowed from foreign tongues, especially from the French, replace and drive out the genuine vernacular. Slipshod methods of expression abound in the speech of the majority, and creep unobserved into the writings of good authors. On every side the outlook is dreary beyond expression.

There was a certain excuse for the utterance, in the past, of these doleful forebodings. The nature of language and of the influences that operate upon it was then but little understood. Not, indeed, until a late period has the radical error which lies at the foundation of these beliefs been recognized clearly; by vast numbers it is still not recognized at all, or, if so, very dimly. For the anxiety entertained about the speech in previous centuries there is therefore explanation, even if it does not amount to justification. Men knew nothing of the historical development of the words and grammatical forms they were in the habit of using.

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They had not the slightest conception out of what impurity had sprung much of the vaunted purity in which they rejoiced. To them the language seemed a sort of intellectual machine which had come into their possession with all its parts finished and elaborated. They were consequently solicitous that nothing should be brought in to impair its imagined perfection; they lived in perpetual dread of the agencies that might threaten its integrity.

There was one aim in particular held before the eyes of the men of the past. This was to render the language what they called fixed. If that were once accomplished, the speech would undergo no further change, save on an extremely limited scale and in certain well-defined directions. The tide of corruptions, real or assumed, would thus be permanently stayed. A belief of this sort has been widely cherished in every age and in every country possessed of a literature. It has naturally exercised the minds of many of those speaking our own tongue. That men of letters should indulge in it is not particularly surprising. However much they may deal with language as an instrument of expression, they have in general little knowledge of its history or of the diverse influences that are always operating

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upon it and modifying its character. But it shows how thoroughly this idea had permeated the minds of all that we find it proclaimed by a scholar of the intellectual stature of Bentley. "It would be no difficult contrivance," he wrote: "if the public had any regard to it, to make the English tongue immutable, unless hereafter some foreign nation overrun and invade us."<sup>1</sup>

But it is perhaps hopeless to expect that any man, however eminent, shall be in most things much in advance of his age. Bentley, great scholar as he was, shared to its full extent in the special ignorance, then prevalent, of the English tongue and of its history. Nor in his general linguistic views was he superior to his contemporaries. In the very passage containing the quotation just given, he spoke gravely of the Hebrew as the primitive language of mankind. He further asserted that it underwent no change from the creation to the time of the Babylonian captivity—that is, according to the then received reckoning, about three thousand years. It is not reasonable to expect that a man should be more accurate in his conclusions than he is in his facts. It will create no surprise, therefore, to find that Bent-

<sup>1</sup>Bentley, *Dissertation upon Phalaris*, vol. ii., p. 11. London, 1836-38.

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ley could see no reason why English, too, having been glutted with Latin words to its full capacity and needing no further additions, should not continue unchanged for the rest of its existence.<sup>1</sup> Even later, Dr. Johnson, in the Plan of his Dictionary, issued in 1747, declared that one end of his undertaking was "to fix the English language." But a man could not compile a vocabulary of the tongue without learning something of the nature of speech. By the time he finished his work, he had been cured of this particular error.

It seemed impossible for most men of the past—the impossibility continues for some men of the present—to comprehend the elementary principle that in order to have a language become fixed, it is first necessary that those who speak it should become dead—dead at least intellectually, if not physically. Then, indeed, it can undergo no change, for there is no one to change it. But so long as it lives in the mouths of men, and not merely in the pages of books, it must constantly introduce new words and phrases to express the new facts which have been brought to the knowledge of those who speak it, the new inventions and discoveries

<sup>1</sup> Bentley, *Dissertation upon Phalaris*, vol. ii., p. 13. London, 1836-38.

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which they have made, the new ideas and feelings which they have come to entertain. Yet the belief that the vocabulary of any particular time can meet the requirements of the users of speech for all time is a fallacy that is brought to our attention by having been frequently proclaimed and occasionally acted upon by men of eminence. The well-known resolution of Fox to admit no word into his History of the Reign of James II. that did not have the authority of Dryden is a signal example of this particular absurdity. Even Dr. Johnson, whose work on his Dictionary gradually impaired his faith in many popular linguistic delusions, continued to entertain or at least to express a belief not essentially dissimilar. According to his view, a speech adequate to all the purposes of use and elegance might be formed from the authors who sprang up in the time of Elizabeth. "If," said he, "the language of theology were extracted from Hooker and the translation of the Bible; the terms of natural knowledge from Bacon; the phrases of policy, war, and navigation from Raleigh; the dialect of poetry and fiction from Spenser and Sidney; and the diction of common life from Shakespeare, few ideas would be lost to mankind for want of English words in which they might be ex-



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pressed."<sup>1</sup> Whatever was Johnson's real belief as to what could be drawn from the sources he enumerated, his practice was far from conforming to it. To express his own ideas he resorted to words which had never been used by any author of the time he specified, for the all-sufficient reason that they did not then exist.

If views such as these could be put forth by scholars like Bentley and Johnson, who presumably studied language as a science, nothing more rational was to be expected from men of letters who were familiar with it merely as an instrument of expression. The desirability of fixing the speech was not only widely held, but earnestly proclaimed. It was not merely held and proclaimed, too, by some of the best and wisest who wrote in the English tongue, but by those of similar character who wrote in the various cultivated tongues of Continental Europe. It is, however, our language alone that concerns us here. The experience of the past furnishes a most significant corrective to those who look upon the indifference manifested by the public to their warnings and to the awful examples they furnish as infallible proof of the increasing degeneracy of the speech. It would save them

<sup>1</sup> Preface to the English Dictionary.

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hours of unnecessary misery were they to make themselves acquainted with the views of the prominent men of former times, who felt as did they and talked as foolishly.

Of beliefs of the sort just indicated, Dean Swift is in our literature far the most eminent representative. The desire for what he deemed the purity of the language amounted with him almost to a passion. To securing it he devoted no small share of thought and attention. One of his earliest utterances upon the subject—perhaps his earliest—appeared in the *Tatler* of September 28, 1710. In it he deplored the general ignorance and want of taste exhibited by the writers of the age. These were bringing about the steady corruption of the English tongue. Unless some timely remedy was found, he declared that the language would suffer more by the false refinements of the twenty years which had just passed than it had been improved in the foregoing hundred. If other means failed, he wished the editor of the *Tatler* to make an *Index Expurgatorius* in order to expunge all words and phrases offensive to good sense, and to condemn the barbarous mutilations of words and syllables then going on. Swift's essay was largely taken up with the exemplification of these asserted barbarisms

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which had been steadily creeping into and corrupting the speech.

They were of three kinds. The first were abbreviations, in which only the first part of a word was used. The result was to add a further number of monosyllables to a language already overloaded with them. As illustrations of these he gave *phiz* for *physiognomy*, *hyp* for *hypochondria*, *mob* for *mobile*, *poz* for *positive*, and *rep* for *reputation*. *Incog* for *incognito*, and *plenipo* for *plenipotentiary*, he expected to see still further docked into *inc* and *plen*. Swift was of opinion that the abundance of monosyllables is the disgrace of our language. Accordingly, it might be supposed that he would look with favor upon the polysyllables which, according to his account, the war then going on — that of the Spanish Succession — was bringing into general use. But no one who has once taken the language under his care can ever again be really happy. That way misery lies. To these long words Swift exhibited the same hostile front which he did to the short ones. Among them he specifically mentioned *speculations*, *operations*, *preliminaries*, *ambassadors*, *palisadoes*, *communication*, *circumvallation*, *battalions*. These, he thought, would never be able to live many more campaigns, though, even in the special

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sense of them which he had in mind, most of them had been in existence before he was born.

Swift's third class embraced a number of words "invented," he said, "by certain pretty fellows, such as *banter*, *bamboozle*, *country put*, and *kidney*." Some of these were struggling for the vogue; others were now in possession of it. "I have done my utmost," he added, "for some years past to stop the progress of *mobb* and *banter*, but have been plainly borne down by numbers and betrayed by those who promised to assist me." Of none of these did his opposition bring about then the disuse.

Of two of the various words he specifically mentioned Swift's dislike was peculiarly intense. In his *Tale of a Tub* he ascribed the employment of the verb *banter* to those who have no share of wit or humor, but abound in pride, pedantry, and ill-manners. "This polite word of theirs," he said, "was first borrowed from the bullies in Whitefriars; then fell among the footmen; and at last retired to the pedants, by whom it is applied as properly to the production of wit as if I should apply it to Sir Isaac Newton's mathematics."<sup>1</sup> It hardly needs to be said that Swift's account of the history

<sup>1</sup> *Tale of a Tub*. An apology.

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of the word is of no more accuracy than his hostility towards it was of importance. *Banter* had, indeed, come into the language sometime during the half-century before he wrote. As it supplied a sense no other word expressed so aptly, it continued to prevail. Swift's censure of it had not the slightest influence upon its fortunes.

Swift followed up this attack in 1712 by a public Letter addressed to the Earl of Oxford, the Lord High Treasurer. In it was contained a proposition for correcting, improving, and ascertaining the English tongue. It is a treatise which ought to be read by the whole generation of those of our time who spend anxious days and sit up nights in order to preserve the purity of the speech. Nowhere can a greater discrepancy be found between predictions of what is going to take place and what has actually taken place. In this Letter we are told that the English language is extremely imperfect. The improvements made in it are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions. Those who have pretended to polish and refine it have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities. Furthermore, it—that is, the tongue itself, not those who speak it—offends against every part of grammar. This is a course of conduct so sin-

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gular, not to say unseemly, on the part of a speech, that it must always be a source of regret that Swift did not specify some of the grammatical crimes of which it is guilty. It is, however, an assertion which has not unfrequently been repeated after him, though with the same scrupulous neglect of illustrative examples.

The period which Swift selected as the one in which English received most refinement was that dating from the beginning of the reign of Queen Elizabeth and ending with the breaking out of the civil war in 1642. With that year began degeneracy. Corruption came in from the fanatics of the commonwealth. This had been succeeded by corruption from the fine gentlemen of the court. From both quarters it had made its way into the writings of the best authors. Affected phrases, new conceited terms had been transferred from the language of high life into the language of plays, and from them had been taken up by men of wit and learning. The poets also had introduced the barbarous custom of abbreviating words, thereby forming harsh, inharmonious sounds that nothing but a northern ear could endure. These had passed from verse into prose. "What does your Lordship think," Swift asked, with pain, "of the words *drudg'd*, *disturb'd*, *rebuk't*, *fledg'd*, and a

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thousand others everywhere to be met? Where by leaving out a vowel to save a syllable, we form so jarring a sound and so difficult to utter that I have often wondered how it could ever obtain."

Like other men before and since, Swift had his method of dealing with the evils he had discovered. This was essentially the project of an academy, though in his Letter he did not put it forth under that specific name. But so he described it in his Journal to Stella. To her he wrote that the essay was about "forming a society or academy to correct and fix the English language." His idea was that a choice should be made of the persons best qualified for the end in view. These should meet together and proceed to make such alterations in the speech as they thought requisite. They should then devise a method of ascertaining and fixing it forever. If this were not done, if things went on at the rate they had been going, nobody would be read with pleasure much longer than a few years, and in course of time could hardly be understood without an interpreter. He could further promise the prime-minister that two hundred years hence some painful compiler, who had been studying the language of Queen Anne's time, would be able to pick out and



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transfer into his new history, written in the language of his own time, that Robert, Earl of Oxford, a very wise and excellent man of the former period, had saved his country. The fuller account, however, of that statesman's life, acts, and character, given by contemporary writers like Swift himself, would be dropped because of the antiquated style and manner in which they were delivered.

The appeal was ineffectual. In spite of it no body of competent persons was selected by the prime - minister to take charge of the English tongue. The Earl of Oxford was in the first place very far from being a Richelieu. But it was no long while before he had all he could do to keep his own head on his shoulders. In consequence he naturally left the language to look out for itself. It seems to have been amply able to discharge that duty. The two hundred years specified have very nearly gone by and not a single one of the dire predictions just mentioned has been fulfilled. No need has been found of resorting to the aid of the painful antiquary to decipher the writings of the time. Every word of Swift's Letter can be understood now as easily as it was on the day it was published. But his failure to note even in his own age any sign of the realization of his



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dismal forebodings never once shook his faith in their correctness. During his whole life he remained faithful to the views here expressed. In the introduction to his *Polite Conversation*, which appeared in 1738, he reiterated the opinions set forth in his *Tatler* essay of nearly thirty years before. His hostility to *mob* continued to the very end, though by that time it had established itself firmly in the tongue. Walter Scott tells us of an old lady who died in 1788, and who was on terms of intimacy with the dean. She used to say that the greatest scrape she ever got into with him was owing to her employment of this particular word. "Why do you say that?" he exclaimed, in a passion: "never let me hear you say that again." "Why, sir," she asked, "what am I to say?" "The rabble, to be sure," answered he.

Swift's idea of the proper agency to keep the English tongue pure and unspotted from the contaminations of a careless world was, as we see, the foundation of an academy created for that specific purpose. This was somehow to exercise plenary power over the speech. In particular it was to raise an effectual barrier against the raving, roaring tide of corruptions which is always threatening to ruin the language beyond redemption. This regularly recurring

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prescription for the cure of our linguistic ills was even in Swift's own time no new one. Schemes of the sort had been in the air during the reigns of Elizabeth and the first Stuarts. Long before the French Academy had a being the establishment of an English one had been mooted. But the projects urged had never been followed by any result. The creation of the French Academy in 1635, and the apparent success it met, gave, however, distinct impulse to the desire to found one essentially similar in England. The attempt itself never went further than plans and proposals. Still it was an idea constantly held before the eyes of men as something in all ways desirable even if not feasible. The Earl of Roscommon in the last years of his short life was deeply interested in a project of the kind.<sup>1</sup> Dryden, indeed, is said to have been concerned with him in the undertaking. This may or may not be true. It is certain, however, that in the preface to one of his earliest plays he expressed a desire that an organization of the sort indicated should be created. He said that he had sought to use the speech "as near as he could distinguish it from the tongue of pedants or that of affect-

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Johnson, *Life of Roscommon*.

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ed travellers. I am sorry," he added, "that speaking a noble language as we do, we have not a certain measure of it as they have in France, where they have an academy erected for the purpose and endowed with large privileges by the present king."<sup>1</sup>

In truth, from the time of the Restoration to the present day there have never been lacking men either to long for the creation of an authority to regulate our speech or to bewail the lack of it. They hold up constantly before our eyes the example of France. They attribute to the body created by Richelieu benefits which no institution of the sort ever had the ability to confer upon a language and never can have. Unquestionably academies are very useful. They may and often do accomplish much good. But the regulation of speech is something outside their province and their powers. The utmost they can do is to exert a slight influence upon its development; occasionally to create an eddy in the stream of tendency. But faith in their wonder-working influence is implanted in the hearts of many. By these they are regarded as a sort of linguistic hospital, equipped with physicians and supplied with

*Changes*

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *The Rival Ladies*, 1664.

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remedies fitted to cure all the ills which have been brought upon a tongue by the ignorance or heedlessness of its users. We see this state of mind fully exemplified in Swift. Others felt as earnestly as he. It would be a mistake to suppose that he was at that time at all peculiar in his sentiments. There were many who thought as did he, but no one else gave to his views expression so unqualified.

With the little then known of the nature of language, it is perhaps no wonder that even the greatest of the men of the past should fail to detect the fallacy which pervades the idea of regulating speech by an academy, and that consequently belief in the effectiveness of such an agency should be widespread. Even those who came to reject it did not reject it on rational grounds. Warburton, who could ordinarily be trusted to give an absurd reason for any correct conclusion at which he arrived, did not miss this opportunity. He attacked the desire for an academy as an evidence of the delight men have in trifles when they have lost their public virtue. "Arbitrary governments," he wrote, "give encouragement to the study of words in order to busy and amuse geniuses who might otherwise prove troublesome and inquisitive. So when Cardinal Riche-

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lieu had destroyed the poor remains of his country's liberties, and made the supreme court of parliament merely ministerial, he instituted the French Academy."<sup>1</sup>

The same failure to comprehend the exact nature of the problem presented pervades the utterances on this subject of Dr. Johnson. He had not, indeed, spent years in vain in the preparation of a dictionary. He saw clearly the futility of the project of an academy to regulate the speech. But apparently he did not see the real reason for this futility. He described Swift's project accurately enough as having been "written without much knowledge of the general nature of language and without any very accurate enquiry into the history of other tongues."<sup>2</sup> But in some ways he had not himself advanced much further than the man he criticised. He took the ground that a language has necessarily the same career as an individual. It has inevitably its periods of growth, perfection, and decay. All the stock remarks about the speech being in perpetual danger of corruption are found in his pages. While he deplored this assumed fact, he had learned to see that the means of rescuing it from this ever-threatened

<sup>1</sup> Pope's *Works*, edited by Warburton, 1751, vol. v., p. 245.

<sup>2</sup> *Life of Swift*.

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calamity do not lie in an academy. But his reasons for the failure of such an institution did not rest apparently upon any impossibility inherent in the project itself to accomplish what it set out to do, but upon the peculiar character of the English people.

Johnson's views concerning the value of an institution of the sort, with their strength and their weakness, their ignorance and their knowledge, present a curious picture of the muddled condition of men's minds upon the general subject. The Italian Academy, according to him, had attained its end. The language was refined and so fixed that it had changed but little. The French Academy had doubtless refined the language, but had not fixed it. It had altered much during the century that had gone by. But even this comparative success was due to the existence of absolute government. Where such prevails there is a general reverence paid to all that has the sanction of power and the countenance of greatness. But in England there was nothing of this feeling existing. Were such an organization as an academy created, it would be, in the first place, Johnson remarked, impossible to secure unanimity in the adoption of the conclusions reached. Even if that could be obtained, the

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philological decrees made and promulgated would have no authority. Englishmen live in an age and country, said the old Tory, in which it is public sport to refuse all respect that cannot be enforced. "The edicts of an academy," he wrote, "would probably be read by many, only that they might be sure to disobey them." It was clearly in vain, therefore, to hope for any salvation to the language from that quarter. The conclusion was right, even if the reasons given for it were wrong.

But belief about the beneficent influence of an academy dies hard. The project is sure to crop up at regularly recurring intervals, though with the increasing knowledge of the nature of language it is less likely each time to meet with favor. Another man of the eighteenth century who saw in the creation of such a body the only way to save the speech from being overwhelmed by the inflowing tide of corruption was John Boyle, the fifth earl of Orrery. Swift's opinion, as we have seen, was that the golden age of the language comprehended the reigns of Elizabeth and the first Stuarts. But by the time he died the point of view had shifted. During the middle and latter half of the eighteenth century it became the proper thing to believe that English had reached its perfection in the so-

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called Augustan period of Queen Anne: that from the accession of George II., if not earlier, the speech had entered upon a process of decline. It was daily becoming more corrupt. New words and phrases were creeping in which would have filled Addison and Swift and Steele with horror. On this point Lord Orrery furnishes us unimpeachable testimony. In 1751 he brought out a little treatise on the Life and Writings of Swift. In it he tells us that in his opinion the language had been brought by that author and his contemporaries to the utmost degree of perfection. He contrasted their style, altogether to their advantage, with that of men like Bacon and Milton. Swift, Addison, and Bolingbroke he considered as the triumvirate to whom the tongue owed an elegance and propriety unknown to their forefathers. But at the time he was writing he assures us that the language was every day growing more debased. It is illustrative of the manner in which men seek to impose upon the speech their personal dislikes and the notions born of their own ignorance, that one of the expressions that according to Orrery indicated this degeneracy was *a few*—a locution which had been in use from the fourteenth century certainly, if, indeed, it does not go back to the first recorded



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beginnings of the tongue. The lack of grammar in the Lord's prayer also disturbed him mightily, as it has done so many before and since his time. Of course, like all the clamorers for an academy, he wanted one with power to carry out his own particular notions and prejudices. Like them, too, he would have been terribly offended, if it undertook to carry out the notions and prejudices of some one else, to which his own were opposed.

In the opinions he held Orrery was a fair representative of his time. The views expressed by him were the views which continued to prevail—in some quarters it would be more appropriate to say, which continued to rage—for the rest of the century. As one of their later exponents we turn to a man who retains with us some little reputation as a small poet, and while he lived was deemed by many to be a great philosopher. He was a Scotchman, and Scotchmen have always seemed to feel a pained solicitude about the English speech. At least they did so in the eighteenth century, when they were at times disposed to look upon it as a foreign tongue. The assumption upon which they proceeded was that a word or expression peculiar to North Britain was by that very fact improper; at all events, that its introduction

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into the literary English tended somehow to corrupt the language. Its appropriateness did not come into consideration, nor did its significance; the all-important point was the place of its origin. It was therefore against so-called Scotticisms that Scotch writers were most vehement. This term, and to a less extent Irishism, were the ones commonly employed before the discovery or invention of Americanism to designate any particular locution, no matter from what quarter coming, to which exception was taken by any Englishman to whom it chanced to be unfamiliar. Consequently the epithet was not unfrequently applied to words and phrases which had never been heard of in the region in which they were supposed to have sprung up. But where everybody is ignorant, positive assertion of a falsehood is just as effective as the announcement of an unquestionable truth. That an expression should be stigmatized as a Scotticism by any half-educated Englishman was sufficient to induce the best-educated Scotchman to abandon the use of it. Hume's anxiety on this point is well known. He bowed with abject submission to the injunctions of obscure men who possessed not a tithe of his ability nor one-fourth of his familiarity with the usage of the best English

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writers. He revised his writings constantly in order to expunge any assumed latent traces of the peculiar speech of his native land. Naturally the ignorance of the men by whom he allowed his own knowledge to be overborne enabled him to discover Scotticisms where none existed. He was always on the lookout not merely for flaws in his own usage but in that of his friends. He censured Robertson for having employed *maltreat* in his History of Charles V. It was a Scotticism, he assured him.<sup>1</sup> In his eyes that reason was all-sufficient for avoiding its use. As a matter of fact, *maltreat* was in no sense a Scotticism. It was one of the words which had made its way into the English tongue from the French during the fifty years following the Restoration and had been used indifferently by writers belonging to every part of Great Britain.

But even had Hume's statement about *maltreat* been true, the reason given for avoiding it would have been none the less worthless. If a provincial or dialectic word expresses some idea adequately which the corresponding literary English word expresses inadequately, it ought to be adopted. The use of language is to

<sup>1</sup> Burton, *Hume*, vol. ii., p. 413.

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convey thought. Any locution which conveys thought most naturally and effectively has a right to its place in the speech, no matter where it originates. But by the Scotch writers of the eighteenth century the belief that a word was either not used or not supposed to be used in England was sufficient to insure its condemnation. That one fact stamped it as a corruption. Boswell, when he went over his *Life of Johnson* for his third edition, changed in at least four places the word *forenoon* into *morning*.<sup>1</sup> He clearly assumed the former to be a Scotticism, though the fact that the object of his hero-worship had admitted it into his dictionary without comment ought to have reassured him on that point. Still it is probable that it was far more in use in the north of Britain than in the south. But, independent of the place of origin or customary employment, the loss of such a word as *forenoon* would be an actual loss to the language. It does something more than correspond to *afternoon*; it marks with precision a particular part of the day. It thereby adds to the resources of the speech.

But the Scotchman who took most to heart the evil influences affecting the language from

<sup>1</sup> Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, edited by George Birkbeck Hill, American edition, vol. ii., p. 283, note.

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the influx of Scotticisms was the one to whom allusion has already been made. His name was James Beattie. He was, as has been said, a poet and a philosopher. In the latter capacity he had commended himself to the religious by a very virulent attack upon the metaphysical speculations of Hume. This gave him great reputation at the time; for his treatise was written in an agreeable style, and with all that clearness of expression which with many serves as a satisfactory substitute for clearness of ideas. Among other results it brought him the favor of George III., with whom, like Dr. Johnson, he had a personal interview. The meeting between the professorial and the official defender of the faith took place in 1773. As became a loyal subject, Beattie was profoundly impressed with the good sense, knowledge, and acuteness of the monarch. One of the topics touched upon was the English language. In it the practical ignorance of the ruler had its counterpart in the philosophical ignorance of the subject. The king asked him if he did not think the language was at that time in a decline. Beattie was forced to reply that such was the melancholy fact. The king agreed, and named the Spectator as one of the best standards of the speech. This was the only proper doc-

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trine to hold then, and Beattie concurred in it with all his heart. It had long been his own opinion. He was a good, genuine conservative, and felt that neither the English tongue nor the English constitution stood in the slightest need of change. Consequently, he was always indulging in a mild form of terror at the ruin impending over the one because of the new ideas coming in, and over the other because of the new words. As for the principal personage in the conversation his published correspondence has made us aware that the English of the king varied widely at times from the king's English.

To Beattie, Hume would have seemed a sinful man not only in his religious but in his linguistic views. All that occupied the thoughts of the latter was a selfish interest in the propriety of his own usage. But the anxiety of the former mainly arose from the degeneracy he seemed to see overtaking the speech itself. His solicitude grew upon him as he advanced in years. He contemplated but never carried out the composition of a criticism on the style of Addison. His aim in this would have been to show its peculiar merits, and, furthermore, to lay bare the hazards to which the language was exposed of being debased and corrupted by the innovations which had of late, he said, "found

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their way into the style of our best and most esteemed writers." He had prepared a collection of Scotticisms, which of course were expressions to be carefully avoided. He began, however, to be timid about publishing it. While he had been engaged in its compilation many of the words and phrases it contained had been adopted in the speech used south of the Tweed. The work, long before circulated privately, was, however, brought out in 1784. It was full of that mixture of truth and falsehood with which manuals of usage have long rendered us familiar. It is fair to say of the collection that it was made up mainly of words and phrases peculiar to the language of North Britain. But it also contained much irrelevant matter. There was a considerable number of locutions which were no more the exclusive property of Scotland than of any other part of the planet where English is spoken at all. Among them, for example, were such vulgarisms or colloquialisms as the preposition *again* for *against*, the preterite *seed* for *saw*, the verb *lay* for *lie*; or such obsolete or obsolescent usages as *learn* in the sense of 'teach' or *harvest* in the sense of 'autumn'. The truth is that many things in the volume were not so much an exhibition of Beattie's knowledge of Scotch as of his ignorance of English. We



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must not say, he told us, *close* the door but *shut* it. We must not say *in place of* but *instead of*. We must not say *simply* impossible, but *absolutely* impossible. To use *here* with verbs of motion instead of *hither* was not allowable. All these locutions were, for some inscrutable reason, reckoned Scotticisms. Among these, in truth, he includes *I reckon* itself in the sense of 'I am of opinion,' 'I conjecture'<sup>1</sup>—a usage once literary, which still remains common in the United States, especially in the South. Beattie's general attitude may be summed up in his remarks upon the following words: "*Narrate* and *to notice*," he wrote, "have of late been used by some English writers: but it is better to avoid them." They had upon them the taint of provinciality. There is, indeed, a note of despondency pervading his work. *Militate*, a verb in no way peculiar to North Britain, he characterized as one of several Scotticisms, such as *adduce*, *narrate*, *restrict*, which seemed "to be getting into the language of England."

As was inevitable, this despondency increased in a man who sincerely believed that our tongue

<sup>1</sup>"In many intricacies Frederick has been; but never, I reckon, in any equal to this."—Carlyle, *Frederick*, bk. xvii., chap. i.



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had been brought to perfection in the days of Addison and Swift, and that any alterations which had taken place since had been alterations for the worse. In Beattie's opinion every unauthorized word and idiom which had been introduced without absolute necessity into the tongue tended to its debasement. His later utterances present an instructive picture of a state of mind which we see constantly exemplified by men of our own day who have little acquaintance with the influences operating upon speech. "Our language (I mean the English) is degenerating very fast," he wrote, sorrowfully, to a friend in 1785; "and many phrases which I know to be Scottish idioms, have got into it of late years, so that many of my strictures are liable to be opposed by authorities which the world accounts unexceptionable." As time went on, the prospect grew even more dismal. In a letter of 1790, commenting on the annotations made to a recent edition of the *Tatler*, he described the language employed in them as "full of those new-fangled phrases and barbarous idioms that are now so much affected by those who form their style from political pamphlets and those pretended speeches in parliament that appear in newspapers. Should this jargon continue to gain ground among us,

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English literature will go to ruin. During the last twenty years, especially since the breaking out of the American war, it has made alarming progress. . . . If I live to execute what I propose on the writings and genius of Addison, I shall at least enter my protest against the practice; and by exhibiting a copious specimen of the new phraseology, endeavor to make my reader set his heart against it."

On more than one other occasion Beattie expressed the anxiety he felt at the degeneracy then taking place in the English tongue and his fear of the impossibility of arresting its progress. The speech was not simply declining, it was declining rapidly. In a letter to a friend, written in August, 1790, he expressed his gratification that Miss Bowdler approved of the sentiments he entertained as to the increase of the corruption which was bringing about the deterioration of the language. "I begin to fear," he added, "it will be impossible to check it; but an attempt would be made, if I had leisure and a little more tranquillity of mind." Time and tranquil mind were apparently both denied. Beattie never completed his treatise on the style of Addison. Accordingly he never furnished his readers with a list of those neologisms which were stealing into and corrupting the

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speech. But in 1794 he printed privately some productions in prose and verse of his son, said to have been a youth of great promise, who died in 1790. Among them were two or three entitled Dialogues of the Dead. These dealt with the subject of language, and unquestionably represented Beattie's own opinions. One of them is the report of an imaginary conversation between Swift and a bookseller and Mercury. Swift is disgusted with the expressions used by the tradesman, and begs Mercury to translate his gibberish into English. A few of the words and phrases, then indicated as corruptions, are still strange to us; but most of them are now used every day by those who are in a state of distress because of the impending ruin of the tongue.

It is both suggestive and instructive to learn a little of this new language which had come into fashion, as Mercury gives Swift to understand. "Instead of *life, new, wish for, take, plunge*, etc," he told him, "you must say *existence, novel, desiderate, capture, ingurgitate*, etc., as—a fever put an end to his existence. . . . Instead of a *new* fashion, you will do well to say a *novel* fashion. . . . You must on no account speak of *taking* the enemy's ships, towns, guns, or baggage: it must be *capturing*." This last word, we are told, had been imported about

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twenty years before. *Sort* and *kind* were unfashionable nouns and indeed quite vulgar; *description*, on account of its length and Latin original, was better. Instead of *undervaluing* your enemies, you *set no store* by them. *Unfriendly* and *hostile* had both given place to *inimical*. This word was said to have come in at the same time with *capture*; but though a great favorite, it was pronounced differently by those who used it.

There are many other words and phrases censured, some of which the majority of us would now think we could hardly get along without. *Line*, *meet*, *marked*, *feel*, and *go*, we are told, were employed on all occasions, whether they had any meaning or not. Instead of saying *conduct*, it was fashionable to say *line of conduct*. You *meet* a person's wishes and arguments. You are received with *marked* applause, or contempt, or admiration. The words *am* and *be* were in danger of being forgotten, having been crowded out by *feel*. Accordingly, instead of using *is* with the following adjectives, one says he *feels* anxious, afraid, warm, sick, ashamed. Instead of saying that one's arguments *proved* certain things, we must assert that his arguments *went to prove*. For *reformation* again everybody was learning to say *reform*, this latter

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being a French word and the other vile old English. *For the future* it had become fashionable to say *in future*. There were also some current phrases which were not merely ambiguous but unintelligible. Among them were such expressions as *scouted the idea*, *netted a cool thousand*, he had not *made up his mind*. Then there was a tendency to use uncommon terminations. Men said *committal* instead of *commitment*, *approval* instead of *approbation*, *truism* for *truth*. Objectionable upon other grounds were *agriculturist* for *husbandman* and *pugilist* for *boxer*. Swift's patience is represented as finally giving way altogether under the infliction of the following sentence:

"We hear it is *in contemplation* to run up a *novel* and *superb pavilion* at Newmarket for *Pugilistical exhibitions*."

He sees his old friend Addison coming, and takes his departure with the assertion that it would require an hour even of his conversation to wear out the disagreeable impression left in his mind by this abominable detail of vulgarity, pedantry, and barbarism.

So much for the eighteenth century. The nineteenth century abounded in men who had very decided opinions as to the debasement which was overtaking the speech, and were filled with

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anxiety about its future. But expression of views of this sort came rarely from writers of ability and learning. To this rule there is one distinguished exception. It is Walter Savage Landor. He, however, made up to some extent for the comparative loneliness of his position by the shrillness and extravagance of his utterance. His observations demand a good deal of attention, not for any value they have in themselves, but for the respect which has been paid them because of his undisputed eminence in other fields. Landor is the only one of the minor gods of the Georgian era in whose honor a cult has been instituted. His worshippers have naturally felt bound to accept his oracles, at least where they did not conflict too violently with their own prejudices. Most of his devotees, being good, conservative Englishmen, have turned away with saddened eyes from the orthographic changes he advocated; for in that matter Landor chose to consider himself a reformer, and, if he could have had his way, would have left our barbarously spelled tongue in a much more pitiable plight than he found it. Many of those, however, who have been shocked by his orthographic vagaries have accepted and repeated his conclusions about corruptions of speech. Yet his views in the

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former matter are far more endurable than those he expressed about language. In his discussion of spelling Landor was occasionally right when he could easily have been wrong; in his remarks on words and their uses he was almost invariably wrong whenever it was possible so to be.

Landor's observations, both general and particular, on language are to be found in certain of his Imaginary Conversations. Of these the first series came out in 1824. Knowledge of the nature and development of speech had made a good deal of progress during the more than century which had gone by since Swift addressed his letter to Lord Oxford. But not a ray of this additional light ever reached Landor's eyes. He still continued to retain and repeat the crude notions, long abandoned by all real students of speech and left now to the craziest class of verbal critics. The desire of the writers of the age of Queen Anne that the language should be settled and fixed met with his unqualified approval. Their natural acuteness, he said, had taught them the utility of this course. Necessarily came from him the same doleful representation of the condition and prospects of the speech. In one of his earlier conversations Landor told us that within another generation the language, with the improper innovations

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constantly made, would have become so corrupt that writers, if they hoped for life, would find it necessary to mount up near its sources. In one of his latest he affirmed that the English tongue had fallen, for the last half-century, more rapidly into corruption and decomposition than any other ever spoken among men. It was in his eyes a subject of regret that Bishop Lowth and Horne Tooke were kept so far apart by their social and political relations that they never could have united "to stop the innovations and to diminish the anomalies of our language." Of course the inevitable Southey had to be dragged in. In Landor's opinion that author, though in his youth during the time indicated, might have been of material assistance to the two. No further comment need be made upon this suggestion than the bare statement that Southey was just fourteen years old when Lowth died.

Landor's specific observations upon usage, and the corrections he proposed for the sake of saving the language from approaching ruin, merit attention for the following reasons. They illustrate forcibly the methods taken by verbal critics to establish the speech in an assumed pure and perfect state; and they bring out even more forcibly the muddiness of ideas and the



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limitation of knowledge which constitute the leading features of these attempts. His discussion of points of usage occurs mainly in two conversations, one between Dr. Johnson and Horne Tooke, and the other between himself and Archdeacon Hare. The first of these appeared in its original form in 1824. If ever a conversation had a right to be termed imaginary, this one is entitled to the distinction. It is not worth while to spend much time upon the numerous glaring anachronisms contained in it throughout. In the very opening of the dialogue Tooke is represented as congratulating Johnson upon the completion of his great undertaking. It had been sent him the moment it came from the press, and he had been engaged ever since in its perusal. Now the Dictionary was published in 1755, when Tooke, or Horne as was his name then, was but nineteen years old. In the lie which is represented as coming soon after from his mouth, that he had read almost all the old English authors that were printed or extant, the matter of age is of little consequence. It would have been a lie, different in degree but the same in kind, had he been ninety instead of nineteen. But the unreality of the conversation is due to the part severally played by the two speakers in the

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dialogue. Tooke does practically all the talking. Johnson is represented as behaving in a way he was incapable of doing. He listens most of the time in submissive silence, occasionally emitting a growl at the personal character or beliefs of his interlocutor, but accepting with assent or without contradiction some of his most preposterous statements, and at intervals contributing to the discussion some observations of his own almost as absurd. To any one knowing about the men the part that Johnson is made to play is more than imaginary; it is inconceivable.

The two dialogues which have been mentioned are treasure-houses of mistakes of fact and mistakes of inference. Rarely can we find crowded into the compass of a few pages so much phonetic, orthographical, and etymological error of all sorts; and along with it a linguistic perversity which enabled Landor, when he hit upon the right view, to give a wrong reason for it. Limit of space makes it necessary to confine attention to errors which illustrate two principal delusions about speech which are widely prevalent among those whose professed aim is to restore usage to its pristine perfection. One concerns the meanings in which words are employed. Few there are which are not capable of being used in a variety of senses. Now and then some of these

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fully authorized significations, for undefined and indefinable reasons, fall under the ban of the purist. Landor, for instance, tells us that it is improper to employ the verb *execute* in the sense of hanging, beheading, or otherwise putting a man to death. He clearly knew nothing of the origin of this usage. He was probably as ignorant as he was certainly unmindful of the fact that, from the fifteenth century on, it is to be found in the works of every writer of English, good or bad, who has had occasion to describe the act denoted by it. His objection never influenced or could influence the action of any one who was at all familiar with the best usage; but it reveals unmistakably the limitations of the objector.

The other and much more prevalent delusion is concerned with etymology. Landor was fully possessed by that devil of derivation which, unlike the evil spirit of Scripture, makes happy him in whom it dwells and vexes only the souls of those with whom he comes in contact. There are some men who seem incapable of comprehending the fact that it is the present meaning of a word which determines the propriety of its use; not its past meaning, still less its meaning in the tongue from which it came. Of this particular kind of incapacity Landor furnished so

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many examples in these two conversations that attention must be restricted to a very few which can be treated in a few words. He implies that it is wrong to say *bad* or *false* orthography, because orthography means by its derivation *right* spelling. He informs us that we are at liberty to gather two or more roses, but not to gather one; for *gather* comes from the same root as *together*. *Examine into* is incorrect, because *examine* strictly means 'to weigh out.' But the evil spirit of derivation conducts itself as do ghosts according to the apprehension of Horatio in the play of Hamlet. It tempts the unhappy victim to the summit of some dreadful linguistic cliff from which, owing to the inability to view and heed everything, he is sure at some time to tumble headlong. We are here required to believe that it is highly improper to say "under the circumstances," though everybody has been saying it for the past two or three centuries. But the Latin *circum* shows that circumstances are about us, not above us; it is therefore quite impossible for us to be under them. So Landor assures us; and then proceeds himself to write *averse to*. This is a construction which has been in the best of use for three hundred years, and is likely so to continue for hundreds of years to come. But while the rest

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of us have the right to say it, Landor had no such privilege, if he purposed to remain faithful to his principles. The construction with *from*, not so common in the best usage, was nevertheless unobjectionable and was open to him. It was his business to use it and not the one with *to*.

To base propriety of present usage upon derivation would render it necessary for an English writer to master three or four languages before he could safely deliver himself in his own. The ridiculousness of such a requirement reveals at once the ridiculousness of the idea that makes an inference of such a nature possible. All that is further needed to enhance the preposterousness of the course is to rest the meaning upon an erroneous derivation. This Landor, who was in no sense a scholar as regards his own tongue, was usually able to accomplish. Conjecture ran riot in his observations, unembarrassed by sufficient knowledge to give it even a slight claim to plausibility. His guesses at the origin of words such, for instance, as *horse-laugh*, *net*, *gossamer*, read like the utterances of a distempered brain. His positive assertions were, if possible, more extraordinary. *Bower*, he tells us, is the last syllable of *arbour*. As a matter of fact *bower* was in the language some centuries before

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*arbor*—originally (*h*)*erbere*—made its appearance in it. Landor, indeed, was so deplorably ignorant of English etymology that he missed the benefit he would have derived from it to support the views he advocated. “We write *island* with an *s*,” he said, in his capacity of spelling-reformer, “as if we feared to be thought ignorant of its derivation.” The truth is, we write *island* with an *s*, because we are ignorant of its derivation. It was not till the sixteenth century that men, under the fancied belief that the word was connected with *isle*, inserted the *s*, which hides from us its real origin. One more illustration must suffice of Landor’s efforts to restore usage to its primitive purity. He was unaware that *whiles* is etymologically a genitive singular; he assumed that it was a plural. On the strength of this blunder he was enabled to pronounce the following dictum for the benefit of writers. “*While*,” he said, “is the *time* when; *whiles* is the *times* when.”

Landor’s opinions about language and the words composing it are so often spoken of as authoritative that it has been necessary to subject his pretensions to strict examination. His comments upon speech are of the same value as his emendations of Shakespeare. These latter have been too much neglected by commentators,

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unaware of the fund of harmless entertainment they afford. For illustration, in the celebrated passage in *Measure for Measure* where Claudio speaks of "the delighted spirit" as compelled "to bathe in fiery floods," Landor substituted *belighted* for *delighted*. From this word, he said, *blighted* was derived, and it itself meant 'struck by lightning.' A strange product would the language have been, after it had been submitted to his remodelling in order to preserve it from corruption. Not that he himself ever had the slightest doubt as to the correctness of his statements and the truth of his convictions. Exposure of his blunders provoked his wrath but never shook his self-confidence. The waywardness and wrongheadedness of the views he expressed joined with the violence of his utterances give a certain justification to Byron's designation of him as "that deep-mouthed Bœotian, Savage Landor." The errors which vitiated his conclusions, as well as the conclusions of those who preceded him, will constitute the subject of the following part.

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### II

The historical survey given in the preceding section, brief as it is, suffices to show conclusively that the belief that the English language is on the road to ruin is not peculiar to any period. It has been held by the men of every generation. All through the latter part of the eighteenth century and the whole of the nineteenth the growing debasement of the speech was the subject of constant comment in the newspaper press. Nor were the utterances of sorrow confined to contributors to slight and ephemeral publications. They came from men who had access to grave and stately periodicals. Take, for illustration, a representative passage from the *Quarterly Review*, which then loomed large before the popular eye. It occurs in a criticism on Chalmer's *Caledonia*, to which work it gave great praise. With the eulogium for the information conveyed was mingled, however, censure for the expression. Yet the faults were criticised not so much as if the writer were personally responsible for them, but as if he had been overtaken and overwhelmed by the flood of corruption pouring into the tongue. "Let not," said the reviewer "a



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writer whom we highly esteem and respect, be offended if, not to hurt his feelings, but as the first protest against a rapid and alarming debasement which is taking place in the English language, we animadvert with honest freedom on the style and composition of his *Caledonia*; a style which is not the fortuitous result of mere indifference to simple and elegant narrative, but formed by a sort of counter-taste, a bad ear, and multifarious reading, out of the dregs of Johnson and Gibbon, whipped up with the best of many modern writers, their miserable imitators. This 'big and burly way of nonsense,' as a great master of style happily termed it, by hard words, involved constructions, awkward metaphors, overloading epithets, and unmeasured sentences, is making such daily and formidable inroads upon the purity and structure of our mother-tongue, that if no check be put to it by those who, in defect of a national academy, have assumed to themselves the province of watching over the national taste and language, the written and colloquial dialects of the country will quickly be removed to an immeasurable distance from each other; and, what is of the greatest importance, though not immediately connected with our present topic, the language of the pulpit as well as the press

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will become almost unintelligible to the mass of our countrymen." <sup>1</sup>

Passages containing similar predictions of contingent calamities could be multiplied by the score from the periodical literature of the nineteenth century. They are found frequently in the publications of the present day, and will doubtless continue to be found a century hence. It is fair to add, however, that rarely in any age have such utterances come from men of the intellectual grade of Swift and Landor. The Beatties and Miss Bowdlers will never die out. Furthermore, it is to be said that from views of this sort there has never been much open dissent. Dryden, indeed, writing in 1670, maintained that the language had been improving since the era of the great dramatists, instead of degenerating. But in this instance, as in so many others, he was arguing as an advocate; he was not speaking as a judge. It is plain from his further words that the opinion he expressed was not the opinion generally entertained. He admitted that many in his time insisted that from Ben Jonson's death to their own day English speech "had been in a continual declination like that of the Romans from the age of Virgil to Statius, and so downwards to Claudian."

<sup>1</sup> *Quarterly Review*, vol. iv., p. 357. November, 1810.

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In truth, if we take for authority the contemporary opinion of successive periods, there is no escape from the conclusion that, for the past two hundred years at least, our tongue has been steadily deteriorating. There is in it an innate depravity which tends to make it go wrong. As if this were not enough, there are always certain mischievous and irresponsible persons who are engaged in the work of destroying its purity. In Swift's time it was the frequenters of the court, the theatrical writers, the translators from the French, and the poets. In Beattie's time it was the political pamphleteers and essayists. But during the last fifty to one hundred years the agency which has been the favorite one to accuse of corrupting the language is the newspaper. Its influence upon it has been described as pestilential. We are constantly treated to specimens of what is called its English. One might fairly infer from the way in which it is often spoken of that with the steadily increasing circulation of this sort of periodical literature there is no hope whatever for our speech.

The influence of the newspaper upon the language can assuredly neither be denied nor disregarded. Yet it is hard to see why this kind of literary production should be selected as the special agent destined to bring about the general

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ruin which is always impending. Why should its influence be so peculiarly calamitous? Are there no other producers of bad English than those who write for it? Of course there are newspapers and newspapers. Some of them deserve all the denunciation which has been impartially laid by their censurers upon the whole body. Doubtless, too, there is a good deal of bad thinking and bad writing to be found in the columns of the very best of them. Nor need it be denied that newspaper work is subject to certain conditions which tend to impair excellence. What is produced must be produced to meet the want of the moment. Little or no time can be allowed for reflection or examination or revision. As, therefore, it is a kind of work that is almost invariably done under stress, it is sure from the nature of things to be specially liable to the faults which spring from haste and carelessness. But haste and carelessness are not confined to newspaper writing, nor is rapid production necessarily poor production.

On the other hand, there are counter-balancing advantages in its favor. The writers connected with the more important journals, whether daily or weekly, are, as a rule, a picked body of men. Besides, they are almost invariably under an influence which tends to promote clearness and

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force of expression. In general, they are partisans. Not unfrequently they are strong and even bitter partisans. Consequently, when they write, they write in earnest. The profession attracts, too, more and more the whole generation of young and ardent spirits who seek to sway the thoughts and lives of their contemporaries. In education, in ability to express themselves, even in the technical knowledge of the language itself, they are as a class far superior to those who set out to criticise their English. The dangers to be anticipated from that quarter are really little more than creations of the imagination. Of course newspapers are the first to spread far and wide the formations which are constantly springing up in a language possessed of vitality. They bring to the notice of large numbers the new words and locutions which are proposed for use. In consequence they may hasten their adoption; but their adoption is inevitable if they are really needed. If not, they are little likely to maintain themselves. If they do not drop out of use entirely, they are reasonably certain to undergo in time that process of differentiation of meaning which adds resources to the speech by imparting to a new term a special signification.

At this point attention must be called to the

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falsity of the belief, once widely and perhaps generally entertained, that the inrush of new words and phrases into a language is evidence of the influences at work in it tending to produce corruption. Men, it was held, should be content with what sufficed their fathers. On the contrary, the number of new locutions which at any given time are presenting themselves for admission into a tongue is a pretty accurate indication of the degree of intellectual activity prevailing among those who speak it. Communities shut off entirely from contact with the outside world, sharing neither in its thoughts, its desires, nor its acquisitions, have no need of additions to their speech. As the amount of knowledge is never increased, nor the circle of ideas enlarged, the same words do duty from father to son for successive generations. But the moment this mental torpor is broken up, the moment men fall under the influence of new interests, new feelings, new thoughts, they find the need of an ampler vocabulary to express themselves fully or more vigorously, and sometimes to express themselves at all. The largeness of the number of words struggling for entrance into a language is a sign of its health, not of its decay. To these aspirants, indeed, the words of Scripture are specially applicable—

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many are called, but few are chosen. Out of the army of terms that offer themselves for admission in every generation, but a very limited number find lodgment in the speech. Nor do these, save in the rarest of instances, displace or make obsolete those already there. The fundamental error which vitiated the conclusions of Swift and his contemporaries consisted in their belief that the language was steadily moving in a straight line away from its sources. Hence it followed that, unless it became what they called fixed, their own writings would in process of time become unintelligible. They complained accordingly that length of fame was denied to modern writers. These could hope to live at best but a bare threescore years. As Pope expressed it and illustrated it by an example,

“Our sons their fathers’ failing language see  
And such as Chaucer is, shall Dryden be.”

The men of that period had not the slightest conception of the conservative influence exerted over speech by a great literature once firmly established. From that the language never moves far. About that it may be said to revolve, and the words and phrases employed by great writers go but little out of use or of fashion so long as no disturbing external forces interfere with the existence of the language itself.

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This consideration bears only indirectly upon the main subject; but it places us in a position to take a farther step. The various expressions criticised by Swift and Beattie and Landor constitute but a pitiful handful of the number that have from time to time been denounced—often, too, by men of ability—as barbarisms and corruptions. Yet nearly all of them are now employed unhesitatingly by those who are engaged in pointing out the present perils of the same sort which threaten the speech. Ordinarily, too, they are employed in complete ignorance of their once scandalous reputation. Indeed, no more curious chapter in the history of our tongue could be furnished than one giving a complete account of the words in common use to which on their first appearance exception has been taken, ranging all the way from mere disapproval to severest condemnation. There can be no question as to the fact that during its history the language has absorbed very many locutions and constructions which, according to the purists of the past, were destined if adopted to prove its bane. There is not, however, any evidence that its health has suffered the slightest in consequence. This condition of things naturally suggests the suspicion that there must be some flaw in the reasoning which leads men



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to look with ceaseless anxiety upon the future of the tongue. It awakens the hope that, after all, English may escape the ruin to which it is logically doomed, in the opinion of particular persons, if they fail to have their own way as to what it should accept or reject. The hope may be converted into certainty if it can be shown that all the alarm about the language is based upon utter misconception of what the real agencies are which impair the efficiency and purity of speech.

This involves the comprehension of two points. The first is that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a language becoming corrupt. It is an instrument which will be just what those who use it choose to make it. The words that constitute it have no real significance of their own. It is the meaning which men put into them that gives them all the efficacy they possess. Language does nothing more than reflect the character and the characteristics of those who speak it. It mirrors their thoughts and feelings, their passions and prejudices, their hopes and aspirations, their aims, whether high or low. In the mouth of the bombastic it will be inflated; in the mouth of the illiterate it will be full of vulgarisms; in the mouth of the precise it will be formal and pedantic. If, therefore, those who employ it as the medium of conveying their

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ideas lose all sense of what is vigorous in action, of what is earnest in belief, all appreciation of what is pure in taste and of what is lofty in conduct—if, in fine, they become intellectually coarse and morally corrupt—their speech may be relied upon to share in their degradation. But the latter result will never take place until the former has previously manifested itself. So long, accordingly, as men take care of themselves morally and intellectually the language can be safely left to take care of itself. Never was there a more ridiculous reversal of the actual order of events than that contained in Landor's assertion that "no nation has long survived the decrepitude of its language."

This is the first point. The second one is that the history of language is the history of corruptions—using that term in the sense in which it is constantly employed by those who are stigmatizing by it the new words and phrases and constructions to which they take exception. Every one of us to-day is employing expressions which either outrage the rules of strict grammar, or disregard the principles of analogy, or belong by their origin to what we now deem the worst sort of vulgarisms. These so-called corruptions are found everywhere in the vocabulary and in nearly all the parts of speech. Words

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are spelled and pronounced in utter defiance of their derivation. Letters have been added to them as a result of slovenly pronunciation. On the other hand, they have been deprived in the same way of letters, and even syllables, to which they are entitled, and the full proper form has in some instances been replaced by a mere fragment of the original. Plurals of nouns have become singulars, and singulars in turn have become plurals. Yet a return to what is the theoretically correct usage would seem like a return to barbarism. Any attempt of that nature would be sure to be denounced as an assault upon the purity of the tongue. Even if permitted in any given case, it would produce upon most of us the effect of something peculiarly grotesque.

In the grammar of two of the parts of speech—the pronoun and the verb—the most flagrant examples of these so-called corruptions are exhibited. All that can be done here is to furnish a few specimens. In the former, the confusion between the nominative and the objective case, which shows itself in the personal and relative pronouns, has succeeded with the plural of the second person in establishing the original dative and accusative as the regular nominative. Hence we all, ungrammatically from the purist point of view, say *you* instead of the strictly

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correct *ye*. No better account can be given of the verb system. Etymologically considered, that is little more than a mass of corruption. In the course of their history the two conjugations have been so confounded that, were it not for the light thrown upon them by comparative philology, we should be unable to bring any order out of the chaos which has come to prevail. To all this add the fact that in the case of several words the literary language now uses a corrupted form, while the really proper one has been relegated to the speech of the uneducated. These are but a few of the many abuses—if so we choose to call them—which abound on every side. Yet we take great credit to ourselves for falling foul of a particular term or locution which exhibits some fault of formation or of derivation. In so doing we feel that we are acting as champions of the purity of speech. Yet all the while we are using with perfect freedom, and in utter unconsciousness of their etymologically corrupt character, other words and expressions which are subject to the very criticism in which we have indulged.

Proof will naturally be demanded of a proposition so sweeping. Out of the host of examples which present themselves it is well to select one which has about it the interest of present controversy. Let us take our first illus-

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tration from the verb system. This abounds, as has been said, in corruptions which time and authority have converted into the best possible usage, often, indeed, into the only possible usage. In it we have now the case of a new participial form which may fairly be considered as a candidate for acceptance or rejection. But before its exact status, however well known to many, can be made clear to all, two or three preliminary explanations must be given. The English verb, like that of its sister Teutonic languages, is divided into two conjugations, called respectively the strong or old, and the weak or new. One characteristic of the former is here to be specially noted. Its past participle always had originally the termination *-en*. In modern English this ending has in some instances been regularly retained, as in *given, taken, fallen, and risen*. In others it has been dropped entirely, as in *sprung, sung, and drunk*, the present representatives of the earlier *sprungen, sungen, and drunken*. In others again the *e* has been dropped while the *-n* has been retained, as in *born, torn, and known*. In still others the verb has kept the fuller and the shorter form side by side, as in *eaten and eat, bitten and bit, gotten and got*. Finally, there are a few verbs which have dropped the original par-

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ticipial form almost entirely, if not entirely, and replaced it by the form of the preterite, as *held* for *holden*, *sat* for *sitten*, and *stood* for *stonden*. These last, it hardly needs to be said, are corruptions of a peculiarly atrocious character. None of these changes, however, affect the fact that *-en* is the distinctive termination of the past participle of the strong conjugation. On the other hand, the past participle of the verbs of the weak conjugation regularly ends and has always ended in *-d* or *-t*.

With this explanation we are in a position to consider the case of the disputed form selected. This is *proven*. The verb to which it belongs is a verb of the weak conjugation. The past participle is therefore properly *proved*. In consequence *proven* is etymologically a corruption. It came into the literary language, so far as it exists in it, from the northern English dialects. These from an early period were fond of adding the strong participial termination *-en* to the root of weak verbs. The verdict in Scotch criminal trials of "not proven" was in all probability the particular agency which made this form familiar to southern ears. Apparently it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the use of it became distinctly noticeable in the speech of the South of Great Britain.

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But in the latter part of the eighteenth we find it even then occasionally employed. "You have proven me busy but I was comparatively at leisure," wrote Lord Sheffield, in 1791, to his intimate friend Gibbon.<sup>1</sup>

Every scholar will admit the fact that, etymologically, *proven* is a corruption. Accordingly, why should not its use be debarred at once and forever? But questions of usage are not settled in this easy, offhand way. The men who prefer to employ the word may naturally ask, Why not make your reformation complete before you object to the introduction of this particular form? *Hide* and *chide* are also strictly verbs of the weak conjugation. In the sixteenth century, and perhaps a little earlier, they added to their weak past participles *hid* and *chid* the termination *-en* of the strong past participle. In this way *hidden* and *chidden* were formed. Both are certainly corruptions of a character not essentially different from *proven*. But they have become so sanctioned by the best usage that we no longer think of disputing their correctness; in fact, but few are aware of the fact that etymologically they are improper. Their history is repeating itself in the word now under

<sup>1</sup>*Private Letters of Edward Gibbon*, vol. ii., p. 241. London, 1896.

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discussion. The adoption or rejection of *proven* is not a matter to be decided by scholars, but by the attitude assumed towards it by the great writers of our speech. At this time usage is discordant. Some authors of repute employ it; some avoid it. In Tennyson's works it first appeared in *Aylmer's Field*, published in 1864. After that date it occurred pretty frequently—a fact showing that his choice of it was deliberate. It has also been used by Bulwer, by Lowell, by Thackeray, by Herbert Spencer, and doubtless by many others. It is more than likely that it is destined to establish itself permanently in the language of literature. It certainly looks now as if the large majority of the users of speech will prefer to sin with Tennyson and Thackeray and Lowell than to be etymologically virtuous with all the grammarians. If such be the result, we can rest assured that the language will be no more ruined by the adoption of *proven* than it has been ruined by the previous adoption of *hidden* and *chidden*. It may be worth while to add that forms of a similar nature occur not unfrequently in our literature. The "well-languaged Daniel," for instance, has *bereaven* in his *Civil Wars*; Milton has *paven* in *Comus*; Kipling, in his *Second Jungle Book*, speaks of "that dim far-litten sky." All of these are of the same



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character as *proven*, and any one of them may at some time find its way into general use.

Let us now take up the consideration of one of the corruptions which has lived through its day of trial and has been long received into the best literary society. The story is one fairly well known, but the lesson it enforces is so important that it will bear repetition. It is the abbreviation *mob*, so hated of Swift. No word in our tongue is theoretically worthy of much severer reprobation. It combines in itself about all the faults which can bring disrepute to a neologism. By origin it is not merely slang, but it belongs to a peculiarly odious kind of slang—that is, the cant of the learned taken up by the mass of people. Furthermore, it is an abbreviation not essentially different in character from that which has given us *gent* for ‘gentleman’ and *pants* for ‘pantaloons.’ It has been so cut down that did we not know its history it would be an absolutely hopeless task to trace its derivation. It is nothing but a fragment of the full Latin original *mobile vulgus*—‘the fickle common people.’ First the noun *vulgus* was dropped. That left *mobile*. In the latter half of the reign of Charles II. this word came into wide use as the general designation of the rabble. Especially was this the case during the

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tumultuous scenes that accompanied the stormy strife caused by the pretended Popish Plot. In process of time it became one of the fashionable slang words which every social aspirant made it a point to admire and employ. For illustration, it does not occur in the dramatist Shadwell's earlier works; but in his *Squire of Alsatia*, brought out in 1688, one of the characters from the country is told by his city cousin that as soon as his clothes and liveries come home, and he shall appear rich and splendid like himself, "the mobile shall worship thee." "The mobile," is the reply; "that is pretty." Such was the state of feeling which brought about the general prevalence of the word.

*Mobile* lasted certainly down to the latter part of the eighteenth century; but by many it was soon found to be too long. Accordingly the last two syllables were discarded. Early in the reign of William and Mary *mob* became a generally recognized form. Swift, as we have seen, abominated it to his dying day. Addison sympathized with this feeling. In No. 135 of the *Spectator*, *mob* is put down by him as one of the ridiculous words which he fears will in time be looked upon as part of the speech. There must have been then a host of minor defenders of the purity of our tongue who bewailed

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its increasing use, and pointed to that fact as evidence of the growing degeneracy of the language. The prejudice against the word lasted in places to a late period. According to Lord Holland, as reported by Moore, Fox looked upon it as not really belonging to the speech. Yet by the latter half of the eighteenth century it had been long in use with the best writers, and, it is needless to say, has so continued. Addison's fears have been realized. The abbreviated form has thoroughly established itself. Accordingly a word which their predecessors stigmatized as a corruption of the vilest kind is now used unhesitatingly by the most precise of modern purists. One reason for its prevalence is obvious. It came to supply a very genuine want. There is no other single word that conveys definitely the idea of a particular sort of riotous assemblage. Still, in these matters it must be conceded that language is largely capricious in the preferences it exhibits, unless we choose to credit it with possessing the keenest sense of what it needs. It adopts one form and rejects another according as it suits its will, or perhaps its whim. Good usage which frowns upon *pants*, which stigmatizes *gents* as utterly odious, or designates by it human beings of a particularly odious species, would regard the loss

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of the similar formation *mob* as impairing the resources of the speech.

In truth, in this matter of so-called corruptions we are all a bundle of inconsistencies. We condemn in one breath what we approve in another. A certain form of some particular word we look upon as a vulgarism of the worst kind; a precisely similar form of another word we regard as the only possibly correct one. We hear occasionally from the lips of the uneducated *drownded* as the past tense of *drown*, itself frequently pronounced by the same persons as *drownd*. We properly consider its use as an evidence of illiteracy. There is no question that it has all the marks of those corruptions which, according to some, are ultimately to ruin our speech. A letter has been added to the end of the word which destroys the correct pronunciation, and furthermore causes the form to deviate from its original. This is perfectly true. Yet it is the mere accident of usage that all of us are not saying it now as well as merely a certain number of the uneducated. It was employed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by reputable writers. Late in the latter it appears; for instance, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, in the original edition of 1678. There Christian is represented as telling Pliable something of what they shall

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see in the kingdom of heaven in the following words:

“There shall we see men that by the world were cut in pieces, burned in flames, *drownded* in the seas, for the love that they bare to the Lord of the place, all well and cloathed with immortality as with a garment.”

Had during those centuries the form been generally adopted by writers of the highest grade, whose works were regarded by all as authorities, every educated man at the present day would be saying *drownd* and *drownded* for *drown* and *drowned*, and wital be ignorant that he was using what was in its origin a corruption of the worst kind.

But, after all, say the upholders of purity, this form did not establish itself. It effected an entrance, indeed, but it was too gross a corruption to be permanently endured. The literary language came in time to recognize its real character, and in consequence left the employment of it exclusively to the unlettered. The example, therefore, instead of sustaining the view put forth, proves that its contrary is the only true position to take. A corruption may through carelessness or ignorance creep into the speech. There it may maintain itself for a while. But its nature cannot always continue unknown. Once let the attention of the users of language

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be called to it, and its ultimate proscription is merely a question of time.

This would be a most comfortable doctrine to hold could the facts only be persuaded to accommodate themselves to it. Let us concede that *drowned* is the worst of English, and that its introduction, had it been effected, would have wrought, so far as its influence went, an irreparable injury to the speech. What are we, then, to say of corruptions resembling it precisely which all, educated and uneducated alike, use without scruple. The *d* of *drowned* is an objectionable and unauthorized letter. Therefore this form of the preterite is properly denounced by us as a vulgarism. But this same letter has been added to other words with the like result of destroying the original pronunciation, and hiding, as far as it can, the derivation. Let us take two verbs as we find them in the following lines from Chaucer:

“A harp  
That *sounèd* bothè well and sharp.”

“*Lene* me a mark,” quoth he, “but dayès three.”

Here are correct forms of two most common English words, *sound* and *lend*. The former came to us originally as a noun through the

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Anglo-Saxon from the Latin *son-us*. In Middle English it appears properly as *soun*. The latter verb comes from the Anglo-Saxon *læn-an*. In neither has the existing *-d* any right to the place it holds. But after Chaucer's time the unauthorized letter established itself in these two words. The corruption doubtless showed itself first in the popular speech, and from that gradually made its way into the language of literature. The forms with *-d* are now the only ones recognized by the English-speaking world. Comparatively few of us know that they are strictly corruptions; that, for instance, in saying *sound-ed* we are using a formation precisely similar in character and origin to *drowned-ed*. The examples just given are very far from being the only ones that could be cited of words which have assumed to themselves final letters to which they are not entitled; but the object in view aimed at here is not to furnish a catalogue but to illustrate a principle.

Even this is not the worst. It is bad enough for the educated to use a corruption of the very kind which they reprobate in the uneducated. But a lower deep is reached when we find them employing what is really a corrupt form, leaving the one strictly correct to the illiterate, and then pointing it out as an evidence of their illiteracy.

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Even in our preference of corruption we are not consistent; for while we accept it in one case, we discard it in another which is precisely similar. Let us take for illustration the four words *again*, *along*, *amid*, and *among*—all at the outset both adverbs and prepositions. In addition, besides the simple form all had a corresponding one with the adverbial ending *-es*, giving us in consequence—variations of spelling being disregarded—*againes*, *alonges*, *amidde*s, and *amonges*. Each one of these latter, either in the fourteenth or the fifteenth or the sixteenth century, added to this ending in *-es* the letter *t*. It was, of course, a corruption. Not only did it establish itself, however, but the corrupt forms terminating in *-st* supplanted in the language of literature the correct forms terminating in *-es*. Consequently, in using *against*, *alongst*, *amidst*, and *amongst*, we are using forms which have no etymological justification for their existence.

But we did not stop here. The history of these four words shows that not the slightest consistency has been observed in their treatment. For a long while the corrupt forms kept their place side by side with the simple forms, and were used interchangeably both as adverbs and prepositions. But in the seventeenth century *alongst*—never, in fact, so common as the



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others—practically died out altogether. *Along* came in consequence to be the sole form employed both as adverb and as preposition. But though we have discarded *alongst*, we still retain *amidst* and *amongst* in conjunction with *amid* and *among*, exhibiting, besides, a preference, on the whole, for the corrupt form in the case of the one and for the simple form in the case of the other. Furthermore, while we continue to treat *amid* and *among* as prepositions, it is only the uneducated that can venture so to employ *again*—usually pronounced *agin*—instead of the corrupted form *against*. “He fought agin him” is a method of expression limited to the vernacular of the unlettered. Yet, as the account just given shows, the form of the preposition employed in it is purer than that which has taken its place. Once, too, it was in the best literary use. In Chaucer’s description of the Knight, for instance, we are told—

“This ilkè worthy knight had been also  
Sometimè with the lord of Palatye  
*Again* another heathen in Turkeye.”

As a further illustration it may be added that the fortune of *while* bears a close resemblance to that of these words just described. Here *whiles*, the allied form with the adverbial ending *-es*,

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took to itself the letter *t*. So doing, it experienced the usual fate. It was supplanted by the corrupt form it had generated by this addition, and has practically disappeared; but *whilst* exists to the present day along with *while*. Finally it may be said that all these words ending in *-st*, which we use with perfect propriety, are of exactly the same nature as *wonst* or *wunst*, a vulgarity occasionally heard. This corruption is produced by adding *t* to *once*, which in turn is itself a corruption of *ones*.

In the case of individual words there is, indeed, little limit to the corruptions of various sorts which have crept into the speech. Men would be astounded were an exhaustive presentation made them of the facts. Here can be given only a few of the more noticeable. The very word *astound* is itself an example. Like a number of them it has taken unto itself a *d* to which it is not entitled. But there is nothing peculiar about the assumption of this particular letter. It was in the sixteenth century that an unauthorized *b* was added to *lim*<sup>1</sup> and *num*.<sup>2</sup> In the seventeenth century it succeeded in establishing itself firmly. Consequently, while we never

<sup>1</sup> Anglo-Saxon *lim*.

<sup>2</sup> Past participle of old English strong verb *nim* (*en*); *nomen*, *nome*, *num*.

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pronounce the final letter, we religiously write the words as *limb* and *numb*. *Thumb* got this useless *b* earlier, but had no more right to it than the two others.<sup>1</sup> It was in this same sixteenth century that a *b* was added to *crum*.<sup>2</sup> There is nothing that can be pleaded in justification of the proceeding. *Crumb*, however, maintained itself alongside of the correct form for the following centuries and now threatens to displace it entirely. The derivative *crumble* has a reason to show for its retention of the intruding letter, for in it, unlike its primitive, the *b* is pronounced. This is also true of the final *t* the appending of which has given us forms like the modern *ancient*,<sup>3</sup> *cormorant*,<sup>4</sup> *pheasant*,<sup>5</sup> *tyrant*,<sup>6</sup> and others, in place of their etymologically correct originals. In all these instances pronunciation has fixed permanently the corrupt form.

But it is not in the final syllable alone that this assumed linguistic debasement has manifested itself. A cockney *h* appears in *hostage*<sup>7</sup> and *hermit*,<sup>8</sup> though the latter has still as a variant

<sup>1</sup> Anglo-Saxon *puma*.

<sup>2</sup> Anglo-Saxon *crume*.

<sup>3</sup> Old French *ancien*.

<sup>4</sup> Old French *cormoran*.

<sup>5</sup> Old French *fesan*, *fesant* from Latin *Phasian-us*.

<sup>6</sup> Old French *tyran*, *tirant* from Latin *tyrann-us*.

<sup>7</sup> Old French *ostage*, *hostage* remotely from Latin *obses*.

<sup>8</sup> Old French *ermite*, *hermite* from Latin *eremita*.

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the etymologically more correct but less favored *eremite*. Nor has the body itself of the word been saved from this contamination. In the sixteenth century an unauthorized *h* established itself in *ghost*.<sup>1</sup> An *n* has been inserted into *messenger*<sup>2</sup> and *nightingale*<sup>3</sup> and *passenger*,<sup>4</sup> a *d* into *kindred*,<sup>5</sup> *jaundice*,<sup>6</sup> and *thunder*.<sup>7</sup> The insertion of *g* into *imprenable*<sup>8</sup> has given us the corrupt form *impregnable*. There are those who will recall what grief the second *r* of *bridegroom*<sup>9</sup> caused Noah Webster. In consequence of its insertion, he said that the word really meant a bride's hostler. Thereupon he wanted us all to go back to the original *bridguma*—in which *guma* means 'man'—and use *bridegoom*. So he printed the word in the edition of his Dictionary which came out in 1828. The insertion of the *r* lay heavy on his heart. "Such a gross corruption or blunder," he wrote, "ought not to remain a reproach to philology." He could not

<sup>1</sup> Anglo-Saxon *gôst*.

<sup>2</sup> Middle English *messenger* from Old French *messenger*.

<sup>3</sup> Anglo-Saxon *nihigale*.

<sup>4</sup> Middle English *passager* from Old French *passager*.

<sup>5</sup> Old English *kin* and *reden*.

<sup>6</sup> Old French *jaunice* from *jaune*, 'yellow.'

<sup>7</sup> Anglo-Saxon *punor*.

<sup>8</sup> Old French *imprenable* from *prendre*, to take.

<sup>9</sup> Anglo-Saxon *brydguma*.

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be consoled by the fact that though the form *bridegroom* did not make its appearance until the sixteenth century—the final word of the original compound having died out—no one ever attached to the personage so designated any debasing associations connected with the stable. Yet Webster, while feeling that the second *r* of this word was a reproach to philology, exhibited the usual inconsistency of the professional purist. He appeared not in the least disturbed by the insertion of this same letter into *vagrant*. This word, it hardly needs to be said, is a corruption. If we insist on deferring to etymology, we all ought to say *vagant*,<sup>1</sup> as we properly do when it appears as the latter part of *extravagant*. Derivation, indeed, real or assumed, has played strange freaks in vitiating the correct forms of words. Under the erroneous impression that its final syllable had something to do with *light*, the correct *delite* was transformed into the corrupt *delight*. A similar blunder of belief has given the corrupt form *sovereign*<sup>2</sup> in place of the correct *sovrain*, because its last syllable was supposed to be somehow connected with *reign*. *Foreign* in a similar way has inserted a *g* into the earlier

<sup>1</sup> Latin *vagans*, *vagant-is*.

<sup>2</sup> Old French *soverain* from Middle Latin *super-anus*.

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*forein*.<sup>1</sup> *Could*<sup>2</sup> has further adopted an illegitimate *l* by a false analogy with *would* and *should*.

This is the kind of melancholy story—if we choose to consider it melancholy—that meets us on every side. Whichever way we look we light upon corruptions which usage has made familiar and custom has made correct; for the examples here given could be multiplied indefinitely. The lesson such a survey enforces is important; but it must not be misunderstood. It does not release any man from striving to make his own usage conform to the best usage, so far as he is able to ascertain it. It does not deter him from putting forth every possible effort to prevent the introduction of erroneous or objectionable forms which are creeping in. But it does teach him the folly of the belief that these erroneous forms, if once universally accepted, bring to pass the ruin of the speech. Had that been true we should not have had to wait till now to witness the full accomplishment of this ever-threatened woe. It should further teach him to be wary about condemning as corrupt expressions which he hears generally from the lips of educated men. Still more should he be wary about pointing out the errors which he

<sup>1</sup> Old French *forain*, remotely from Latin *foras*, 'out-of-doors.'

<sup>2</sup> Old English *coude*.

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finds or fancies he finds in the writings of great authors. In the latter case his strictures are more likely to spring from his own lack of acquaintance with what is good usage than from any violation of it on the part of those he censures. To understand a great writer's ignorance of the language demands, therefore, a knowledge of the history and development of the words and idioms he uses; and this is not a qualification acquired by meditation, by processes of reasoning, or by consultation of one's sense of the fitness of things.

In itself it is right that men should hold and express opinions about the propriety of usages already existing or coming in, and do all that in them lies to bring about the rejection of what they deem undesirable. It is right, too, that the advice of scholars and special students of the speech should be asked, and that their views in regard to the adoption or exclusion of any particular locution or any particular neologism should receive the fullest consideration. But it is a gross mistake to fancy that to them ever has been left or ever can be left the final decision in cases of doubt. No one can make a thorough study of language without recognizing the falsity of this belief. That final decision invariably rests with the whole body of the cultivated users

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of speech. They have an unerring instinct as to its necessities. They are a great deal wiser than any of their self-constituted advisers, however eminent. Fortunately, too, they have the ability to carry their wishes into effect. They know what they need; and they can neither be persuaded out of it nor bullied out of it. They try many things; they let go very many which they try; but what they approve they hold fast. Protests, no matter from what quarter coming, are of no avail. If they retain a word or construction, it may be generally taken for granted that it supplies a demand which really exists. There is, indeed, a rough average sense in the whole body of cultivated men which brings them, as it were by instinct, to the same conclusions which scholars reach by the special study of words and constructions. To both, this assumed abstract purity of speech, about which so many are anxious, is felt to be nothing but a delusion. No matter how many of these so-called corruptions creep in, no fear need be entertained that the language is going to ruin in consequence. That result depends on agencies entirely different from those which affect the formation of words, the rules of syntax, or the construction of sentences.



## II

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IN his life of Story, Mr. Henry James mentions the presence of the sculptor at a dinner given in London by the critic and essayist John Forster. During the course of it the talk chanced to turn upon a letter from Hampden to Sir John Elliot which had been read. The peculiar beauty of its expression struck all present. Story observed that the English language seemed no longer to have its old elegance. This remark led to an outburst from the host. "As soon," said Forster, "as grammar is printed in any language, it begins to go. The Greeks had no grammar when their best works were written, and the decline of style began with the appearance of one."

Forster has not been the only one to take this view, nor was he the first to give it utterance. Extravagantly stated as it is, there is in it a certain element of truth. The early authors of a tongue have in their minds no thought of pos-

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sible censure from any linguistic critic. Every one does what is right in his own eyes, restrained, so far as he is restrained, only by that sense of propriety which genius possesses as its birth-right and great talents frequently acquire. But in later times, when grammars and manuals of usage have come to abound, there is frequent consultation of them, or, rather, a constant dread of violating rules which they have promulgated. Such a method of proceeding is not conducive to the best results in the matter of expression. When men think not so much of what they want to say as of how they are going to say it, what they write is fairly certain to lose something of the freshness which springs from unconsciousness. No one can be expected to speak with ease when before his mind looms constantly the prospect of possible criticism of the words and constructions he has employed. If grammar, or what he considers grammar, prevents him from resorting to usages to which he sees no objection, it has in one way been harmful if in another way it has been helpful. Correctness may have been secured, but spontaneity is gone. The rules laid down for the writer's guidance may be desirable, but they are likewise depressing. He thinks of himself as under the charge of a paternal government, and he is not happy;

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for our race, in its linguistic as well as in its political activity, bears with impatience the sense of feeling itself governed.

Such a result would be sure to follow, were grammars and manuals of usage absolutely trustworthy. But no such statement can be made of most of them, if, indeed, of any. It is an unfortunate fact that since the middle of the eighteenth century, when works of this nature first began to be much in evidence and to exert distinct influence, far the larger proportion of them have been produced by men who had little acquaintance with the practice of the best writers and even less with the history and development of grammatical forms and constructions. Their lack of this knowledge led them frequently to put in its place assertions based not upon what usage really is, but upon what in their opinion it ought to be. They evolved or adopted artificial rules for the government of expression. By these they tested the correctness of whatever was written. They were thereby enabled to proclaim their own superiority to the great authors of our speech by pointing out the numerous violations of this assumed propriety into which these had been unhappily betrayed. As the rules they proclaimed were copied and repeated by others,

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a fictitious standard of usage was set up in numerous instances and is largely responsible for many of the current misconceptions which now prevail as to what is grammatical.

It is the belief in this fictitious standard which is responsible not merely for numerous misstatements about the correctness of particular phrases and constructions, but for the frequent failure to comprehend the nature of prevailing linguistic conditions. One of the latter requires special mention here. It is no infrequent remark that in these later days there exists a distinct tendency towards lawlessness in usage, a distinct indisposition to defer to authority. We are told that the language of the man in the street is held up as the all-sufficient standard. If this statement were ever true, it was never less true than now. There might have been apparent justification for an assertion of this sort in the great creative Elizabethan period. Then no restraints upon expression seem to have been recognized outside of the taste or knowledge of the writer. As a consequence, the loosest language of conversation was reproduced with fidelity in the speech of the drama, then the principal national literature. But nothing of this freedom is found now. A constant supervision over speech is exercised by

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amateur champions of propriety. These are ensconced at every fireside. In colleges and academies and high schools they constitute an army of assumed experts, who are regularly engaged in holding in check any attempt to indulge in real or supposed lawlessness.

It is not, therefore, from the quarter of license that any danger to our speech arises. If peril exist at all, it comes from the ignorant formalism and affected precision which wage perpetual war with the ancient idioms of our tongue, or array themselves in hostility to its natural development. That this, so far as it is effective, is a positive injury to the language was pointed out several years ago by a scholar who, in consequence of the study he had given to the usage of the great writers, was enabled to speak on this subject with an authority to which few have attained. He was discussing the remarks of certain critics who had professed to consider as inaccurate and ungrammatical the preterite *wended* in the locution, "he wended his way." "It is by such lessons as these," he continued, "that the unreflecting and uninquiring are misled into eschewing, as if they were wrong, words and phrases which are perfectly right." If there is any revolt against the authority of such guides, equally blind and pre-

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sumptuous, if there is any lack of deference to the rules they seek to impose, it is a condition of things to be welcomed and not to be deplored.

Obviously it is idle to discuss questions of usage unless some general principles can be established in accordance with which the correctness or incorrectness of particular expressions can be tested. If these do not exist, or if they cannot be ascertained, opinion as to the propriety of particular words or grammatical constructions will necessarily vary with the tastes or prejudices of the writer or speaker. If this be not supported by adequate knowledge, it will ordinarily be little more than the expression of personal feeling. A particular individual dislikes a particular word or phrase. That is one of the best of reasons why he should not employ it himself; it is not a very cogent reason for inducing others to follow his example. There are, of course, many offences against good usage that cultivated men everywhere will condemn without hesitation. These, however, are not the ones that cause embarrassment. Every writer is constantly confronted with the denunciation of words and locutions which he not only hears in the speech of those he meets daily, but finds employed in the works of men regarded by all as authorities. If he himself has made no

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study of the usage thus condemned, if he recognizes that he is not in a position to decide the matter for himself—and few men have either the leisure or the opportunity to gain the special knowledge requisite for that purpose—it is inevitable that he should be left in a state of perplexity and consequent indecision.

Assertions as to what is proper or improper in speech are now, indeed, encountered everywhere. They naturally form a constituent part of grammars. They furnish the sole contents of some manuals. They turn up in most unexpected places in books and periodicals of every sort. It is a subject upon which every one feels himself competent to lay down the law. It has now become practically impossible for any writer so to express himself that he shall not run foul of the convictions of some person who has fixed upon the employment of a particular word or construction as his test of correctness of usage. Should any person seriously set out to observe every one of the various and varying utterances put forth for his guidance by all the members of this volunteer army of guardians of the speech, he would in process of time find himself without any language to use whatever. Just as, in the Old Curiosity Shop, Dick Swiveller's approaches to the Strand were cut

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off in succession by the creation of new creditors in different streets, so the writer's avenues to expression would be closed one by one, and he would finally be compelled to resort to the most tortuous and roundabout devices to convey the simplest meaning.

Can, therefore, any general principles be found which will put us in a position to reach in any given case conclusions independent of our personal prejudices or prepossessions? One there certainly is which, until lately at least, has been always accepted without question. In the form in which it is familiar to us it was stated about two thousand years ago by Horace in his treatise on the Poetic Art. There he tells us that words which are now disused shall be revived; and words which are now held in honor shall disappear. Then he adds the remark which has become almost a commonplace:

"Si volet usus,  
Quem penes arbitrium est et jus et norma lo-  
quendi."

Usage, therefore, according to the dictum of Horace, is the deciding authority, the binding law, the rightful rule of speech.

But a further question at once arises. Usage, it may be conceded, is the standard of speech.



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But whose usage? Certainly not the usage of this man or that man indifferently. Horace, in laying down his dictum, could not have been thinking of the general body of his fellow-countrymen. These spoke the Latin of the camps and the market-place. Much of what they said would have sounded to his ears as barbarous; some of it would in all probability have been absolutely unintelligible. But if he did not mean these, of whom was he speaking? The answer is so evident that hardly anything can be more surprising than the doubt which has been entertained and expressed of its exact nature. Clearly, what Horace had in mind was the usage of the best speakers and writers. It was that, and that only, which in his eyes constituted the standard of propriety. The acceptance by such men of a new word or locution, no matter from what source coming, gave it established currency; their employment of a grammatical form gave it the stamp of authority. The *usus* of Horace was, in consequence, precisely the same as that which Quintilian called later the *consensus eruditorum*—the agreement of the cultivated. Good usage, in short, is the usage of the intellectually good. The same thought is brought out strongly by Ben Jonson in his observations upon style, though his words are little more

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than a literal translation from the Latin author last named. "Custom," said he, "is the most certain mistress of language, as the public stamp makes the current money." But, like Quintilian, he was careful to define what he meant by this supreme authority. "When I name custom," he added, "I understand not the vulgar custom; for that were a precept no less dangerous to language than life, if we should speak or live after the manners of the vulgar; but that I call custom of speech, which is the consent of the learned; as custom of life, which is the consent of the good."<sup>1</sup>

The dictum of Horace, indeed, has hardly been called in question for most of the two thousand years which have elapsed since its utterance. But of late attempts have occasionally been made to dispute its correctness. Many of these have come from those who evidently did not comprehend what the poet meant by *usus*. They have, consequently, imputed to Horace something which Horace never had in mind. They have attributed to him the promulgation of the error just indicated—that is, that anything is good usage which is sanctioned by the usage of the large majority of speakers and writers, in-

<sup>1</sup> Ben Jonson, *Discoveries, De orationis dignitate*.

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dependent of the character of the individuals who make up that majority. But denials there have been of his assertion by certain persons to whom it is hardly possible to attribute this lack of perception. These have been put forth in books which in some cases still continue to have a fairly respectable sale. The remarks made by the writers of these works show, however, that it is much easier, as it is altogether more common, to content one's self with a general denial of the truth of the poet's declaration than to find any substitute to take its place. Authority there surely must be somewhere. Did it not exist, there would be a reign of license in which each man, no matter how incompetent, would be a law unto himself. If usage, therefore, is not the standard of speech, it is reasonable to ask, What is? If the best speakers and writers are not guides, to what quarter can we repair in cases of doubt or difficulty?

Several answers or rather attempted answers have been made to this question. Let us take up the consideration of the two most loudly trumpeted substitutes which are to furnish us a higher law for propriety of speech than can be found in good usage. The first of these, we are told, consists in the principles of universal grammar. In them is lodged the supreme authority.

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What are these principles of universal grammar, it is natural to ask. They can hardly be anything else than rules based upon practices which all languages agree in observing. But if there be such, we come back for their establishment to the usage of those who speak these various tongues. Consequently, whenever in them usage differs, as in many instances it does, we must either deny in a given case the general applicability of the particular principle, or insist upon deciding the grammatical propriety of the practice of one tongue or of one set of tongues by the practice of an alien or of alien tongues. To put this matter in as clear a light as possible, let us consider an illustration furnished by one of the most ardent upholders of universal grammar as the final arbiter. "No amount of wisdom," says he, "can excuse the use of a really singular noun with a plural verb, or the reverse."

This has certainly a reasonable look. If any example can be adduced which will justify the establishment of this theoretical standard of propriety, none is likely to be found more satisfactory than the one just given. But at once there arises the thought that in the Greek language—by many deemed the most perfect instrument of expression that mankind has ever known—the plural nominative of the

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neuter noun had pretty generally its verb in the singular. How does the advocate of the law higher than usage meet this violation of his principles of universal grammar? He does not meet it; he calmly evades it. He assures us that the Greek neuter plural may be looked upon as a collective. But if this be so, it must be because usage has come to deem it as such; for it cannot be so in the nature of things. Furthermore, if the privilege of thus regarding it be conceded to the Greek, it must also be conceded to the English or to any other tongue, if its users prefer to look upon it in such a light. The imputed authority of universal grammar consequently breaks down in its chosen illustration. Nor are we here at the end of our difficulties in the very example under discussion. In modern Greek the construction in question no longer exists. Even in ancient Greek it occurs much less frequently in the Epic dialect than in the Attic. What, then, are we to think of these vaunted principles of universal grammar which allow a construction to be proper at one period or in one speech, and at another period or in another speech declare it to be improper? As a matter of fact, it will be found that in every instance selected to illustrate the impossibility of usage overriding grammar, it is usage that has

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to be evoked in order to justify the apparent violation of grammar which has taken place.

Still another standard has been set up which has the distinction of being much more confidently proclaimed than clearly defined. Here are the words of one of its promulgators. "The truth is," says Richard Grant White, "that the authority of general usage, or even of the usage of great writers, is not absolute in language. There is a misuse of words which can be justified by no authority, however great, by no usage, however general."<sup>1</sup> There is nothing at all new about this assertion. It is the one which has been regularly made for the last hundred and fifty years by every person who finds that locutions to which he takes exception occur in the writings of those whose literary superiority is everywhere recognized. Like his predecessors the utterer of this dictum did not make any definite announcement of the standard which was to take its place. As near, however, as can be gathered from various passages in his writings, the guide he had in mind was reason. Under its benign direction, we are told that "rude, clumsy, and insufficiently worked-out forms of speech, sometimes mistakenly honored under

<sup>1</sup>*Words and Their Uses*, p. 24.

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the name of idioms," tend more and more to disappear.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately for the guide here designated, reason in the intellectual world is very much like conscience in the moral; the same fact will lead two men to draw exactly opposite conclusions. The dictates of each ought, of course, to be obeyed by the individual; it is quite another thing to seek to impose them upon the conduct of others. In morals an unenlightened conscience often induces its owner to condemn the acts of those far better than himself. Worse than that, it sometimes leads him to commit acts in themselves essentially wicked. It is exactly the same in the matter of language. An unenlightened reason constantly leads men to condemn words and constructions used by those far superior to them in knowledge and taste and ability. But even where ignorance does not prevail, any so-called standard, such as reason, fails us when it is most needed. Two persons, each of a high degree of intelligence, are often found disagreeing as to the propriety of employing particular words or constructions. Their knowledge may be the same; it is their judgments which vary. In the conflict between

<sup>1</sup> White, *Words and Their Uses*, p. 23.



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the reasoning powers of two equally cultivated men who is to decide? The only way that can properly be taken—it may be added, it is the only way that ever is taken—to settle the dispute is by an appeal to authority. That, of course, is nothing more than the reason of the best speakers and writers exhibited in their practice. Here once again we come back to usage, as the standard of speech. It invariably turns up as the final court of appeal. Whatever road we set out to take, we find ourselves travelling in this one at last.

The truth is, were everything known about good usage with the positiveness with which assertions about it are made, the constant controversies which arise in regard to it would be a simple impossibility. In discussions of it, what is called reason is often only another name for ignorance. The “insufficiently worked-out forms of speech, sometimes mistakenly honored under the name of idioms,” prove to be insufficiently understood forms of speech which the verbal critic condemns because he knows nothing of their nature and history. In consequence there has never really been the slightest ground for disputing the dictum of Horace when rightly understood. It embodies nothing more than the result of universal experience. There are



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modifications, or, rather, explanations, to which it is subject; but its general truth cannot be successfully questioned. The standard of speech is therefore the usage of the cultivated. Such men are the absolute dictators of language. They are the lawgivers whose edicts it is the duty of the grammarian to record. What they agree upon is correct; what they shun it is expedient to shun, even if not wrong in itself to employ. Words coined by those outside of the class to which these men belong do not pass into the language as a constituent part of it until sanctioned by their approbation and use. Their authority, both as regards the reception or rejection of locutions of any sort, is final. It hardly needs to be said that "the man in the street" is not only no dictator of usage, but that he has no direct influence upon the preservation of the life of any word or phrase. This depends entirely upon its adoption by great writers. If these fail to accept a new locution, it is certain to die eventually and as a general rule very speedily. On the other hand, the purist is as little a final authority. He may protest against the employment by famous authors of certain words or constructions. He may declare these opposed to reason, contrary to the analogies of the language, or tending to

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destroy distinctions which should be maintained. If they heed his remonstrances, well and good. If they disregard them, he mistakes his position when he pretends to sit in judgment upon the decisions of his masters.

The establishment of this dictum, with the limitation of its meaning, leads directly to another conclusion. Good usage is not something to be evolved from one's own consciousness, or to be deduced by some process of reasoning; it is something to be ascertained. It must be learned just as language itself is learned. Furthermore, there is no short-cut to its acquisition. Grammars may in some instances help us; in some instances they do help us, but in others they sometimes do just the reverse. But in no case can they ever be appealed to as final authorities. There is one way and but one way of attaining to the end desired as a theoretical accomplishment, and fortunately it is a course open to every one. Knowledge of good usage can be acquired only by associating in life with the best speakers or in literature with the best writers. The latter resource is always available. It is the practice and consent of the great authors that determine correctness of speech. The pages of these are accessible to all. If they differ among themselves about details, choice is

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allowable until a general agreement settles in course of time upon one mode of expression as preferable to another or to any others proposed.

So much for the general principle. But there is a still further limitation of the sense of Horace's dictum. When we say that usage is the standard of speech, we mean not merely good usage, but present good usage. Neither the grammar nor the vocabulary of one age is precisely the grammar or vocabulary of another. The language of a later period may not vary much from the language of an earlier one, but it will vary somewhat. It is not necessarily better or worse; it is simply different. The fact that the good usage of one generation may be distinctly improper usage in a generation which follows is frequently exemplified in the meanings given to individual words, and sometimes in the words themselves. This we all accept as a matter of course. But the same statement can be made just as truly of grammatical forms and constructions. In the case of these the variations between different periods do not impress themselves so much upon our attention because they are comparatively few. Still they occur. Ignorance of this fact or indifference to it has often led to the denunciation of the

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writers of the past as being guilty of solecisms or barbarisms, when they have done nothing more than conform to the usage of their own time. If such criticism be accepted as just, we in turn shall be left at the mercy of our descendants. We shall be reproached for employing words in senses they do not approve, or for resorting to forms and constructions which they have ceased to look upon as correct. If we recognize that whatever is in usage is right, we must be prepared to go a step further and concede that whatever was right.

### III

#### THE LINGUISTIC AUTHORITY OF GREAT WRITERS

THREE fundamental principles were laid down in the preceding essay. The first is that usage is the authoritative standard of speech. The second is that it must be good usage. The third is that it must be present good usage. When the two last concur—as in the large majority of instances they do—there is no further appeal possible in any given case. The question has been definitely settled. To this proposition we all unhesitatingly assent, when it comes to the consideration of disputed points in foreign tongues, especially the classical. In them the grammarian has been taught to know his place. Take, for example, Latin. If a word or construction occurs in Cicero, the question of its propriety is settled at once. No one thinks of disputing the authority of so great a master of the speech.

The same principle applies to English. It follows, therefore, that when we find an expres-

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sion of any sort employed by a writer of the first rank, the assumption must always be that this particular expression is proper. The burden of proof invariably falls upon him who maintains the contrary. Other things being equal, the chances are immensely in favor of the great author being right in his practice and of his critic being wrong in his censure. For while the great author is liable to commit error, he is far less liable to commit it than he who undertakes the office of corrector. It is idle to suppose that a man who has attained the highest eminence in literature will not, in the vast majority of instances, have been particular as to the proper treatment of the material with which he has been dealing. If the critic be solicitous in the matter of language, it is reasonable to believe that he whose success depends upon his use of it has paid more than ordinary attention to the minor morals of his profession. If he employs locutions which his censor condemns, it is a natural inference in consequence that he has employed them designedly. This involves the further inference that his knowledge of good usage is better than that of his critic.

Against this view it may be said that there are many authors, and even authors of highest repute, who have little solicitude about expres-

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sion in itself. They clothe their thoughts in the words that come first to the pen. It is enough for them if the reader understands or feels what they have sought to say. Why should they not as a consequence be guilty of frequent errors? Furthermore, a large number of great writers, and perhaps the majority of them, have risen from a station in life comparatively if not actually humble. Necessarily such have had few early advantages. During their most impressionable years they have not been accustomed to hear the language spoken with purity. Why, then, should they not continue to be affected by the associations which surrounded their childhood? Why should they not unconsciously commit errors which, owing to the influences they were under, do not strike them as errors?

There need be no denial that there is a certain degree of justice in the implication which these questions are intended to convey. Still there is far less of it than would be supposed at first thought. The answer to them, indeed, brings out sharply a point in discussions of this sort which is almost invariably ignored. There is another and a higher way than scrupulous care in which the great author is kept from wrongdoing. He has been born, so to speak, in the

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purple. As compared with other men he starts out with an immense handicap in his favor. He is saved from an infinity of errors by that fine sense of expression which belongs to him by the right of genius. Furthermore, no matter what may have been his social station, he has from his earliest years ordinarily lived and moved in the society of the best and greatest of his profession. By his lifelong familiarity with their writings he has developed the delicate taste, the keen sensitiveness to what is right or wrong in usage that holds the place in literature which conscience does in morals. It has furnished him, without his directly seeking it, with a standard of literary behavior. He can therefore afford to disregard and usually to despise the rhetorical guide-books which more or less ignorantly set out to show him what to follow and what to avoid.

This is the salvation of those great authors who do not consciously make a study of style beyond the simple desire to say clearly and effectively what they mean. They follow the right path because it is the only path they know. They do not seek for rules because they do not need them. It is with them as with a highly cultivated man who has been brought up from his earliest years in the most refined and polished



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society. Such a one does not acquire his good breeding by studying books of etiquette. His manners come from the unconscious adoption by himself of the manners of the class to which he belongs and with which he has mainly associated. He acts properly because he has never known what it is to act otherwise. His own behavior is in truth the standard upon which the rules contained in books of etiquette are founded, if they possess any value or authority at all.

It is accordingly the consciousness of their position which explains the attitude generally taken towards most verbal criticism by authors of the highest grade. They may not be able to analyze the expressions they use or defend them by convincing arguments. It is sufficient for their purposes that they are following the practice of the great writers before them and contemporary with them. Naturally the opinion of grammarians and purists does not affect them profoundly. They are satisfied that a reason for their course exists, though they may not have charged themselves with the labor of ascertaining it. Scott, for illustration, is constantly spoken of as a very careless writer. His productions have been a favorite hunting-ground for verbal critics. Why has he been selected for

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special censure? Simply because he disregarded a number of rules which men infinitely inferior to himself have set up as tests for correctness of speech. Many of these, he could hardly have helped seeing, were nothing but the outcome of the limited knowledge possessed by his censurers. Scott, to be sure, was a very rapid writer, and his style at times exhibits the inaccuracy and slovenliness which arise from haste. Errors of this kind he would have conceded to be errors, and in fact conceded and corrected them when they were pointed out. But in the great majority of instances the faults with which he has been charged would not have been deemed by him faults at all. Had his attention been called to them, he would not have made the slightest alteration.

On this very point he has not left us in doubt. Not even his regard for his son-in-law was sufficient to induce him to disguise his contempt for his son-in-law's verbal criticism. There is a significant entry in his diary which bears upon this subject, under the date of April 22, 1826. "J. G. L. points out," he writes, "some solecisms in my style, as *amid* for *amidst*, *scarce* for *scarcely*. *Whose*, he says, is the proper genitive of *which* only at such times as *which* retains its quality of impersonification. Well! I will

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try to remember all this, but after all I write grammar as I speak, to make my meaning known, and a solecism in point of composition, like a Scotch word in speaking, is indifferent to me. . . . I believe the Bailiff in the Good-natured Man is not far wrong when he says, 'One man has one way of expressing himself, and another another, and that is all the difference between them.'"

The passage just quoted is interesting for two reasons. It exhibits in the first place the different attitude towards expression assumed by the man who approaches speech from the side of literature and the man who approaches it from the side of what he deems grammar. The one feels himself the master of language; the other regards himself as its slave. But the passage conveys a much more useful lesson as to the distinction prevailing between the two. That is, the superiority of the most careless man of genius to the most careful man of talent in the very matter in which the latter arrogates to himself special proficiency. Few linguistic critics will venture to claim for themselves the knowledge and skill possessed by Lockhart. He was himself a writer of no mean ability. He was at the head of one of the two great reviews of the day which exerted the widest influence.

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He considered himself a good deal of an authority upon propriety of speech. He assuredly had a better right to think so than most of those who aspire to that somewhat dubious dignity. Yet in his hands verbal criticism was as valueless as in those of nearly all who devote themselves to that occupation.

The point to be made emphatic here is that Scott in his usage was entirely right and Lockhart in his censure of it was entirely wrong. His so-called corrections display nothing more than his own narrow limitations of knowledge and taste. Scott's hardly disguised contempt for them discloses the real feelings of the great writer towards the pedantic but ignorant purism which according to its own account is animated by a lofty solicitude to preserve the language from corruption. With his intimate acquaintance with literature he could hardly have helped observing that the adverbial form *scarce* had been far more common in the best usage of the past than *scarcely*, and was certainly as much so in the best usage of his own time. Nor could he have doubted that both *amid* and *amidst* were open to him to choose from at pleasure, guided only by that fine sense of propriety which genius imparts, enabling its possessor to decide in any given instance which

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word would be the more appropriate. He may not have been aware that *whose* was etymologically the genitive of the neuter interrogative pronoun as well as of the masculine. He was probably ignorant of the history of the form, and of the change of character and employment it had undergone. But he was in possession of the far more important knowledge that it had been employed as a relative to antecedents denoting things without life by every author in our literature who is entitled to be called an authority.

The general statement cannot be successfully contravened that no rules of verbal criticism are worthy of consideration unless they are supported by the concurrent usage of the best writers. But at this very point arises the necessity of a still further caution. It is the practice of the great author that is to be heeded; frequently, but by no means invariably, his precepts. For reaching a correct decision upon doubtful questions of usage he may be no better qualified than hundreds of men inferior to him in the art in which he excels. Especially will this be the case when the point in dispute does not depend upon taste, in which he is likely to surpass any one of those holding adverse opinions, but upon the results of linguistic study. There are

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matters in regard to which no height of genius can supply the place of a little accurate knowledge. When a great writer steps forth to enlighten us upon a question of language, for the proper consideration of which an historical investigation is essential, he has gone out of the province where he is a recognized authority and placed himself in a situation in which in nine cases out of ten his words will not carry and ought not to carry so much weight as do those of the dullest specialist who has made a study of the origin and history of the form or construction under discussion. In entering into any such novel sphere he is subject to all the infirmities of his fellow-men. Like them he has his pet aversions. As a general rule, indeed, he is in little danger of committing positive error in his own practice. Not unfrequently, however, he is led into the negative error of rejecting some word or expression which is perfectly legitimate. In thus doing he necessarily impairs his own authority; especially so when he aggressively sets up his individual condemnation of the usages of men as great as himself, if not greater.

To the student of English speech there is, indeed, nothing at times more entertaining, or at other times more afflicting, than the statements

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of eminent authors upon the etymology of words, and the superstructure of fictitious inference they build upon the treacherous foundations they have chosen. To many will occur Carlyle's derivation of *king* from *can*, therefore "Canning, or man that was able," and the significance he imparted to the title as a consequence of his adoption of this mythical origin of the word. In modern times, however, there is but little of this once reckless dallying with etymology by great writers. In usage, too, there is much hesitation on their part in resorting to dogmatic assertion on disputed points. Still it occurs; and when it does, the authority which its utterer has gained in other fields naturally imposes upon his fellow-men in this. Such a result is sure to happen when he is recognized as being a careful student of expression, and for that reason entitled to have what he says treated with respect. How many men, for illustration, have been and still are affected by Macaulay's denunciation of Croker as being guilty of "the low vulgarism of *mutual friend*." The truth is that the last word has not yet been said as to the propriety of this phrase. It has never been made the subject of an exhaustive investigation. But a locution, which has been employed by scores of reputable writers—including names as eminent as Burke,

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Walter Scott, Disraeli, Byron, and Browning—cannot properly be designated as low or vulgar. Since, also, it has been taken as the title of a work of fiction by one of the greatest and most popular of English novelists, there is little likelihood of its losing speedily its vitality in current speech. Macaulay himself would probably have hesitated about resorting to this example, had he taken time to recall the many excellent writers by whose authority the practice of his detested opponent was kept in countenance. With his enthusiastic admiration of Jane Austen he would never have been disposed to attribute to her the use of a low vulgarism. Yet in her novel of *Emma* the heroine is represented as asking Mr. Knightley about the health of “their mutual friends.” All this goes to show the difficulties that lie in the way of arriving at positive conclusions. As long as the propriety of the expression remains unsettled, it is well for the peace of mind of the writer who is sensitive to criticism to refrain from employing it. But it is equally advisable for him to refrain from proclaiming the employment of it by others as something unpardonable.

He, however, stands out conspicuously among his fellow-men who has not some particular word or expression against which he cherishes



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a special aversion. Some of us, more richly endowed with prejudices, hold not merely one but several locutions in highest reprobation. In manifesting feelings of this sort we please ourselves with the belief that we are making a personal contribution of our own towards preserving the language from corruption. This might be true were our views invariably well founded. It is an unfortunate fact, however, that the zeal of those who take the speech under their care is rarely according to knowledge. It is not, for instance, an unexampled thing to find a man censuring a perfectly legitimate use of a word and almost in the same breath proceeding to employ the same word illegitimately.

Take, for illustration, the adverbial use of *some* in the sense of 'about,' seen in such an expression as "some ten years," and in countless similar ones. This usage goes back to the earliest period of the language. It is not merely colloquial; it is literary. It is safe to say—and any one can verify the assertion for himself—that there is not a classic author in our speech who has not employed it, and in many instances employed it frequently. Yet a usage which is supported by the authority of the best writers from the tenth to the twentieth century has often

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been stigmatized as improper by men who seem unaware that in so doing they are simply proclaiming their ignorance of good usage. Here, therefore, is a locution absolutely correct which has frequently been made the subject of unintelligent attack.

On the other hand, there is another employment of this same word *some* which, sanctioned nowhere by the practice of the great masters, is heard with us frequently in conversation and seen not infrequently in print. This is the use of *some* in the sense of 'somewhat.' Expressions such as "I looked at it some"; "I studied it some"; "I am some tired," have of late become widely current in this country. Apparently they meet with little notice or condemnation. Such an employment of the word is a characteristic of the dialect of Scotland, from which it probably came to us; for it is unknown, I think, in England. Unknown in the usage of the educated, and perhaps also in that of the uneducated. By the lexicographer, however, it is recognized. One of the English dictionaries has this characterization of it. "In Scotland," it says, "as well as in the United States, *some* is often used by the illiterate in the sense of *somewhat*, a little, rather; as, 'I am *some* better'; 'it is *some*

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cold.'"<sup>1</sup> But this mark of illiteracy occurs not infrequently in the speech of men who would resent an intimation to the effect that they were not highly educated. It is even heard occasionally from the lips of those who profess to be particular about language. It is found again and again in the columns of newspapers—of certain of them, indeed, which are much exercised in spirit over the employment of two or three of the most time-honored idioms of the speech.

Now the objection to the employment of *some* in the sense of 'somewhat' does not arise from any sacredness in the word itself, or in the desirability of confining its meaning to a particular sense. It rests upon the one simple fact that such employment of it has not the slightest sanction from good usage. To make a general denial always involves a certain risk. Yet one may venture to say that not a single example of the use of *some* in the sense of 'somewhat' can be found in the writings of an author of the first or even of the second class when he is speaking in his own person. Certainly if such instances exist, they are excessively rare. The objection to it is therefore the same in kind, though different in degree, as that which exists

<sup>1</sup> *The Imperial Dictionary of the English Language*, under *Some*.

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to the adverbial form *illy*. This has some slight authority in its favor. It can be found—rarely, to be sure, but still it can be found—in the writings of Fielding, Southey, Washington Irving, and very likely of several others of equal repute. The point to be insisted upon here is that the word is not in itself reprehensible. It is as bad, we are told, as it would be to say *welly* for 'well.' This is undeniably true; but *welly* strikes us as ridiculous, not to say grotesquely offensive, for no other reason than that it is absolutely unknown. The objection to *illy* is not really an etymological one, nor even that it is an utterly unnecessary form. It is due entirely to its lack of support from good usage, save on the most limited scale. So long as this condition of things continues, the word will remain under the ban. He, therefore, who employs it deliberately does so with the full knowledge that he is exposing himself to severest censure, and has no right to complain when he receives it.

A statement not essentially different may be made about *firstly*. This word, however, happens to have been employed by a much larger number of writers of authority. It stands in consequence upon a distinctly better footing. Analogically, too, there is a good deal to be urged in its favor. All the other numeral ad-

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verbs of its class end in *-ly*. Why should the one that begins the list be made an exception to the general rule? A conviction of this sort must have affected the action of some writers who could not well have been ignorant of the fact that in using *firstly* they were running counter to the general practice, and would therefore expose themselves to the prejudice which always favors a long-accepted usage. At all events, such a result followed, as any one will discover who takes the trouble to consult the critical literature of the past, and especially that of the eighteenth century.

It is not alone, however, anonymous writers in periodicals who have found fault with it. Attacks have been made upon it by writers of repute, by some of high repute. "*Firstly* is not English," said Landor in one of his Imaginary Conversations. This is the convenient but not altogether convincing formula which is commonly used to express the severest condemnation of some locution to which the speaker takes decided exception. "I detest," wrote De Quincey, "your ridiculous and most pedantic neologism of *firstly*." An illustration of the varying modern attitude in regard to the word can be found in the Life and Correspondence of Henry Reeve, who edited the Edinburgh Review

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from 1855 to 1895. Apparently the form had somehow crept into the columns of that august quarterly. It called forth a grieved remonstrance from one troubled soul among its readers. This, it would seem, had been followed in turn by an apologetic explanation from the editor, to the great satisfaction of the complainant. "I am much pleased," wrote Lord Wensleydale to Reeve, "to hear that *firstly* was an error. I hope you will take some course to vindicate your judgment—'a very first authority'—and to prevent the Edinburgh Review giving the word its high authority. I have taken every opportunity to amend the error in *Dom. Proc.* I have a sort of mania on the subject." Later in his letter Lord Wensleydale remarked that he "differed with" another person about a certain matter. It gives one a conception of the impossibility of reconciling the varying views entertained about various points of usage to find the biographer—a distinguished professor in an English university—commenting in the following fashion upon the language of this communication. "Think," said he, "of a writer objecting to a harmless *firstly* and perpetrating an atrocious *differ with.*"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Henry Reeve*, by J. K. Laughton, vol. ii., p. 126.

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The feeling — call it mania, if you please — which leads men to care for propriety of speech is worthy of all respect; but it defeats itself unless it fortifies the positions it takes by acquiring the preliminary knowledge necessary to hold them. Men by neglecting to do this are led to injure their own side by making statements which are indefensible. To start with, *firstly* is in itself, in spite of Landor, as much English as *scarcely* for *scarce* or *fully* for *full*. In the second place, it is not a neologism, as De Quincey asserted. It goes back to the sixteenth century. It can be found occasionally used in every century since by reputable writers and by some who are distinctly eminent. It occurs not infrequently in the correspondence of two of the most charming letter-writers in our language. One of them, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, belongs to the eighteenth century. The other is Byron. There is no linguistic peculiarity more observable in his correspondence—nor is it confined to that—than the constant appearance in it of this word. *Firstly* occurs certainly a dozen times where *first* occurs once. Novelists, too, have been more or less addicted to the use of this fuller form. It is frequent in Dickens; it is found in the writings of Scott, Charlotte Brontë, Thackeray, Charles Kingsley, Trollope,

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and Kipling. To the list—undoubtedly a very incomplete one—may be added the names of Carlyle and Gladstone. Authorities like these will not save from the censure of many him who employs the word. By many more they may not be deemed sufficient to vindicate its correctness. But on the other hand they tend to make intelligent criticism speak of it warily, if not hesitatingly.



## IV

### UNCERTAINTIES OF USAGE

IT follows from what has been said in the previous article that the main question which a man ought to ask himself in discussing points of usage is something quite different from those he is in the habit of asking. It matters not whether he likes or dislikes a particular locution; whether it is in accord or not with any theory of propriety of speech he may have adopted; whether or not he is able to satisfy his grammatical conscience in regard to the purity of its character. The question is simply, Is the particular word or construction under consideration sanctioned by the authority of the best writers of the past and of the present?

Unfortunately just here arises the great and as yet unsurmounted difficulty which prevents any satisfactory settlement of numerous disputes concerning correctness of usage. Whenever there is a point in doubt, it cannot be settled conclusively unless the decision has been preceded

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by an examination which covers the whole field of the best literature, past and present. While theoretically, therefore, there is no question about the standard, practically there is a great deal doubtful about it in particular cases. There is a long list of disputed locutions in regard to which we are not yet in a position to say which is the best prevailing usage. No thorough attempt has been made to collect it and to register it. The syntax, in particular, of English speech has never been made the subject of a systematic and exhaustive investigation which has devoted itself to ascertaining the practice of its greatest writers. The evidence, so far from being all in, has on many questions in dispute been scarcely collected at all. Accordingly, the generalizations contained in grammars in the shape of rules can frequently not be received with implicit confidence, because they have been based upon insufficient data. The work of gathering the material upon which to found positive conclusions remains in many instances yet to be performed.

If we often get no help from grammars in the settlement of doubtful points, we are not much better off when we go to dictionaries. To a limited extent these set out to gather and record the best usage. Still, this part of their work has never been made their main object, or even a

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main object. The consequence is that what has been done has been done in a haphazard and incomplete way. For it must be borne in mind that in discussing the rightfulness or wrongfulness of a disputed locution it is the authority of good writers, and preferably of great writers, that is alone of weight. If, for illustration, a particular word or construction is used by some obscure author of the seventeenth century, the fact may be of a certain interest in recounting its history. But with that its importance would end. If, however, it were used by Milton, it would occupy an entirely different position. An example of his employment of it serves the double purpose of proving its existence at the time and of giving it the sanction of one of the great masters of English speech. To the writer, therefore, the character of the author in whose productions a word occurs is of far more importance than the time of its occurrence. Of all our lexicographers Dr. Johnson seems to have been the only one who looked upon this portion of his task as of special consequence. To his partial accomplishment of it his work owed no small share of the success it achieved. But by most compilers of lexicons the use of a particular locution by a classic writer is regarded as a mere incident. Hence, in seeking authorities

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for a given usage, the best dictionaries, indispensable as they are, largely fail us.

As, therefore, the collecting and codifying of the usage of the classic writers of our speech has never been done, he who discusses the subject at present must come before the public imperfectly equipped for the task. Do the best he can, investigate as fully as he may, his results will always lack completeness. That can only be secured by the efforts of bodies of men whose labors cover the whole field and are directed conjointly to a common end. Such organization has never been set on foot in the case of our own speech. All attempts in this vast field have been attempts on the part of the individual. Upon some points under discussion his results may be sufficient to justify him in making positive statements. But there are others upon which, in the present state of our knowledge, he will wisely refrain from committing himself with too much assurance, still less with dogmatism. To make the matter perfectly clear, it may be worth while to consider in detail one of the many disputed usages about which very positive pronouncements are constantly made by men who have not taken the pains to acquire the slightest familiarity with its history.

The poet Moore in his Diary tells us of a con-

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versation he had with a certain gentleman who praised highly one of his works, but found fault with a mode of expression which occurred in it frequently. He had in several instances made use of such phrases as "the three first centuries," "the four first centuries." His usage, his critic further informed him, was an Irishism. Even Burke had fallen into this error. It has already been pointed out, that before the term Americanism came to be applied to a word or expression which the Englishman, who was particularly ignorant of his own tongue, deemed for any reason objectionable, he was wont to stigmatize it as an Irishism or Scotticism. Moore, it is to be added, stood up stoutly for the locution he had employed. At all events, whether he had done rightly or wrongly in using the word-order criticised, he declared that he had not done so inadvertently. In his eyes it was the true English idiom. "For instance," he continued, "every one says the 'two first cantos of Childe Harold,' meaning the two cantos that come first, or are placed first."

It was in June, 1833, that this discussion took place. According to Moore, in the use of the locution he preferred he was conforming to the general practice of his time. It may be regarded as a partial confirmation of his assertion that

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Byron in his correspondence invariably spoke of the half of Childe Harold originally published as "the two first cantos." Moore, furthermore, went on to tell the tale of the struggles he had on this very point with Simmons, whom he characterized as his "valuable typographer." It will recall to many authors similar experiences they have had with proof-readers. Simmons was very anxious to have the expression read "the first two cantos." The poet, however, was obdurate, and succeeded in having his own way. This is not always the fortune of the modern writer; for the proof-reader, having the last chance at the page, makes the change he desires just before the work goes to the press.

Here is a form of expression in regard to which the fullest dictionaries give us but imperfect information. It is one as to which there has never been anything but the most superficial examination of the practice of great writers. Accordingly, nothing exists to show decisively on which side the weight of the best usage lies. The question in dispute is far from being a simple one, even were we to govern ourselves entirely by reason, to which the unreasonable are always appealing. We are told by some of these that the word-order which Moore preferred is quite impossible. Two cannot have the distinction of

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each being first. That will depend upon the light in which *first* is regarded. If it is to be considered an ordinal, no one would be likely to maintain that "the two first" is to be justified. If, however, it be looked upon as an adjective, Moore's explanation of its meaning and propriety is perfectly satisfactory. There is a further objection on the score of reason to the order of words proclaimed as the only reasonable one. The preferred expression is in most cases illogical. "The first two" implies a succession of twos, at least a second two. Hence it is strictly improper to use it except when there is an intention of conveying the idea that another pair or other pairs are to follow. In its variation from propriety in this respect, English has gone further than the other principal languages of modern Europe. French and German are in full accordance with reason in their usual arrangement of the words. In these tongues the practice prevails of saying "the two first." In French it is *les deux premiers*; in German, *die zwei ersten*. In Spanish and Italian the same rule largely holds good, though there is, perhaps, greater disposition to vary from it in practice.

For us, however, the important question is not what, according to any theory, the mode of expression ought to be, but what it actually is, as

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seen in the practice of the best writers. At this point the uncertainty which always attends incomplete examination asserts itself. Both locutions have been long employed. To which does the weight of the most authoritative usage incline? No one with the knowledge now existing on the subject can venture to answer the question positively. The following statements, embodying the results of only a partial investigation, are therefore given, subject to correction. The probabilities are strongly in favor of their accuracy, but certainty cannot be assumed. For the sake of convenience the example adduced by Moore is taken as representative of the whole class.

The statement which can be made with the most confidence is that "the two first" is preferred to "the first two" in our older speech. Indeed, it is not till a period comparatively late that the latter mode of expression seems to occur on any but the most limited scale. The earliest instance of its employment recorded by the new Historical English Dictionary belongs to the very close of the sixteenth century. That, too, is taken from a writer of no authority. Even his use of the locution was very likely due to the fact that it is found four times in the Genevan, then the most common version of the



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Bible. The history of its appearance in that work may in truth be thought to indicate a certain hesitancy about its employment by the early translators. Take, for illustration, a part of the nineteenth verse of the twenty-third chapter of second Samuel, belonging to a passage in which is given an account and a comparative estimate of the exploits of Benaiah. In the Wycliffite version of the fourteenth century it is said of him that "he came not to the three first men." In Coverdale's version of 1535 it is said, "he came not unto the three." In Matthew's version, following a few years later, the passage read, "He attained not unto those three in acts," but a note in the margin adds, "understand the first three." The Bishop's Bible of 1572 inserted part of this marginal explanation into the text, enclosing it in parentheses. It read accordingly, "He attained not unto (the first) three." But the Genevan version inserted "the first" without any qualification. In so doing it was followed by the revisers of King James's.

There is plenty of evidence to show that the usage represented by "the two first" was originally the preferred one. Still that represented by "the first two" made its appearance as early at least as the fourteenth century. There

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is a striking example of the use of both methods of expression standing side by side in the eleventh chapter of first Chronicles, one in the Wycliffite version proper, the other in Purvey's recension. "Unto the three first he came not," says the former; "He came not till the first three," says the latter. This early and apparently hitherto unnoted instance of what scholars regard as the later locution seems for centuries to have had but few if any imitators.

The second statement is that up to the middle of the eighteenth century, and probably later, the word-order indicated by "the two first" had pretty certainly in its favor the sanction not only of the most common but of the best usage. It is noticeable that not a single example of the second word-order, given in the Historical English Dictionary, is taken from an author who would be regarded as having any weight in deciding a question of propriety of speech. The inference, accordingly, is that such did not exist. What was until a comparatively later period the preferred mode of expression can be indicated by quotations from three authors, who represent the language of men belonging to distinct grades of intellectual achievement. In his tractate on Education, Milton referred to "the two or three first books of Quintilian." In his True

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Born Englishman, De Foe, in speaking of James I., mentions "the seven first years of his pacific reign." Pope may be taken as the best representative of the general practice of the former half of the eighteenth century. The revision which appeared in 1743 of his great satire contained in its appendix, among other things, "the preface to the five first imperfect editions of the *Dunciad*." Furthermore, in November, 1714, in a letter to Broome, he spoke of "these commentaries of Eustathius on the first four *Iliads*," and in 1724 he told the same correspondent that "the verse of the whole thirteen first books is now done."<sup>1</sup> This word-order continued, indeed, to be much later the preferred form with the best writers, though steadily frowned upon by the rising body of purists who professed themselves unable to understand how more than one person could ever be first. Gibbon, for illustration, in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, spoke of the price of wheat under the successors of Constantine as being "equal to the average price of the sixty-four first years of the present century."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter of April 3, 1724. Elwyn and Courthope's edition of Pope's *Works*, vol. viii., p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. ii., chap. xxiv.

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But by the middle of the eighteenth century a strenuous propaganda began to exert itself in favor of the mode of expression indicated by "the first two." From that day to this it has gone on laboring unceasingly. It is the word-order almost invariably held up as the only correct one in manuals of usage; and however little such works affect the action of men of letters or the belief of scholars, they unquestionably have a good deal of influence upon the practice of many, which in time tends to affect that of all. By the latter part of the eighteenth century this hostile attitude towards the earlier locution was making itself distinctly felt. For illustration, the *Monthly Review*, the leading critical periodical of that time, had made use of the expression, "the three first." It was immediately taken to task by a correspondent. For once an editor, ensconced behind his bulwark of type, submitted meekly to reproof. Instead of defending himself, as he might easily have done, by the authority of the greatest of his contemporaries, Johnson, Burke, and Gibbon, he surrendered incontinently. "Thanks to Amicus," he said in the notice to correspondents in the number for December, 1784. "He is very right. 'The first three' is conformable to our usual mode of expression; and 'the three first'

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was a slip." Just as subservient to the belief in the assumed error, but not so submissive to reproof, was the rival periodical. The *Critical Review* had printed a hostile notice of the *Anti-Lucretius* of George Canning, the father of a much more celebrated son. Naturally the author did not like it. The following year he brought out a pamphlet containing an appeal to the public against the malicious misrepresentations, impudent falsifications, and unjust decisions of the anonymous fabricators of the *Critical Review*. Canning forgot that the conductors of periodical publications of any sort have the advantage of never fighting in the open. Accordingly they can venture to say in their collective capacity what not an individual among them would dare utter were he compelled to give his name. The critic resorted to one of the then usual devices for warding off blame. It was not his fault, but that of the printer. He admitted that he had been detected in an inaccurate expression—"the three first books." But it was on the cover of the review in the department of the compositor. In consequence the injured author was welcome to applaud his own sagacity and enjoy the triumph.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Critical Review*, vol. xxiii., p. 76. January, 1767.

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Both of these locutions exist now side by side. Since the middle of the eighteenth century one of them indeed has been constantly denounced by verbal critics, the other proclaimed by them as the one alone justifiable. How far these injunctions have affected the practice of the great writers of the past hundred years no one has taken the pains to inform us, even if he has informed himself. Yet such an investigation is a necessary preliminary to reaching any conclusion worth heeding upon the point in dispute. That it has affected the practice of inferior writers there can be no question; but while that may exhibit a tendency on the part of language, it cannot of itself justify usage. Not until a complete examination shall have been made of the works of the greatest authors of the past century and of the comparative frequency of their employment of both modes of expression, will any one be in a position to decide whether the best usage resorts to each of the two indifferently, or tends to adopt one to the exclusion of the other.

The account just given shows clearly that to reach correct conclusions about propriety of speech is in numerous instances far from being an easy task, however easy many make it for themselves. No one who studies the subject thorough-

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ly will look upon it as the occupation of idle moments or resort to it as an occasion for passing hasty judgments. It behooves him, indeed, to be, above all things, circumspect who sets out to express positive opinions on matters where usage varies widely. Yet it is perfectly safe to assert that there is no one department of human instruction undertaken with more thoughtless self-confidence or with less appreciation of the necessity of that preliminary equipment which consists in making one's self reasonably familiar with words and constructions as employed in the classics of our tongue. As a consequence the course commonly followed has been attended with some most astounding results. There is not a single great author in our literature in whose works numerous errors have not been pointed out or thought to be pointed out. They are charged with violating rules involving the purity if not the permanence of the language. A somewhat depressing inference follows from the situation thus revealed. The ability to write English correctly does not belong to the great masters of our speech. It is limited to the obscure men who have devoted themselves to the task of showing how far these vaunted writers have fallen short of the ideas of linguistic propriety entertained by their un-

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recognized betters. As a result of these critical crusades there is no escape from the dismal conclusion that the correct use of the language is not to be found in the authors whom every one reads with pleasure, but is an accomplishment reserved exclusively for those whom nobody can succeed in reading at all.

The very statement of such a condition of things carries with it the condemnation of the processes by which it has been brought about. Not that it is the intention to maintain here that the great writer cannot fall into error. That he does so is certain. It happens, indeed, far less frequently than is commonly asserted. Still, there is no doubt that through haste or heedlessness or even pure ignorance the most scrupulous is sometimes betrayed into language of doubtful propriety, if not of positive impropriety. Here, of course, is meant not the disregard of the numerous observances and restrictions which every callow student of speech thinks it his duty to set up, but the commission of errors which would be looked upon as errors by the whole body of cultivated men and would be acknowledged as such by the author himself the instant his attention was called to them. Even he who strives with the utmost solicitude for what he deems correctness of expression will



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be more fortunate than most if some lapse into which he has been betrayed never reveals itself to him until what he has written has been enshrined in the immutability of print.

There is nothing, indeed, to give the great author absolutely complete possession of all the facts of language—which are in truth infinite—any more than the facts of any other branch of knowledge. Mistakes accordingly must occur. Even writers of the highest grade have gone down before the confusion which exists in colloquial speech between *lay* and *lie*. The example usually furnished of this is found in Byron's words, "There let him lay," contained in the apostrophe to the ocean with which Childe Harold concludes. But this is really an unsatisfactory one. There is little question that here the word was resorted to intentionally and not inadvertently. The poet wanted a rhyme to *bay* and *spray*, and accordingly grammar was made to bow to the necessities of the verse. But Byron must not only have been aware that his use of the verb was common in colloquial speech, but with his wide reading of literature he could hardly have failed to observe that it also appeared occasionally in reputable English authors, and in a few that can justly be called classic.

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Certain of these examples are so striking as to lead to the conclusion that in the minds of some no real distinction existed in the use of the two words. The confusion of *lay* with *lie* naturally goes back to the period when the preterite of the one verb came to have precisely the same form as the present and infinitive of the other. It would not be surprising, therefore, to find the two confounded, as they are now by the uneducated or the imperfectly educated. Yet there are examples of the employment of the one for the other where no plea can be set up on the ground of ignorance, no palliation can be offered on the ground of haste or carelessness, no justification on the ground of real or fancied poetic necessity. Bacon tells us in one place that "nature will *lay* buried a great time and yet revive upon the occasion of temptation."<sup>1</sup> The sentence containing this passage was added to the enlarged final edition of the *Essays* which appeared in 1625, dedicated to the Duke of Buckingham. The form is therefore found in a work which had been written deliberately and had been revised carefully. There is hardly any escape from the conclusion that Bacon regarded the usage as allowable.

<sup>1</sup> *Essay on Nature in Men.*

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This view is borne out by the fact that later in the same century, and during a large share of the century which followed, the use of *lay* for *lie* can be found in the writings of authors who were at least respectable and in some instances fairly eminent. It is accordingly reasonable to believe that while in certain cases it was a blunder, in others it was deliberately employed because it was deemed correct. Occasional examples of the confusion between these two words can be observed in Pepys, Fielding, Mason, Cumberland, Horace Walpole, besides a number of writers who, however, under no pretence can be reckoned as authorities. In nautical language, in fact, the use of *lay* for *lie* may be said to have definitely established itself with us in certain expressions. A general tendency to confound the two was at one time existent and to some extent still is. Mrs. Montagu, the head of the blue-stocking world, wrote in 1766 to Beattie, "I wish that Ossian's poems were laying by me." Walter Scott, in one verse certainly, said *laid'st* for *lay'st*. In the account of the nominal author given in a letter included in the introduction to Knickerbocker's History of New York mention is made of "old mouldy books laying about at sixes and sevens." This may have been intentional on

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Irving's part. But no such explanation can be given of the usage which is put in the mouth of the hero of Trollope's novel of *The Belton Estate*. "What is the use," says he, "of laying in bed when one has had enough of sleep?"

But among authors of any rank the most incorrigible offender, from the grammarian's point of view, was Sterne. That *lay* for *lie* does not constantly appear in his writings in modern editions is due not to him, but to the editors of his works. Contemporary critics attacked him for perpetrating "such English"; but their censure had no effect upon his practice. When in 1768 his *Sentimental Journey* was published, the leading review of the day savagely assailed him for adopting a vulgarism characteristic "of a city news-writer," it said. "But Maria laid in my bosom," wrote Sterne. "Our readers," remarked the irate reviewer, "may possibly conclude that Maria was the name of a favorite pullet." Sterne's indifference to the rebukes he received on this particular point seems to indicate that he was one of those who regarded the usage as proper.

This account of *lay* and *lie* has been given so fully, not to disprove the theory that the usage of the best writers is the standard of speech, but to establish the truth of it beyond dispute. It

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brings out sharply two decisive points which are to be kept constantly in mind. One is that the errors into which the great author falls are not only exceptions to his usual practice, but they are very rare exceptions. It is what he does regularly which serves as a model for imitation, not what he may occasionally be betrayed into doing through heedlessness, or even induced to adopt designedly. The other is that these errors are not only committed rarely by writers of the highest grade, but by the vast majority of them they are never committed at all. When we take into consideration the millions of times in which *lay* and *lie* are confounded in popular speech, and the petty number of instances of such confusion that can be gleaned from the most exhaustive study of all our great authors, we recognize what it is that constitutes that consensus of which Quintilian speaks as the authority to which we all have to submit.

No better proof indeed is there of the right to rule which inheres in the collective body of great authors than the fact that so few errors of this sort occur in the heat of composition or pass unchallenged in revision. The wonder must always be, not that they happen, but that they happen so rarely. Least of all should linguistic students make their appearance, if they do ap-

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pear, a matter of reproach, when we find a similar confusion between *set* and *sit* in the writings of a professed philologist. The late George Perkins Marsh was one of the foremost promoters of English scholarship. To the students of the former generation his works did more than furnish instruction; they were an inspiration. Yet in the second of his lectures on the English language he speaks of a person giving "a cluck with his mouth not unlike the note of a setting hen." One would naturally suppose that a linguistic scholar, who was in addition a stern critic of usage, ought to know sooner than any one else that, though anybody can set a hen, the hen herself sits. The confusion of the two verbs is, however, so common in conversation that it is liable at any time to appear in print. The only thing remarkable about the example just given is that it should occur where it does.

## V

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IN questions of disputed propriety of usage it is not the voice of any single writer, no matter how eminent, which settles definitively the correctness or incorrectness of a particular locution. It is the concurrent voice of all. From that there is no appeal. Individuals may err; not so the collective body. This wields an authority that cannot be successfully defied or even disputed.

It is, of course, conceivable that a man may insist that a particular word or construction which has been employed, for instance, by the translators of the Bible, by Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Gray, Johnson, Goldsmith, Wordsworth, Macaulay, Tennyson—to cite a few—is wrong and should be avoided. With such a person, if he exist, controversy cannot well be carried on. There is no common ground upon which the disputants can meet. Still, it is not likely, wherever agreement prevails in

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the usage of the very best writers, that any one would knowingly set up against their united authority either his own opinion or the opinion of any grammarian. He might have the disposition; he would pretty surely lack the requisite impudence. As a matter of fact, as we shall see later, he frequently does set up his opinion against their united authority. But that is not because he possesses daring, but because he lacks knowledge. He censures, as he supposes, the individual writer. Had he been aware that the whole body of great authors was included in his attack, he might indeed have solaced himself in private with the consciousness of his superiority to them all; but before the public he would have taken care to preserve silence.

The examples which have been given of difference of usage in the case of locutions like *the two first*, *firstly*, and *our mutual friend* show what caution must be exercised in many instances, what pains must be taken before the student of speech can be in a position to justify any announcement he makes of his conclusions. Even much fuller must be the more delicate sifting of evidence which will enable the investigator, wherever variation exists between two different modes of expression, to decide whether



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the language is tending towards the exclusive adoption of one of them or is disposed to retain both. Take the case of the verb *thrive*. At present it is inflected according to either the strong or the weak conjugation—that is to say, we use indifferently and with equal propriety in the preterite and past participle *throve*, *thriven*, or simply *thrived* for both. Is there a disposition to settle upon the adoption of one of these methods to the exclusion of the other? In the eighteenth century the superficial observer would have been tempted to say that the weak inflection would in time become the only one. In the nineteenth century a similar observer would have been led to express the opinion that the verb was going over entirely to the strong conjugation. But no thorough examination of the best usage during either of these periods has ever been made. There is, in consequence, no room for dogmatic assertion. The inflection of *thrive* according to the weak or the strong conjugation is, therefore, with us now merely a matter of personal preference. All that we can safely say further is that such it seems likely to remain, so far as the known data in regard to its employment permit us to form an opinion.

It has already been remarked that this

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preliminary preparation of investigation and thought, required to fit one to discuss properly disputed questions of speech, is not ordinarily regarded as in the least degree essential by those who assume the office of instructors in good usage. It is much easier to lay down rules of one's own devising, based though they be upon insufficient knowledge and inadequate linguistic training, and, according as others observe or fail to observe these, pronounce decisively upon the verbal or grammatical correctness of what they say. This course has further the warrant, to no slight extent, of worldly wisdom. Men like positiveness in those who set out to act as their guides. In matters of usage in particular they prefer the certainty of dogmatic utterance to the hesitancy of statement which arises from the knowledge of the fact that the field under discussion has been but partially surveyed, and that conclusions founded upon the little that has been ascertained are liable to modification if not to reversal. They are consequently willing and even eager to heed the words of any one who takes it upon himself to direct them with sufficient assurance, no matter what may be his qualifications.

One result of this readiness on the part of the mass of men to accept any one as authority who

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chooses to proclaim himself as such is that the language has for a long time been undergoing the process which the late Professor Whitney used to describe as that of being school-mastered. Instead of following a natural normal development upon the lines laid down by the great writers of our literature, a set of artificial rules for the regulation of expression have been and from time to time still are announced. Some of these are imported from alien tongues. Some are the creation of men who, not knowing what good usage is, have sought to impose upon the speech their crude notions of what it ought to be. To a certain extent these have been adopted in grammars. As a consequence they are taught by scores of teachers, occasionally even by those connected with our higher institutions of learning. This observation does not, of course, apply to all grammars any more than it does to all institutions; in particular it does not apply to any of the larger German grammars of our speech. These, being the work of scholars, follow the methods of scholars. Accordingly, they base their conclusions not upon any preconceived opinions of propriety, but upon the actual practice of eminent writers. But the statement is true of too many of these manuals in our own tongue. So far as the artificial standards set up

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in them are accepted, they tend to cramp expression and to put formal and pedantic utterance in the place of that which is natural and idiomatic.

Herein lies the sole justification for the complaint made by Forster and others that the study of grammar portends and paves the way for the ruin of style. It is not grammar itself, but grammar falsely so called, that can by any possibility produce such an effect. The peril, too, is exaggerated. It is mainly by the semi-educated in language that all recommendations or denunciations found in works of this character are religiously heeded. They can scarcely be said to affect to any extent worth considering the practice of eminent writers. These are much more familiar with and naturally are much more acted upon by the great literature of the past than by any grammatical treatises of the present. Furthermore, it is rarely the case that injunctions of the sort here indicated come from men whom such writers regard as being entitled to speak with authority. Authors of the first rank are as little disposed to originate these artificial restraints upon expression as they are to respect them. Perhaps the only exception that can be found is that of Walter Savage Landor. He scattered broadcast criticisms upon points of

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usage, and it is no easy matter to decide whether in so doing he displayed more whimsicalness or ignorance. Still, his literary position was such as to give a certain vogue to the wildest vagaries he originated or adopted.

Landor's reckless assaults upon 'the vernacular idiom'—to use a phrase of Bentley's which he put under the ban—furnishes a most amusing chapter in his stormy life. Like all who set out to be purists, he would now and then select some one word or expression to bear the opprobrium of corrupting the speech, while he employed without hesitation scores of others which were exactly in the same class, and therefore justly exposed to the same objection. Nothing, for instance, is more common in language than to use a word both in a general and in a specific sense, or even in different specific senses. Illustrations of it abound in our daily speech. Landor fixed his eye upon one example of this practice. He fell foul of the noun *executioner*. That word had been regularly used since the fifteenth century to designate specifically the person inflicting the death penalty, preferably by hanging or beheading, though sometimes extended to other modes. Naturally the corresponding limiting significations had likewise attached themselves to *execution* and *execute*.

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Such a use of the three words had been made for generations by every writer who needed for any reason to employ them. The same course will doubtless continue to be followed so long as the language exists. But Landor for some reason took it into his head that this was all wrong. *Executioner* ought not to denote the hangman. The term, he insisted, was more appropriate to the judge whose business, according to him, was to execute the laws. It was useless to tell him that an authority far mightier than he had settled the meaning long before he was born.

Not improbably such utterances as these have influenced to some extent the conduct and belief of inferior men who have transferred to Landor's linguistic dicta a deference due to the knowledge and ability he displayed in other matters. But, man of genius as he was, his pronouncements upon usage never affected the practice of writers who were his equals or superiors. One exception there is to this statement. It is so curious that it deserves recital. The neologism of *would better* with the infinitive instead of *had better* owes what little headway it has made to Landor's advocacy. The sole example, however of its employment by any other writer of the first class which I have been able to discover occurs in Browning. The concluding

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scene of Pippa Passes is taken up mainly with a dialogue between Monsignor and the intendant. The latter gives utterance to a desire to be asked what service he had done the bishop's brother. In the reply, as it originally appeared, Monsignor is represented as using the English of literature, the English of good writers, past and present, and consequently saying, "I had better not." But later in life Browning revised the work and changed the expression into the unidiomatic and really meaningless "I would better not." But it was not to the teaching of any grammaticaster that his error was due. He made the alteration, as he acknowledged, in deference to Landor. He defended it upon what he called his friend's magisterial authority. He even united himself to him in a common bond of ignorance by adopting as his own the long-exploded derivation which regarded *I had* as an expansion of *I'd* contracted from *I would*.

At the present day these attempts at school-mastering the speech are going on all the while before our eyes. One agency in particular which is working havoc in the minds of many is the disposition to insist that the modern signification of a word or its modern grammatical construction shall conform to its derivation. This is a delusion to which men who aspire to

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be considered cultivated are peculiarly susceptible. One point indeed there is which the average man of education, or rather the man of average education, seems wholly incapable of comprehending. He cannot be made to see that it is the meaning which living men put into the words they use that is alone of any significance; that of very trifling significance is the meaning that dead men have given to those from which the former have come. To the prevalence of this hallucination—for hallucination it is in the strict etymological sense of that term—we owe the efforts constantly put forth to alter the speech of our fathers and to limit freedom of expression.

Of course were men to set out seriously to regulate the whole speech in accordance with this principle, the language would at once be thrown into a state of wildest confusion. There is not a day of our lives in which we do not use a large number of words in a meaning not merely inconsistent with their derivation, but in actual defiance of it. We speak of December as the twelfth month of the year, though etymologically it is the tenth. Necessarily a similar statement is true of the three months preceding it. We designate the political, literary, and scientific periodicals which come out weekly, and



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even monthly, by the name of *journals*, as do the French from whom we took the word. Were we under the bondage of derivation, we should have to limit the use to a daily paper. An *anecdote*, linguistically speaking, is strictly something which has never been published. It is a portion of secret history that for the first time has been revealed. Very severe censures were once passed upon those who used it in the sense in which everybody uses it to-day. No one would now think of restricting its employment to its etymological signification. With us, indeed, the fault that is found with anecdotes is not so much that they have never been published, but that they have been published altogether too often.

These illustrations of the fallaciousness of basing present meaning upon derivation ought to be sufficient. But so great a hold has the belief in it over the minds of men, especially of educated men, so much respect is often paid to it by them, that it is perhaps worth while to give a few more examples out of the vast number that exist. Take the case of the word *manufacture*. By derivation it means something made by hand. Its signification has now so far departed from its etymology that the present distinguishing characteristic of manufactured

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articles is that they are not made by hand. In the case of *manuscript* the sense still continues to remain fairly faithful to the derivation. But the increasing use of the typewriter is certain to cause the term to wander away from its strict signification. Another example, as striking as *manufacture*, of this same etymological perversity is seen in *manœuvre*. The word, whether as noun or verb, did not come into use till the latter half of the eighteenth century. Strictly it can only mean 'work with the hand'; in all its existing senses it refers to actions which are the result of the operations of the mind. In truth, the fact that *manœuvre* and *manure* are precisely the same word, so far as their origin is concerned, reveals at a glance the worthlessness of relying upon derivation as a final authority for present meaning.

Influences of various sorts have often affected or established the meaning of words of which their originals give of themselves not the slightest indication. *Knave* is by derivation a boy. The current sense conveys to us no reminder of the etymological. When we see or hear the *bugle*, no thought of the horn of the wild ox presents itself to our minds. When we speak of a *canopy*, we do not think of a mosquito-netting. The son of Priam, who

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gives us the verb *hector* was the farthest possible remove from a bully. *Disparagement* does not involve the idea that one is married to a person of inferior condition. We do not associate ale with the thought of a *bridal*. The morning hours are not the hours which are devoted to *matinées*. Similarly a *levee* no longer has any connection with a reception at the time of rising. In England it is regularly in the afternoon; in America it can be at any time of the day, but preferably in the evening. A *candidate* is never likely to suggest to any one the idea of being robed in white. An uneducated private citizen is not necessarily an *idiot*, nor is an adventurer a *pirate*, nor a *lewd* man a layman. A *harbor* is not the place for an encampment of an army. A *pagan* to our thoughts is in no way a villager or rustic. *Usher* has with us but little of the primitive sense of door-keeper, nor does *hostler* suggest hotel-keeper, nor *marshal* a horse-attendant. According to its derivation *noon* is three o'clock. Etymologically considered, all these words ought to mean what as a matter of fact they do not mean. The ones given are a few examples of a list which might be stretched to an almost indefinite length.

Turn now from words to grammatical forms. We use *riches* as a plural, though it is nothing but

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the old English singular *richesse*. The process which brought about the change which has taken place in the grammatical character of this word we can now see going on at the present day in the case of another word. With the keener sensitiveness which has come to exist in matters of language, the goal towards which the latter has long been tending may never be actually reached. Still, when something is said of a man's stamina, how small is the number of those to whom it occurs that *stamina* is a plural. Such, however, it certainly is. Yet to use it as the subject of a plural verb would jar now upon the linguistic sense of even the classically educated. So men who are aware of its origin free themselves from embarrassment by employing it almost invariably in the objective case. With this no fault can be found. Some who are ignorant of its being a Latin plural occasionally use it as the subject of a singular verb. If the language of the few should become in this particular the language of the many, that of itself would not suffice to make the practice good usage. But if it should be so employed by the best writers, the status of the word would be settled decisively. *Stamina* would then become a singular just as *riches* has become a plural.

But every now and then some unfortunate

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word or construction is selected to bear the brunt of linguistic attack because it is employed in a way which its etymology does not justify, though scores of other examples of a precisely similar nature are passed over in silence. Attempts in consequence are made to compel men to give up their natural speech and adopt in its place some prescribed mode of expression, which, it is assumed, must be particularly correct because it is so disagreeably stiff and formal. Though the process has been called, in accordance with Professor Whitney's phrase, a school-mastering process, it is a process the application of which is not confined to schoolmasters. Perhaps as a class the teaching profession is less inclined to employ it than any other body of educated men. There is a touch of this particular form of pedantry in no small number of the cultivated who set out with insufficient equipment to deal with the problems of speech. A pedant is not necessarily a pedagogue, though etymologically he has no business to be anything else. The path of derivation, as the examples just given show, is beset at every turn with pitfalls. Into one of these he who starts out to follow it blindly is sure to tumble. Consequently the good sense of the immense majority of the users of speech has

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taught them to shun this dangerous way; at least, if it is not their good sense, it has been a necessity of the situation. It is of course impossible for the great body of speakers to conform the meanings of the words they employ to those of their originals found in a language which they do not understand. Even such as are not ignorant in this particular respect are almost invariably indifferent.

That this state of feeling is at times productive of harm there can be no question. There are variations of signification based upon derivation which add to the resources of speech. It is always a misfortune when they come to be disregarded. Let us take an illustration from the confusion widely prevalent in the case of the two words *vocation* and *avocation*. These have, as etymology implies, different meanings. A *vocation* is strictly a man's calling, the main occupation of his life. An *avocation* is something which summons him away temporarily from its pursuit, whether it be of the nature of diversion or of business. To confuse the two senses is therefore a loss to the language. So again the proper use of *allude* in the sense of hinting at or suggesting a person or thing without direct mention carries with it a delicate distinction in usage which it is most desirable to

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retain. Yet there is no question that both *avocation* in the sense of *vocation* and *allude* with the mention of person or thing, have been employed not simply by ordinary men, but by speakers and writers of high cultivation, and in a few instances of high authority. So long as the greatest authors do not present a united front against such usage the proper signification of the words is in danger of being lost. To that extent the language is made the poorer. Were all of this class of writers to fail us here, we would have to regret the impairment of the speech thereby produced. None the less should we have to accept it, at least for the time being.

It is not, however, from disregard of derivation that the speech is in any serious danger. Much more harmful is the deference mistakenly paid to it. From this results not unfrequently a pedantic and even painful mode of expression in opposition to the best usage, and that too without the slightest counterbalancing advantage. A remarkable illustration of this can be seen in the case of *none* as the subject of a plural verb. When and where the outbreak of hostility to this usage first manifested itself it may not be easy to determine. Apparently it was not until of late that any one ever thought seriously of questioning the propriety of the construction. But



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the fancy seems suddenly to have dawned upon the mind of some student of speech that *none* was a contraction of *no one*. Strictly it is a contraction of the negative particle *ne*, and *ân*, the original of 'one.' In Anglo-Saxon the compound *nān* was inflected in both the singular and the plural. But under the belief that *none* was a late contraction of *no one*, the processes of logic were set in motion. *No one* is exclusively confined in its construction to the singular; it cannot be used with a verb in the plural. In that all would agree. The conclusion was then at once drawn that the word theoretically derived from it must be exactly in the same situation. It was therefore highly improper to use *none* as the subject of a plural verb.

It is needless to say to any person who has made himself familiar with the best usage, either written or spoken, that *none* has been and is employed indifferently as a singular and a plural; if anything, more frequently in the latter number than in the former. The study of our best writers settles that point decisively. It is in the power of any one to decide the question for himself; and it will make little difference what is the work he takes up. At Miletus, Paul tells his followers of the bonds and afflictions which await him at Jerusalem. "But none of



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these things move me," he continues, according to the authorized version which adopts here the translation of the passage as found in some of the earlier sixteenth-century versions. "None deny there is a God," said Bacon in his essay on Atheism, "but those for whom it maketh that there were no God." "None are for me," Shakespeare puts in the mouth of Richard III., "that look into me with considerate eyes." "None are seen to do it but the people," wrote Milton in his *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. It would be easy to fill page after page with examples of the use of *none* as the subject of a plural verb, taken from the best writers of the language of every period, and indeed from writers of every grade of distinction from the highest to the lowest. As a single illustration of what can be found in modern usage, in the one short poem of Browning's, entitled *Clive*, the word appears three times as a plural.

There is even more to be said. As there are cases where *none* with the verb in the singular is the only proper construction; as again there are cases where *none* can be used indifferently as a singular or a plural—so there are cases where its use as the subject of a plural verb is the only possible as well as proper construction. Fancy the result which would follow the employment

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of *goes* for *go* in this somewhat celebrated couplet of Pope's:

“ 'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none  
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.”

Similar examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely. Yet a practice which is etymologically correct, which is sustained by the good usage of both the past and the present, which in many instances is absolutely essential to correctness of expression, has been held up to censure because it is assumed not to conform to this crazy canon of derivation. There is no harm in a man's limiting his employment of *none* to the singular in his own individual usage, if he derives any pleasure from this particular form of linguistic martyrdom. But why should he go about seeking to inflict upon others the misery which owes its origin to his own ignorance?

## VI

### ARTIFICIAL USAGE

THE attack upon *none* as a plural, with the consideration of which the previous essay ended, is but one of numerous instances of the attempts that are made to model correctness of expression upon something else than the usage of the best speakers and writers. Artificial rules are set up to which we are told we must conform in order to employ the language properly. These are at best the creations of pedantry; too often they are the creations of unintelligent pedantry. This is disposed to carry on a protracted war with the long-established idioms of the language. It seeks to substitute for what usage really is crude conceptions of what it ought to be. Its success would mean the decay or death of grace or ease of expression. "Pedantry," said an eminent prose writer, "though it were unconscious pedantry, once steadily diffused through a nation as to the very moulds of its thinking and the general

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tendencies of its expression, could not but stiffen the natural graces of composition and weave fetters about the free movements of human thought."

So wrote De Quincey in his essay on Style. In these words he indicated the only serious peril which can menace a tongue, the users of which hold up before themselves high ideals of moral and intellectual excellence. So long as such continue to be cherished, no fear need be felt of any harmful consequences befalling the language from so-called corruptions which are always on the point of ruining it beyond redemption, according to the belief of those who possess little familiarity with the historic development of speech. In pedantic usage, however, there is a certain, though fortunately but a slight, degree of danger. Under its influence the disposition comes to prevail to set up artificial modes of expression as the only correct ones; to look with disfavor upon what is idiomatic and natural when contrasted with what is formal and precise.

In every community where the subject of usage comes up for discussion, a body of men can be found who are not content with perfect propriety. They are determined to have what may be called pluperfect propriety. This dis-

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position takes frequently the form of preference for an affected precision which has all the disagreeableness of pedantry without being based upon the adequate knowledge which serves as a palliation of pedantry when it is not its justification. It inclines to the policy of restriction. In the case of words and phrases it picks out one of many meanings and insists that this is the only one that can be used properly. In so doing, not content with defying common usage, it not unfrequently defies common-sense. There is, for instance, a glaring illustration of this fact contained in some manuals that have had a wide circulation. We are told that it is quite wrong to say *at length*, when what we mean is 'at last.' The phrase should be employed only when it refers to fulness of detail. It is pretty hard to conceive of the nature of the mental operations of a man who assumes that *length* has nothing to do with time but only with space; that, for illustration, it would be proper to say "he spoke at length," but quite improper to say, "at length he spoke." But the injunction is as contrary to the best usage as it is to reason. No one who has made any study of the practice of the great writers in this particular can have failed to note that *at length* is employed by them five times in the

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sense of denoting the end of a period, where it is used once in denoting the full extent of anything. Either usage is of course correct; but the former is far more common than the latter. This is something which any one can determine for himself by examining the works of any eminent author, no matter who he be or what is his subject.

But instances of this pedantic hostility to good usage are not confined to words and phrases. It shows itself not unfrequently in the denunciation of certain grammatical constructions. It insists that some particular one is not only a proper one, but that it is the only proper one. It therefore attacks on the one side the employment of long-established idioms, for which an equivalent exists which can be made to take its place. This is not unfrequently done under the mistaken impression that they are of recent introduction. On the other side it manifests an uneasy hostility to any later modes of expression which the language has struck out or is striking out for itself. One of this number will be considered at length later in this volume. Here attention will be confined to two idioms belonging to the former class. These, however, are glaring instances of the pedantic stiffness which would sacrifice ease or variety of expression or

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idiomatic energy to the fancied requirements of formal grammar.

The first of these two concerns itself with a very common idiom in our tongue, the use of the present tense of the verb for the future. One particular illustration of this there is which comes up pretty constantly for discussion. A person wishes on some given day, say, for instance, Saturday, to designate the day following. He ordinarily says, 'To-morrow is Sunday'—that is, he says so if he uses the language as if it belonged to him and not as if he belonged to it. If he chance to be in the company of one who is in the latter unhappy situation, he is not unlikely to be interrupted by some such remark as this, "Pardon me, you should say, 'To-morrow will be Sunday.'"

This foregoing is a specimen of the sort of examples usually adduced by scholars as an illustration of pedantic usage occasioned by imperfect linguistic training. Yet in spite of its commonness it does not strictly belong to the class of cases here under consideration. It is merely one of many instances where the idea of future time is conveyed not by the verb but by some other word or phrase in the sentence. In the example just given it is found in the subject *to-morrow*. If any person take exception to the

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expression, it is perfectly legitimate to ask him if the day specified be not Sunday, what day is it? Important engagements will usually compel him to betake himself elsewhere before he finds time to answer. In all cases of the sort it is of course proper enough to use the future tense. Occasionally it may be necessary to do so, either for the sake of contrast, or of emphasis, or even of securing variety. But ordinarily its employment adds nothing to the clearness or force of what is sought to be said. It therefore approaches the nature of an expletive. On the other hand, the use of the present tense not only makes the idea just as distinct, it sometimes renders it far more effective. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die," wrote Paul, arguing against those who denied immortality. Undoubtedly, "we shall die" would have expressed exactly what the apostle had in mind; but it would not have given his words the vividness and energy they now have.

But there are plenty of instances in our literature where the present tense is used independently, sometimes to express directly, sometimes to imply the idea of future time. The subject is too extensive to receive here little more than reference; but the examples of the



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usage are frequently striking. When Othello threatens the brawling combatants at the court of guard that he who lifts his arm in further quarrel shall meet with immediate and condign punishment, he adds to the effectiveness of his speech by employing the present tense and not the future. "He dies upon his motion" are his words. Extreme instances of this usage occasionally occur. A verb in the present tense indicating future time has sometimes been opposed in the same sentence to another verb in the present tense indicating present time. Take a short extract from Milton's ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity. Contrast the future sense of *is* with the present sense of *begins* in the following lines:

"And then at last our bliss  
Full and perfect is,  
But now begins."

This use of the present for the future, perhaps known in all languages ever spoken, has, however, a more than ordinary justification for itself in the class of languages to which English belongs. In these there were originally but two tenses. The present, therefore, indicated not only what then was, but what was to be. When the Teutonic invaders of France adopted

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the language of the conquered country, they felt no necessity of having a distinct future. They therefore dispensed with that tense of the Latin. The present satisfied all their requirements. When later they came to appreciate the need of the precision and consequent clearness which a special form for the future imparts to speech, especially in the language of literature, they made up one from a combination of words which primarily denoted necessity. It was a new application of an old use. The idea of necessity passed into that of futurity, and as a result of this transference the new tense came into being.

So in the case of English it took several hundred years to develop the future fully. "Six days thou workest; the seventh day thou retest," says the Anglo-Saxon version of the Decalogue, literally translated. The verb-phrases, consisting of *will* and *shall* with the infinitive, had indeed made their appearance in the speech when it was committed to writing. But so far from having then attained supremacy, they secured at first little more than recognition. It was a slow process that established them in general use. The encroachment of these special forms for the future upon the domain of the present must have brought sorrow to the linguistic conservatives among our early ancestors,

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so far as such persons then existed. But the protracted grief of centuries has long been forgotten, and the lesson conveyed by it is unheeded. There are those of us, in consequence, who are now insisting not merely upon the further extension but upon the exclusive sway of a usage which some of their forefathers doubtless deplored as a corruption.

The gradual development of the future has shown itself further in the subtle distinction which came at last to prevail in the use of *shall* and *will*. Readers of our version of the Scriptures and of the plays of Shakespeare do not need to be told that it did not exist, certainly as a binding rule, when these works appeared. Even now between the use of the past tenses *would* and *should* it is sometimes not easy to discriminate; but no one at the present day would be likely to make any such employment of the former in the sense of the latter as is found not infrequently in Bacon. In his essay on Masques and Triumphs, for illustration, he observes of the requirements for acting in song that "the voices of the dialogue *would* be strong and manly." Again, in his essay on Gardens, in giving directions about the proper setting-out of fruit trees, he remarks that "this *would* be generally observed that the

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borders wherein you plant your fruit trees be fair and large and low, and not steep." Such passages, which could easily be multiplied, show how remote was often the usage of the Elizabethan period from that which is prevalent to-day. But though the present distinction had not then become fully established, it must have been in process of establishment. By the middle of the seventeenth century it had imposed itself upon the cultivated speech and, consequently, upon the literature of England. In Scotland and Ireland it never gained any secure foothold. In those parts of the United States which once religiously regarded it, the prevalence it formerly held has now largely disappeared. The pressure of emigration has been too strong for it. The Irish do not bring it with them; the Germans do not acquire it. In order to use it with absolute correctness, it seems almost as if the proper employment of it must be imbibed with the mother's milk. Even then, under the Teutonic and Hibernian influences surrounding early years, it is constantly subjected to assaults which tend to weaken what would naturally become the instinctive feeling as to what is right or wrong. A child who during the most impressionable period of life is likely to hear daily such a

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sentence as this, "Will I go to the door?" can hardly help having its linguistic sensitiveness in this matter distinctly impaired. He may not when he reaches manhood find it difficult to comprehend that *shall* ought to have been employed in the sentence just given, but he will not have that almost unconscious perception of its rightfulness which is essential to the preservation of pure idiomatic usage.

There is little question that in certain parts of America—especially where the foreign emigration has been vast—the distinction in the employment of these two auxiliaries has largely died out, and in all parts of the country has been more or less affected. Rules can afford but a partial help towards mastering its intricacies, for they are always in danger of being misapplied. An incident illustrating this possibility was once related to me by the late Professor Thacher, of Yale University. In his early life, while studying in Berlin, he became the tutor in English of the nephew of the then reigning King of Prussia. One day his pupil said to him, "My father shall go to the army manœuvres next Monday." "You mean, he will go," corrected the instructor. "No, no," replied the future Emperor, "he shall go. He has got to go. The King has commanded him."

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If a man of exceptional cultivation and ability could not always securely apply the rules he had received, we can fancy the sort of havoc that would be made in the use of them by one of ordinary attainments. Furthermore, the advanced student of English stands in danger of having his principles corrupted by the example of the earlier authors with whom he makes himself familiar. In the very greatest of these, as has already been seen, the distinction is not found, because it did not then exist. There is a curious picture presented of the gradual extension of knowledge about the usage, in the comments made upon a line of Shakespeare's. In the Comedy of Errors, Antipholus of Ephesus tells Angelo to go to his house for the money due him, and adds, "Perchance I will be there as soon as you."<sup>1</sup> "*I will* instead of *I shall* is a Scotticism," is the remark of the antiquary Douce upon the expression. "And an Irishism too," added Isaac Reed. The implied censures of the two Englishmen aroused the patriotic protest of the Irishman Malone. "And an ancient Anglicism," he observed further, "as appears by the present passages, and from several of our old writers."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Act iv., scene i.

<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare's *Works*, vol. iv., p. 217, Variorum of 1821.

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To return to the subject itself. Of all these attempts made in behalf of pedantry to restrict freedom of expression, the most vociferous—it is hard to refrain from calling it the most senseless—is the one directed against the construction in which the passive voice is followed by an object. Certainly there is none which involves completer ignorance of the best usage or more absolute defiance of the authority of the great writers of our speech. In the construction itself there is nothing peculiar to English. It is found in Latin, more frequently in Greek. No student of the former tongue needs to be told that verbs of asking and teaching in the active voice govern two accusatives; and that in the passive these same verbs can be followed also by one of these two accusatives. It is in English, however, that this sort of construction has undergone a development so full that it has come to partake almost of the nature of a special idiom. In the case of no small number of verbs, a noun as object follows the tenses of the passive voice or the passive participle. The usage has never been made the subject of exhaustive investigation, especially as regards the early periods of the language. But about its later history and its increasing frequency in later times very positive statements can be safely made.

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While so common now, the construction does not seem to have been known to our tongue in its earliest form. No example of it occurs—I speak subject to correction—in Anglo-Saxon. It made its appearance, however, in the language about the end of the twelfth century. During the three or four centuries following it was seemingly but little used, though the fact that but few traces of it have been found, or at least have been recorded, may be due to the further fact that they have not been diligently sought for. It is enough here to prove its early existence by citing three or four illustrative passages, the spelling of which is here modernized. “I found Jesus bound, scourged, given gall to drink,” says Richard Rolle de Hampole. “The merchant was paid thirty pounds fine,” is the statement made in the metrical romance of Sir Amadas. “Fie! the tales that I have been told,” is the speech of one of the characters in the Coventry Mysteries. “I was promised venison, against my feast,” says, in 1479, one of the writers of the Paston Letters, “of my lady Harcourt and of another person too, but I was deceived of both; but my guests held them pleased with such meat as they had, blessed be God.”

It is not worth while, however, to linger over



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the occurrence of this construction in writers whose names, even if known, would carry no weight. The examples given are enough to show the antiquity of the usage; they are not of sufficient consequence to establish its authority. Let us pass on to the sixteenth century. By the end of it the idiom was flourishing in full vigor. From that day to the present its employment has not only been frequent, it has become increasingly frequent with the progress of time. Still, from the very nature of things, the construction is limited to a comparatively small class of verbs. In one sense, therefore, it can never be exceedingly common. It may be that it was for this reason that for a long time it seems to have escaped the attention of grammarians. Mention has already been made of this fact that it was not until about the middle of the eighteenth century that men began to be linguistically self-conscious on any large scale. Then it was that the vehicle of the thought came to attract attention as much as the thought that was to be conveyed. It was then that many began to feel resting upon them the burden of preserving the speech in its so-called purity. It was accordingly inevitable that a construction of this sort would arrest their attention. It was opposed to all their preconceived ideas

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of grammatical propriety. It was what they called anomalous.

Still, it unquestionably had abundant authority in its favor in the books men daily read and in the speech of those they met. The attitude of grammarians towards it therefore varied widely. Many continued to ignore it, either because they did not observe it or because they did not know what to say about it. A few accepted it with apparent approval. Most, however, looked at it askance, even when they refrained from condemning it. The more intelligent of this last-named class, daunted by the frequency with which the construction was found in the best writers, submitted sometimes meekly, sometimes grumblingly, to the condonement of this grammatical offence. That there were authors so linguistically depraved as to employ the construction was, indeed, something to be deplored. But these were so many and so great that the censors of speech, while they had the desire, did not have the courage to condemn. But no small number of grammarians stood up stoutly against the usage. They took the lofty ground that grammatical purity, or what they deemed grammatical purity, must be preserved, no matter how much expression suffered.

Two or three representatives of these classes

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may be cited to illustrate the views just described. Noah Webster, in his *Philosophical Grammar*, mentioned the usage. One of the examples he quoted was taken from Blackstone's *Commentaries*, "The bishops and abbots were allowed seats in the House of Lords," said the great jurist. Webster observed that the construction ought to be, "Seats in the House of Lords were allowed to the bishops and abbots." But he clearly took a despairing view of the possibility of effecting any reformation. The comment he made upon the examples he cited of the practice reveals his state of mind. "The idiom," he wrote, "is outrageously anomalous, but perhaps incorrigible."

Later Lindley Murray considered the usage. He borrowed Webster's examples and re-echoed his sentiments. But the construction was itself too much for the grammarian. It requires, indeed, painful and protracted vigilance on the part of the most scrupulous pedantry to avoid falling inadvertently into the use of an idiom so common, so convenient, and supported by authority so abundant and so great. Murray, in consequence, was apt to resort unconsciously to a practice which in theory he condemned. The lapses he made from linguistic virtue brought infinite satisfaction to a grammarian

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who flourished in this country about the middle of the nineteenth century. This man was Gould Brown. He published in 1848 a bulky volume entitled the Grammar of English Grammars. It is not of so much value for what it directly teaches as for the estimate it indirectly leads us to set upon works of this nature. It abounded in examples of errors or assumed errors in the use of speech. They were gathered in the large majority of instances not from the classic writers of the language, but from the works of grammarians. These persons, Brown assured us, were misleading the schools. It was his delight to point out and to exemplify the various blunders they committed and the false doctrines they inculcated. Lindley Murray was still a name to conjure by. Towards him he, for that reason apparently, exhibited special rancor. There is scarcely one of his collections of passages containing real or assumed errors of speech in which this grammatical hero of former generations does not figure as a conspicuous offender against some principle of grammar.

Brown himself never doubted in the slightest his own knowledge both of what was and what was not correct English. A passive verb followed by an object was a construction which stirred

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his soul to the depths. He was not in the least disposed to follow the pusillanimous course of those grammarians who were inclined to put up with it as a necessary concession to man's grammatical hardness of heart. Not for an instant would he tamper with the unclean thing. He took Webster to task for his faint-heartedness. He quoted his despondent remark already given as having been written "with too little faith in the corrective power of grammar"—by which he manifestly understood his own grammar. The betrayal of his principles which Lindley Murray had disclosed in his practice naturally called for severe comment. "We too," said that writer, "must be allowed the privilege of forming our own laws." In this sentence, which Brown cited as a specimen of false syntax, his predecessor had uttered a great truth about his own language without being aware of the extent of its application.

These fulminations against the idiom have had as little weight with the great authors of the present as they would have had with the great authors of the past had the latter been called upon to encounter them. The antiquity of the construction has been shown by examples. It is now worth while to show its universality. Here, accordingly, will be given a few examples

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of the usage taken from the great authors of our literature from the end of the sixteenth century to the present day. The mass of illustrations that can be given is mighty. Space, however, can be afforded to only a few, but these so far as possible will be made representative of every period and of various classes of writers. It may be said of this idiom that it occurs most frequently with verbs having the general idea of grant, permission, and refusal, though it is far from being confined to them. Still, from these classes, the examples will be in the main taken. Frequent illustrations will be given of the use of particular words which have been made the subject of special attack. To show the continuous use of the idiom, the earlier citations are printed in the order of the time of publication of the works in which they occur.

“It's late in death of daunger to advize,  
Or love forbid him that is life denayed [*i.e.*, denied].”  
Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, bk. iv., canto 12, stanza 28.

“We are denied access unto his person.”  
Shakespeare, *2d Henry IV*, act iv, scene 1.

“So shall nature be cherished and yet taught masteries.”  
Bacon, *Essay on Regiment of Health*.

“If a man be asked a question, to answer.”  
Ben Jonson, *Discoveries*, *Parasiti ad Mensam*.

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"None shall be  
Denied their lawful wishes."  
Fletcher, *Sea Voyage*, act v., scene 4.

"Such favor I unworthy am vouchsafed."  
Milton, *Paradise Lost*, bk. xii., line 622.

"The best thing I have heard of Christianity is that  
we women are allowed the privilege of human souls."  
Dryden, *Don Sebastian*.

"It cannot well be allowed the honor of a fourth."  
Swift, *Tale of a Tub*.

"I remember an honest gentleman in my neighbor-  
hood who was served such a trick."  
Addison, *Spectator*.

"I was denied my second request."  
Steele, *The Lover*, No. 1.

"I am uneasy to be so long denied the satisfaction  
of it."  
Pope to Jervas, December 12, 1718.

"I heard the other day that I was writing a play and  
was told the name of it."  
Gray, *Letter to Walpole*, 1747.

"Love . . . when it is denied a vent in one part, it  
will certainly break out in another."  
Fielding, *Tom Jones*, bk. ii., chap. viii.

"I will not be denied the grant of my present request."  
Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison*, vol. iv., p. 28 (ed.  
of 1754).

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“He was refused admittance.”

Smollett, *Humphrey Clinker*, vol. vii., p. 85 (ed. of 1872).

“He was forbidden access to the sacrifices . . . he was refused the protection of the law.”

Hume, *History of England*, vol. i., chap. i.

“They were refused the common right of being heard by their council against a bill of pains and penalties.”

Gibbon, *Autobiography*, p. 296 (ed. of 1896.)

“An offer of freedom from England would come rather oddly, shipped to them in an African vessel, which is refused an entry into the ports of Virginia or Carolina, with a cargo of three hundred Angola negroes.”

Burke, *Speech on Conciliation with America*.

“I knew by their looks upon their returning they had been promised something great.”

Goldsmith, *Vicar of Wakefield*, chap. x.

“In the library I was shewn some curiosities.”

Dr. Johnson, *Journey to the Western Islands*.

“In my account, denied  
That sensibility of pain with which  
Refinement is endured.”

Cowper, *Task*.

“Those who ne'er deigned their Bible to peruse,  
Would think it hard to be denied their news.”

Crabbe, *The Newspaper*.

“He may be spared any unpleasant feeling of disappointment.”

Wordsworth, *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*.



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"He had been refused a passport through the Neapolitan countries."

Byron, Letter to Bowring, May 12, 1823.

"An idle tale current among themselves that a lanzhnecht was refused admittance into heaven on account of his vices, and into hell on the score of his tumultuous, mutinous, and insubordinate disposition."

Scott, Quentin Durward.

"I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit."

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, chap. xlv.

"He was offered fifty guineas for the house in which we are to live."

Coleridge, in Southey's *Life and Correspondence*, vol. ii., p. 148.

"Evils of every kind, physical, moral, and political, are allowed their free range."

Southey, *Colloquies on Society*, vol. i., p. 56 (2d ed.).

"I was also shown the caparisons of velvet."

Irving, *Alhambra*.

"The incorruptible . . . could not be refused a week of delay."

Carlyle, *French Revolution*, vol. iii., p. 5.

"They were offered their lives if they would consent to abjure the cause of the insurgent Covenanters."

Macaulay, *History of England*.

"If you were shown a great heap of dolls. . . . If you were shown a flock of birds."

Dickens, *Tale of Two Cities*, bk. ii., chap. xv.

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"She was denied admission to Miss Crawley's apartments."

Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, chap. xiv.

"If your own soul has been spared perplexity."

George Eliot, *Romola*, chap. lix.

"I would gladly have been spared the sight."

Hawthorne, *Scarlet Letter*, chap. x.

"Being through his cowardice allowed  
Her station."

Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, *Guinevere*.

"I was shown the Green River yesterday."

Matthew Arnold, *Letters*, vol. ii., p. 403.

"I was given a bit of Childe Harold instead."

Ruskin, *Proterita*, vol. i., p. 31.

"Mr. Ferrars was offered a second-class West Indian government."

Disraeli, *Endymion*, chap. xviii.

"Hear me denied my right  
By such a knave!"

Browning, *Return of the Druses*, act 1.

"Gratian was refused entrance."

Froude, *Saint Teresa*.

"Was I not once promised a visit?"

Emerson to Carlyle, *Correspondence*, vol. ii., p. 329.

"He was given a lodge to keep."

Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, pt. vi., chap. iii.

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Many authors of as high a grade as several included in the foregoing list, are not represented in it, but few authors of the very first class have been omitted. If their concurrence sanctions usage, here is ample evidence of its universality. For scores of pages could be filled with further illustrations of this idiom, drawn not merely from those already cited, but from writers of every kind and grade of achievement during every period of modern English literature. No construction is more firmly established in our language than this. It is on the whole commoner in prose than in poetry. It is more common in some authors than in others. It is frequent, for instance, in Shakespeare and Milton: it is rare in Spenser and Bacon. It is frequent in Browning: it is rare in Tennyson. But it is found in all, as well as in all sorts of productions. Furthermore, its employment seems to have been on the increase since the sixteenth century. It has assuredly never been more used than in the middle and latter half of the century which has just closed. But in every period, in spite of the comparatively small number of verbs which permit the construction, there are few pieces of any length which do not contain one or more examples of it. In Addison's *Travels in Italy*, the one passive verb *to be shown* is

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followed five times by an accusative. Or take a more modern instance. In his essay on Warren Hastings, Macaulay gives an account of the application of the two attendants of the princesses of Oude for the privilege of taking exercise in the garden of the prison in which they were confined. He tells us that the officer in charge "stated that if they were allowed this indulgence there was not the smallest chance of their escaping." Further, in this same production, in speaking of the great harangue of Sheridan on the spoliation of the Begums, he informs us that the orator "was offered a thousand pounds for the copyright of the speech, if he would himself correct it for the press." It is needless, however, to multiply examples. These every one, if he wishes, can easily find for himself in any writer of the first rank. But he who is not convinced of the correctness of the usage by the authorities already cited is gifted with that sort of brain which can be relied upon to reject any evidence which comes in conflict with its prejudices and preconceived opinions.

The antiquity and universality of the idiom is one thing; its origin is quite another. In the comparatively little as yet known of the historic development of English syntax he is treading upon insecure ground who now at-

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tempts to set forth the precise cause which led to the introduction into our speech of an idiom which did not belong to it originally. But three agencies in particular have contributed to its prevalence. There is first the combination, so common in English, of a verb with the substantive it governs gaining thereby a special meaning allied to the substantive. This compound phrase is usually, though not invariably, followed by a preposition. Thus we can say indifferently to *notice*, or *to take notice of*. No one would feel any hesitation about using the construction "he was noticed." But by so doing he is led almost inevitably to employ the equivalent passive construction "he was taken notice of." It is worthy of remark, as regards the origin of the idiom under discussion, that the first example of it which has been adduced—the first, at least, of which I am aware—is an expression belonging to this class. So far back as the beginning of the thirteenth century "they are let blood" occurs in *Layamon*.

Another agency which has contributed to the prevalence of the usage is the not uncommon fact that a verb followed by a preposition is often equivalent in sense to a simple verb. *To present with*, for illustration, conveys a meaning not essentially different from *to give*. Such a

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sentence as "The boy was presented with a book" would bring no protest from the sternest of grammarians. But so long as such expressions are in use, it is asking too much of human nature to expect that the equivalent *given* will not be substituted for *presented with*. In that case the passive followed by an object has descended upon us in all its assumed horribleness.

But the main agency in bringing about the wide extension of the usage is something quite different. The construction in question belongs primarily to a verb which in the active voice governs two accusatives, the one of a person, the other of a thing. But it so happens that early in the history of our speech the forms of the dative and the accusative, originally separate, were melted into the one we call the objective. When the distinction between the two appealed no longer to the eye or the ear, it was sure, in the case of most men, not to appeal long to the mind. In such a sentence as "They paid the man twenty pounds," the verb seemed to the popular apprehension to govern two accusatives. Consequently, when the passive construction was employed, the original dative of the person, conceived of as an accusative, became the subject of the verb, while the actual accusative remained as its object. Ac-

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ordingly, the sentence assumed the form, "The man was paid twenty pounds." This particular kind of usage did more than establish itself; it gained strength and expansion in various ways, the details of which would require for their discussion a special treatise.

But whatever may be the origin of the idiom, there is no more question as to its legitimacy than there is as to its usefulness. No one, to be sure, is compelled to employ it. With the exercise of sedulous care and at the expense of much tribulation of spirit it can always be avoided. Every man has the fullest liberty to indulge in any sort of linguistic asceticism under the illusion that he is setting an example of linguistic holiness. It is only when he insists that others cannot be pure without accepting his notions of purity that he becomes objectionable. It is not particularly creditable to the English-speaking race that at this late day any necessity should exist of defending a construction like the one under consideration. The denouncer of it proclaims by that very fact his lack of familiarity with the best usage. Here is an idiom which has been employed for more than six centuries. For the last three of these it has been in use by every writer whom we regard as an authority. It is, furthermore,

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an idiom which adds facility and variety to expression, and thereby increases the resources of the language. No more preposterous proposition was ever advanced in the history of any cultivated tongue than that all men should deliberately abandon a construction now embodied in the very framework of the speech, because it offends the linguistic sensibilities of some men who have studied grammar without studying the literature upon which any grammar entitled to consideration is based.

It is said that there are newspaper offices in this country where this construction is strictly tabooed. Were this true of all, as it may be of some, there would be a certain justification for a common but essentially absurd charge that the press is doing all it can to ruin the language. No anxiety, however, about the success of such an undertaking could be entertained by any one who has made himself familiar with the history and development of speech. The futility of the attempt would be more conspicuous even than its fatuity. Yet efforts directed to the accomplishment of this impossible task will without doubt always continue to be put forth by a certain class of verbal critics who can never free themselves from the impression that man was made for language and not language for man.



## VII

### ON THE HOSTILITY TO CERTAIN WORDS

NOTHING is more striking in the history of language than the hostility which manifests itself at particular periods to particular words or phrases. By this is not meant the aversion entertained by individuals to certain locutions. This is a state of mind which characterizes us all, and rarely, if ever, does it affect seriously the fortune of the expression disliked. The reference here is to that organized onslaught made by large numbers upon some unfortunate word or construction with the intent of driving it entirely out of use.

This hostility may spring from several causes. Three there are, however, which are conspicuous in bringing about the condition of things denoted. One of these is that the new word or construction is entirely unnecessary. All it conveys is already sufficiently expressed by some other word which has been long in use. This is not a consideration, however, which prevents the

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introduction of many new terms which make their way into the speech unheeded and therefore unattacked. But if one of these proposed locutions chance from any cause to attract public attention and special censure, it is obliged to go through a fiery ordeal before it is received, if even it is received at all. Take the case of *donate*. It apparently came into existence about half a century ago. It is one of the few words of the many, which are so called, that seem justly entitled to be enrolled among Americanisms. It has been pretty regularly shunned by the highly respectable. When employed, it sometimes appears enclosed in quotation marks in order to indicate to the reader that the writer, though he has resorted to it, cannot strictly give it his august approval. Now whether the word is to be deemed really unnecessary or not, and accordingly retained or rejected, is a matter to be decided by the collective body of the users of speech, not by individuals among them however eminent their position. It is further to be said that the word is as regularly formed as is *fascinate*, *venerate*, and a host of others with the same ending. It had been preceded, too, by the corresponding substantive *donation*, which goes back to the fifteenth century, and if one could be used

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without objection during this long period there seems little reason for excluding the other. Nor as regards its ultimate acceptance is it even now in any worse situation than have been several of its predecessors with the same termination. Take, for illustration, *narrate*. This verb, as we have already had occasion to note, was once denounced as a Scotticism. It therefore lacked that perfect purity which could belong only to words whose birth took place south of the Tweed. The *Quarterly Review*, which in its early years was always in a state of disquietude about the English language, unbent on one occasion sufficiently from its severe classicality as to express a liking for the Scotticisms with which a work it was reviewing abounded. But at the word just mentioned it drew the line. The style was described as being "free from all modern affectation, except the abominable word 'narrate,' which must absolutely be proscribed in all good writing."<sup>1</sup> But even *Quarterly Reviews* are frail. Only a few years passed and the objectionable word was rioting in its own columns.

Another cause of this hostility is that the given locution offends the etymological sense of par-

<sup>1</sup> Review of McCrie's *Life of John Knox*, in *Quarterly Review*, July, 1813, vol. ix., p. 433.

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ticular persons or of all persons who care about etymology at all. The word may be or may seem to be unsatisfactorily formed; the phrase may be or may seem to be ungrammatical. Hence those averse to its use feel that in displaying their dislike they deserve well of their fellow-men for standing up for the purity of English undefiled. The prejudice they entertain sometimes, indeed, owes its origin to their ignorance; but that fact renders it none the less potent or effective. We have constant exemplification of the state of feeling here indicated whether there be justification for it or not. Take the case of *reliable*. About the propriety of this word a contest has been raging for a full hundred years and seems now no nearer a settlement than when it began. This particular adjective can be found at a much earlier period, but it was first introduced to cultivated society by Coleridge about the beginning of the nineteenth century. Though he did not originate the word, it was his employment of it and the criticism he received for employing it that first fixed upon it public attention. De Quincey added to the storm which was raised by definitely criticising it as irregularly formed. In his essay upon Style he spoke of Alcibiades as being "too unsteady and (according to Mr.

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Coleridge's coinage) 'unreliable,' or perhaps in more correct English, too '*unrelyuponable*.'" At any rate, from that day to this the discussion of the propriety of the word has been constant. Locker-Lampson tells us that Dean Stanley complained that much as he had associated with Gladstone, he had never influenced him in anything. "Yes," he said, recollecting himself, "I influenced him in one matter. I told him he ought never to use the word *reliable*, and I gave him my reasons. Some time afterwards I met Mr. Gladstone in the street, and he said as we parted, 'I have never used that wretched word *reliable* since you spoke to me about it.'"<sup>1</sup> There is hardly need of adding that America has usually had to bear the burden of introducing it into the speech. That is one of the functions which in all such cases this country discharges. Yet in this as in the instance of numerous other words men are inconsistent. Those who without hesitation will say *available* and *indispensable* and *laughable*, will refuse to sanction by their use the not essentially dissimilar form *reliable*.

Under this head of words tainted by etymological defilement are included certain terms

<sup>1</sup>Locker-Lampson, *My Confidences*, p. 348.

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which are technically called back-formations. To many these are peculiarly objectionable, and sometimes, it must be added, with very sufficient reason. The idea which serves as the basis for their creation is the desire of expressing in a single word what will otherwise require a phrase of more or less length. They usually undergo a long probation before they enter into the classical speech, and sometimes they never reach that haven at all. There are, for instance, at the present time three words of this class not unfrequently used in newspapers. They are *burgle*, meaning 'to commit burglary,' *enthuse*, 'to be filled with enthusiasm,' and *resurrect*, 'to rob a grave of a dead body for the purpose of dissection.' The last of these has further developed *resurrectionist* or *resurrection-man*, to denote the sort of persons pursuing that grewsome occupation. With this compound Dickens's Tale of Two Cities has made us all familiar. It is never easy to tell where and when locutions of this sort originate, unless we adopt the short and easy method followed in England of attributing them all to America. Of the three *enthuse*, which is most objectionable, seems the only one to which we on this side of the water can lay an assured claim. Not one of them, so far as I know, has ever been

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seriously employed by authors whose use of it would give a sort of sanction to its acceptance. So long as that condition of things exists, these words must be relegated exclusively to colloquial speech, and must be content to find themselves stigmatized as "low" in the dictionaries. That will remain their status until the only authority capable of giving them position in the language has pronounced in their favor.

There are those who insist that no such authority can be found anywhere; that back-formations have no right to their existence. This is a principle they lay down to which their practice does not conform. At the present day no one is disposed to take exception to the use of the word *greed*. For nearly a century it has been found in such excellent company that few appreciate how recent is its introduction into the classical speech. It is a Scotticism pure and simple. In Sir John Sinclair's observation on the Scotch dialect, published in 1782, he spoke of it as "a corruption of greediness." That it certainly is not. It is merely a back-formation from *greedy*. The Anglo-Saxon has no noun from which *greed* descended, or if it had, it did not transmit it to later times. *Greedy*, however, existed from the earliest period. Out of this adjective Scotland created the noun

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*greed*. No one is likely now to deny the value of the word or that it has an expressiveness which does not belong to the regularly formed derivative *greediness*. The loss of it would be an absolute loss to the language.

Take an illustration of another sort. Many will remember that a few years ago there went on a violent controversy about the word *tireless*. The discovery had been made that *-less* was a suffix which could properly be appended only to nouns. Hence the form must be discarded, and we must all take pains to say *untiring*. The duty of so doing was preached from scores of professorial and newspaper pulpits. No one seemed to think of or care for the various other adjectives similarly formed, and therefore liable to the similar censure which they never received. Hostility was directed against it alone. The actual flaw which vitiated the arguments against *tireless*, its censors never knew or never took into consideration. This was that the fancied rule covering the creation of such words had practically long ceased to be operative whenever a new formation struck the sense of the users of language as being desirable.

Unquestionably, in our earliest speech the suffix *-less*, when employed to form adjectives, was joined only with nouns. But the general



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sloughing off of nominal and verbal endings which went on in later centuries reduced a great proportion of substantives and verbs in the speech to precisely the same form. In consequence the sense of any fundamental distinction between the two broke down in many ways, in one way in particular. There is nothing easier in our speech than to convert a verb into a noun or a noun into a verb. It is a process which has taken place constantly in the past, and is liable to take place at any time in the future, either at the will or the whim of the writer or speaker. This applies more particularly to the earlier words of our tongue, than to those of later introduction. The former have usually lost their distinctive terminations. They therefore pass with ease from one part of speech into another. Take the case of *black*. It is in the first place an adjective. We can form from it, and have formed from it by means of the suffix *-en*, the verb *blacken*. But while we retain this, and use it, we no longer feel its absolute necessity. We can and do use the adjective itself as a verb. Furthermore, we not unfrequently convert it into a substantive. This is but one of hundreds of instances which could be adduced of the transitions which are going on constantly in our language in consequence of words being so

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stripped of endings as to present only their root form. Now and then, in consequence, some example of this easy transformation from one part of speech into another becomes, for undefined reasons, an object of attack. It was but a very few years ago that an onslaught was made upon the use of the word *voice* as a verb. It was denounced as a neologism by men who had certainly forgotten their Shakespeare, not to speak of numerous other authors. In truth, in the case of our early words, whether of native or of French origin, a noun can be used, as has just been remarked, as a verb or a verb as a noun at the discretion of the speaker. To a less extent this is true of later words of Latin origin. Still there are instances of such transition of usage, making in consequence nonce-words, which, even when used by authors of eminence, have not as yet found record in the fullest dictionaries. Gibbon, for illustration, writing from Lausanne in 1755, employed *communion* as a verb. "Brought up," he said, "with all the ideas of the Church of England, I could scarce resolve to communion with Presbyterians, as all the people of this country are."<sup>1</sup> But the example of this sort of transition

<sup>1</sup> *Private Letters of Edward Gibbon*, vol. i., p. 3 (1896).

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which has been made of special significance is the conversion of the noun *loan* into a verb. Very many worthy persons have been aroused by this practice into a state of wrath hardly distinguishable from delirium. About no usage have statements been made more extraordinary and more preposterous. It is only ignorance or snobbery, we have been told, that would lead men to resort to its use. "The word," says one of its denouncers, "is the past participle of the Anglo-Saxon verb *lænan*, to lend, and therefore, of course, means lent."<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to imagine what possible conception of the forms of Anglo-Saxon verbs could ever have suggested such an impossible derivation. It implies not merely the ignorance of a particular word, but of a whole part of speech.

As a matter of fact, *loan* is a word of Scandinavian origin which after the Norman Conquest took the place of the corresponding Anglo-Saxon noun from which *lene* was derived. This *lene* as has already been mentioned,<sup>2</sup> assumed a *d* to which it was not entitled and became *lend*, a form, strictly speaking, corrupt, but which like many other corruptions we have come to cherish. But the Scandinavian substantive *loan*

<sup>1</sup> R. G. White, *Words and Their Uses*, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> See page 70.

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was itself early used as a verb. In the Parliament of 1542-43 an act was passed concerning collectors and receivers. There is so little originality in the world that it is not a matter to excite surprise that the reasons given for enacting the law reveal the existence in the reign of Henry VIII. of the same sort of rascality which has never died out since. Incidentally, the act introduces us to this particular word used as a verb. In it we are informed that these officers of the revenue had been in the habit of retaining the tax collected, and converting it to their own "singular profit and commodity as in *loning* and laying out the same for gaynes and purchasing land of greate value, and in bying of wooles and other marchaundize, whereby the kinges majestie hath ofte tymes lost greate parte of his debtes and dueties." This is but one of several instances of the early employment of this word which are given in the new Historical Dictionary of our speech. But though the usage goes back for several centuries in England, there is little question that it is in this country it early secured and retained the widest currency. Hence it is fair to say of it that though not American in origin, it is American by adoption. Instances of it occur every now and then in the eighteenth century. "Colonel Humphreys,"

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wrote Joel Barlow in 1778, "has made me promise to loan him the plan and the first book of my poems to read at headquarters."<sup>1</sup> Its not unfrequent use in America has led some of the more scrupulous to assume an air of superiority for their abstention from its employment. To censure it is felt to give the impression of possessing high social culture. "Loaned," comments Oliver Wendell Holmes, "as the inland folks say, when they mean 'lent.'"<sup>2</sup> Now, linguistically speaking, no exception whatever can be justly taken to the use of this noun as a verb. Hundreds of other substantives have gone through precisely the same experience. What distinguishes it from its fellows is that for some reason it has been made the subject of hostile criticism. Yet the only thing about it that can come properly under consideration is not its character, but its necessity. This is a matter which can never be decisively settled by individuals, but must be left to be determined by the great body of the cultivated users of speech.

To go back to *tireless*. This lack of distinction in the form of words which are both verbs and nouns, this frequent interchange in their use naturally affected the derivatives from their

<sup>1</sup> C. B. Todd, *Life and Letters of Joel Barlow*, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Elsie Venner*, chap. vii.

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stems. So, from the sixteenth century on, we have had a very respectable number of adjectives formed by adding the suffix *-less* to the verb, not because it has been employed as a noun, but because it is always capable of being so employed. But there is sure to be one word selected for special reprobation from the class of presumed offenders against some assumed canon of speech. While others of precisely the same character are used by every one without being subjected to criticism or even comment, this particular one is chosen to be the scape-goat to bear into the wilderness the burden of the sins of all its brethren. In the case of the class of words under consideration, it chanced to be *tireless*. The verb upon which it is formed could have been treated as a noun had the users of language been so inclined. That they were not so inclined is a mere accident of usage. The possibility of such employment of it was and is always latent. As a consequence it was subjected to precisely the same treatment as might have befallen it without reproach had it chanced to pass over in general usage from the class of verbs into that also of nouns. It came to have appended to it a termination which originally had been limited to substantives. How much this was a mere whim

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of usage can be seen in the case of *ceaseless*. This word has been in regular use since the sixteenth century. To the general consciousness its first syllable is never anything but a verb; but as to a slight extent it has been employed for a long while as a noun, the formative brings no grief to the most anxious of purists.

It has just been intimated that *tireless* is far from being the only offender of its class. There is no small number of such formatives in our speech. They have come into general use, and continue in it without protest and apparently without discovery. Others there are which are the coinage of particular writers, and are used only by them or their imitators. Of each of these classes a few examples will be given; but they will be sufficient to put the truth of the statement beyond question. Take first the words which have come into fullest acceptance. Who would hesitate now to say *dauntless*? It has been in continuous and still continuing use from the time of Shakespeare to the present day. It was employed by Milton, by Pope, by Gray, and appears in the title itself of one of Scott's poems. With Macaulay it seems to have been a somewhat favorite word. Milton did not confine himself to *irresistible*. *Resistless* is found not alone in his poetry; in his prose he spoke

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of "nature's resistless sway."<sup>1</sup> This word was also very common in Dr. Johnson's writings, and is further found in Raleigh, in Dryden, in Keats, and doubtless in scores of other authors. Gray, in his Hymn to Adversity, addressed that goddess as "relentless power." The same adjective had been previously used by Milton, by Dryden, by Pope, and by his own contemporary Dr. Johnson. It would probably be a matter of some difficulty to find any author since who would feel it necessary to use *unrelenting* in its stead. *Quenchless* again has been in common use from the time of Shakespeare to the present day. He was not the first to employ it; nor apparently has any one since his day felt an overpowering desire to substitute for it *unquenchable*.

When we come to words of the second class, there is little limit to these possible formations. Any writer may coin them: their adoption by others is a matter of chance. All we know of them is that they have never come into general acceptance. Milton, in one of his prose works,<sup>2</sup> speaks of the endurance of "a clamorous debate of utterless things." Peele, in his Arraignment of Paris,<sup>3</sup> has "thriveless swain." In Sir Philip

<sup>1</sup> *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, chap. xxi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Act iii., scene i.



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Sidney's Masque of the Lady of May one of the characters is told not to be "bashless." In this opposite of *bashful*, *bash* is an aphetic form of the verb *abash*. These all belong to an early period, but there are plenty of late examples. In February, 1826, Charles Lamb remonstrated with Bernard Barton for his use of one of these same formations. "One word," he wrote, "I must object to in your little book, and it occurs more than once — *fadeless* is no genuine compound; *loveless* is, because *love* is a noun as well as a verb; but what is *fade*?" Lamb seemed to be unaware that as early as 1796, in the volume of Coleridge's poems published that year, to which he had contributed three pieces of his own, his friend in addressing Cottle, whom he styled "unboastful bard," had expressed the wish, "May your fame fadeless be." Lamb himself was destined to furnish later an awful example of the assumed fault he reprehended. In the translation from Palingenius, which he published in 1832, he weakly yielded to the requirements of verse and, using neither *immovable* nor *motionless*, spoke of "the moveless stone." In his novel of Venetia, Disraeli mentioned "*avoidless* care." Browning, too, committed a similar offence, if it be an offence. In A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, he permitted Merton to

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ask Mildred if she could see "no expressless glory in the East." The heroine failed to point out to him, as she should have done, the impropriety of employing this word in place of *inexpressible*. Lowell, again, was taken to task for saying *weariless*, just as Stevenson employed the corresponding *weariful*. He resolutely refused to give it up. "I don't agree with you about *weariless*," he wrote. "In language one should be nice, but not difficult. . . . I thought of the objection when I was correcting the proof." It is needless to multiply further examples. The so-called rule limiting the suffix *-less* to nouns is no longer deemed binding by the great body of the educated users of speech. With their decisions it is vain for the objector to struggle. His only course is to bear his affliction patiently, and content himself with assuring his misguided fellow-men, as in King Lear, Gloucester did the gods, that he will no longer fall

"To quarrel with your great *opposeless* wills."

The third agency which produces the hostile state of mind indicated concerns itself not with the form or grammatical nature of a locution, but with its meaning. It is, therefore, directed almost exclusively against the use of certain

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words or certain senses of words. The aversion usually arises from the fact that such words connote some idea upon which the attention has been made to fix itself. This by being rendered prominent renders the term itself offensive. Hence some word or some meaning of a word, after having been for a long while held in highest repute, becomes an object of opprobrium. This point can be set forth sharply and clearly by giving an account in detail of one or two examples.

Let us consider first a word which is now in the best of use, but for a long time was practically banished from the speech. This is the verb *occupy*. It came into the language in the fourteenth century. From that time until the seventeenth it was used in a variety of senses. But one of them carrying an indelicate meaning became so fixed upon it in the popular apprehension that it was sure always to suggest itself whenever the word was employed. The result was that for about the space of over one hundred and fifty years it is scarcely found in the literary speech. The degradation which had already overtaken it, when the second part of Henry IV. appeared—which was before 1600—is indicated by the comment made by one of the characters in this play upon the title of captain

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applied to Pistol. "These villains," she says, "will make the word as odious as the word 'occupy'; which was an excellent word before it was ill-sorted"—that is, before it had ill associations. Ben Jonson had a remark to the same effect. "Many," said he, "out of their own obscene apprehensions, refuse proper and fit words—as *occupy*, *nature*, and the like."<sup>1</sup> In the case of these two the hostility displayed failed utterly to affect the fortunes of the one, while, as we have seen, it seriously impaired those of the other. From its temporary degradation, however, it has now recovered. Towards the end of the eighteenth century all the evil ideas connected with *occupy*, which had led to its disuse, had been forgotten. As a consequence it was brought back again into the common speech.

The fortunes of words, indeed, are subject to as many vicissitudes as the fortunes of individuals. A specially noteworthy illustration of this fact has taken place almost before the eyes of the men of this generation. There is perhaps no one term which just now deserves more commiseration for the hard fate which has befallen it than the substantive *female* used

<sup>1</sup> De Stilo, *Discoveries*.

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as a synonym for 'woman.' In reading the denunciations of it constantly met with at this day, the mind instinctively reverts to the line of Goldsmith deploring the lot of the unfortunate being denoted by it. "Turn thine eyes," says the poet, in his *Deserted Village*,

"Where the poor houseless shivering female lies."

The epithets Goldsmith applied to the condition of the character depicted by the word are now, in a certain measure, applicable to the condition of the word itself. It is turned out-of-doors by every corrector of the press. It is contemptuously spoken of as a vulgarism; modern ignorance has sometimes styled it a modern vulgarism. Such by no means has been always its position. Like Goldsmith's 'female,' the word has seen better days. It was once to be met everywhere in good society. The most pedantic of purists expressed no objection to it; the most scrupulous of writers unhesitatingly employed it. Its story is accordingly worth giving in full; for to it belongs more than the interest of the passing moment. It is the representative of a class, and its varying fortunes show the all-dominating power of usage, and in particular its frequent disposition to frown upon some special locution

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while receiving into favor some other locution having characteristics essentially similar.

The word *female* reaches us from the Latin through the French. The remote original in the mother tongue was *femella*, 'a young girl,' which in the daughter tongue became *femelle*. *Femella* was an uncommon word in classical Latin literature. It itself is a diminutive of *femina*. This latter word was regularly employed in Latin to designate the female of the human species, but was likewise applied in that tongue to the female of the lower animals. Its descendant in the French of to-day is *femme*.

*Femme* did not pass over into English; but *femelle* did. It made its appearance in our language in the general invasion of French words which took place in the fourteenth century. Therefore its strictly correct form is *femelle*; and such it was with us originally. But this did not long continue. Almost from the very outset the tendency manifested itself to corrupt the word into its present form. This was doubtless due in part to the ending being confused with the suffix *-al*, which was even then displacing the *-el* in terms of French origin. But the main influence in producing the change was the word *male*, which had come into the language at the same time. Then as now the

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two words stood in frequent juxtaposition and antithesis.

*Female*, as substantive and adjective, goes back to the fourteenth century; but though the noun was then occasionally employed as a synonym for 'woman,' such usage can hardly be called common. Still it is found. The Wycliffite translation of the Bible, for illustration, reads in the twenty-fourth chapter of Matthew that two women shall be grinding at a quern, the one to be taken, the other left. But in the polemic treatise Wycliffe wrote, expounding this same chapter, the two "women" of the gospel appear as two "females." The word turns up occasionally from that time during the three centuries that follow; but so far as any one man's necessarily limited reading justifies the drawing of general inferences it appears but occasionally. In Shakespeare, for instance, in any senses which it has as a noun, it occurs but eleven times, while there are more than four hundred passages where *woman* is employed. In two places, indeed, where the dramatist uses it, the implication is conveyed that the term belonged to what Ben Jonson called "the perfumed phrases of the time." One example we see in *Love's Labor's Lost*, in the letter which is sent to the King of Navarre by Don Armado,

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described as "the refined traveller of Spain." This character is represented throughout the play as revelling in the choicest phraseology. In the epistle he charges the clown Costard as consorting with "a child of our grandmother Eve, a female, or for thy more sweet understanding, a woman." Again, in *As You Like It*, Touchstone gives certain directions to his rival William, in language which contrasts, or seems intended to contrast, the two words as employed in ordinary and in affected use. "Therefore," says he, "you clown, abandon—which is in the vulgar, leave—the society—which in the boorish is company—of this female, which in the common is woman."

The word is found now and then in the writings of the other dramatists of the period, as, for instance, Fletcher and Massinger; but if I can trust the results of my own reading, while not objected to, it was not largely employed. But there was plainly manifest a slowly but steadily increasing tendency on the part of good writers to make use of it during the latter part of the seventeenth century, and even more in the early part of the eighteenth.<sup>1</sup> Still, while it is

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, in Richard Steele's periodical publication entitled *The Lover*, consisting of forty papers, from February 25 to May 27, 1714. In these



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found oftener than before, it is not found often. It was not that there was any stigma attached to it such as now exists; it simply did not occur to men to employ it, save possibly for the sake of giving variety to expression, or because in certain passages it struck them as being somehow more appropriate. All assertions of this sort must indeed be taken with a good many grains of allowance. They represent impressions rather than systematic and thorough investigation; for no wide-embracing study of the practice of our great writers in the matter of disputed usages, either of words or constructions, has ever yet been made. Until that is done something of uncertainty must attach itself to what are on the surface apparently well-founded conclusions.

But by the time we reach the middle of the eighteenth century we have left behind the region of doubt. A complete change has come over the fortunes of the word. *Female* as a synonym for 'woman' had become then comparatively common in the very best usage. One may almost venture to say that it sprang into fashion with the appearance of the modern novel. It is far from infrequent in the works of Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett. As we the noun *female* occurs eight times—No. 2, twice; No. 3, twice; and once each in Nos. 13, 20, 23, 25.

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have seen from the line taken from Goldsmith—and to this examples from other authors could be added—it sometimes invaded the region of poetry.

There, however, it was strictly out of place; and so it was perhaps unconsciously felt to be. Certainly its use by the best writers in that form of composition was distinctly limited. In truth, *female* as a noun, in all periods of English, belongs rather to prose than to poetry. It could, of course, have belonged to the latter, had the users of language been inclined so to employ it; as a matter of fact, they have never manifested any such disposition. This limitation to prose conveys no imputation against the propriety or usefulness of the word. It is a characteristic which it shares with many other most respectable terms, with some terms indeed which we could hardly do without; just as there are many valuable and, in fact, necessary members of society who would not feel themselves at home in the most select circles, or be so looked upon by others. In a letter to Coleridge, Charles Lamb, in criticising a contribution to the Anthology, declared that “the epithet *enviable* would dash the finest poem.” The remark was a just one. *Enviably* is a good word, a proper word. It has been used by statesmen, historians,

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novelists, and men of science; but it ought to know its place, and its place is not in poetry, save under very peculiar conditions.

*Female* as a substantive is essentially in the same class. Charles Lamb would not have been likely to favor its use in poetry. But in prose, in which, as he said, and very justly said, he considered himself a dab, he employed it not infrequently. In his private correspondence he had no hesitation in applying it to his dearly loved sister. But he probably would have felt that it was a word which did not belong to high-wrought expression, and therefore under ordinary circumstances was out of place in verse, so long as verse retains the associations which are generally connected with it. At all events, it rarely puts in an appearance in poetry, and, when it does so, it is usually, though not invariably, when the poetry is on a low level.

It is perfectly clear, however, that in the latter part of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth nothing of its present opprobrium attached to the word. One, indeed, gets at times the impression that it was beginning to displace the synonymous 'woman' in general usage. How little there was of aversion to it during the first of the two periods mentioned, how little there was of any trace of

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the feelings which now exist, is made very clear by the practice of Madame D'Arblay. In her earlier years, as Fanny Burney, she employed it in her novels. At times the word makes its appearance in her other writings in places where it strikes the sense of the most liberal-minded in matters of usage as somewhat incongruous, not to say queer. In her diary, for instance, under the year 1786, she speaks of the Princess Royal, not as the second lady, but as "the second female in the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

For a hundred years at least the word was not only in common but in the best of use. No one objected to it, no one apparently thought about it. It was not till after the middle of the nineteenth century that the crusade against it seems to have begun; not till the last third of it that it came to be effective. At all events, it is only then that it becomes noticeable; but of course it must have been the object of numerous previous attacks before the hostility could gather sufficient volume to make itself perceptibly felt. The repugnance to it has become so extended that it has led the editor of the New Historical English Dictionary now appearing—a dictionary which no student of the language can afford

<sup>1</sup> Vol. iii., p. 62, edition of 1842.

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to be without—to give a somewhat misleading view of the fortunes of the word. While what is said of it may be itself absolute truth, it leaves out so much of the truth that it tends to produce an altogether wrong impression. There is not a single illustration of its employment by any great or even fairly good writer after the middle of the eighteenth century though such could have been found by the hundred. The citations are taken from authors little known, and in the matter of correct usage carrying no weight whatever. Furthermore, to the section containing the definition of the word as a mere synonym of 'woman' is appended the remark "now commonly avoided by good writers, except with contemptuous implication." The only confirmatory authority given for the existence of this asserted contemptuous implication is an extract from a daily newspaper, condemning its employment. No one knows who is the author of the censure—a matter of first importance. Whether the statement made be true or false, it would be difficult to arrive at a nearer approach to no authority at all upon a question of usage.

The inference may be entirely unwarranted, but the citations made—of which after the opening of the eighteenth century the only one

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of any weight comes from Sir Richard Steele—with the accompanying comment, lead to the belief that the word during the last one hundred and fifty years has been at no time in general good use. Furthermore, it conveys the impression that it has not received the sanction of the best writers for a long time past; for a feeling such as the one indicated is never the result of any mere momentary or transient hostility. So general, indeed, has now become this assumption that it is worth while to give an outline of the history of the fortunes of the word from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth; to make clear its claims to perfect respectability, and to ascertain who were the good writers of the period indicated who were careful to avoid it. They may have existed, but up to the present time they have been successful in eluding my own search.

It has been previously remarked that at the time of the first appearance of the modern novel the word was in the fullest vogue. Richardson not only employed it frequently, but, in his *Sir Charles Grandison*, coined from it *femality* to denote the female nature. This, on several occasions, he puts in the mouth of Harriet Byron's uncle, Mr. Selby. "Neither

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you nor your niece," he tells his wife, "know how with your fine soul and fine sense, to go out of the common femality-path."<sup>1</sup> But manifestly this word found no favor with the little coterie of women who surrounded Richardson and bowed down before him and worshipped him. The heroine herself expressed scorn both for it and for what it implied. She brings against it one crushing argument. It is, she said, "a word I don't like: I never heard it from Sir Charles."<sup>2</sup> This, of course, settled the matter. But while there was dissatisfaction with the derivative, no one thought of taking exception to the primitive. The same condition of things is evident from the practice of the two other great novelists of the period. In their writings there is not the slightest hesitation in using the word either when speaking in their own persons or through one of their characters. In Tom Jones, for illustration, *female*, in the sense of 'woman,' is employed at least fifteen times.<sup>3</sup> In Smollett's *Humphrey*

<sup>1</sup> *Sir Charles Grandison* (1st ed.), vol. vi., p. 142.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> Bk. i., chap. vi.; *ibid.*, chap. x.; bk. ii., chaps. iii. (twice), iv. (twice); bk. iii., chap. vi.; bk. v., chap. ii.; bk. vi., chaps. iii., viii.; bk. ix., chap. vi.; bk. x., chap. ii.; bk. xiii., chaps. v., vii. (twice).

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Clinker it is found thirteen times.<sup>1</sup> In both these works there may be some instances overlooked of the occurrence of the word; but even if so, there is a sufficient number cited to establish the universality of its acceptance.

Nor during the latter half of the eighteenth century were women in the slightest degree averse to its employment. It is doubtful, indeed, if a single female writer who flourished between 1750 and 1800 failed to make use of it. Take, for instance, Mrs. Inchbald. In her novel entitled *A Simple Story* it occurs several times. In 1792 May Wollstonecraft brought out her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Among those rights to which she clung was apparently that of using the word *female* to designate the members of her own sex. It certainly did not occur to her that it was one of their wrongs. But the most persistent offender in this respect—if it be an offence—was Fanny Burney, as may be inferred from the example already given. In her writings, whether dealing with fact or fiction, the word is likely to turn up on any page. To the modern woman, indeed, she might almost seem to have a perverse fondness for it.

<sup>1</sup> Smollett's Works (ed. of 1872), vol. vii., pp. 191, 197, 211, 215, 242, 272, 293, 296, 313, 316, 342, 424, 472.



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In her Diary on one occasion she observes, "What choice has a poor female with whom she may converse?"<sup>1</sup> On another she intensifies her preference for it by contrasting it with the masculine word opposed to 'woman.' She remarks that "the three men and the three females were all intimately acquainted with one another."<sup>2</sup> To offset this affront of hers to her sex, it is fair to quote Fielding's similar affront to his own. In a passage speaking of the disposition of fighting women to strike each other on the nose, he remarks that according to some it is derived "from their being of a more bloody inclination than the males."<sup>3</sup>

So much for the eighteenth century. For three-fourths of the nineteenth the same state of feeling continues, so far as that can be inferred from the practice of its favorite authors. No reader of Scott can be unaware that it turns up with unfailing regularity in his writings. It would probably be safe to affirm that he made as frequent use of it as he did of its synonym, if not more frequent. In the Legend of Montrose, for instance, *female* appears twelve times and *woman* has to be contented with six. In so

<sup>1</sup> *Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay* (ed. of 1842), vol. iii., p. 331.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p, 207.

<sup>3</sup> *Tom Jones*, bk. iv., chap. viii.

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expressing himself Scott was following the general practice of his age, so far at least as fictitious narrative was concerned. In so expressing himself he was followed by all his imitators and successors. Cooper, in fact, has been reproached again and again for his frequent use of the word, and the imputation that he was particularly exceptional in this respect has been more than once conveyed by exceptionally ill-informed critics. The accusation can be brought with as much justice against most, and perhaps all, of the tale-writers of the nineteenth century belonging either to the first or second grade. *Female* is contained in Bulwer's novel of *Pelham*, which came out in 1828, and was the one which first brought him reputation; it is also contained in his unfinished novel of *Pausanias*, which was not published till a few years after his death. In his *Rienzi*, which appeared in 1835, it is found fourteen times.<sup>1</sup> Dickens exhibited the same attitude towards the word. In the *Pickwick Papers*,<sup>2</sup> his first novel, it occurs thirty-

<sup>1</sup> Bk. i., chaps. iv. (twice), v., ix., xii. (four); bk. iii., chap. ii.; bk. iv., chap. i.; bk. vi., chaps. iv., v.; bk. vii., chap. i.; bk. x., chap. vii.

<sup>2</sup> Chaps. vii. (twice), viii., ix., x., xii., xviii. (twice), xx., xxii., xxv., xxvii., xxx., xxxiii. (three), xxxiv. (seven), xxxvii., xli., xlvi., lii. (seven).

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three times, and in none of his later writings is there manifested the least hesitation about employing it. The same thing can be said of Thackeray. In his novel of *Vanity Fair*, *female* as a noun appears twenty-one times.<sup>1</sup> In a similar way it occurs in the writings of Washington Irving, Disraeli, Hawthorne, George Eliot, and Trollope, not to mention others. Some of them use the word only occasionally, some frequently; but whether using it little or much, there is never to be found in any of them an intimation that the employment of it was at all objectionable. Still less, if possible, was there indicated any intention of conveying by it a contemptuous implication.

In fact, were there to be made an exhaustive study of the usage of good writers who flourished during the last century—at least, before the last quarter of it—it would probably be found that there was not a single one of them who did not feel himself fully authorized to employ the word. Instances have been given of the results which attend the examination of particular works produced before the middle of it was reached. Let us follow this up by specifying the facts

<sup>1</sup> In chaps. xii., xiii., xiv., xvi., xviii., xxix., xxx., xxxiv., xxxv., xlix., li., lii., liv., lviii., lxiv., lxv. In chap. xiv. it occurs six times.

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which are furnished by the examination of another work which came out while the second half of the century was well under way. Charles Reade's masterpiece, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, was published in 1861. In it *female* as a mere synonym of 'woman' occurs more than twenty times. It assuredly never occurred to the novelist that he was making use of either affected or vulgar speech, or that he had exposed himself to the slightest censure on the ground of having resorted to an improper usage.

It is clear that the elder writers, born and brought up amid the linguistic traditions of the earlier half of the nineteenth century, were not in the slightest degree under the influences now prevalent; and that the disrepute into which the word has fallen is mainly the work of the last thirty years. It is hard to tell under what circumstances the feeling of dislike to it arose, or what were the main determining agencies that brought about the state of feeling we recognize as existing to-day. If the remark will not seem invidious, I am inclined to attribute the disfavor in which it is now held to the ill-will entertained and expressed towards it by the members of the sex it denotes. It may be said that they ought to have a determining voice in choosing the appellations by which they are designated. But

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language is not disposed to accord to either man or woman this liberty of selection. Furthermore, if it be true now that special hostility exists on their part to the use of the word, the examples which have already been adduced prove clearly that it was not true once. Madame D'Arblay's evidence has already been cited. Her course has had plenty of followers among the members of her own sex. Among these, too, must be included our Jane of Janes. She not only applied the word to the characters in her novels, but used it when she was speaking of herself personally. "I think," wrote Miss Austen in a letter, "I may boast myself with all possible vanity to be the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress."<sup>1</sup>

Here are two words employed which are simply dreadful from the point of view of the modern woman. It once fell to the lot of the present writer to have an extended conversation with a noted female author who had very decided opinions as to the character of the sex to which he had the fortune or misfortune to belong. Among other things she expressed the utmost indignation at being styled an "authoress." It was not for the like of me to contend with a goddess

<sup>1</sup> Letter of December 1, 1815.

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who insisted upon being called a god. Being, furthermore, of a dull masculine apprehension, and consequently lacking the delicate feminine perception of the one with whom I was talking, I was unable to detect the great wrong inflicted upon her by having her sex denoted; nor could I understand why she should desire to have her identity as a woman merged in that of a sex physically stronger, to be sure, but in her opinion morally inferior. It flitted through my mind—the thought was left unexpressed—that she would probably have no objection to becoming an heiress, and in such a case might prefer to be designated by that term rather than by heir.

It was in 1815 that Jane Austen termed herself a 'female.' The indifference manifested by her to the reproach contained in the usage continued with writers of her own sex down even to the close of the century. Recklessly and almost ruthlessly many of the best and ablest among them, unconscious of the rising tide threatening to submerge the word, kept on employing it without scruple and without hesitation. In 1882 Fanny Kemble published her *Records of a Later Life*. In it she denounced with vigor the black beetles which overran the rooms in her residence near Philadelphia. They were es-

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pecially attracted, she tells us, "to unfortunate females by white or light-colored muslin gowns."

But something more painful, not to say more flagrant, belonging to an earlier period, has to be recorded. In January, 1846, Miss Barrett communicated to her future husband certain facts in regard to Tennyson. He was, she told him, writing a new poem. The account she gave of it is now almost harrowing to members of her sex, not for what she says, but for the way in which she says it. From her description it is evident that the work she had in mind was the Princess. "It is," she wrote, "in blank verse and a fairy tale, and called the University; the University members being all females." It shows how much we have advanced in exquisite-ness of taste and in propriety of speech over Jane Austen, Mrs. Browning, George Eliot, and Fanny Kemble, that the thought of being styled 'females' would awaken grief and fiery indignation in the halls of Vassar, Wellesley, and Bryn Mawr, and that over the intervening hills Mount Holyoke and Smith would call to each other as deep answers unto deep.

This utter insensibility of the past shows that there is really nothing in the word itself which justifies the sensitiveness of the present; and that the now prevailing prejudice against it is

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purely an artificial creation. It is termed artificial, not to cast any discredit upon it, but to bring out distinctly the fact that the dislike exhibited towards the term is the result of a special linguistic crusade, not a normal natural development of expression such as attended the extension of the now assailed usage beyond its earlier restricted employment. Occasionally reasons for this feeling outside of usage have been paraded as existing in the nature of things. The only one worth mentioning is that the word can be and is used in two senses. It designates the female of the human race and the female of the lower animals. In this it resembles its remote Latin original *femina*. It is doubtless the labored insistence upon one of the meanings denoted by the word that has brought about its present unpopularity. But there is nothing peculiar in its having a double sense. That is a characteristic the possession of which it shares with nearly every common word in the speech. To most of them a variety of significations is attached, and it is the context alone that decides the precise one intended. If the speaker or writer has expressed himself properly, the most profound stupidity cannot miss the meaning, the most perverse ingenuity cannot wrest it from its natural interpretation. When, for



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illustration, we talk of a bride and groom, no one feels it necessary to explain that the attendant of the former is not a representative of the stables.

Yet, singular as it may seem, the argument has been seriously advanced that the employment of *female* as synonymous with 'woman' would result in confusion. It seems impossible for some persons to comprehend the elementary fact that language was not designed primarily for the use of idiots. Both in conversation and writing something must be left to the unaided human understanding. If a man insists in all sincerity that when he meets the word *female* in the sense of 'woman,' he is unable to distinguish it from the same word designating one of the lower animals, he really has no business to be at large in a civilized community. His proper place of habitation is a home for the intellectually incurable. When it comes to the consideration of questions of usage he will meet in such a resort with many congenial associates.

The purely artificial nature of the present prejudice is further made manifest by the fact that it does not exist in the case of the corresponding noun *male*. Like *female*, this term is applied to the lower animals as well as to human beings. Such was the case also in the language

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from which it is derived; such it remains in the languages descended from it. The history of *male* with us resembles in most respects that of the word to which it is often so antithetically joined. Like that it came to us from the Latin through the French. Like that it made its appearance in our tongue during the fourteenth century. Like that it belongs to the language of prose rather than of poetry. But for some reason it has never been made the subject of persecution. It has consequently never fallen from its high position. As an adjective, too, it has intrenched itself in the Constitution of the United States. Having in that instrument secured the right to be connected with the suffrage, it is not likely to suffer from any restriction upon its right to usage.

This last consideration gives additional evidence of the artificial nature of the existing prejudice against the word *female*. The hostility now exhibited towards it is exhibited towards it as a noun and not as an adjective. No reason in the nature of things exists for making any such distinction. Undoubtedly efforts have been or will be made to restrict or discard any such employment of it by those highly intellectual beings who insist that usage must be logical. But, unfortunately, there is no other word to take

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its place. *Womanly* conveys ordinarily an entirely different idea, and *feminine* would often be distinctly inappropriate. This is perhaps the reason why no one seems to have risen up publicly to denounce *female* as an adjective; at least if he has, no perceptible heed has been given to his utterances. Nor in regard to the word as thus employed has any pretence ever been put forth that confusion between human beings and the lower animals would be likely to arise in consequence. When a man talks of going into female society, not even the most intellectually obtuse supposes that he is contemplating a visit to the barn-yard in order to see the cows. All of us have or ought to have female friends; we discuss female education; we talk of female beauty; a great poet, indeed, in a celebrated passage, ventured to speak of female errors. We cannot read, in truth, the classic writers of our tongue without constantly coming across some employment of the word in its attributive sense.

But artificial as is the hostility which has been worked up against the use of the word, it has been none the less effective. It has created against it a prejudice so general and potent that every writer who is sensitive to verbal criticism is disposed to avoid it. In characterizing this

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hostility as artificial, it must not be inferred that there is any intent to pass judgment upon its rightfulness. The question of the desirability or undesirability of the expression has so far not come at all into consideration. It is with its history that this discussion of it deals, and with the causes which have brought about the estimate with which it is now regarded. It has been selected as perhaps the most signal illustration of the varying fortunes which can attend a particular word, and of the fate which may chance to befall one against which an organized opposition has set itself in motion. *Female*, as we have seen, has been in the language for more than six centuries. For most of that time it has been in good repute: for a century and a half it was in the very best of repute. Nobody objected to it. Nobody seems even to have thought about it. So prevalent was the use of it by all persons as well as by the best writers, that when colleges for women were first established in this country the word formed part of their title, and no one questioned the propriety of so designating them. All this is now changed. There is no doubt that the noun *female* is at present distinctly under the ban. The same agencies which have brought it into disrepute may in the

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future restore it again to favor. But of that there is no immediate indication.

Nor need it be denied that, taking into consideration the general practice of the great body of our best writers during all periods, the influence of our highest literature is as a whole unfavorable to the use of the word in spite of the countenance it received during the greater portion of both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In nine cases out of ten the word 'woman' is to be preferred. But it is the tenth case that counts. The prejudice against it, if carried so far as to cover this, will cripple to some extent the resources of the language. When Carlyle sought to enhance the terrors of the battle of Prague as one of the most furious battles of the world, he brought home to all of us its strenuous nature by observing that the very emblem of it "done on the piano by females of energy scatters mankind to flight who love their ears."<sup>1</sup> How inexpressibly tame and inadequate it would have been to have used 'women' in this passage! Furthermore, *female* is the more general term. It is not and never has been a mere synonym for 'woman.' Consequently the loss of it would be a positive

<sup>1</sup> *Frederick the Great*, bk. xviii., chap. ii.



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loss to the language. The latter word signifies one who has reached a mature age. It would be grossly inappropriate to apply it to a small child, and no one in his senses would think of so doing. But *female* belongs to all ages, from the infant to the great-grandmother. Hence it can be and has been employed where the appearance of any other word would be unjustifiable, and where the non-existence of it would compel the users of language to resort to a clumsy or roundabout mode of expression.

A single example will suffice to put this point beyond dispute. It is taken from a letter of Motley, who, it may be added, like most historians, was in the habit of using the word as a noun. In writing to his mother from Rome, towards the end of November, 1858, he told her that he was in the habit of getting up at daylight, which at that time of the year was about seven o'clock. "Little Mary and I and Susy," he added, "have a cup of coffee at that hour together, the two other females not rising so early." In this instance it is obvious that neither *women* nor *ladies* would have expressed what the writer had it in his mind to say. The only word that would do was the word he employed, unless he forced himself to change the construction of

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his sentence or went into roundabout detail. Devices of such a sort are distasteful to language. It hates circumlocution much more than in the old physical theories nature used to abhor a vacuum.

## VIII

### TO AND THE INFINITIVE

I N his Life of Sir Stafford Northcote, Mr. Andrew Lang records with pride the noble stand taken, not by any mere individual Englishman, but by the English government itself, on an occasion when the purity of the speech was threatened. Negotiations for a treaty were going on at Washington between the United States and Great Britain. The subjects for discussion and settlement were of the utmost gravity. Controversy existed about the Alabama claims, about the Canadian fisheries, about the San Juan boundary, besides other matters, of minor importance indeed compared with the foregoing, but nevertheless of importance in themselves. On numerous points under consideration there was naturally wide difference of opinion. Proposals and counter-proposals were constantly exchanged. According to the account given in the biography, a difficulty, wholly unnecessary, fell to the lot of the English



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commission. In addition to the inevitable disputes with its opponents it found itself a good deal annoyed and hampered by instructions from the home government.

At last an agreement was reached. It involved certain concessions to the American demands to which, in the opinion of some, assent should never have been given. Indeed, Mr. Lang, in commenting upon the negotiations, goes so far as to assert that "the English is a nation which practically cannot fight on points of honor and delicacy." There is often a tendency to mistake unwillingness to enter into war for consciousness of inability to carry it on, or for indisposition to carry it through to the end when once it has been undertaken. One who is not an Englishman may be permitted to observe that Mr. Lang's remark exhibits something of the influence of such a feeling. As this world goes, reluctance to fight on the part of a strong nation implies, also, a determination, when once war is undertaken, not to recede until the point in dispute has been definitely settled for all time. At any rate a country hostile to England, which should seriously set out to act upon the view expressed by him, may rely upon being treated to one of the most unpleasant surprises which can befall a people.

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But though certain concessions were made, there is one point, we are told, upon which the home government was sternly inflexible. "For it," says Mr. Lang, "much may by literary persons be forgiven them." It telegraphed that in the wording of the treaty it would under no circumstances endure the insertion of an adverb between the preposition *to*, the sign of the infinitive, and the verb. Mr. Lang feels justly the heroic nature of this act. Much might be yielded on questions in dispute which all knew would ultimately involve expenditure of money, and indeed implied at the time admission of previous wrong-doing. Much might further be yielded in the case of certain things which the biographer himself seems to regard as points of honor. Still, on these minor matters it was thought advisable to give way. So much the more must our tribute of admiration be paid to the English government for remaining immovable as the solid rock when it came face to face with the great question of severing the close tie that binds to the infinitive the preposition *to*. "The purity of the language," observes Mr. Lang, "they nobly and courageously defended." Rarely can history present a grander spectacle than the one here depicted of a mighty nation willing to sacrifice treasure and

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blood in its resolute determination to resist the insidious efforts of another power to debauch its grammar.

Of the serious nature of this assault upon the integrity of the speech Mr. Lang has the keenest appreciation. The biography mentioned above is not the only place in which he has expressed an opinion similar to that just quoted. In 1890 he brought out a lecture which had been delivered by him at the South Kensington Museum. It was entitled *How to Fail in Literature*. In the course of it he assures the one who is aiming at such a desirable result that he cannot be too reckless of grammar. There is always a certain vagueness in utterances of this sort when taken by themselves. Ever since the school-master started on his journey abroad there have been as many kinds of grammar as there are kinds of school-masters. It is therefore pertinent to inquire whose grammar is meant. All of us keep a certain assortment of rules of our own, and according as men conform or fail to conform to them we test the linguistic soundness or frailty of our neighbors. Fortunately Mr. Lang comes to our help in this instance, and illustrates recklessness of grammar by saying that one "should always place adverbs and other words between *to* and the in-

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finitive." He concedes, indeed, that there are persons who are guilty of this atrocity who have attained popularity. But though these linguistic criminals may have succeeded in alluring the public to buy their books, they have failed in literature; and it is about literature that he is speaking. This dictum contributes something towards solving what has always been a perplexing problem. It may be difficult to determine exactly what literature is; but we are now furnished with a short and easy method of determining what it is not. Writings which contain an adverb inserted between *to* and the infinitive may be enjoyed by the herd, but they are not literature.

But even the herd have rights which the most superior person is bound to respect. It is no unreasonable requirement on the part of its members that they shall have pointed out to them the precise character of the peril which led the English government to hurry nobly and courageously to the defence of the English tongue from the crafty assaults of the American commissioners, who, by the very fact of being Americans, were necessarily engaged in devilish devices for corrupting the speech. Let it be conceded that the practice censured is improper. But why is it improper? What is the nature of

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the particular havoc wrought to the language by the insertion of a word or words between *to* and the infinitive? On this point the objectors to the usage in question, along with the severity of their attitude, maintain a silence so profound that the suspicion inevitably suggests itself that they communicate no information about it, they advance no arguments against it, because they have neither information to furnish nor arguments to present. Of expressions of personal opinion, however, both of the usage and its users, the supply is ample. It consists mainly in the application to each of derogatory epithets and phrases. The practice is termed a barbarism, a solecism. It is held up as a glaring example of the corruptions which are invading our speech.

But the question comes up, Why is it a barbarism, a solecism, a corruption? On this point a scrupulous reticence is maintained. Since, then, we have no arguments to meet, we must content ourselves with the consideration of assertions. Of these the constant charge of its being a corruption holds the foremost place. To readers familiar with the examples given in the preceding pages, this will not seem a very startling or crushing objection. It is the term regularly employed to denote the new words or the new grammatical constructions to which

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he who dislikes them takes exception. From the point of view of the past a great number of expressions, which we now use unhesitatingly, were once innovations stigmatized by many as scandalously incorrect. A living speech is always in the condition of growth, and in language no less than in life growth implies to some extent the abandonment of the old and the assumption of the new. Every one recognizes this in the matter of vocabulary. There the changes constantly going on—the abandonment of old words or the addition of new ones—meet with but little comment or criticism outside of a few peculiar cases. But this is not so in grammar. At least it is not so when once speech has come into the possession of a great literature. The opposition to the introduction of new forms and constructions is apt then to assume a character of irreconcilable hostility. To some extent their feeling is true even of the order of words. Of this the usage in question is a signal example. It serves conspicuously to bring out sharply the distinction with which changes are regarded in a language devoid of a literature and a language which has entered into the full possession of one. The hostile sentiments are of the same character in both cases; but in the former they exercise the slightest possible influence.

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For the first thing to be noted is that the practice of joining *to* to the simple infinitive the preposition *to* was itself originally a corruption. In our early speech *to* belonged strictly to the gerund, or, as it was sometimes called, the dative case of the infinitive. Of this gerundial infinitive we have still in our tongue no small number of examples. Locutions like "rooms to rent" or "houses to let" are genuine representatives of the original usage, though the verb has been shorn of the ending which once proclaimed its distinctive character. But with us *to* was not at first prefixed to the infinitive proper, though there were other early Teutonic tongues in which such was the case. We still retain traces of the primitive linguistic virtue we once universally possessed. After certain common verbs, such as *bid*, *make*, *see*, *feel*, *help*, *let*, *hear*, and a number of others, we rarely or never use *to*. The language in the course of its history has wavered in the case of these words between connecting them with the pure or the prepositional infinitive. But the former has become the preferred construction. There are, however, a number of verbs in which the use of either depends largely upon the form of the sentence or upon the choice of the writer. *Dare*, for instance, was in earlier times generally

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followed by the pure infinitive; in modern times it hesitates between that and the prepositional. There are no small number of verbs, indeed, indicating some form of mental or physical vision which are connected with the infinitive either with or without *to*. But this, though once true of *see*, is not so now. It is no longer the normal construction. To say, "I saw him *to* do it," would strike every one as unidiomatic. It would surely kindle the indignation of those who devote all the leisure at their command to the preservation of the purity of the speech.

Let us imagine, then, what must have been the feelings of the purist of the twelfth century—for the purist, like the poor, we have always with us—when he saw the preposition *to* transferred from the gerund, to which it properly belongs and prefixed indiscriminatingly to the infinitive proper, where it has no business to be. He doubtless foresaw in the act the approach of the ruin which is always about to overwhelm the tongue. But there was at that time no government to hurry to the rescue of the imperilled speech. The powers that be were then talking French and cared nothing for English. There was no one of sufficient authority to organize a successful opposition. In



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consequence the distinction between the use of the infinitive with *to* and without *to* broke down entirely. Accordingly, when in the fourteenth century a great literature began to be created, it found fastened upon the language this monstrous impropriety. It was there. It could not be dislodged; and, further, there was no desire to dislodge it. For the usual result had followed. Vice, the poet tells us, is so hideous that the moment we see it we hate it; but if we see it often enough, we begin with enduring it and end by embracing it. So it has been in this case. Devotion is but a weak name for the affection now felt for a usage which in its origin was a corruption. In the eyes of many the tie that unites *to* and the infinitive surpasses in closeness and sanctity the matrimonial relation. It is regarded by them as so essential that the existence without it of a verb in this mode is hardly suspected. It is to this conception, or rather lack of conception, that we doubtless owe that most extraordinary specimen of grammatical terminology which gives to the separation of the preposition from the verb the name of "split infinitive."

It is plain from this historical survey that the prefixing of the preposition to the pure infinitive had in its origin all the distinguishing marks of a

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corruption. But it is by no means plain that the insertion of an adverb between *to* and the verb can be so designated. The burden of proof assuredly lies upon him who makes an assertion to that effect. For let us consider the abstract propriety of the usage. The infinitive, we all know, is a verbal noun. Between other substantives and the prepositions governing them words are constantly introduced. Indeed, we are frequently compelled to insert them in order to convey our meaning fully or properly. That fact does not affect in the slightest the grammatical construction. When we remark, for illustration, that "he sent a letter to the friend of his youth," no one could possibly regard as improper the insertion of the definite article and possessive pronoun between the two prepositions and their objects. Why, then, should this verbal noun enjoy the distinction, denied to all other nouns, of having the attendant *to* connected with it directly in all cases? What dignity hedges it about? It is all the harder to comprehend, because the preposition in the position indicated has in the large majority of instances lost its proper prepositional force. Many grammarians, indeed, treat it in such cases as an adverb. Others have designated it by the vague generality of

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“particle.” There is certainly ground for the difficulty they have experienced in its characterization. Prefixed to the gerund, it meant something. But with the simple infinitive it merely precedes; it does not govern. It has become little more than a mechanical device to indicate that the verb following is in the infinitive mood; and this it would indicate whether joined to it directly or separated from it by a word or words. It is, however, so valueless in itself that when it is omitted, as it regularly is after certain verbs, its absence is not even felt.

Enough has been said to dispose of the charge of corruption brought against this usage. But, besides this, we are told that it is an innovation. This of itself could never be deemed a convincing argument for its avoidance. If an innovation is a desirable one, it is to be welcomed and not to be eschewed. But the principal difficulty with this objection is not its fallaciousness, but its falsity. More than twenty years ago the late Fitzedward Hall—that terror of those indulging in loose and unfounded assertions about usage—showed conclusively that the practice of inserting words between the preposition and the infinitive went back to the fourteenth century, and that to a greater or less degree it has pre-

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vailed in every century since.<sup>1</sup> He had not been the only one to observe the fact. Very likely he was not the first to announce it. But he was the one above all who made it his business to establish the truth of it by a wealth of illustrative extracts that nobody had previously taken the pains to bring together. His essay settled definitively that whatever sanctity attaches to grammatical constructions from age, it belongs in an eminent degree to this particular one which purists are now often accustomed to stigmatize as a modernism.

In the light of the facts just given we can therefore feel justified in looking with indifference upon the charge of corruption brought against this usage. That is a distinction which every grammatical form must have enjoyed some time during its existence. We can further treat with scant ceremony the charge of innovation. That owes its origin to ignorance of the facts. But there remains another and much more serious accusation. It is the one intimated, and indeed almost directly asserted, in the opening paragraphs of this essay. It is there implied that the practice has never met

<sup>1</sup>“On the Separation by a Word or Words of *To* and the Infinitive,” in *American Journal of Philology*, vol. iii., p. 17 ff.

with the sanction of good writers. If true, this would be a convincing reason for its avoidance. A usage deliberately rejected by all authors of excellence is to be shunned, no matter if thousands of a lower class employ it unhesitatingly. But the same difficulty attends this assertion as attended the previous one. It is not in accordance with the facts. It was most effectively disposed of in the paper of Dr. Hall to which reference has just been made. He showed that the practice had not only existed in every century from the fourteenth to the present, but that in every century it had been indulged in by good writers. Let us throw out of consideration the passages he furnished from the works of authors who, however highly esteemed in their own generation, are to us hardly so much as a name. Still, without reckoning these, the examples he adduced are not to be sneered at for their number any more than for the quality of those contributing them. They begin with Wycliffe in the fourteenth century. He is found employing such locutions—of which I have modernized the orthography—as “to this manner treat,” “to never have received,” “to evermore trow,” and others of a similar nature. The following century was one not much given to literature of any sort; but examples of this

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usage are furnished by two of its most distinguished names—Bishop Pecock and Sir John Fortescue. One illustration—in which the spelling is modernized—shows how much danger there was that this liberty might pass over into license. “Whenever,” wrote Pecock, in his *Repressor*, “he taketh upon him for to in neighborly and brotherly manner corrept<sup>1</sup> his Christian neighbor.”<sup>2</sup> In the sixteenth century Tyndale and Lord Berners had no hesitation in resorting to this usage. In the succeeding centuries passages are cited from a large number of authors, among whom are Sir Thomas Browne, Pepys, Bentley, De Foe, Dr. Johnson, Burke, Southey, Coleridge, Lamb, Wordsworth, De Quincey, Charles Reade, Macaulay, Ruskin, Herbert Spencer, and Leslie Stephen. One writer who was specially addicted to the usage was the poet and divine, John Donne.

It can hardly be denied that this is a very respectable gathering of men who have failed in literature. Some of them might even meet the approval of the “literary persons,” as Mr. Lang terms them, whose hearts swelled with

<sup>1</sup> Reprove.

<sup>2</sup> *Repressor*, Prologue, ii. See, further, in *Repressor*, ed. Rolls Series, 1860, “for to first give,” p. 5; “for to not do it,” p. 16; “for to the rather be,” p. 32, etc.

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joy at the opportune succor brought by the British government to the imperilled speech. But all the well-known authors who have been guilty of this linguistic crime, if it be deemed a crime, are not included in Mr. Hall's list. Occasional transgressors also are Goldsmith, Cardinal Newman, Carlyle, Lowell, and George Eliot. It may be well, indeed, to give a few more illustrations of the practice from writers who are generally thought to have attained a respectable position in English literature:

"To rather pity and excuse than blame me."  
—Franklin<sup>1</sup> (1738), (Works ed. of 1887), vol. i., p. 4.

"Long have I led them—not to vainly bleed."  
—Byron's *Corsair*, canto 1.

"To nightly call  
Vesper, the beauty-crest of summer weather."  
—Keats's *Endymion*, bk. 1. 362.

"Without permitting himself to actually mention the name."  
—Matthew Arnold, *Essay on Translating Homer*, sec. iii.

Even the great poet of Scotland has to be included among the offenders. It was Burns

<sup>1</sup> The extracts from Franklin and Keats I owe to an article communicated to the *Nation* of January 19, 1893, by Mr. Albert Matthews.

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who, in one of his most famous pieces, spoke of Wallace as one

“Who dared to nobly stem tyrannic pride.”<sup>1</sup>

Doubtless many more names could be added to the catalogue given were an extended examination made of the usage of the prominent writers of our literature in reference to this particular point. Especially would this be the case if we directed our attention to those now living. The application of the rule proclaimed at the beginning of this essay would certainly exclude the works of all our present popular novelists from being regarded as literature. But that is Mr. Lang's quarrel, not mine.

Even as it is, such an array of imposing authorities might at first sight be deemed sufficient to settle the question. But let us be just. A discussion of this sort ought not to have for its aim a one-sided presentation of the facts. All that has been said has been truly said; yet it is right to add that in one sense it is utterly unfair. It tends to give the impression that there has never been any genuine reason, based upon the practice of great writers, for finding any fault with the usage here under consideration. This is far from being the case.

<sup>1</sup> *Cotter's Saturday Night.*



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For while the custom of inserting an adverb between *to* and the infinitive goes back to the fourteenth century, and while, furthermore, it has been found in every century since, it is not until a comparatively recent period that it has been found frequently. From the middle of the sixteenth century down to the beginning of the nineteenth the probabilities are that the practice has against it the weight of authority. On this point, as on so many similar ones, there has never been an exhaustive examination of the works of our foremost authors—hardly even an approximation to it in a single case. Accordingly, all assertions of this nature must be taken subject to correction. Still, so far as investigation, necessarily imperfect, justifies the making of any statement whatever, it seems safe to assert that the usage in question has been avoided by the large majority of the great writers of our speech. Perhaps it would be better to say that the thought of resorting to it has never occurred to them. Furthermore, it may be observed that many of those who have employed it in the past have done so rarely. With our present inadequate knowledge no hard and fast rules can be laid down. In some writers it occurs but seldom; in others it is found frequently. Of the former there are two

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striking illustrations. Only a single instance was pointed out in Dr. Johnson, and only one in Macaulay. It is, of course, to be kept in mind that the employment of the infinitive without any adverbial modifier is almost immeasurably more frequent than its employment with it. Against a single example of the latter usage in any given work can always be found scores of the former.

But with the information we have, it is fair to assume that in previous centuries the great majority of the best writers of our literature never took kindly to the practice under discussion. The objection to it, based upon this general disuse, is therefore one which cannot be set aside lightly, still less dismissed contemptuously. If the feelings in regard to the practice which held sway in the past continued to prevail in the present, the only course open to him who is solicitous about conforming to the best accepted standards of expression would be to refrain from its employment. But these feelings no longer prevail. As constantly happens in the history of language, the old order of things is changing. Usage which can impose a restriction can also take it off, if it so chooses. That in this case it is choosing to take it off is perfectly plain to the student of speech, whose

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business it is to note things as they are, and not as, in the eyes of grammarians, they ought to be. The practice of inserting an adverb between the infinitive sign and the infinitive has steadily increased during the last hundred years, and goes on increasing still. Even a slight examination of the best and the worst contemporary production, both in England and America, will make clear that the universal adoption of this usage is as certain as anything in the future well can be. That to some it is and will continue peculiarly offensive there is no question. This, indeed, is a point upon which they will not neglect to keep us fully informed. But the ranks of those who employ the construction will be steadily swelled by new recruits who will use, not only without scruple, but without thought, a method of expression which they meet everywhere in print and hear everywhere in conversation. The mere weight of numbers will eventually settle the dispute. The time, indeed, will come when men will be unaware that there has ever been any dispute about the matter at all.

But until that time comes there will continue to be on this point both diversity of opinion and diversity of usage among educated men. Some even who in theory approve of this denounced word-order and recognize the inevitableness of

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its universal employment are certain to be so affected by the linguistic traditions in which they have been brought up as to refrain from resorting to it in practice. Among writers at all periods there are those who shrink from the new, even when they look upon it as desirable in itself. On the other hand, there are those who accept without hesitation any neologism whatever, if they think that thereby they can secure additional clearness and expressiveness. The varying attitude of modern authors towards this particular usage is strikingly exemplified in the works of the two great representative poets of the Victorian era, Tennyson and Browning. No one possessing an atom of discretion will venture to maintain a universal negative unless he has carefully gone over the whole ground in dispute. I therefore content myself with observing that if Tennyson ever inserted an adverb between *to* and the infinitive it has escaped my notice. Such abstention on his part from a usage which in his time had become comparatively common would be in accord with the conservative tendencies he generally exhibited in matters of grammatical construction. Whatever innovations he made were in the way of reviving the obsolete or introducing the dialectic.

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But with Browning the case was far different. The practice so violently condemned by many, among whom are doubtless some of his admirers, was one to which he was peculiarly addicted. His fondness for it is manifested in both his earlier and later pieces. Take, for illustration, the tragedy of *A Blot in the 'Scutch-eon*. In that play we find "to *merely* have reproached," "to *plainly* make the charge," and "to *only* signify." It is, however, more convincing as well as more satisfactory to test Browning's attitude towards the usage by his prose. In poetry the necessities of the measure may sometimes lead an author to commit what he himself will confess to be a fault; but, nevertheless, a fault voluntarily committed in order to produce a striking beauty. But in prose no excuse can be pleaded on this score. In that the writer who resorts to any disputed practice does so with his eyes open, does so deliberately, not to say defiantly. Now in Browning's play of *A Soul's Tragedy*, the second part is written in prose. With the question of this usage in mind, the following extracts from this comparatively short piece clearly indicate his opinion of the matter:

"I had despaired . . . of ever being able to *rightly* operate on mankind through such a deranged machinery as the existing modes of government."

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“It becomes a truth again, after all, as he happens to *newly* consider it, and view it in a different relation with the others.”

“I only desired to do justice to the noble sentiments which animate you, and which you are too modest to *duly* enforce.”

In the whole of this second part there are just six instances of adverbs qualifying the infinitive; in three of these, as we observe, it precedes it directly.

Browning's course is so illustrative of the later attitude of men generally towards this usage that it may well serve as an introduction to an account of its wider modern extension. Paracelsus, his first acknowledged work, was published in 1835. In this poem appeared several instances of the insertion of an adverb between the preposition and the verb. The fact is of itself fairly conclusive evidence of the headway which the usage had already gained. There is every reason to believe that this method of expression was then employed by the poet unconsciously. It probably never occurred to him at the time that any objection had been or could be made to the practice. Later in life, with the clamor raised about it, he could hardly have remained in this happy ignorance; though if knowledge came, it did not affect his action.

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At all events, the unconsciousness of linguistic criminality, which he seems to have felt at the beginning of his career, was shared in by no small number of his contemporaries. The usage, though long before in existence, did not apparently begin to obtrude itself upon the attention of the public until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Notice was then occasionally taken of it in the reviews; but so far as my own observation goes, it was treated as a singularity and not denounced as an enormity. No fault seems ever to have been found on this account with Madame D'Arblay by any critic, though she gave ample occasion for it by the frequency with which she resorted to this particular arrangement of words. Thus the usage, little heeded, gained ground steadily. By the middle of the nineteenth century it had become common. Then the champions of purity of speech suddenly woke up to the gravity of the situation. Following the time-honored fashion of locking the stable door after the horse has been stolen, they started a systematic crusade against the practice. It has been kept up with little interruption from that day to this. At no period, indeed, has the attack upon the usage been so virulent as during the past dozen years; and at no period has its futility been so apparent.

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The purists had been aroused from their torpor too late, if, indeed, their awakening at any time would have made any difference in the result.

One further point remains for consideration. What are the reasons which have led to the wide extension of the practice in modern English? To the trained student of the development of expression they are quite obvious. This particular change in the order of the words is but an illustration of that conscious or unconscious effort always going on in language to give greater precision or strength to the meaning. The users of speech feel, whether rightly or wrongly, that they can secure either added clearness or added force by putting the qualifying adverb directly before the verb it qualifies. There are numerous instances where the adoption of the word-order usually followed occasions a certain degree of ambiguity. Scores of illustrations could be found from the works of well-known writers. Let us take, for example, one from the dedication to Lyttleton of the novel of Tom Jones. "I have endeavored strongly to inculcate," wrote Fielding, "that virtue and innocence can scarce ever be injured but by indiscretion." In this sentence, does *strongly* modify *endeavored* or *inculcate*? A very respectable argument can be got up for either view; and though in this



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instance it makes no particular difference, there are always liable to be cases where the matter is of importance. Furthermore, the separation of the adverb from the verb seems to many to deprive expression in some measure of strength. In the line previously cited from Byron, "to vainly bleed" will seem to most men a more emphatic way of stating the fact than it would be by using "vainly to bleed" or "to bleed vainly." Similarly, "I have determined to never speak to him again" is to the popular apprehension a more forcible method of declaring one's resolution than by saying, "I have determined never to speak to him again." When, in his *Elsie Venner*,<sup>1</sup> Holmes refers to things "which few except parents can be expected to really understand," one can hardly help feeling that added strength is given to the expression by inserting the adverb between *to* and the infinitive. The inherent right or wrong of the apprehension does not come under consideration, nor how men ought to feel about the matter. What they do feel has been the all-controlling influence which induces them in many instances to change the order of the words, and has made them unsatisfied even with placing the adverb after the

<sup>1</sup> Vol. ii., chap. xix., p. 52 (ed. of 1861).

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infinitive. This latter, too, is in some cases impossible.

It is apparently in this way only that the single instance, so far recorded, of Macaulay's resort to this method of expression can be explained. It occurs in the essay on Lord Holland. That nobleman had died in 1840, and Macaulay's article appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* for July of the following year. As it was originally published in that periodical, one of the paragraphs began with the following sentence, "In order *fully* to appreciate the character of Lord Holland, it is necessary to go back into the history of his family." In 1843 Macaulay brought out an edition of his essays carefully revised. In that the beginning of the sentence just quoted had been changed so as to read, "In order to *fully* appreciate the character of Lord Holland." This is the form which was retained in subsequent editions. There seems no other reason to give for the alteration than the belief on the part of the essayist that thereby he imparted greater force to the assertion. For Macaulay was never careless about his expression. What he did he did designedly. Accordingly, he must have believed that in thus departing from his usual practice he had secured the additional emphasis for which he was striving.

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Such is a brief outline of the fortunes of this so-called corruption. It is hardly necessary to say that throughout this essay the term corruption has been used, not in the proper sense of the word, but in that given to it by those who apply it to all transformations and changes going on in language which have not the good-fortune to meet with their personal approval. It is a duty as well as a right on the part of such to protest against innovations which seem to them objectionable. But they cannot afford to make the mistake of fancying that dogmatic denunciation can ever supply the place of argument. The mere opinions of individuals, no matter how eminent, will never long carry much weight with the users of speech. If men come seriously to believe that ambiguity can be lessened or emphasis increased by changing the order of words in any given phrase, we may be sure that in time the habit of so doing will be adopted whenever it is deemed desirable. It is clear that most of those who now refrain from the practice under discussion no longer do so instinctively, as was once the case, but rather under compulsion. They refrain, not because they feel that it is unnatural or unidiomatic, but because they have been told that it is improper. Artificial bulwarks of this sort will

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never hold back long a general movement of speech. If the present attitude of men towards this particular usage continues—and of this there seems every likelihood—they can be relied upon to brush aside the objections of purists as summarily and as effectively as they have done in the case of the passive form *is being*. If they proceed so to do, no one need feel the slightest anxiety as to the injurious consequences which will befall the English tongue. It is not by agencies of this nature that the real corruption of speech is brought about. Were such the case, our language would have been already ruined any number of times and at any number of periods.

## IX

### HAD LIEFER, HAD RATHER, AND HAD BETTER, WITH THE INFINITIVE

AT the present day one occasionally meets in newspapers and even in books such an expression as "he would better do so and so." It is asserted, indeed, that the use of the construction has been enjoined in schools, though this is something hard to believe. It is, of course, not absolutely impossible that a corruption of this sort may come in time to be accepted as proper. The language has more than once accomplished feats full as difficult. Still the uselessness of the locution as well as its unidiomatic and ungrammatical character ought to stand, and doubtless will stand, effectually in the way of any such result. A sort of plea could be got up in favor of "he should better," though even for that phrase there would be no necessity. But what the one who employs "he would better do," really says—going on the assumption that he says anything—is that he would do such or

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such a thing better than he would do something else. What he is trying to say is that it would be better for him to do such or such a thing instead of something else.

A locution of this sort is the invention of the purists in speech,—who, it is quite needless to remark, are beings essentially distinct from the pure in speech. In every period are to be found persons who can never be sincerely happy unless they can parse every word of every expression they use. To their eyes *had better do* presents insuperable difficulties. It matters nothing that they constantly come across it, or locutions like it, in the writings of great authors—never so often, indeed, as of late years. This fact satisfies the ordinary man; it does not satisfy them. Before they are willing to accept authority for any idiom, it must be reconciled to what they choose to call their reason. If in this they fail, they are ready to sacrifice sense to any method of expression which they fancy to be consistent with grammar. Hence has originated the substitution of *would better* for *had better*.

This latter is not the only locution of the sort which has fallen under censure. There is a similar one contained in a favorite text of the Bible which has excited as much grammatical heart-burning as various other texts of that

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book have theological. "I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness," says the Psalmist. It is fair to observe in behalf of those who take exception to the idiom found here that the explanation of it does not lie on the surface. It presents a very genuine difficulty which has perplexed generations of men. The hostility to it is in consequence no new thing. To many lexicographers and grammarians in the past it has been both a stumbling-block and an offence. Further, though its nature had been previously pointed out, no exhaustive study of its exact character and early history was ever made until about a quarter of a century ago. Then the task was accomplished by Fitzedward Hall,<sup>1</sup> who so effectually demolished the myths pertaining to the junction of the particle *to* with the infinitive. Accordingly, in telling the story of these locutions, much that is said here is based primarily upon the results of his investigations and upon the materials he collected.

There have existed and still exist in our tongue three idioms of essentially the same character. They are *had liefer* (or *liever*), *had rather*, and

<sup>1</sup> On the origin of "Had Rather Go" and analogous or apparently analogous locutions, in *American Journal of Philology*, vol. ii., pp. 281 ff.

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*had better*. The order in which they have been mentioned is the order in which they came into general use. At the outset it may be said that none of them goes back to the earliest period of the speech. At that time the regular expression for the first of these locutions which presented itself was made up of the comparative of *lief*, 'dear,' the dative of the personal pronoun, and the preterite subjunctive of the substantive verb. Instead of *I had lief*, men said *me were lief*—that is, 'it would be dearer to me.' The words are here modernized; nor was this the order in which they always appeared; but essentially it is the original idiom.

It was towards the close of the thirteenth century that *had lief* followed by a verb made its first recorded appearance in the language. Once established it came rapidly into extensive use. No reader of Chaucer needs to be told how frequently it is to be met in his pages. Nor is his practice in employing it different from that of his contemporaries and immediate successors. For about two hundred years this particular locution may be said to have been fully recognized, not merely in colloquial speech, but in literature of all sorts. But about the middle of the fifteenth century a rival idiom sprang up. It conveyed the same idea with the use of a



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different word. This was *had rather*. The new-comer did not expel *had liefer* speedily. As a matter of fact it never has expelled it entirely. But it steadily encroached upon the frequency of its employment. Though the two expressions lasted side by side for at least a century, the later form not only pushed gradually the earlier one from its supremacy, but finally drove it almost entirely from literary use. The practice of Shakespeare may be said to indicate the fortune which in his time had overtaken the supplanted and supplanting idioms. *Had rather* is found in his plays scores of times, *had liefer* not once.

Practically, therefore, after the sixteenth century this particular locution had died out of the language of literature. It can, indeed, be found employed in it occasionally. Even in our own day it is not altogether disused. Two or three writers of eminence have at times resorted to it; but as a general rule, when it now occurs, it is either put in the mouths of the uneducated or is the conscious adoption of an archaism. In this latter respect the effort made by Tennyson to revive the idiom is worthy of mention. As early as 1842 he had made use of the archaic combination of *lief* and *dear* in the *Morte d'Arthur*; but it was not until his later writings that he introduced *had liefer*. The first instance

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of its occurrence is in the *Idyls of the King*, which came out in 1859; after that it is found not infrequently in his productions. Twice does Enid employ it in the poem which goes under her name. Her first use of it is where she says that, compared with having her lord suffer shame through his love to her,

“Far lieber had I gird his harness on him.”

But Tennyson's course seems, up to this time, to have found few imitators. Decay has overtaken the expression. There has probably never been a period in which it has not been more or less employed in the colloquial speech; but in literature its day has long been gone.

*Had rather* is therefore the lineal successor of *had liefer*, or, strictly speaking, its supplanter. The meaning of both is essentially the same. But in the sixteenth century there began to be employed an analogous, though not a rival, locution. This was *had better*. An example of it has been cited from a poem of the fifteenth century; but even if no doubt exists of its appearance then, it did not come into general use until a good deal later. Like *liefer*, but unlike *rather*, *better* had been originally employed with the pronoun and the substantive verb. *Me were better*—that is, ‘it would be better for me’

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—was the method of expression which gradually gave way to *I had better*. It may be remarked in passing that a confusion of these constructions sprang up in the Elizabethan period and became somewhat prevalent. The dative with the substantive verb was sometimes replaced by the nominative. Hence we find such expressions as Viola's in *Twelfth Night*, "She were better love a dream." It was *had liefer*, however, which pretty certainly furnished the model upon which *had better* was formed. But the latter was apparently slow in coming into any wide general use. It could not encroach upon the employment of *had rather*, for it was distinct in meaning; but for some reason there seems to have been for a long while a reluctance to resort to it. In our version of the Bible it does not occur. In Shakespeare it is found but once followed by a verb, and that instance belongs to a part of *Henry VIII.* which is now usually ascribed to Fletcher.

This condition of things seems to have continued during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. *Had better*, though employed, was, comparatively speaking, not much employed; at least this is true if we confine our consideration to the writings of authors of the first rank. But in the nineteenth century all this was

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changed. The idiom came to be constantly used in literature, while the analogous *had rather*, though still retaining its full hold upon colloquial speech, began to appear less frequently in written. The change which has taken place in the employment of the two idioms may be indicated by the result of an examination of representative novels of two of the greatest novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively. The first is Fielding's *Tom Jones*. That work appeared in 1749. In it *had rather* occurs just fifteen times.<sup>1</sup> It is used indifferently by characters of every station, including the author himself when speaking in his own person. On the other hand, *had better* is used but twice.<sup>2</sup> Nearly a hundred years later—in 1848—Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* was published in book form. In that work *had better* occurs twenty-three times, while *had rather* occurs only once, if we leave out of account locutions beginning with contracted and therefore doubtful forms like *I'd*. The situation had been completely reversed. It may further be added that in neither of these novels, largely representing, as

<sup>1</sup> Bk. i., chap. iii.; bk. vi., chaps. ii. (twice), vii.; bk. vii., chap. xiii.; bk. viii., chaps. ii., xi., xv.; bk. xi., chap. vii.; bk. xii., chap. x.; bk. xiii., chap. ii.; bk. xv., chap. xi.; bk. xvi., chaps. ii., v.; bk. xvii., chap. i.

<sup>2</sup> Bk. vi., chap. ix.; bk. vii., chap. xii.

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they do, colloquial usage, does *had liefer* appear at all; though in Tom Jones this idiom with the double comparative—giving us *had lieferer*—is in one instance put in the mouth of an illiterate person.

Facts of this sort do not justify the formation of sweeping generalizations. They represent nothing more than an incomplete and necessarily one-sided investigation. In matters of usage, too, the personal equation always has to be considered. There will consequently be found in individual writers a condition of things which seem to bear directly against the truth of the general conclusions deduced. In Holmes's *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, for instance, *had rather* is found seven times,<sup>1</sup> and *had better* but three.<sup>2</sup> Inferences, therefore, based upon what must necessarily be imperfect investigation must always be given subject to correction. Yet it is not likely that fuller examination would yield results essentially different. Certainly all the evidence which has so far ever been adduced points to the conclusion that a growing preference has been exhibited in literature for *had better* over *had rather*. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, the former occurs

<sup>1</sup> Ed. of 1900, pp. 15, 90, 152, 208, 225, 266, 272.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 90, 160.

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twelve times, the latter but four. Take, as a further illustration of the prevalence of the feeling, Disraeli's novel of *Sybil*. This appeared in 1845. In it the former locution is found thirteen times, the latter not once.

It is no difficult matter to explain the present comparative infrequency in literature of *had rather*, once so much more common than *had better*. The place of the former can be easily taken by *would rather*, in which *rather* is distinctly an adverb. This latter locution had appeared in the language as early at least as the twelfth century. It consequently preceded *had rather*; furthermore, it had always existed alongside of it, and had generally been interchangeable with it. If less idiomatic, it served the purpose well enough to be adopted by the timid as soon as the outcry against the assumed ungrammatical character of the almost synonymous expression made itself distinctly noticeable. This first began to be heard in the second half of the eighteenth century. As long ago as 1768 the locution was made the subject of a portion of a special treatise.<sup>1</sup> It was designated

<sup>1</sup> Two Grammatical Essays, first, on a Barbarism in the English Language in a Letter to Dr. S——; second, on the Usefulness and Necessity of Grammatical Knowledge, in order to a right interpretation of the Scriptures. London, 1768.

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in the very title of the work as a barbarism. Not unnaturally the spurious account of the origin of the locution, which was then becoming prevalent, was introduced to play its part. According to this, as has already been intimated, *I would*, for the sake of brevity in speaking and writing, had been contracted into *I'd*. This in turn had been expanded by ignorant authors, or perhaps printers, into *I had*. As was perhaps to be expected, the denouncer of this so-called barbarism left much to be desired in his own expression in order to make it conform to correct usage. It was a subject of ironical regret with some of the reviewers that those who are able and willing to give our language a purity it has not are apparently unable to succeed in writing it with the purity it has.

*Would rather* could at any time be substituted for *had rather* with propriety. But the case is different with *had better*. In no such easy way could men escape from the employment of that locution. *Would rather* says, even if sometimes imperfectly, just what it means; *would better* is forced to have a sense imposed upon it in order to mean anything at all. The use of it is so distinctly repugnant to our idiom, not to call it absolutely improper, that, when met with, it is apt to provoke a cry of pain from him

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who has been nurtured upon the great classics of our literature. It cannot be stated positively where and when it came first to be employed; but the vogue it has now, such as it is, it owes largely to the influence and example of Walter Savage Landor. In a previous essay<sup>1</sup> the reason has been given why Browning in one passage substituted *would better* for the classical *had better*. It was in deference, he said, to the "magisterial authority" of Landor. There was a peculiar innocence in the poet's estimate of the value of his friend's linguistic utterances. In questions of usage Landor, indeed, was the most untrustworthy of guides, but for a reason quite different from what might be supposed. He occasionally made a correct statement. Hence the uninstructed reader can never have the desirable assurance that everything he asserts is always wrong even if it be so generally. We may entertain what view we choose of Landor's style; but there can hardly be two opinions, among those who have studied the subject, as to the value of his pronouncements upon points of usage. In his observations upon language no man of equal abilities ever surpassed him in the combination of limited knowledge of the facts with unlimited wrong-

<sup>1</sup> See page 150.



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headedness in drawing conclusions from them. Naturally he adopted and repeated the entirely erroneous account just given of the origin of *had better*. Nor did he stop with imparting misinformation. Landor had always the courage of his perversities. In his devotion to what he fancied correctness he was capable of writing such a sentence as the following, "Those who removed it were little aware that they had better left it."<sup>1</sup> All sorts of linguistic atrocities have been perpetrated in the name of grammar; but perhaps none can be found that equals this in defiance of the English idiom.

As it was always practicable to substitute *would rather* for *had rather*, the use of the latter tended to become less frequent after the middle of the eighteenth century. Such as did not feel sure of their ground took this easy method of escape. There are those, in consequence, who think that *had rather* is destined to undergo the same fate as *had liefer*; that while it will continue to be heard in colloquial speech, it will disappear from literary. But this is altogether improbable. There may be variation in the extent of the employment of the locution at particular times and by particular persons. That is some-

<sup>1</sup> I give this on the authority of Fitzedward Hall. I have not myself verified the passage.

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thing, however, quite distinct from its abandonment. *Had liefer* had died out of general literary use before literature had had full opportunity to exert its conserving influence. For the great agency which prevents the decay and death of words and idioms is their employment by a large number of writers of the highest grade. Such authors always continue in fashion; they are always read and studied and imitated. Hence they give enduring vitality to the forms of expression which appear in their productions. In the great writers of the past *had rather* is found almost universally; in some of them it is found very frequently. Their employment of the locution is certain in consequence to keep it alive; its concurrent employment in the colloquial speech will keep it vigorous. The most determined efforts directed against it for a century and a half have failed to displace it from the usage of the educated. With the fuller knowledge now possessed of its origin and character, these efforts are sure in process of time to be abandoned altogether. It accordingly remains now to explain its exact nature and to recount some of the various views entertained about it.

It is clear from what has been said that during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries men were in the habit of using *had rather*,

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and to a less extent *had better*, with no thought at all of the peculiar character of these locutions. They accepted them, as they did many other idioms, without seeking to understand them. It was enough for them that they found them in good use at the time, or saw that they had been in good use in the past. But there always comes a period in the history of a cultivated language when it begins to be studied for itself as well as for what it contains. The vehicle is to some of full as much importance as the material it conveys. Points of linguistic propriety, which at all times have interest for the few, begin now to be discussed by the many. In English this feeling first made itself distinctly manifest in the second half of the eighteenth century. Grammars and dictionaries then took up to some extent the question of usage. Manuals made their appearance instructing us as to the expressions we ought to avoid. It was inevitable that an idiom of the peculiar nature of *had rather* should attract attention. It was not understood in the least; and idioms not understood, like men in the same situation, are sure to be misunderstood. At the outset, accordingly, to mention this particular locution was usually to misrepresent it and to censure it. The analogous expression *had liefer* had died out

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of the language of literature; *had better* was comparatively little employed. The brunt of the attack fell consequently upon *had rather*.

There are two persons who are deserving of particular mention in connection with the early criticism of this idiom. Attention is due to the one because of his influence upon English lexicography, and to the other because of his influence over later grammarians. It was in 1755 that Dr. Johnson brought out the dictionary which goes under his name. No previous work of the nature, so far as I can discover, contained even an allusion to the locution under discussion. Their compilers either did not have their attention called to it or chose to refrain from committing themselves upon a matter which they were unable to comprehend. It is certainly not referred to in the dictionaries of either Dyche or Bailey, the two works of this kind which were in widest use before the appearance of Johnson's. It would have been no injury either to the truth or to his own reputation had Johnson preserved the same reticence as his predecessors. On the subject he had two utterances, one under *have*, and the other under *rather*. The fifth definition which he gave of the verb was 'to wish, to desire in a lax sense.' Two passages were cited to exemplify the meaning, and of these one was

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the text of the Psalms previously quoted. Under *rather* he defined *to have rather* as meaning 'to desire in preference.' "This is, I think," was his added comment, "a barbarous expression of late intrusion into our language, for which it is better to say *will rather*." In these remarks Johnson not only showed ignorance—which, considering the time he wrote, was pardonable—but he displayed obtuseness, which is not a characteristic he was wont to exhibit. *Have rather*, in the sense of 'prefer,' prevailed to some extent for a considerable period, but it had practically died out by the beginning of the Elizabethan era. So far from being of late intrusion into the language, it had made its appearance in it by the middle of the fourteenth century. Still, Johnson was addressing a generation even more unintelligent in this matter than himself. It is therefore not particularly surprising that these almost ridiculous statements should have been adopted by several later lexicographers. A quarter of a century afterwards, Sheridan, for instance, improved in his dictionary upon the original error, and informs us that *had rather*—not *have rather*, in which the verb is in the indicative—is "a bad expression." It should be, he said, *will rather*.

The other writer alluded to was Robert Lowth,

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who died in 1787 as bishop of London. In 1762 he brought out a small work entitled *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*. Lowth was a man of ability and an eminent scholar in many fields; though it is well to remark here that scholarship in our tongue, as we understand it, can hardly be said to have existed in his day. Accordingly, while he knew a great deal more than his predecessors of the historical development of our grammatical forms, what he knew was not itself a very great deal. The consequence was that though he corrected some misstatements and removed some misapprehensions, he added both misapprehensions and misstatements of his own. It is a question, indeed, whether in the long-run he did not do more harm than good. For Lowth was perhaps the first person, and certainly the first person of any recognized learning and ability, who devoted himself to the practice of pointing out mistakes, or supposed mistakes, of usage in the writings of eminent authors. Undoubtedly there is some justification for the course. Every great writer is liable, though under ordinary conditions not very likely, to commit errors. But the difficulty with those who assume the office of critic is that in nine cases out of ten the so-called errors they fancy they find are not

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errors of the author in violating good usage, but errors of the censor arising from lack of knowledge of what good usage actually is.

Lowth was no exception to this general rule. In the original edition of 1762 he had nothing to say of the particular locution here under consideration. But in a later one he took notice of it. He found it by no means reducible to any grammatical construction. He then proceeded to promulgate the theory already mentioned, that its origin was due to a contraction of *I would* into *I'd*, and the erroneous expansion of this last into *I had*. Lowth was very likely not the person who was originally responsible for this precious piece of etymology, but his name and influence caused the wide acceptance of the belief that in this particular way the corruption had crept into the language. Although there was for it not the slightest justification in fact, it became during a good share of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a common, not to say the common, explanation of the origin of the locution. From Lowth's day down to Landor's it was fairly certain to be dragged into the discussion of the idiom by every one who objected to it. In truth, it was for so long time an accepted solution of the difficulty the expression presented that it is not un-

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likely that it may be found lingering still in some quarters, in spite of the not infrequent exposure which has been made of its falsity. The state of mind which led to its adoption is indicated in the remark with which Webster accompanied his discussion of the idiom in the edition of his Dictionary that appeared in 1828. "Is not this phrase," said he under *have*, "a corruption of *would rather*?" By the time he had reached the latter part of the alphabet he felt fairly well able to answer his own question. He continued, indeed, to express himself hypothetically about the origin of the idiom, but about the use of it he had now reached very positive conclusions. "The phrase," he wrote under *rather*, "may have been originally *I'd rather*, for *I would rather*, and the construction afterward mistaken for *had*. Correct speakers and writers generally use *would* in all such phrases." Observations of this character have long disappeared from Webster's Dictionary; but their occurrence in the earlier editions spread far and wide in this country the mythical belief about the origin of this locution and the impropriety of its use. Both of these views received, also, a quasi-support from Worcester.

In England, however, grammarians and lexicographers were, as a general rule, somewhat



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chary about committing themselves on the question of the propriety of the locution. This is true in particular of the early ones. Some of them clearly refrained from saying anything about it because they knew not what to say. On the one side was the adverse decision of the great literary autocrat of the times. On the other, they could not fail to observe that the expression had been regularly used by the best writers; and that even Dr. Johnson himself, four years after the denunciation of it in his dictionary, had fallen, during a temporary lapse into the English idiom, into the employment of it in his *Rasselas*. "I had rather hear thee than dispute," says the prince to Imlac, in the course of that not altogether exciting narrative. Men of literary eminence, indeed, were not often likely to display hostility towards a locution which they themselves were in the habit of using consciously or unconsciously. In this matter the practice of English authors has been generally much more creditable than the attitude of English scholarship. The latter has constantly allowed ignorant criticism of the idiom to be made without entering any protest. Men have in consequence been led to assume that the censure of it has not been questioned because it cannot be questioned. Take as an illustra-

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tion of too frequent comment the remark of Mrs. Orr, in her *Life of Robert Browning*. She quoted a passage from a letter of his in which he used the expression "I had better say." Then she informs us that Mr. Browning would have been very angry with himself if he had known that he ever wrote *I had better*. If he did not know that he had written it, he was inexcusably ignorant of his own poetry. Assuredly, if he took pains to make himself familiar with that, he would have been furnished with several opportunities for being angry with himself for using both *had better* and *had rather*.

It seems, indeed, rarely to occur to purists that an expression which is heard everywhere from the lips of cultivated men, which has also, as authority for its employment, the usage of the great writers of our speech, must have justification for its existence, even if they cannot comprehend what that justification is. In such cases we are bound to accept on faith, even if sight be denied. But in this instance sight is not denied. That the idiom in question is in accordance with the requirements of the most exacting syntax an analysis of any one of the three locutions specified, wherever it occurs, shows conclusively. Let us take, for example, the *had rather be* of the text from the Psalms

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which has been already given, and subject to examination each one of its constituent parts.

In regard to the first of these three words two things are to be taken into consideration—its grammatical character and its meaning. At the outset it is to be observed that *had* is here not an auxiliary, but an independent verb. Furthermore, it is in the past tense of the subjunctive mood and not of the indicative. The use of this subjunctive form has never died out, though its place is usually taken by *would have* or *should have*. Yet, if in later times its employment has become more restricted, it cannot be called uncommon, especially in conditional sentences. In the raising of Lazarus described in the Gospel of John, both Mary and Martha are represented as saying to Christ, "Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother *had* not died." "But for delays of the press he *had* had this answer some months ago," wrote the great scholar Bentley. So Byron represents the pirates, at the close of their song in *The Corsair*, when deploring the fate of their comrades, as exclaiming, while they divide the spoil,

"How *had* the brave who fell exulted now!"

It is needless to multiply illustrations. In fact, the instances where *had* is thus employed, though

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not common in colloquial speech like *would have* or *should have*, are so frequent that its occurrence creates no ambiguity and causes no surprise.

As regards the meaning of the verb in this particular locution, it is to be said that the original sense of the word *have*, which is to hold a material thing in one's hands, underwent a natural extension to holding a conception in the mind. Hence it came to mean 'account,' 'esteem,' 'consider,' 'regard'; to signify, in fact, the idea which is often expressed by the word *hold* itself. In this respect it has gone through precisely the same course of development as the Latin *habere* and the corresponding verbs in various other languages. In English it remains no unfamiliar usage. The phrases 'had in reverence,' 'had in contempt'—for the verb of which we might substitute *held*—are heard not infrequently, and do not strike us as at all peculiar. Combining, therefore, what is implied by the grammatical form and the meaning, the *I had* of *I had rather be* can be exactly represented in ordinary English by 'I would hold, or deem.'

So much for the first word; now comes the second. Few need to be told that *rather* is the comparative of both the adverb *rathe*, meaning 'quickly,' 'early,' and the corresponding adjective *rath(e)*. The positive forms of each

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practically died out long ago. When they appear now, they appear as archaisms; indeed, Milton's "rathe primrose that forsaken dies" is the one passage which has made the word familiar to most modern ears. Further, the comparative *rather*, while common as an adverb, is hardly known with us as an adjective. It is, in truth, to the particular idiom under consideration that it is now almost entirely restricted. There is but little difficulty in tracing the development of meaning which took place. *Rather* strictly signifies 'quicker,' 'earlier.' But when a man wishes to have something more speedily than something else, it is generally safe to say that he has for it a distinct preference. Accordingly, the transition from the sense of 'quicker' into that of 'more desirable,' 'preferable,' was both natural and easy. That it was actually made we know outside of this particular idiom; but here it has found its regular manifestation. It follows that *I had rather* is precisely equivalent to 'I would hold more desirable (or preferable).' An *it* might be inserted between the verb and the adjective, to denote the following clause; but it is not necessary, and is here omitted, as in several other like phrases.

We come finally to the last word, *be*. This is

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not only an infinitive, but it is now almost invariably the pure infinitive. Originally, however, it was not such at all. In the earlier period the sign *to* frequently accompanied it, as it did also the infinitive when following *had liefer*, *had as lief*, and *had better*. There was a good deal of variation in the use of this particle. When the sentence contained two clauses, each with an infinitive of its own, *to* was sometimes used before both verbs. The construction can be seen in the following lines, in modernized orthography, taken from Chaucer :<sup>1</sup>

“ ‘ Brother,’ quoth he, ‘ here woneth<sup>2</sup> an old rebeck,<sup>3</sup>  
That had almost as lief to lese<sup>4</sup> her neck  
As for to give a penny of her good.’ ”<sup>5</sup>

Again, it sometimes preceded the infinitive of the first clause and was omitted before that of the second. This will be illustrated by another quotation from Chaucer:

“ Liefer I had to dien on a knife  
Than thee offendè, truè dearè wife.”

More frequently it was omitted before the infinitive of the first clause and retained before that of the second. This mode is exemplified in the text of the Psalms now under examination.

<sup>1</sup> “Friar’s Tale,” lines 275-277.

<sup>2</sup> Dwells.      <sup>3</sup> Crone.      <sup>4</sup> To lose.      <sup>5</sup> Property.

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All these methods of construction existed in the case of *had liefer*, *had rather*, and *had better*. In all of them the tendency increased to drop the *to* in both clauses. In process of time this became the distinctive one as we find it to-day. Still, any construction which has behind it a past of good usage gives up the ghost reluctantly. It is, therefore, not surprising that examples of the employment of *to* following these phrases should turn up occasionally in later literature. The impudence of editors, indeed, in substituting their own crude notions of what the author ought to have written, instead of what he actually wrote, often renders it a task of peculiar difficulty to trace the history of an idiom. This is no exception to the rule. "He had better *to* do so ten times," wrote Ben Jonson, "than suffer her to love the well-nosed poet, Ovid."<sup>1</sup> In the more or less inaccurate modern editions of this dramatist the *to* is quietly dropped. A resort to the originals is absolutely necessary if we wish to gain a trustworthy knowledge of usage, and this is often not easy and sometimes not practicable. Still, there is sufficient evidence to show that while, in the immense majority of instances, the sign of the infinitive has been discarded since the middle of the seven-

<sup>1</sup> *Poetaster* (fol. 1616 a), act iv., scene 7.

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teenth century, it has at times put in a belated appearance. This occurs even in authors of repute. "You had better to have let this part of your story sleep in peace," wrote Richardson in 1754. In his Roman History, first published in 1769, Goldsmith said of Cæsar that "he was heard to say that he had rather die once by treason, than to live continually in apprehension of it." There are other examples belonging to the latter half of the eighteenth century that could be furnished; but as they come from writers of little repute and no authority, it is hardly worth while to burden the page with quotations of them.

*Had rather* with the infinitive has been used by almost every writer of good English since the middle of the sixteenth century. There is no further defence for its employment needed than that simple fact. But the analysis given here of the construction shows that its grammatical character is perfectly pure. The passage of Scripture with which the description of the subject began can accordingly be paraphrased so as to present clearly the exact nature of the idiom. This done, it would read as follows: "I would hold (or deem) it more desirable (or preferable) to be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wicked-



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ness." An explanation essentially similar is true of any sentence in which the archaic *had liefer* occurs.

*Would rather* and *had rather* are with us interchangeable. But this is not true of *would better* and *had better*. The two idioms under consideration stand on an entirely different footing. In the one volition is the underlying idea. 'He had rather do it,' means that he would prefer to do it. Hence there is no difficulty in substituting *would* for *had*, for in both cases the meaning would be essentially the same. But no such easy interchange can take place in the case of the other idiom. In *had better* there is implied not a sense of mere choice or volition, but one of obligation, or of the compulsion of circumstances. When we say 'he had better do so and so,' we do not mean that he may prefer to do so and so, but that it is the part of wisdom or of duty for him to do so and so. Hence the absolute insufficiency of *would* in place of *had*, were there no other objections to its employment. There are instances in which *might better* could be properly substituted for *had better*; but in most cases the change would be unsatisfactory. It was probably the desire for directness and conciseness, and perhaps for additional energy, which led to the introduction

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of the established locution into the speech. 'He had better do it' once was and still can be represented by the phrase 'It were (*or would be*) better that he should do it.' It was hardly to be expected that the latter diffuse locution could hold its ground permanently against the brevity and condensed energy of the former. Still the history of this contracted method of expression shows that while now accepted everywhere by cultivated men, it made its way but slowly into its present wide employment.

One further observation remains to be made in connection with idioms of this general nature. In the three examples of it which have been considered, *liefer*, *rather*, and *better* are adjectives. This is also true of the superlative *best* in *had best*, and of the positives *good* and *lief* in the expressions *had as good* and *had as lief*. The last-named locution maintained itself in usage after *had liefer* had died out, and, in colloquial speech at least, still flourishes as vigorously as it did in the days of its youth. But in every one of these phrases the leading word has seemed to the popular apprehension and continues to seem not an adjective, but an adverb. Especially is this true of *had rather*, in which the positive *rathe* has never had much more than a poetic or dialectic existence. With such a

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feeling about these words on the part of the users of speech, it could be predicted with almost absolute certainty that if there were extension by analogy of the employment of the idiom, adverbs would be resorted to and not adjectives. The probable has become the actual. In our later speech the locutions *had sooner*, *had as soon*, *had as well*, have come to play no inconspicuous part in expression. They seem to have made their first appearance in the speech about the middle of the eighteenth century. This inference, however, may be due to the fact that it was then they apparently first attracted the attention of critics. "If any one," wrote a reviewer, "shall either in speaking or writing use these expressions, *I had as gladly stay*, or *I had sooner go*, we should be grossly offended, and should not scruple to pronounce them barbarous." This was the sort of welcome with which they were then received. But they were condemned not because their critics knew that *liefer* and *rather* and *better* were adjectives, and that *gladly* and *sooner* were adverbs, but because they were both included in the common censure which owed its existence to the general ignorance that prevailed of the exact character of the earlier idioms, according to the analogy of which the later ones had been formed. Nat-

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urally objections of this sort did not operate as a restraint upon their employment, and they have continued to be found frequently in literature up to the present time. About the propriety of using these genuine adverbs in the expressions which have been given there may be room for grammatical controversy, but in the case of the adjectives there is none at all.

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