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or
The Future of English



By
BASIL DE SÉLINCOURT

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ENGLISH

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POMONA

POMONA OR THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH

Before discussing the future of English, one is forced, in the bustle of these scientific days, to inquire whether language itself has a future. “We are working”, wrote Mr. J. B. S. Haldane, in his brilliant little essay *Daedalus*, “towards a condition when any two persons on earth will be able to be completely present to one another in not more than a twenty-fourth of a second.” Is speech quick-moving enough to keep a place in such a picture? When everything else has learned the speed of lightning, will the transference of our thought be likely to lag behind and is it not a waste of time to ask if future generations will speak German, or Japanese, or Esperanto, when they may not need to speak at all?

Scientific knowledge is a delightful plaything. Working with measurable quantities, it can treat the future like a ball of string to be unwound. Though life is all wonder and surprise, though the world always turns out stranger and richer than we expected, we know that the future will be linked mechanically with the present as the present is with the past. The machinery of human existence fifty years hence will be the practical application of possibilities known to-day. There is basis, then, for a certain kind of scientific prediction. The future of language is in a different case, because the mechanical element in it is subsidiary. It is conjecturable, of course, that it may one day be superseded, that men may learn to transfuse their meanings by a kind of controlled telepathy, mind meeting mind. But to do this they would need to be able to think without words, and language, as we now know it, is not for communication only: it is the very framework of our thought. It is part of our lives; and what our lives are to be we can tell only by living them.

A good deal has been learned of late about the evolution of language—enough to modify very much our views as to the influences that really count, the habits which conduce to accuracy or to vitality. But there is a long way between understanding after the event and understanding before

it. It is with the different languages of the world as with the different species of animals: once they have come into being, one easily sees which way they came, one cannot see in the least which way they are going. Of all whom change awaits, man seems likely to change most and most quickly. Whole nations are stirred to hope and restlessness. Never did the future beckon more enticingly than it does now. Science lays a finger upon the springs of life and dreams of a race to be made perfect, not by the murderous processes of haphazard struggle, but by the swift and decisive elaboration of a conscious design. The man of the future, we hear, may differ as much from ourselves as we do from monkeys. Inventive eugenics, new as motor-cars, is to inaugurate a still more drastic revolution and make of us, in the near future, whatever we may wish to be.

What then do we wish to be? A fundamental question that—to which the answer, surely, is that we cannot deeply wish to be other than we are, seeing that we have become what we are because it was what we wished to be. We wished it for a hundred thousand years, while slowly the wish took form and substance. That form, that substance have been determined by the movements of the mind: they are its tutored response to the totality of the conditions of life on the earth; and therefore it is one of our justest instincts to be jealous of any tampering with the results, any light pretension of the flickering intellect to replace these gradually matured perfections. How fruitless for man to lift his head nearer heaven if his feet cease to touch the ground! One thing we may be sure of, that the processes of our amelioration, physical or spiritual, will never be spectacular. Let the mind, rushing ahead, call the body a lumberer if it will; the body never was and never will be idealist. Its province is not to set a feather on the mountaintop, but to arrive with bag and baggage.

It is because language is a branch of the tree of life that we can do so little by way either of influencing or predicting its future. The expert in eugenics vividly suggests to us that in time to come he will give us twelve fingers if we want them, and we can understand why he is so confident. He is saying “Only have courage, and we will do with men to-morrow what we are doing with guinea-pigs to-day.” But we must not let his love of the picturesque delude us. These things could be done only on condition of our surrendering our lives to beings as high above us as we are above pigs; and surrender to superiors is not a means of progress. The jesuitry of religion is

bad enough, but at least it secures us against succumbing to any jesuitry of science. The development of the machinery of the individual life is bound up with the development of the individual mind; it requires independence, not submission. In this our language is like our members. The scientists of speech are tempted from time to time to descend upon us and prove what a much better instrument we might have than the one which we have painfully elaborated for ourselves; and indeed the wastefulness, the inconsistencies of every language that exists are plain to the merest tyro. Nevertheless it is of the essence of our language, as of our members, that it should have grown upon us, that it should have grown out of us. "Improvement makes straight roads," wrote Blake, "but crooked roads without improvement are the roads of genius", and by genius he meant simply life working upon life. It is a curious fact, that when experts advise on language, their advice is generally bad. Language, if it is to live, must follow the ways of life; and advice, even good advice, can never allow enough for one factor at once decisive and unknowable, the new experiences of newly situated minds.

What is the future of the English language? The problem is evolutionary. It is of little interest to conjecture how many mouths will be speaking it in a hundred years and with what sort of twang or accent; speculations of that sort range too widely. Our aim must be to inquire whether English is or is not a growing member; whether those who use and are to use it have an instrument capable of enlarging and purifying their knowledge, whether it can help them to mould themselves more closely to the pattern of truth. Languages, like other organisms, have their appointed length of days. The tree cannot go on putting out fresh leaves for ever. The more leaves there are, whispering and breathing in the wind, the thicker the trunk must be and the denser the roots and branches, for flow of sap from tip to tip; and the whole must keep sweet if that flow is to continue. It is the same with language. The leaves are our conversations, the roots are our experiences, the trunks and boughs our literature. And that great woody framework, which is the strength of the fabric, is also a seat of trouble and decay. It has taken shape, it determines us. Only through it can our ideas pass to their being; it has decided what we must be. What if its form is biassed, if it is preternaturally confined? Our condition then is that of animals who have missed the highway of development, turned into some cul-de-sac, and come to a full stop. Every animal except man has done it, and most races of men

have done it too. The continuance of progress is extraordinarily difficult; there are always a million chances against it at any particular time and place.

Can English, then, maintain its life-current? Our literature, indubitably, shows symptoms of fatigue. Everyone feels in Chaucer the joyous expansiveness of youth, in Hardy the sombre introspection of old age. Chaucer, were he living now, would not be Hardy; but Hardy's view of life is widely accepted as representative, and few are surprised by it, while the sweet serenity of Bridges surprises many. How far is the change merely literary, how far is it racial, and what are the modes in which racial and literary progress interact? Literature, to begin with, is an art and art is in this unlike nature that it does not tolerate simple repetition. Events like Shakespeare's plays or *Paradise Lost* cannot happen twice; and by happening once they prevent many other things from happening at all. To write in English without knowing them is almost impossible; to know them and not be influenced by them quite impossible. The English literary artist has therefore the choice of working on the same lines as his precursors and going further, or of finding different lines to work on. So Tennyson becomes daintier, Browning more boisterous, Swinburne more exuberant, Meredith more congratulatory, Hardy more afflicted, than any one was before; and in the achievement of each one overhears the sigh for a serener element, all are recognizably oppressed and restless in their thickly peopled pool. They are aware that the main outlines of an Englishman's experiences have been laid down, that new territory exists only in nooks and corners, while, as to the methods of exploration, they have been so greatly taken, the virtues so generously submerging the faults, that ability to take them has become almost synonymous with greatness and a change unthinkable. Thus the poet of to-day must allow that his instinct to outvie all predecessors can hardly be gratified, that where he deserts them it is at his peril, and that the best he can hope for is to hit on some secluded bypath where his mind, wandering in freedom, may dispossess itself of fruitless rivalries.

So much for the merely literary, but what of the racial position? In so far as the experience of the English race is fed and sustained by its literature, it must necessarily be affected by any toxin of age with which that literature is charged. But, in the first place, no race possessed of a great literature has ever had a less literary experience than we have, and, in the second place,

the circumstances of English lives now-a-days (and, indeed, of human lives everywhere) are subjected perpetually to so many and such startling changes, that our accumulation of racial experience takes a different bearing, may help instead of hindering us. The English of England, or of the British Isles, appear, it is true, to be living too close and to have lived too long to be able to continue living freely; and yet there are signs that the natural developments of racial life are still proceeding. To King, Lords, and Commons is being added among us one might say, a fourth estate: we are endeavouring to found an ordered commonwealth on the conscious collaboration of a prosperous working-class. The bulk of the people, therefore, still looks forward; and, this being their attitude, there is fair hope of their learning how to possess themselves of the new world that is opening up around them.

So English, though already an old language, is even in England still spoken by a young people; and its future everywhere (the future of a language cannot be separated from the future of those who speak it) depends on its power to reconcile these as it has reconciled so many other opposites. The English or Anglo-Saxon temperament has from the first been equally remarkable for its absorptiveness and its idiosyncrasy. The characters we find in *Piers Plowman* or the earliest lyrics acknowledge, in idioms like our own, our own ideals:

No love to love of man and wife;
No hope to hope of constant heart;
No joy to joy of wedded life,
No faith to faith in either part;
Flesh is of flesh and bone of bone
When deeds and words and thoughts are one.

The thought expressed here by an anonymous Elizabethan might have been expressed yesterday or in Chaucer's time. It was with us from the first, is not outgrown, and never will be. And part and parcel of the thought is a certain bluntness in its expression. It is felt to be worth more than any possible expression, to have the right to be guarded against facile exposure. The trait is typical, and justifies us in calling English the expression of an inexpressive people. Communication flows slowly among them; their ideas, before they brim over into speech, have felt the north and the south wind

and turned their faces east and west. There is modesty in this as well as deliberation, and mingled with it are tolerance, humour, and common sense. Aware of the world, they have been aware that it is made up of many sorts of men, aware too, finally, that the world is not something that we make but something to which we lend ourselves that it may make us: a point at which the practical and the mystical join hands. All these qualities have passed into the language, which has great diversity in its contacts, an admirable economy in its mechanism. It is a comprehensive, a hospitable, a pliable language; it is full of inconsistencies, yet it works; and if its grasp, wide always, needs now to be wider than ever before, will anyone assert that it has found its limits?

The English have certainly shown themselves in the past to be a people who could live and let live; as the possessors of this rare virtue, they now find themselves living everywhere; but how shall words, which have been formed on the lips of the inhabitants of a small island in a soft misty climate, express the lives of men whose homes are the continents of the world and to whom nature is revealed in all her grandiose extremes of heat and cold, drought and flood, bounty and bareness? The birds of the moor and the woodland do not speak alike; they say the same things, it may be, but their tone they borrow from their habitat; and the languages of men have a similar reflectiveness. In Celtic, with its tenderness and wild glamour, we feel the mountain and the valley, the rocks and the rain; in the mellow vowels of Italian the blue of the Mediterranean and its cloudless skies. English, it would appear, resembles rather the chirping of the sparrow—a noise capable of following men wherever they go and echoing under any roof with which they protect themselves from the elements. It has a faculty of almost brutish accommodation, attracts indolence, ignores discomfort, and thrives in the absence of the graces.

Every one who loves birds, though he cannot deny the sparrow many virtues, shrinks at the thought of his capacity for mere multiplication and is haunted by a nightmare vision of a world from which the more fastidious species have been banished, leaving all one sparrowdom. A similar horror fills the mind of the humanist when it occurs to him that English may be destined to be the language of the human race. *What* English, he wonders, and reflects that there are men now working to that end who do, after all, represent one aspect of the English genius, making it not impossible that

half-baked bricks and gim-crack motors may one day overrun the earth. The nettle-like loose rankness of our language not only helps to spread it, but makes it liable to tower domineeringly as it spreads. In plain truth, it is already spoken too generally for its good, and, in spite of all the machinery we possess for unifying it, its expansion may yet prove its undoing.

The issue is so important as to justify us in reflecting a little on the nature of language in itself. Invented to be of service to truth, it is committed to a compromise with falsehood. Our experience is indivisible, but, in order to explain it to ourselves and others, we are obliged to split it up into segments; to which segments and the relations between them we give names. What we name is therefore an interpretation imposed on nature, not nature itself; and even when our names seem to belong to objects which Nature classified before we did, as when we talk of a man or a woman, we are not protected against error. Into the word 'man' come creeping all the associations born of our experience of the men we know, and we suppose every two-legged talking animal to have their failings and their virtues. Such words as 'liberty' or 'peace' are more misleading still; they are names of variable types of feelings and relations; we can judge of their application to reality only after the experience of half a lifetime.

Thus, though our language grows from us like a limb, it yet has its mechanical side, and the reconciliation of the vital and the mechanical is always difficult. A machine like a mowing machine interferes with the activity of Nature at set stages; that is simple enough: it is different with a machinery which must avail itself of the movements of life and adapt itself to them; and such is the machinery of language. Its cogs are letters, syllables, the sounds they prescribe; it is still mechanical when it assigns to these sounds their limited meaning; and, although it does not cut up Nature's map into a jig-saw puzzle, yet its divisions, however careful, can never be conclusive, because it is cutting up an organic whole into inorganic parts. How different is music,—how much truer! No note of music has meaning in itself; it means what it means from its position in a phrase, and, as phrase follows phrase in a movement, the music develops and completes this meaning in an organic whole, no part of which can be detached from it alive. Thus music is, as it were, all life and universally intelligible, language only part life, the rest mechanical attachment. Nor have these attachments even the security of being hitched to stable objects.

They are an intermediary between one kind of life and change and another. The makers of the names change while they make them, and the objects have changed before their names are known.

What do we mean, for example, by 'love'? something, surely, as definite as it is familiar. But no! the meaning of 'love' is a historical study—it belongs even to the future almost as much as to the past. We have not found its meaning yet, we have not given it its meaning. We have for long devoted ourselves to the pursuit of a meaning for it, and after centuries of failure have endowed it with a halo of converging aspirations. Love is the name of an ideal, constantly sought, partially realized. In its fullest sense, it suggests an enduring tie between a man and a woman which is also a pattern of the true relationship of the soul to the world.

But what is that true relationship?—something that we have still to find out. The French call love 'amour'; 'amour' too has its halo. About the word 'amour' has gathered the memories of a race that has learned to consider its physical and spiritual impulses irreconcilable. It has in it the wild contrasts of some natural upheaval and a prevailing tenderness, like that of calm after storm. It is a great word, providing a name for one deep chord of experience, which in English, by the different focus of our attention, we have left nameless. But the differences between the two words not only proceed from differences of racial temperament, they also produce and perpetuate such differences. The average Englishman who hungers after 'amour' never obtains it, because the thought of 'love', of which he cannot divest himself, intervenes. The average Frenchman is equally debarred from 'love', for the very sound of 'amour' assures him that it is a romantic dream. So the indivisible experience of reality is split up in one way by one people, in another by another, and each perforce sees it along its own dividing lines. Both cannot be right, and truth is hidden from men by the apparatus with which they hoped to unveil her.

Of course the words that count for most in a language are those in which men exchange their common thought about the purposes on which they are chiefly bent, the goal to which they are steering; and words of this kind are apt to be merely national. The German 'Kultur' is an example. 'Kultur' was the focus of a peculiar complex of associations, which involved, among other things, a novel conception of the relation of the muscles to the mind. The Germans thought they had found in it an ideal of conquering force, and

many people in England spoke shyly of 'culture' for a time, as if the love of letters and the arts must lead every one where it had led the Germans. Temperamental concentrations of the kind that gave 'Kultur' its intensive meaning are constantly at work; we see the result in the different characters of the Greek, the Spaniard, the Italian. The Italians and the French, the French and the English, have different notions of what life ought to be. 'Libertà' is a word still found in Italian dictionaries, but Signor Mussolini has revised its meaning very drastically. Breathing the same air, walking the same earth, the different peoples blend the elements in different mixtures and draw from the soil a sap that permeates their being and gives individual colour to every feeling and thought. These variations of tincture are valuable in themselves; life would be poorer if there were only one kind of flower or fruit; the idiosyncrasies of nations give brightness and colour to the human comedy. But they are also of capital importance to progress, because they remind us that our own blend of ideas is a makeshift like the rest, and that, if we are not to be left stranded, we must learn how to leave it open to possibility of change. With the establishment of a universal language these fruitful comparisons would cease; the human race would be committed to one set of conventional ideas and caught for ever in a prison of its own making; and even if such a universal language were only ancillary, though the worst evil would be avoided, the adopted language would tend to be debased, since men of different schemes of experience would use the same words in different senses, so step by step obliterating their true sense and leaving them flavourless.

Great therefore as is the glory for a language of being as wide as the world, that glory has its drawbacks and its dangers; and the crisis in the condition of English is aggravated by its exceptional capacity for assimilating foreign influences. It is useless harking back, as some idealists do, to the pure well of Anglo-Saxon simplicity. Anglo-Saxon was not simple; it was cumbrous and complicated, more like German than English. The first English that is easily intelligible to us is already half French; and all through their history, wherever they have gone in their travels, the English have brought words back with them. In India, Africa, America, Australia, amalgamation still goes on, and the result is that our vocabulary, in its mere bulk and before one begins to think of the anomalies it contains bears heavily on the frail intelligence of mortal man. With half-a-dozen different peoples continually tossing fresh petals into the vast pot-pourri,

what will happen to the unifying aroma which is the all-in-all? What influences, habits, ideals shared by all these people can have strength to overcome their growing divergencies? Their eyes open on different scenes, they are surrounded by different plants, birds, and animals, eat different food, endure or enjoy different climates. Nor do these differences remain external: they evoke different temperaments, different constitutions. Will not these different constitutions soon dictate a different rhythm, a different articulation, a different music for their expression? The problem is the more engrossing, because the determining conditions have no parallel in history, and our developed machinery, of communication and reduplication, from printing to telephony, introduces influences the effect of which no one can foresee. If it is enough for us to hear the same speeches and read the same books, there is now nothing to prevent our doing so. The one language is obviously a great convenience. But does not the machinery which sustains it favour conventional forms rather than living speech?

The salient feature of our age is the increasing participation of the masses in the guidance of life and in its interests. Machinery has made this possible, and more and ever more machinery will be required, if we are to attain the broader humanity we desire. Yet machinery symbolizes the ossifying routine, the obstructive red tape, which chokes progress; and machinery always has undue importance for undeveloped minds. The unlettered villager of old was a walking poem; he grew like the hawthorn in the hedgerow, still pruned, still sprouting; his thoughts were the lichen on its trunk, the idiom of his speech had the twists and freaks of its knotty boughs. Forms of life surrounded and emanated from him; he knew nothing else. But when the choice came between life and machinery he chose machinery, not thinking of it as a choice. Because you buy a bicycle, you do not cease to have a garden; only, in course of riding, you pass your garden by; you have removed it a little from your life. The printed book works in the same way. It multiplies a man's commerce with words; and though it increases also his power to see through words to thoughts and things, it does not increase this power in the same proportion; and so with all the rest of our literary machinery. Here again the world-wide language suffers, its diffusion weighting the balance against its life. If print is really at times to get its meaning over, there must still be lips from which words fall like flowers, there must still be minds in which language is growth and beauty; and there must be a *Gradus ad Parnassum*, a means of working-up through

the machine-made stages, a consciousness piercing somehow down into the copy-book world, something to remind the half-lettered of the primitive life they have emerged from and the completer life to which they would attain. Our English must keep its natural warmth and concreteness, its gift of free response to the fresh fact. These things cannot be preserved. Preserves, it is true, keep indefinitely, but at the sacrifice of freshness; and it is freshness that we want. What we love most in English is just that quality of unsugared sweetness, which is the difference between fruit and jam.

Here we bring new water from the well so clear,
For to worship God with this happy New Year.

The best English always has a bloom upon it. The danger is that, as vulgarisms increase on one side, proprieties will increase on the other, and that conversation may begin to burden itself with a sense of duty. To be correct is already to be mechanical. The defiance of correctness, even by the vulgar, has in it something of the virtue and virility, which, in the work of masters, we recognize as the genius of the language. It is easy enough to avoid saying “like I do”; but it is difficult to realize that living language overrides grammatical distinctions and that the test of a phrase is not whether it has been tabled at Oxford, but whether it has its share of soil and sun and dew. Here the indolences of our language, its cautiousness, and even its propensity to wallow in the mire, may have their saving influence. They are all symptoms of the instinct to get appearances on the honourable side, the instinct to appear less, not more, than you are; they are the tacit acknowledgment of a standard of reality, and count for ballast and steadiness.

Are there then no means of vitalizing our English speech? One cannot put the question without seeing that it is unreal. “The answer is in the negative”, as our officials say. Even education itself, consciously applied, may defeat its object; for if people are to talk English, they must talk as they wish to talk; they know that the majority of their would-be masters talk the worse for talking as they have been taught. As to the meanings of words, the temptation to suppose that they can be decided from on high must specially be resisted. We all have our contribution to make to the meaning of the words we use, and the greatest words—faith, freedom, sport, spirit—cannot mean more than we do. These cannot be standardized;

standardization, the name without the thought, is their death, simply. The Trade Unionists of England are disposed to banish 'competition' from our dictionary; will nature vanish it from hers? 'Religion', somewhere in America, is the belief that the world was created in six days; if truth is a fundamentalist, well and good. Obviously there must be standardization up to a point if people are to stick together, and we must be prepared to swallow it in considerable doses now that English is the language of two hemispheres. But the essential is that the point should be a point of agreement. The kind of feeling, the kind of habit, that can be imposed on a man are not worth imposing: the Germans showed that. We, too, have our outbreaks of the dragooning impulse: the word 'Empire' is a notorious rally, with hyænas always hot upon its trail. But, on the whole, the tendency to reduce experience to rule and its expression to a formula, the tendency to regularize men's minds and drill them into uniformity, flatly opposed as it is to all our traditions, wins little success amongst us. True, we have a certain uniformity of drabness (the livery of the sparrow) which suggests an army inured to all the degradations of drill and rebellious only against its smartness. But then, it is the smartness that kills. Drill is machine-made uniformity, a necessary evil of which the English hate to make a panache. Their uniformities are morose, because they are uniformities of submission; their pride goes out to the things they touch directly and can make their own. This is the attitude to be cherished at all costs, because the future is open to it, because it opens to the future. By Heaven's grace, the English have it deep ingrained. Thus the future of English presents itself to the mind as depending, above all, on the survival, in its pre-eminence, of the spirit of freedom, the more so because the scope of freedom is determined by the capacity for discipline. The question of the day is how much machinery a man can stand; and the hope for English is that the average Englishman can stand so much. Regulations are necessary everywhere. Language itself must have its dictionary, grammar its rules. The English rob them of their sting by toleration. Their order even when they speak is spontaneous and has a taste of liberty.

That an Englishman should regard England as the life-centre of the English language is, perhaps, inevitable; yet he is foolish if he assumes her to be so. The life-centre of English is to be found where the spirit of those who speak it is in closest accord with developing realities, and these cannot reveal themselves to minds fixed in any past, however vital that past may

have been when it was present. Are not, then, the Americans living a more contemporary life than we are?—has not the focus of development passed over to them? This is a question so searching that I can touch upon it only with the greatest diffidence. At the conclusion of his first preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman, distinguished among great writers for the forward view, congratulated himself and the Americans on the qualities of the language they had inherited. “English”, he wrote, “is the chosen tongue to express growth, faith, self-esteem, freedom, justice, equality, friendliness, amplitude, prudence, decision, and courage.” It is a noble list of virtues which no one would wish to disavow; and yet the Englishman, of whatever station, would still prefer the briefer catalogue of Chaucer’s knight, who, five hundred years ago,

loved chivalrye

Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisye.

In such words as courtesy, chivalry, and honour, though doubtless he does not understand them quite as Chaucer did, he would trace a fullness of experience, for which self-esteem, friendliness, and their like, however generously mixed with faith and courage, seem poor equivalents. Now, Chaucer’s virtues obviously assume inequalities between men and a sense of the responsibilities of privilege. Whitman’s assertion is that the English ideal survives when privilege is discarded. Can it? Is not the bloom, is not the ripeness of our most comprehensive, most human words, is not the peculiar aroma which surrounds the English conception of the virtues, traceable to our candid admission that inequalities, even when traditional, may be bedded in truth? Honour itself, though not the property of a class, belongs we feel, to those who, by favour of circumstance in part, have come to see that circumstance counts for nothing by the side of truth and loyalty, and who therefore identify these with their very being. Arising out of advantage, the sense of honour carries with it a compensating obligation to all from whom such advantage is withheld. No such associations can attach to the word in America, because they imply limits which are not recognized, nor is honour allowed its externalization, its badge. The King is, with us, the fountain of honour, as he is also its personification at the height; and to them our toleration of royalty is a mysterious medievalism. Yet the Englishman who easily sees the absurdity of kings in general finds

his own miraculously contemporaneous. Differences like this affect in a thousand ways the flavour and idiom of the two languages (for, for the moment, we must call them two), and even the tone with which they are spoken. American talk is full of equality; and to the English ear this equality sounds less like a harmonious prevision of Nature's purpose than a grim determination to wrest it into line with human wishes.

Right and wrong in such a matter can be decided only by the event. However it be, the United States, obviously, is now the scene of the severest ordeals, the vividdest excitements of our language. Only when we hear English on the lips of Americans do we fear for its integrity; others might drag it down; they alone could lift it into change; they alone speak an actively competitive English. They have the right. The English of the United States is not merely different from ours, it has a restless inventiveness which may well be founded in a sense of racial discomfort, a lack of full accord between the temperament of the people and the constitution of their speech. The English are uncommunicative, the Americans are not. In its coolness and quiet withdrawal, in its prevailing sobriety, our language reflects the cautious economies and leisurely assurance of the average speaker. We say so little that we do not need to enliven our vocabulary and underline our sentences, or cry 'Wolf!' when we wish to be heard. The more stimulating climate of the United States has produced a more eager, a more expansive, a more decisive people. The Americans apprehend their world in sharper outlines and aspire after a more salient rendering of it. No doubt the search for emphasis in the speech of Americans and of American women particularly arises, in part, out of the sheer volume of their communication; but it is also because of their keener interest in things that they have a greater desire to talk about them.

With this greater vividness goes, inevitably perhaps, a disposition to anticipate, to define, to 'fix'. The American nation was born of the desire for a more perfect freedom than was obtainable in England; and one of its first actions was to get freedom fixed, to define and express it in a constitution. It might seem impossible that freedom should ever be a chain, but stranger things have happened; and a chain that passes under the name of freedom is peculiarly galling. The American is threatened by a danger of knowing his freedom before he gets it; the Englishman at best surmises, out of a mind stored with immemorial checks and inhibitions. Idealism with the

English is an unacknowledged leaven, permeating action and language and passing from one to the other in a haze of tolerance that helps them to surmount the difficult transition from thought to things. Sleepy blundering protects them against the cruder certitudes. The American attitude has more of the unmediated clash of steel on steel, unsurpassable when the fit is perfect and the speeds accurately timed, but, in the world we know, liable to produce friction, heat, and jarring. The bright slap-dash of the American vernacular shows the defect of this quality, and with its insistence on scoring leaves reality behind. In the 'he-man' hero of 'sob-stuff' efficiency and sentimentalism meet and marry.

Oppressed by the weight of their traditions, anxious to find a machinery for maintaining them, the English in England show symptoms of decline. Societies to study and protect a language however admirably inspired, have an ominous, classicizing trend. We are becoming conscious of our language as of our Empire, and our virtue was our unconsciousness. The fresh outlook, the frank unconcern, the overflowing youthfulness of the Americans drive us back upon ourselves, it may be, but they are a reviving challenge, nevertheless; and though much that is most deeply characteristic of the language is threatened by Americanism, the conditions under which English is spoken in the United States (where it is only one language among many) have a great deal in common with those out of which it originally grew, and are certain to produce, as indeed they have produced already, a flow of novel words and novel devices, some of which will remain to enrich and renovate our speech. The fact, too, that America and England stand for different impulses, not easily reconcilable, may enable them to discover and release a further impulse, deeper than that with which either seeks to be identified. Above all, the more magnetic, more mercurial, the tauter, stormier American temperament has, with these gifts of the modern life of speed and contrast, a quicker sympathy, a warmer and more inclusive comradeship. Love and freedom are the greatest words of our speech; and if, in America, 'freedom' is losing some of its bloom, 'love' has found there a new substance and sweetness.

The contrasting and competitive use of their one language by the English and the Americans gives it a new occasion for the exercise of its old and noble faculty of compromise. In a period of promise and renewal, it was beginning to grow old, the Americans are young; in a period of urgency, it

was lagging, the Americans have made speed their element. Nothing, we may be sure, will ever make the English language brisk; but its strong constitution will assimilate tonics as fast as friends can supply them, and take no serious harm. Changes are certainly in store for it; but the best and most English instinct is still that of resistance to change, and above all to any plan or method of change, any committee or academy or association to school and enlighten us. Let the future of our language repose in our own keeping; let us be jealous of our property in it. Take the most obvious of its faults, its vagaries of spelling and pronunciation. Of course it would be an advantage if there were less chaos here. But it is doubtful whether, if a revision was made by the best people that could be found, our gains would outweigh the loss we should suffer in having asked for it; and, just because rulings are un-English, they generally come from the worst people. On pronunciation the B.B.C. already undertakes to instruct us, and its chief adviser is said to be an Irishman. *O passi graviora...*! The Lord will make an end of these things too. Milton spelt a number of words variably to express degrees of emphasis; it is pleasant to think that nothing need prevent a successor of his doing the same to-morrow, if he ever finds a successor. But, naturally, the position is different now that usage is settled. Usage is our best law. The Americans have dropped a *u* out of humour and other words; possibly we should have done so, if they had not. An inconspicuous adjustment like this which saves time and trouble is obviously harmless, and one may even hope that it will be followed by others. From time to time experiments can be aired in the press or by some enterprising publisher; if they find favour, they will be adopted. But conscious spelling leads to conscious pronunciation; and, again, this kind of consciousness, when English people get it, always goes wrong. You change 'humour' into 'humor' and you get people talking as if the last syllable rhymed with 'or'. You change the spelling of a word to bring it into line with the pronunciation and, before you can look round, people have changed the pronunciation to bring it into line with the spelling. Where are you then? The truth is, that sensitive pronunciation of English involves gradations and blends of vowel sound that the alphabet has no means of recording; and our frank anomalies are really useful if they help to remind us of this. How am I to pronounce 'prophecy' or 'library' or 'worship'? I only know when I hear them on the lips of some one who can speak English. A further value of our spelling, as we have it, is its bond with the

past. It is a pity that many usages, when first established, were established amiss; but the errors are of such ancient date that they have grown into the language. Most of our spellings, too, have something to tell us of the history and origin of the words concerned, and, in a mixed language like ours, this is much more important than that they should attempt to imitate and perpetuate our way of pronouncing them. It is absurd to spell 'rough' and 'dough' as we do; but if we substituted 'ruff' and 'doe', we should lose interesting information and also fall into a confusion which we now avoid.

What applies to spelling applies equally to grammar and to the formation of words. We appreciate it, of course, when people who have studied language and have leisure to think about such things tell us how we ought to speak and what kind of improvements we might introduce into our language if we chose. This is the sort of topic which serves admirably for the correspondence columns of the daily press during the month of August, and gives its readers something to refresh their minds with in intervals of fishing and shooting. But when enthusiasts run campaigns against 'cinema' or 'aeroplane', telling us that we must say 'kineema' and 'air-plane', and suggesting that English will go to the dogs unless we are more serious and can consent to be guided by competent authority, the reply is that seriousness and authority *are* the dogs, where English is concerned. So far, it has always kept them running and we hope it always will.

All the same, it would be the greatest mistake to suppose, because English refuses to be dictated to and dislikes above all things the dictation of the specialist, that the destinies of the language are really in the hands of an unlettered herd. Authority is always at work; but it emanates from sources wider, fresher, and saner than any from which it would be possible to obtain it in the form of rules and laws. If no authority is recognized, it is because we all aspire to be authorities in our measure, and perceive by instinct which of our neighbours sees further or knows more than we do. Instead of a regal fiat, which it would be ignominy to ignore or disobey, what guides us is an infection of reverence for a mysterious rightness, the tutelage of which belongs to ourselves just so far as we are able to penetrate the secret of its being. The final exponents of this rightness are, of course, the great writers of English when they are writing as they would like to do—few if any of them have often done it; and the way of penetration is the knowledge of their works: not the knowledge which regards them as things

done once and for ever (though, in one aspect, they are inevitably that), but such as finds in them, rather, the revelation of a spirit capable of revealing itself anew and of taking forms which, in proportion to their life and worth, must always be unpredictable.

For, of course, if English is to continue to be the speech of vital, developing, progressive peoples, nothing is more certain than that this vitality and progress will be accompanied and sustained by a literature. We stand together now because of the treasury of wisdom which our common language enables us to share; but wisdom itself fades to a dream, unless new expressions of it are continually found, to illuminate and summarize the swift accumulations of human experience. Not that books are to be regarded as the greatest thing in life; or, rather, let us be bold and say that they must be so regarded; but they are in life, and there are a thousand other things in it which divide the interest of those who would appreciate books at their true worth, and which constitute, let us confess it, a very tolerable education for those (in England they have always been many) who never open a book at all. The best books are concentration of the experience of the best lives, of men who, over and above their faculty, for direct living, have the impulse to live a second life in which they share with others the discoveries and delights of the first one. And, just as, among ordinary English people, action is more than speech and speech shines by its contented subservience, so, among those who read and write English, the direct life has always counted for more than the translation. English literature has been the work of men who lived before they wrote: that is its greatness. And though this quality is certainly menaced now that writing tends to become a trade; though the modern audience of two hundred millions tempts even an Englishman to raise his voice; yet modern life, we may reflect, has room for many things, and the worry and self-importance of our literary professionals of all kinds will somehow get worked into the larger equilibrium required of us, along with much else that is worrying and imposing. Life is richer now in its opportunities, more exhilarating in its occupations, more tantalizing in its questions, more urgent in the close pressure of its reality than it ever was for our forefathers; and the men who enter into all these things in flesh and blood will not fail to lift their meaning one day into the ideal world of books.

Meantime the life itself has to be lived, and the very fact that it will be inevitably a harassing, distracting life gives the impassive Englishman his chance. Some one has to take the lead and steer the steady course—why not he? It is ‘up to him’; for he is not only solid but sociable; the institutions he devises are the attraction and the torment of the world. No one else can work them; every one that sees them has to have a try. Roughly stated, the problem of Western Civilization is still to abjure slavery, to be rid of the legacies of a social organization which involved the unconsenting sacrifice of a class. Every man’s mind is now to be its own master; everything of value must be open to every one capable of possessing it; the individual must know his limitations to be his own. And this is no idealist’s ideal; it is a necessity arising from the diffusion, by mechanical means in the main, of a knowledge which may easily wreck us, but of which we cannot get rid. How then is this knowledge to be formed into an instrument of progress? The condition of success, clearly, is the presence of a soul-stirring warmth among all classes, the participation of all in one atmosphere—for every man, however unawakened, his place in the sun, so that, even if he does not care to lift his eyes to the light, light may at least reach him through the pores of his skin. This percolation of light, this preparatory gestation of embryonic soul, is assured to the English by the natural mysticism of their intelligence, by the tincture of poetry that irradiates and solidifies their common sense. The influence which chiefly sustains them in this firmest and fruitfulest of all their compromises, is, no doubt, their age-old familiarity with the Bible. All classes have possessed it, and possessed it so thoroughly as to insist on a hundred private and personal interpretations of the one sacred text. Nothing is more English than non-conformity, except the acceptance of it, and nothing more necessary to the vitality of the practical English mind. For to conform is to take your truth from another or to acknowledge that the truth is beyond you. But religion is practised by the English because its truth is known; personal discovery has made truth real to them; and the vehicle of the discovery has been a collection of mysterious poems and rhapsodies, the words of which there is no holding, for they mean at the same time everything and nothing. From childhood up poetry has ruled us all, and our language has been a kind of rainbow-bridge on which we passed from earth to heaven. The speech which was on our lips from day to day belonged not only to the day’s events, but also to a region of heavenly mystery which brooded over them. Our very faculty of

experience has been cradled in the love of incomprehensible beauties; the ruling virtues of our lives draw radiance from the words in which they were made known to us.

Out of the merging of the practical and the poetical, the intuitive acknowledgment of unknown margins as a working factor in everyday affairs, springs the evolutionary virtue of the English mind, the hope of its future; and, of course, however broadened by the Bible, the English instinct for poetry does not stop and did not begin there. It has expressed itself at large in English literature, the most companionable literature the world has seen, and it has permeated the language, a language formed for common uses and stubbornly matter-of-fact, yet one in which matter-of-factness itself is not hard, but deep. The English practical man is poetically practical; for, in his view, the practical lines, in thought and action, are the lines of life; things that are to succeed, he feels, must hold their place in an equilibrium, must learn their forms and limits and the economy of their power as wild things do in the world of natural competition; his genius is at its best, in work or play, when his occupation is richest in vital analogies. What is the greatness of cricket—cricket, one of the great words of the language as it is one of the great facts of English life—if not that its excellencies can be developed only in a large frame of human feeling, that it is life in little, as much a poem as a game? Now the practical life is the life all have to lead; and if the spirit in which men lead it on the humble level of quiet plodding is the same as that which in his more radiant element inspires the poet, it would seem that the condition, essential to progress in this age, of one light shining for all in varying degrees of brightness, is actually fulfilled.

What we have abutted on is not, really, a paradox. The nettle, the sparrow of the world, is its rose, its nightingale. Again, why not?—he has been, and may be again. The point is that, in life as the English practise it, one passes into the other imperceptibly. For other peoples, poetry has been a thing removed from truth and fact, treating of shadowy or unearthly beauties in an atmosphere no human being ever breathed. That has never been the prevailing English view. For them the poet's task has been the practical one of making language live, casting on one side the intellectual figments and abstractions in which speech entangles us and bringing back to words their primal power and motion. Poetry is often called simple, but the word needs

a gloss. Simple people have poetry because they are so near nature and speak so little that their speech is like an animal's cry, half its own, half an echo of its surroundings. As the complexities of civilization pass over them, they become complex, they 'grow up', and because they are grown up, we think them more mature. They are not really more mature: they are more mechanical. So far as by growth we become complex, we are growing towards a condition in which growth is stultified. The mature is that of which the elements are indistinguishably fused together, it is simplicity at a higher power. This is the simplicity of poetry, which outreaches the finest minds in their subtlest discriminations and abashes science with the flames of its enveloping beauty. This, too, is the simplicity of the English nature, and the English language; neither of them, obviously, simple things at all, but possessed, it seems, of Nature's secret of growth and therefore destined, we may believe, to go on growing.

It was right that an essay on the future of English should contain very little about English itself. To test the mirror, watch what it reflects. The less we think about our language, the likelier we are to retain the qualities which have made it what it is; the more we study it, the greater the risk of breaking that continuous impulse with which the English mind, in high and low alike, feels its way through the world, watching without defining, absorbing rather than classifying, identified with the meanings of things, not distinguished from them. For its loyal use and a true maintenance of the virtue of its tradition we have only to assume that it was made for our purposes by others whose purposes were the same as ours, and to see that it lives to-day on our lips as it lived once on theirs. "Ripeness is all."

Transcriber's Notes:

Punctuation and spelling inaccuracies were silently corrected.

Archaic and variable spelling has been preserved.

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