

Essays and Reviews.

LAW IN LANGUAGE.

THE discovery of law in the operations of nature or of man gives peculiar pleasure, and is a leading element in human progress. It unfolds order, reveals design, and kindles imagination. Imagination suggests new theories; and efforts to test the correctness of these start the race on a fresh journey of advancement.

Science has long investigated matter, and still delights to read the laws which regulate the changes of the material world; but to this century chiefly belongs the credit of probing the mysteries of speech.

Is there law in language? If it is an invention of man, as Adam Smith and others powerfully argue, there can be no more law in its history than in that of painting or sculpture. If language has sprung from innate faculties, and is as natural to man as walking or 'breathing, then its beginnings may be feeble, but its progress will exhibit unvarying methods of development.

There are reasons for expecting to find law in language,—that universal gift of man, and that crowning distinction between the human and the brute. Man has universal characteristics which must show themselves in all that is peculiar to the race, and not to specially gifted individuals. Hence, in language and its progress, there must be invariable elements. Man is physical, and his organs are affected by geographical and meteorological conditions. He is guided by sight and sound; and, if one of these is wanting, the other cannot produce the effects peculiar to that which is gone. Free-will exists in man, and it shows itself in mighty cataclysms in the history of his speech; but there is in him an element of necessity, too. In him, as in all created things with which we are familiar, there is a universal tendency to decay, which can be arrested only by the timely application of the fruit of some "tree of life;" and, in his speech, as in all he does, this tendency must be seen.

But the most effectual answer to our question is found, not in considerations of what must be, but of what is. Observation and comparison are necessary to the discovery of facts and laws. Well, men have observed and compared. *Hervas*, *Adehung*, the Russian *Catherine*, *Sir Wm. Jones*, *Bopp*, *Pott*, *Grimm*, *Humboldt*, *Steinthal*, *Schuchardt*, and