

Literary.

The English Language.

A deeply interesting lecture was read by M. H. RICHEY, Esq., in the room of the Athenaeum, on the evening of the 6th ult., upon the development and destination of the English language, of which the following is an extract, which we copy from the "Mayflower" Magazine:

THE LANGUAGE OF ENGLAND BEFORE THE NORMAN CONQUEST.

The speech of the ancient Britons is represented as the same with that of the Gauls, from whom, it is probable, they derived their origin, and to whom they presented, in their manners, their government, and their superstition, a striking similarity.

Sharing the fate of their institutions, it was swept away by the overwhelming inundation of the Anglo-Saxon race. Britain, alone of the European nations who fell beneath the German power, lost its language with its liberty. While in every vanquished portion of the Continent the ancient speech continued to be spoken, there it was almost extirpated. The name of the country itself was changed to Anglo-land or England.

It was in the fifth century that the Saxons subjugated Britain, and, settling in the country, substituted their own language for that of the conquered people. For six hundred years it continued to be spoken with scarcely any variation. The age of Alfred has been mentioned as the era of its highest development: for, to that prince, "whose whole history is one panegyric," must be assigned a place no less distinguished in arts and literature than in arms and legislation. "He was," says Burke, "indefatigable in his endeavours to bring into England men of learning in all branches from every part of Europe, and unbounded in his liberality to them." But not content with patronizing the labours of others, "he applied himself to the improvement of his native language; he translated several valuable works from the Latin, and wrote a vast number of poems in the Saxon tongue with a wonderful facility and happiness."

This language, which so long remained the unaltered medium through which the thoughts of our ancestors were communicated, was a dialect of the Gothic or Teutonic. Copious and energetic, it had the power to combine its elements and form new compounds at pleasure—a power which it has, alas! been the custom to overlook; and which, from want of exercise, has, it is much to be feared, been irretrievably weakened. It resembled more the modern German than the present English in the inflections of its parts of speech, and in the inverted order of its construction—a mode of construction applicable only to languages where many variations exist, but which has been pedantically attempted with the modern English by some who rank among the most illustrious of its writers.

Though it has been positively affirmed that the ancient Anglo-Saxon tongue consisted chiefly of words of one syllable, such an assertion is altogether incapable of proof: for the most ancient specimens of that language now extant, consist of a very fair proportion of words of more than one syllable.

The Anglo-Saxon was rich in synonyms. In illustration we may remark that it has been ascertained to have ten words for man, and as many for woman; nine simple terms and ten compounds to designate persons invested with authority. It applied eighteen to mind, and was remarkably prolific in words expressive of the nature and attributes of the Supreme Being. "Great verily," says an old writer, "was the glory of our tongue before the Norman conquest in this, that the old English could express most aptly all the conceits of the mind in their own tongue without borrowing from any."

This noble language, though greatly modified, and deprived of many of its characteristics, continues to be the ground-work of our present speech. It is affirmed that "five-eighths at least of the language spoken by Alfred still circulates in the veins of the modern English."

MODERN ENGLISH.

About A. D., 1260, has been spoken of as the time when the change in the language of England to its present form was nearly consummated. From the middle of the preceding century, when the Saxons and Normans began to lay aside their mutual antipathies, and to converse more familiarly together, the work of transition had been going on; but all writers upon this subject confess themselves unable to fix with accuracy, the period when the transformation from Saxon to English may be considered as complete.

If we consent to leave a fruitless speculation, and come down a century later than the epoch mentioned, we shall find satisfactory evidence of the ascendancy which the modern speech had gained. "An act of Parliament was made A. D., 1362, that all pleadings in all courts both of the king and of inferior lords, should be in the English tongue, because French was now much unknown in the realm; and that the people might know something of the laws, and understand what was said for and against them;"* and Trerisa says, "Sir John Cornwayl, a mayster of gramer, chaunged the teehyng in gramer sehole and construction of Frenssh into Englysshe, and other scool maysters use the same way in the year of our Lord Mij. Clix. the ix. yere of Kyng Rycharde the second, and leve all Frenssh in scoles, and use all construction in Englysshe. Wherip they have auauntege one way, that is that they lerne the sonner theyr gramer. And in another disauauntege. For now they lerne no Frenssh ne con none, whiche is hurte for them that shal passe the see. And also gentelmen have moche lefte to teche theyr children to speke Frenssh."

The change of which we speak was occasioned rather by the introduction of the French idiom than by any very extensive infusion of French words. "It consisted," as an able writer remarks, "essentially in the grammar, and not in the vocabulary." Saxon words were generally retained while the inflections were lost. And the way in which this may be accounted for is, that where the exigencies of two races, speaking different languages, require them to communicate with each other, the race which finds itself compelled to learn the words of the other's speech, may not, with an equal facility, acquire a knowledge of its construction, if that be artificial, and will therefore combine its terms in a more simple form, which simpler structure will gradually gain the ascendancy. Gibbon illustrates this: "The modern Italian," he says, "has been insensibly formed by the mixture of nations: the awkwardness of the barbarians in the nice management of declensions and conjugations reduced them to the use of articles and auxiliary verbs; and many new ideas have been expressed by Teutonic appellations. Yet the principal stock of technical and familiar words is found to be of Latin derivation;—and if we were sufficiently conversant with the obsolete, the rustic, and the municipal dialect of ancient Italy, we should trace the origin of many terms which might perhaps be rejected by the classic purity of Rome." From a similar mixture of nations did the English language result; and when the Normans began to speak in Saxon, they modified the language to a greater accordance with their former modes of expression.

We may now consider the English language as formed; a compound of Latin, French, and Saxon, but with the last greatly predominating. How little was given up by the Saxon, and how little was received from the other languages, may be inferred from the fact, that even at this distance of time, after the lapse of five centuries, during which we have been industrious in crowding it with exotic expressions, it is estimated that out of thirty-eight thousand words, of which the English language is supposed to consist, twenty-three thousand are Saxon.

At the period of which we now discourse, viz: the close of the fourteenth century, our Literature may be said to begin. Then arose Chaucer, "great in song," who has been called the first finder of our language, and whose works Spencer pronounced "the well of English undefilde." Authors indeed had written in English before the time of Chaucer; but of them we need not speak.

* Henry, Hist. Eng

However illustrious in the eyes of their contemporaries, their light waned when Chaucer appeared, as the morning star pales before the rising sun. It was well for the English language that so early in its history it had the genius of Chaucer to aid its development. He was a man of uncommon scholarship and judgment. "Whoever reads the works of Chaucer with attention," says an able judge,* "will be surprised at the variety and extent of his learning as well as charmed with the fertility of his invention, the sweetness of his numbers, (for the times in which he lived;) and all the other marks of a great and cultivated genius." Another intelligent critic remarks, "In elevation and elegance, in harmony and perspicuity of versification, Chaucer surpasses his predecessors in an infinite proportion; his genius was universal, and adapted to themes of unbounded variety. In a word, he appeared with all the lustre of a true poet, in an age which compelled him to struggle with a barbarous language and a national want of taste; and when to write verses at all was considered as a singular qualification."

Notwithstanding the eulogium of Spenser, it must be admitted that Chaucer introduced many French words with the language. He translated from the French; and Johnson tells us that "no book was ever turned from one language into another without imparting something of its native idiom." Frequency of translation he therefore considers "the great pest of speech." But how far, if at all, the accumulation in our language of foreign words by translation, has been detrimental to its vigour or beauty, is an open question. Had the Anglo-Saxon continued uncorrupted and unchanged, a judicious development of its inborn strength and varied latent treasures might have presented us with a language consistent throughout, copious—flexible—harmonious; rivaling, perhaps surpassing in all these qualities, the ancient Greek. As it is, reflecting upon the great revolution to which, between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, it was subjected, and the alteration of its grammatical structure, we cannot but think that the subsequent addition of foreign terms has tended rather to enrich than to deprave it.

For the Wesleyan. Mental Science. No. XVI. THE EXISTENCE OF THE HUMAN MIND.

The intellectual powers of man may be divided into many branches, some or other of which almost every one possesses in a manner peculiar to himself; but very few excel in all. A sound understanding is however, perhaps, the highest attribute of an intelligent being. A sound understanding, like a good eye, is of immense importance, and is correct and exact in its perceptions and judgment. Two particulars constitute a good understanding: first, it has no natural defect; and secondly, it has no redundancy of imagination. If it be defective, nothing is discovered with clearness; and if mere imagination predominate, every object surveyed will be lost in the clouds of fanciful imagery. As one justly observes, "What we call common sense is, perhaps, the best characteristic of a sound understanding; for that, generally, perceives things as they are, without any material addition or diminution."

Common sense signifies that power of the mind by which it self-evidently perceives truth. It is not derived by progressive argumentation, neither from education or habit; but from an instantaneous instinctive, and irresistible impulse; acting independently of our will whenever its object is presented, according to an established law of nature. It is designated sense; and acting in a similar manner upon all, or at least upon a great majority of mankind, it is called common sense. It is equally valuable and permanent when elicited, and forms the basis of all understanding. He who possesses this, even without any other particular trait of mind, can never fall into contempt; even of superior abilities; while all the shining talents that ever dazzled the Circus or Forum, without common sense, cannot secure him from the ridicule, even of inferiors. Common sense

enables him to reason, which forms the grandest distinction man has above the brute creation.

In proof of the existence of the human mind, it may be requisite to notice that it wills or desires. These must not be confounded. Desiring and willing are two distinct acts of the mind. Desire is a strong or earnest wish to obtain or enjoy an object; the will is that faculty of the mind by which it embraces or rejects anything offered to it. Treating of the desires of the human mind, Dr. Watts says, "Those desires that arise without any express ideas of the goodness or agreeableness of their object to the mind beforehand, such as hunger, thirst, and so forth, are called appetites. Those which arise from our perception or opinion of an object, as good or agreeable, are most properly called passions. Sometimes both these are united. If our desire to do or receive good be not violent, it is called a simple inclination or propensity. When it rises high, it is termed longing; when our desires set our active powers at work to obtain the very same good, or the same sort of good which another desires, it is called emulation. Desire of pleasure of sense, is called sensuality; of honour, is called ambition; of riches, covetousness. The objects of a good man's desires are, that God may be glorified, his sins forgiven and subdued, his affections enlightened and placed on God as the supreme object of love, his affections sanctified, and his life devoted to the service of God."

Desire may, therefore, be denominated a state of uneasiness; or an uneasiness of the mind for the want of some positive or supposed absent good. Desire, like hope, when "deferred, makes the heart sick"; and this sickness is in proportion to the greatness of the desire; which sometimes raises the uneasiness to such an extent, that those who are under its influence, are induced to exclaim, give us the thing desired, or we die. Life itself, with all its enjoyments and sorrows, often actually becomes a burthen, intolerable to be borne, under the lasting and unremoved pressure of such uneasiness.

This uneasiness, when properly regulated by the mind, is a great blessing. It determines the will, and excites to, or becomes the spring of action. That which immediately determines the will, from time to time, to every voluntary action, is the uneasiness of desire, fixed on some absent good. The greater part of our lives is made up of this uneasiness which determines the will to successive voluntary actions, by which we are conducted through different courses to different ends. Every man knows that he is content with his state, when he is perfectly without any uneasiness. So long as he thus continues he has no motive, no spring, to action; but uneasiness stimulates to action.

The will, as already defined, is that faculty of the soul by which it chooses or refuses anything offered to it. The will itself is indisputably free. The will, simply as the will, must be so, or there is no such faculty. Its existence is unquestionable, and its freedom to act, equally certain. The human will, however, being finite, has necessarily limits, which so far may be said to confine it, because it cannot act beyond those limits; yet, within the extent of its capacity, it necessarily is, and ever will be, spontaneous. The limits of the will, therefore, do not destroy its inherent liberty.

The will, according to Locke, is "nothing but a power in the mind to direct the operative faculties of a man to motion or rest, as far as they depend on such direction." If the question should be asked, What is it which determines the will? We answer, The mind. The agent itself is the directive power. But what moves the mind, so as to determine the will, in regard to our actions? Some uneasiness which we are under at the time. This is that which successively determines the will, and induces us to do those actions which we perform. This uneasiness may be called, as it really is, desire; for what is desire, but an uneasiness of the mind for the want of some absent good? Without this uneasiness, the will never is determined to any action; but the most pressing uneasiness naturally determines the will.

But this desire or uneasiness, which determines the will, should, in accountable beings, ever be regulated by reason and the Word of God. It must, however, be admitted, that since the fall of man, his understanding has been