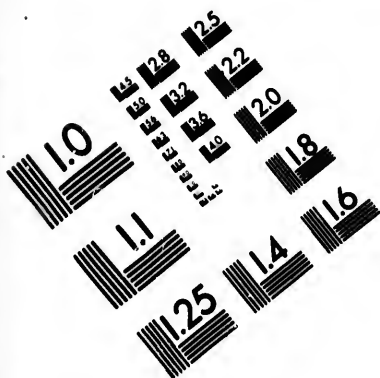
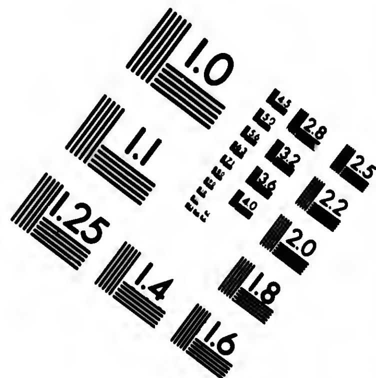

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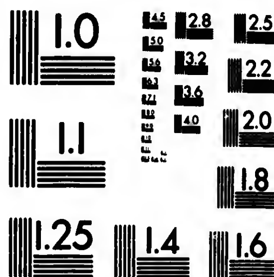
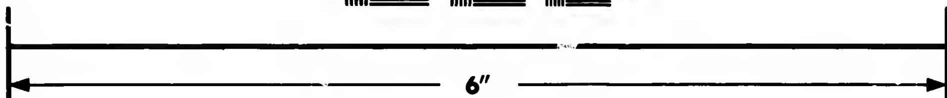

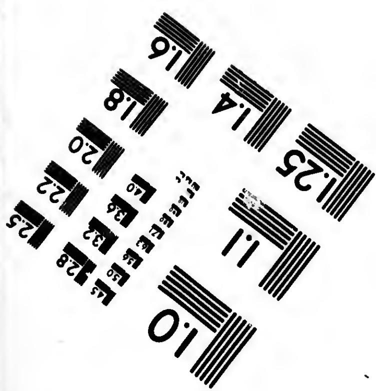
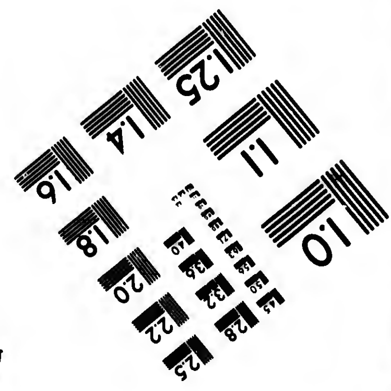

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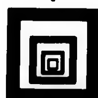

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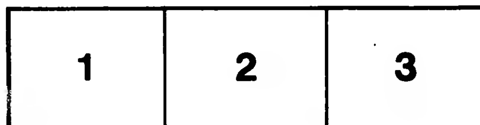

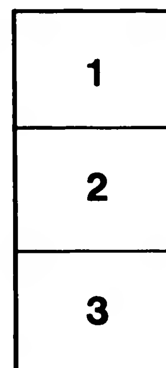

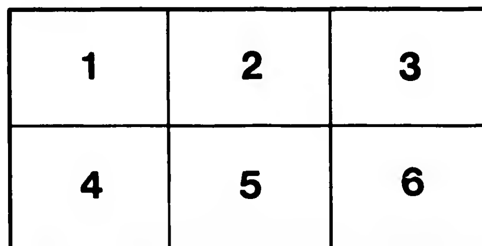

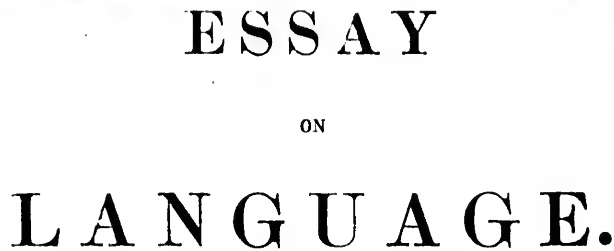

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ON

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ON THE 5TH MARCH, 1857.

BY

EDWARD T. FLETCHER, ESQ.

PUBLISHED BY RESOLUTION OF THE ASSOCIATION.

Toronto:

LEADER AND PATRIOT STEAM-PRESS PRINT, KING STREET EAST.

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ON LANGUAGE, AS SUBJECTIVE & OBJECTIVE.

I propose to consider language as vesturing thought: to see how far a classification of dialects may be based on psychological differences of race: to examine to what extent diversities of speech indicate corresponding varieties of mental constitution.

As regards their outward structure, languages are either isolating, agglutinative, or inflectional. The first class comprises those which like the Chinese are monosyllabic, devoid of inflection and dependent mainly on intonation and position for the expression of connected discourse. The second division, or that of agglutinative languages, includes the Indo-Arian and Turanian branches, or those dialects which decline and conjugate by the addition of particles to the root; and lastly, the third class, the Syro-Arabian or inflexional family, may be said to comprehend those languages where inflection is effected rather by a change in the entire word than by the addition of particles.

Thus, in the Chinese class, each vocable has not only a specific meaning in itself but is also variable in sense from its position in the sentence, from varieties of tonic accentuation, and even from occasional gestures in the spoken language, all of which seem required to eke out its original poverty in radical etymons and inflexional shades of meaning. Viewing Central Asia as the cradle of our race, it would seem as if, while the other swarms dispersed towards the South and West into comparatively fertile tracts, the Chinese protoplasts

migrated Eastward into the salt desert of Cobi and the sterile wilderness of Eastern Tibet, where, from the miserable and isolated mode of life they were compelled to assume, their speech, losing in the course of ages its original richness, may have slowly declined to its present condition. We have said that it depends largely on sequence and intonation. Nor only this, but the same attribute or qualifying term is differently expressed for each different class of subjects: thus, in speaking of "twenty ships," the word twenty is not the same, in Chinese, as it would be in speaking of "twenty houses." Literally translated, most of their sentences would appear to us clumsy, circuitous, and periphrastic. For instance, the simple question—"where have you been ?" if literally translated from the Chinese would read,—"you just now go which one place come ?" Thus, from the rigid and inflexible genius of the language, thought, among this singular people, has ever been restricted to the barest utilitarianism. A play of fancy or imagination was no more possible than the combination of free and athletic exercise with the use of a strait jacket. A halting system of ethics, a reverence for old age, a code of endless ceremonial observances, a literature composed of unimaginative comedies, chronicles, and moral apothegms, a subtle ingenuity in copying, in constructing bridges and canals and in works of agriculture, mechanism and engineering: this is nearly the sum of their attainments. The mythical or heroic period, common to all beside, has with them had no equivalent. No Iliad or Kalevala, no song or epic, the national incarnation of a people's genius, has run like living fire through their broad and luxuriant vallies, to kindle all hearts and gladden every hearth. Beyond its lower manifestations, the universe to them has been a blank. Age after age, each with its mystery and its lesson, has swept by them—but in vain. The seasons have come and gone, the thunder has rolled above and the graves have yawned at their feet, the world of nature has unfolded its wonders, all grand and gen-

tle influences have been with them as with others—but in vain. As that vast and wondrous sphinx of stone, that has stood since the dawn of time beside the river of Egypt, with its couchant lion-paws and its grandly massive features, half bestial, half divine, yet filled with a sublime and unutterable mournfulness; on whose eyes the sun and stars still shine on forever, unrecognized and unknown, so, in this remarkable family of nations, the higher utterance of the soul has ever remained dumb and lifeless, rigid and fixed in stone. They remind us of the immature condition of physical nature in Australia, the land of strange and else-unknown types of being, as if the creative power had stopped half way—where both the Fauna and Flora seem to have been arrested, as by a breath, whi e yet imperfectly devolped, where a dicotyledonous vegetation is almost wholly wanting, and where the dark hued forests are haunted by such structural monstrosities as the ornithorynchus, half bird, ha f reptile—where the marsupials are the highest of irrational mammals, and the leafless acacia the most universal of plants.

Widely different in language and modes of thought from the subjects of the middle Empire are those two divisions of the human family which we have now to consider, the Indo-Arian and Syro-Arabian. In the first, which for the purposes of the present classfication, includes also the Turanian dialects, we have the principle of agglutination as the basis of declension and conjugation, a principle broadly manifest iu the Osmanli or modern Turkish, and carried to the highest degree of euphonic perfection in the old Sanscrit and its modern derivatives. Thus, in the Osmanli, from the root *sevmek,* to love, are derived the fo.ms *sevilmek,* to be loved, *sevmemek,* not to love, *sevememek,* not to be able to love, *sevdurmek,* to cause to love, *sevishmek,* to love another, *sevinmek,* to love oneself, and so on; the root being every where easily distinguishable from the particles which are agglutinated to it to express the

required modification of meaning. But the spirit of the Syro-Arabian tongues, as the Hebrew, Arabic, and their congeners, is essentially different. Agglutination is here too, but subordinated to a higher principle, and the modifications of which we have spoken are here effected not so much by the addition of particles to the root as by a change of the root itself; and thus, to the old Arab the conception *men* seems to have presented itself not as the singular *man* with something voluntarily added, but as a purely independent and snbstantive idea.

If we revert for a moment to the beautiful idealistic theory of Bishop Berkely, in re'ation to the philosophy of the human mind, we may recollect that the stronghold of his idealism lay in this: he viewed the mind as a formative agent, adding and abstracting at will, and clustering round an idea the various particulars which constitute its contingent modes and accidents. In a word, he looked on the thinking principle as essentially subjective and disposing at pleasure of the materials of thought. On the other hand, the opponents of this theory, as Thomas Brown and others, maintain the objectivity of the mind, and assert that in each modification of an idea, the entire mind of the thinker is changed, every variety of conception being represented by a new and correspondingly varied state of consciousness. The train of thought is by them supposed to be objective, and the thinker mainly passive, recipient, and controlled by influences external to himself; whereas, by the former, he is held to be subjective, active, creative, and the Demiurgus, as it were, of his own conceptions.

We may draw the same distinction between the Indo-Arian and Syro-Arabian modes of thought. It will appear that the former is as truly subjective as the latter is objective; and that the literature of the Indo-Arian nations is as remarkable for plastic fancy, for exquisite invention, for art, combination, and masterly grouping and arrangement, as that of the Syro-Arabians is for depth and intensity of feeling, for profundity of thought, and for that grandeur and snblimity

of sentiment which seem the legitimate result of then susceptibility to influences transcending their own personality. Thus diversely prepared then, thus variously gifted, did both in old time enter the arena side by side, to meet and confront, as they best might, the great problem of Life.

The Problem of Life. Yes, for before every generation of men, before every individual, still sits the veiled Isis, the unanswerable Sphynx. To every man, if left to himself, the question has arisen—What am I? Whence is this being that I bear with me? This stormy life force, wherewith mountains are levelled and the course of rivers turned aside, to what end is it? Is it rounded on either side by a dumb eternity of silence? And when all is done, and all pleasant sights and sounds have faded, will the old Earth still speed rejoicingly on her way, bearing no memorial or footprint of the offspring that loved her so well? Or shall we accept the analogy of the flower and the plant, and believe that to us also a palingenesis, a return of spring, is possible, is probable, is true?

These and questions such as these met every thinker at the onset. No poet or prophet went forth who found not this lion in his path. To solve these difficulties was to bend the bow of Ulysses to which few if any were equal.

Yet once and again in the attempt to meet the problem of existence, has the human soul found utterance in song addressed to the universal heart of man, and intelligible to the sympathies of every age. The Indo-Arian formative and creative spirit, aided and inspired by the refined synthesis of its linguistic forms, after no ignoble prelnde in the old Indian epic, those georgeous figments, "beautiful exceedingly," that, like drifting lotus-flowers on the bosom of their own Ganges, have floated down to us from afar, found at length its clearest and most perfect expression in the songs of Homer. Never before or since, has there been heard a strain so joyous and resonant, so full of enjoyment of life, so throbbingly

alive with every feeling and emotion that have evoked the smiles or tears or laughter of a common and catholic humanity. The old Homer, how delightful the associations suggested by the sole mention of his name;—the well-remembered school room, the beloved teacher who first taught us to lisp the godlike language of the Hellenes, and guided our trembling feet into that

> wide expanse
> That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;—

—the green field where our first game of cricket was played, the stream where we fished, and the trees elect for birds-nesting—aye, and farther back too, till we reach the quiet threshold of childhood and those sacred parent knees, whose touch, even now, were it so permitted, would cleanse us in a moment from the leprosy of sin. The old Homer,—we call him old, but in his speech, in his unfailing freshness and vigor, he seems ever young—bright and glowing with the sunshine of immortal youth: he will not look on life a problem, to him it is a picture: all that is sad or revolting or harshly untuneable he will not look at, or at most he will but glance that way, and again, rising as a lark into the clearness of God's sky, he pours forth a flood of song, a pœan of sustained and glorious melody, waking all sympathies and moving the heart of the listener as by some irresistible spell, till it swells with a sense of responsive and re-echoing ecstacy. Affectionate and simple of mood, he will stoop to notice the most common and homely things: but when the occasion comes, he can rise to any height or expand to any theme; there is no argument to whose greatness he will not ascend, there is no emergency to which he is not equal. The very ease with which he is great places him immeasurably above his compeers. Gentle of heart, he is like his own Ulysses, who weeps at the song of Demodocus, and veils himself that the Phœacians may not see his tears, but when the bounds are set and the time for contest is come, the heavy discus flies with scarce

an effort from his hand, far beyond the marks of his competitors. None have had a keener sense of the common blessings of life. He luxuriates alike in the freshness of morning, the warmth of noonday, and the night overcanopied with stars. Feasting and wine to him are good things, and on sleep, the balmy restorer, he bestows every grateful and endearing epithet. In other poets the tide of inspiration ebbs at times, and a dark shade of sadness creeps over the deserted strand, but with him there is no fatigue or weariness: he speeds on his way with radiant brow, always exulting and untiring in his strength. He seems full and boundless and inexaustible as the great sea itself, cincturing all the treasures of earth within its silver zone, and mirroring on its surface the starry mansions of the Gods.

Such was the strain that startled in old time, the dwellers by the broad Egean But already in southern lands, the rent rocks and scarred wildernesses of Arabia had re-echoed to a life-song of yet deeper pathos and intenser energy,—the song of Job and his sufferings. We know not the author of this wonderful Arab poem, but it seems strange that, unjewish as it is, silent on everything connected with the early history of God's people, and entirely opposed in its breadth and universality to the sectarian spirit of Judaism, it should ever have found its way into the old Hebrew canon. Its very existence there shews the strong hold it had obtained on the sympathies of men. It stands there fiery and terrible as some threatening comet stretched athwart the Heavens, an indignant denial of the doctrine that prosperity is in anywise the invariable portion of the righteous, a sublime protest against the creed that we should serve God that good may come of it, and that it may be well with us and our children. No ; it was not thus that the old Arab, listening to solemn spirit voices, alone in the wilderness with Night and his own soul, had shaped his creed. He, looking steadfastly on the existence of evil, and enquiring in extremest agony of mind why it was thus, had

found at length the scales fall from his eyes and the truth stand visibly revealed before him. Then as the mists rolled away from his vision, he saw how all things became clear, he saw that happiness was not of necessity the end or aim of our being, but that Truth and Fidelity and Holiness were to be practised, let the happiness come as it might. He saw that it was better to serve God aright, though it was with bruised feet and bleeding brow, than to hold, with any poor Paley, that virtue was to be practised because of the probable gain to ourselves. And he has told us this great lesson in a work of surpassing sublimity, in words that have rolled their thunders from age to age unceasingly, in strains of divinest pathos, in fiery outbursts of indignation that consume as lightning;—and yet how few have learned the lesson he would teach us. Surely there should be a higher moral code than this unhappy Paleyism. Surely (to borrow the words of another*) there is a love which exults in the power of self-abandonment and can glory in the privilege of suffering for what is good. "Que mon "nom soit flétri" said Danton, "pourvu que la France soit libre." "Let my name be withered, so that France be free," and those wild patriots who had trampled into scorn the faith in an immortal life in which they would be rewarded for what they were suffering, went to their graves as beds for the dream of a people's liberty,—and shall we, who would be thought reasonable men, love the living God with less heart than these poor men loved their phantom? Justice is done; the balance is not deranged. It only seems deranged, so long as we have not learnt to serve without looking to be paid for it.

Thus from the fertile Ionian land, and from the parched and burning south, arose these two utterances,—towered up, side by side, these two colossal spirits, both great, but how different! The one blandly expansive as the universal sunlit air, the other profoundly earnest and pathetic, sounding all depths, vast and shadowy and solemn as Night itself.

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* Vid. West Review No. 118.

Nor did their influence expire with their age. As men still gaze from afar on the twin mountains Ebal and Gerizim, and weary not of admiring the grandeur of the one and the luxuriance ot the other, so all who have since trod the pathway of life have beheld these two giant peaks, Homer and the old Arab poet, still visible above the receding horizon.

And in long after ages, the Scandinavian Voluspa and the Finnish Kalevala testified how deep and lasting had been the impression created by those two grand prophetic voices. For the recovery of the latter of those two noble songs, the Kalevala or National Epic of the Finns, we are indebted, it may be mentioned 'par parenthèse,' to the philologer Lönrött who after travelling over Finnland for many years gave the world the latest result of his researches in 1849 when the Kalevala appeared in 50 Runes, containing nearly 23,000 verses and relating the life and exploits of Wäinämöinen the mythic father of his race born of Ocean and the daughter of the Air, his wondrous voyage towards the north, and his adventures in the future home of the Finns, all conceived and executed in the highest style of romantic subjectivism. The metre of this great epos, it may also be remarked, is octosyllabic, or that of the Hindoo Nalus and Damayanti, and trochaic, as that of the national drama of Castile, and of the recent poem by Professor Longfellow. In fact the latter delightful legend so closely resembles the Kalevala both in method, spirit and metrical structure as to make it probable that 'Hiawatha' was suggested by a perusal of the older saga.

But I have detained you too long. Yet to make the thesis complete, I should have spoken of the two lines of thought which I have indicated, the reflective and creative, running side by side

Darkness and light, ebon and gold inlaid,

throughout the warp and woof of the modern literature of Europe. I should have told how in the land of the old Etruscans,

and deeply imbued with their spirit, the great Florentine poet arose, dark and terrible as one of the old Hebrew b-rds; and how the echoes of his sublime Vision had scarce died away aud men yet held their breath for very awe, when our own land gave fo th the large and noble utterance of Chaucer, a true poet, nay, one of the greatest of our poets, whom it is a shame for Englishmen to have neglected so long. I should have told how these two opposing lines seemed at length to merge and unite in the profound and creative Shakespere, of whom it has been said with truth, that were the dwellers of earth swept away as by a pestilence, and were the inhabitants of some other world then to alight upon our planet, these wonderful dramas would alone suffice to inform him of the passions and emotions, the joys and sorrows, the fears and hopes and aspirations of the race that lay buried at his feet. It is no mere national feeling that makes us speak of Shakespere as great among the greatest. He, it is true, is pecu'iarly our own; he has gained for us a brighter aureole than all our achievements in science or in war; he is entwined in our thoughts with every fondest recollection of our country and our home. But in his wondrous many-sidedness and universality, compared with all the world beside, he

> Above the rest
> In shape and gesture proudly eminent,
> Stands like a tower.

He is as the sun before whom all lesser luminar es fade. And in reviewing the history of the advance and retrocession of the landmarks of human intellect, and the names of those who have ruled as annointed kings in the realm of thought, it may be said that, apart from the sacred books, there have been but three great poets,—Homer, Dante, and the author of Hamlet and Othello.

Toronto, March 5, 1857.

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