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On the Study of Words

Richard Chenevix Trench



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**ON THE
STUDY OF WORDS**



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BY

RICHARD CHENEVIX TRENCH, D.D

EDITED WITH EMENDATIONS BY

A. SMYTHE PALMER, D.D

Author of "Folk-Etymology" "The Folk and Their
Word-Lore" etc



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EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE copyright of the tenth edition of Archbishop Trench's *Study of Words* having expired through lapse of time, it seemed to the publishers that a new and revised edition, at a popular price, of what is now become an English classic, would prove a boon to the large and ever-growing circle of readers who take an intelligent interest in the growth and history of their mother tongue.

When we look back to the time—now more than half a century ago—when these chapters were first delivered as lectures to the students of the Winchester Training College, we can perceive what a 'path-making' piece of work he then achieved. The popular treatises then current on English etymology were Horne Tooke's *Divisions of Purley* and Charles Richardson's *Study of Language*. In the English dictionary of the latter English lexicography had reached its high-water mark; wherein indeed might be found a well-plenished storehouse of quotations piled together somewhat at random, but its etymological part a mere undigested *réchauffé* of all the old unscientific guess-work of Verstegan, Minsheu, Skinner, Junius, *et hoc genus omne*. The author

thus laboured under the disadvantage of writing on linguistic subjects at a time when the science of language had hardly as yet gained a footing in this country. Nevertheless, such were his scholarly instincts and soundness of judgment that he seldom goes far wrong, and we rather marvel that there is so little in his admirable lectures that needs correction. All that seemed required in this way has been added in the notes and placed within square brackets to distinguish it from the original annotations. No alterations have been made in the text. It might seem presumptuous for one who is proud to call the great Archbishop his master, and was first imbued with a taste for such studies by reading the very book which he now ventures to edit, that he should take it on himself to revise the conclusions of so eminent a scholar. It must be remembered, however, that etymological discovery has made immense strides during the last few decades, and that the author of *The Study of Words* has himself largely helped to supply the means for such revision and emendation by having initiated that great *Lexicon Totius Anglicitatis*, *The New English Dictionary*, the ground-plan of which was outlined by his hand. That monumental work, so ably carried into effect by Dr. Murray, Mr. Bradley and their assistants, must ever remain the ultimate court of appeal when any points of English philology are in question.¹ I have so used it, as I am sure the Archbishop himself would have done ; for though himself " the first scholar in Europe " (as a

¹ In one instance, however, I have had the hardihood to dissent from this high authority (see p. 53).

contemporary pronounced him) he was ever learning to the end of his life, and ever correcting and adding to his published works. I well remember seeing an interleaved copy of the present work lying open on his table, in which from time to time he used to enter the results of his later acquisitions and more mature judgments. None could draw a lesson or enforce a moral from the teaching of a word with such wisdom and insight as the Archbishop. He is here altogether unrivalled. And apart from the value of his etymologies, the all-pervading charm of his chaste and dignified style, which could invest even commonplaces with a grace of its own, will prevent his works ever being superseded as out-of-date. In the judgment of the Editor, the present generation, if they desire to enter upon the most interesting of all studies, the Study of Words, wherever else they may complete it, cannot begin better than by putting themselves under the guidance of Archbishop Trench.

A. SMYTHE PALMER.

HERMON HILL, S. WOODFORD.



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AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

THESE lectures will not, I trust, be found anywhere to have left out of sight seriously, or for long, the peculiar needs of those for whom they were originally intended, and to whom they were primarily addressed. I am conscious indeed, here and there, of a certain departure from my first intention, having been in part seduced to this by a circumstance which I had not in the least contemplated when I obtained permission to deliver them, by finding, namely, that I should have other hearers besides the pupils of the Training School. Some matter adapted for those rather than for these I was thus led to introduce—which afterwards I was unwilling, in preparing for the press, to remove ; on the contrary adding to it rather, in the hope of obtaining thus a somewhat wider circle of readers than I could have hoped, had I more rigidly restricted myself in the choice of my materials. Yet I should greatly regret to have admitted so much of this as should deprive these lectures of their fitness for those whose profit in writing and in publishing I had mainly in view, namely, schoolmasters and those preparing to be such.

Had I known any book entering with any fullness, and in a popular manner, into the subject-matter of these pages, and making it its exclusive theme, I might still have delivered these lectures, but should scarcely have sought for them a wider audience than their first, gladly leaving the matter in their hands, whose studies in language had been fuller and riper than my own. But abundant and ready to hand as are the materials for such a book, I did not ; while yet it seems to me that the subject is one to which it is beyond measure desirable that their attention, who are teaching, or shall have hereafter to teach, others should be directed ; so that they shall learn to regard language as one of the chiefest organs of their own education and that of others. For I am persuaded that I have used no exaggeration in saying, that for many a young man " his first discovery that words are living powers, has been like the dropping of scales from his eyes, like the acquiring of another sense, or the introduction into a new world,"—while yet all this may be indefinitely deferred, may, indeed, never find place at all, unless there is some one at hand to help for him, and to hasten the process ; and he who so does, will ever after be esteemed by him as one of his very foremost benefactors. Whatever may be Horne Tooke's shortcomings (and they are great), whether in details of etymology, or in the philosophy of grammar, or in matters more serious still, yet, with all this, what an epoch in many a student's intellectual life has been his first acquaintance with *The Diversions of Purley*. And they were not among the least of the obligations which the young men of our time owed to Coleridge, that

he so often himself weighed words in the balances, and so earnestly pressed upon all with whom his voice went for anything, the profit which they would find in so doing. Nor, with the certainty that I am anticipating much in my little volume, can I refrain from quoting some words which were not present with me during its composition, although I must have been familiar with them long ago ; words which express excellently well why it is that these studies profit so much, and which will also explain the motives which induced me to add my little contribution to their furtherance :

“ A language will often be wiser, not merely than the vulgar, but even than the wisest of those who speak it. Being like amber in its efficacy to circulate the electric spirit of truth, it is also like amber in embalming and preserving the relics of ancient wisdom, although one is not seldom puzzled to decipher its contents. Sometimes it locks up truths, which were once well known, but which, in the course of ages, have passed out of sight and been forgotten. In other cases it holds the germs of truths, of which, though they were never plainly discerned, the genius of its framers caught a glimpse in a happy moment of divination. A meditative man cannot refrain from wonder, when he digs down to the deep thought lying at the root of many a metaphorical term, employed for the designation of spiritual things, even of those with regard to which professing philosophers have blundered grossly ; and often it would seem as though rays of truths, which were still below the intellectual horizon, had dawned upon the imagination as it was looking up to heaven. Hence they who feel an inward call to

teach and enlighten their countrymen, should deem it an important part of their duty to draw out the stores of thought which are already latent in their native language, to purify it from the corruptions which Time brings upon all things, and from which language has no exemption, and to endeavour to give distinctness and precision to whatever in it is confused, or obscure, or dimly seen"—*Guesses at Truth, First Series*, p. 295.

ON THE STUDY OF WORDS

I

INTRODUCTION

THERE are few who would not readily acknowledge that mainly in worthy books are preserved and hoarded the treasures of wisdom and knowledge which the world has accumulated ; and that chiefly by aid of these they are handed down from one generation to another. I shall urge on you in these lectures something different from this ; namely, that not in books only, which all acknowledge, nor yet in connected oral discourse, but often also in words contemplated singly, there are boundless stores of moral and historic truth, and no less of passion and imagination, laid up—that from these, lessons of infinite worth may be derived, if only our attention is roused to their existence. I shall urge on you (though with teaching such as you enjoy, the subject will not be new), how well it will repay you to study the words which you are in the habit of using or of meeting, be they such as relate to highest spiritual things, or our common words of the shop and the market, and of all the familiar intercourse of life. It will indeed repay you far better than you can easily believe. I am sure, at least, that for many a young man his first discovery of the fact that words are living powers, are the vesture, yea, even the body, which thoughts weave for themselves, has been like the dropping of scales from his eyes, like the acquiring of another sense, or the introduction into a new world ; he is never able to

cease wondering at the moral marvels that surround him on every side, and ever reveal themselves more and more to his gaze.

We indeed hear it not seldom said that ignorance is the mother of admiration. No falser word was ever spoken, and hardly a more mischievous one ; implying, as it does, that this healthiest exercise of the mind rests, for the most part, on a deceit and a delusion, and that with better knowledge it would cease ; while, in truth, for once that ignorance leads us to admire that which with fuller insight we should perceive to be a common thing, and one therefore demanding no such tribute from us, a hundred, nay, a thousand times, it prevents us from admiring that which is admirable indeed. And this is so, whether we are moving in the region of nature, which is the region of God's wonders, or in the region of art, which is the region of man's wonders ; and nowhere truer than in this sphere and region of language, which is about to claim us now. Oftentimes here we walk up and down in the midst of intellectual and moral marvels with a vacant eye and a careless mind, even as some traveller passes unmoved over fields of fame, or through cities of ancient renown—unmoved, because utterly unconscious of the lofty deeds which there have been wrought, of the great hearts which spent themselves there. We, like him, wanting the knowledge and insight which would have served to kindle admiration in us, are oftentimes deprived of this pure and elevating excitement of the mind, and miss no less that manifold teaching and instruction which ever lie about our path, and nowhere more largely than in our daily words, if

only we knew how to put forth our hands and make it our own. "What riches," one exclaims, "lie hidden in the vulgar tongue of our poorest and most ignorant. What flowers of paradise lie under our feet, with their beauties and their parts undistinguished and undiscerned, from having been daily trodden on."

And this subject upon which we are thus entering ought not to be a dull or uninteresting one in the handling, or one to which only by an effort you will yield the attention which I shall claim. If it shall prove so, this I fear must be through the fault of my manner of treating it; for certainly in itself there is no study which *may* be made at once more instructive and entertaining than the study of the use, origin, and distinction of words, which is exactly that which I now propose to myself and to you. I remember a very learned scholar, to whom we owe one of our best Greek lexicons, a book which must have cost him years, speaking in the preface to his great work with a just disdain of some, who complained of the irksome drudgery of such toils as those which had engaged him so long—thus irksome, forsooth, because they only had to do with words; of them who claimed pity for themselves, as though they had been so many galley-slaves chained to the oar, or martyrs who had offered themselves to the good of the literary world. He declares that, for his part, the task of classing, sorting, grouping, comparing, tracing the derivation and usage of words, had been to him no drudgery, but a delight and labour of love.

And if this may be true in regard of a foreign tongue, how much truer ought it to be in regard

of our own, of our 'mother tongue,' as we affectionately call it. A great writer not very long departed from us has borne witness at once to the pleasantness and profit of this study. "In a language," he says, "like ours, where so many words are derived from other languages, there are few modes of instruction more useful or more amusing than that of accustoming young people to seek for the etymology or primary meaning of the words they use. There are cases in which more knowledge of more value may be conveyed by the history of a word than by the history of a campaign."

And, implying the same truth, a popular American author has somewhere characterized language as "fossil poetry." * He evidently means that just as in some fossil, curious and beautiful shapes of vegetable or animal life, the graceful fern or the finely vertebrated lizard, such as now, it may be, have been extinct for thousands of years, are permanently bound up with the stone, and rescued from that perishing which would have otherwise been theirs—so in words are beautiful thoughts and images, the imagination and the feeling of past ages, of men long since in their graves, of men whose very names have perished, these, which would so easily have perished too, preserved and made safe for ever. The phrase is a striking one; the only fault which one might be tempted to find with it is, that it is too narrow. Language may be, and indeed is, this "fossil poetry"; but it may be affirmed of it with exactly the same truth that it is fossil ethics, or fossil history. Words quite as often and as effectually embody facts of history, or convictions of the moral common sense, as of

* [Emerson, *Works* (Routledge), p. 86.]

the imagination or passion of men ; even as, so far as that moral sense may be perverted, they will bear witness and keep a record of that perversion. On all these points I shall enter at full in after lectures ; but I may give by anticipation a specimen or two of what I mean, to make from the first my purpose and plan more fully intelligible to all.

Language then is fossil poetry ; in other words, we are not to look for the poetry which a people may possess only in its poems, or its poetical customs, traditions, and beliefs. Many a single word also is itself a concentrated poem, having stores of poetical thought and imagery laid up in it. Examine it, and it will be found to rest on some deep analogy of things natural and things spiritual ; bringing those to illustrate and to give an abiding form and body to these. The image may have grown trite and ordinary now ; perhaps through the help of this very word may have become so entirely the heritage of all, as to seem little better than a commonplace ; yet not the less he who first discerned the relation, and devised the new word which should express it, or gave to an old, never before but literally used, this new and figurative sense, this man was in his degree a poet—a maker, that is, of things which were not before, which would not have existed but for him, or for some other gifted with equal powers. He who spake first of a ‘ dilapidated ’ fortune, what an image must have risen up before his mind’s eye of some falling house or palace, stone detaching itself from stone, till all had gradually sunk into desolation and ruin. Or he who to that Greek word which signifies “ that

which will endure to be held up to and judged by the sunlight," gave first its ethical signification of 'sincere,' 'truthful,' or as we sometimes say, 'transparent,' can we deny to him the poet's feeling and eye? * Many a man had gazed, we are sure, at the jagged and indented mountain ridges of Spain, before one called them 'sierras' or 'saws,' the name by which now they are known, as *Sierra Morena*, *Sierra Nevada*; but that man coined his imagination into a word which will endure as long as the everlasting hills which he named.

But it was said just now that words often contain a witness for great moral truths—God having impressed such a seal of truth upon language, that men are continually uttering deeper things than they know, asserting mighty principles, it may be asserting them against themselves, in words that to them may seem nothing more than the current coin of society. Thus to what grand moral purposes Bishop Butler turns the word 'pastime'; how solemn the testimony which he compels the world, out of its own use of this word, to render against itself—obliging it to own that its amusements and pleasures do not really satisfy the mind and fill it with the sense of an abiding and satisfying joy; † they are only 'pastime'; they serve

* [*Εἰλικρίνης*, as if examined (*κρίνω*) in the light (*εἶλη*) of the sun, and so pure, sincere, like Ken's "conscience as the noon-day clear."].

† *Sermon* xiv. *Upon the Love of God*. Curiously enough, Montaigne has, in his *Essays*, drawn the same testimony out of the word: "This ordinary phrase of Past-time, and passing away the time, represents the custom of those wise sort of people, who think they cannot have a better account of their lives, than to let them

only, as this word confesses, to *pass* away the *time*, to prevent it from hanging, an intolerable burden, on men's hands ; all which they can do at the best is to prevent men from discovering and attending to their own internal poverty and dissatisfaction and want. He might have added that there is the same acknowledgment in the word 'diversion,' which means no more than that which *diverts* or turns us aside from ourselves,* and in this way helps us to forget ourselves for a little. And thus it would appear that, even according to the world's own confession, all which it proposes is—not to make us happy, but a little to prevent us from remembering that we are unhappy, to *pass* away our *time*, to *divert* us from ourselves. While on the other hand we declare that the good which *will* really fill our souls and satisfy them to the uttermost, is not *in* us, but *without* us and *above* us, in the words which we use to set forth any transcending delight. Take three or four of these words—'transport,' 'rapture,' 'ravishment,' 'ecstasy,'—

run out and slide away, to pass them over and to baulk them, and, as much as they can, to take no notice of them and, to shun them, as a thing of troublesome and contemptible quality. But I know it to be another kind of thing, and find it both valuable and commodious even in its latest decay, wherein I now enjoy it, and nature has delivered it into our hands in such and so favourable circumstances that we commonly complain of ourselves if it be troublesome to us or slide unprofitable away."

* ['Diversion' is rather a 'turning aside' from one's serious and more regular occupation to enjoy rest and recreation, a suspension of work. Just as 'sport' for 'disport' (old Fr. *se desporter*, Lat. *dis-portare*) is a 'taking oneself off,' or withdrawing for a time from one's customary labour for play or amusement.]

'transport,' that which *carries* us, as 'rapture,' or 'ravishment,' that which *snatches* us out of and above ourselves ; and 'ecstasy' is very nearly the same, only drawn from the Greek.

And not less, where a perversion of the moral sense has found place, words preserve oftentimes a record of this perversion. We have a signal example of this, even as it is a notable evidence of the manner in which moral contagion, spreading from heart and manners, invades the popular language in the use, or rather misuse, of the word 'religion,' during all the ages of Papal domination in Europe. Probably many of you are aware that in those times a "religious person" did not mean any one who felt and allowed the bonds that bound him to God and to his fellow-men, but one who had taken peculiar vows upon him, a member of one of the monkish orders ; a 'religious' house did not mean, nor does it now mean in the Church of Rome, a Christian household, ordered in the fear of God, but an house in which these persons were gathered together according to the rule of some man, Benedict, or Dominic, or some other. A 'religion' meant not a service of God, but an order of monkery ; and taking the monastic vows was termed going into a 'religion.' Now what an awful light does this one word so used throw on the entire state of mind and habits of thought in those ages ! That then was 'religion,' and nothing else was deserving of the name ! And 'religious' was a title which might not be given to parents and children, husbands and wives, men and women fulfilling faithfully and holily in the world the several duties of their stations, but only to those who

had devised self-chosen service for themselves.*

In like manner that 'lewd,' which meant at one time no more than 'lay,' or unlearned—the 'lewd' people, the lay people—should come to signify the sinful, the vicious, is not a little worthy of note.† How forcibly we are reminded here of that saying of the Pharisees of old : " This people which knoweth not the law is cursed " ; how much of their spirit must have been at work before the word could have acquired this secondary meaning !

But language is fossil history as well. What a record of great social revolutions, revolutions in nations and in the feelings of nations, the one word ' frank ' contains, which is used, as we all know, to express aught that is generous, straightforward, and free. The Franks, I need not remind you, were a powerful German tribe, or association of tribes, who gave themselves this proud name of the ' franks ' or the free ; and who, at the breaking up of the Roman Empire, possessed themselves of Gaul, to which they gave their own name. They

* A reviewer in *Fraser's Magazine*, December 1851 in the main a favourable, and always a kind one, doubts whether I have not here pushed my assertion too far. So far from this being the case, it was not merely " the popular language," as I have expressed myself, which this corruption had invaded, but a decree of the great Fourth Lateran Council (A.D. 1215), forbidding the further multiplication of monastic Orders, runs thus : Ne nimia *religionum* diversitas gravem in Ecclesiâ Dei confusionem inducat, firmiter prohibemus, ne quis de cetero novam *religionem* inveniat, sed quicumque voluerit ad *religionem* conver ti, unam deapprobatis assumat.

† [Lewd, O. Eng. *læwede* (as if *laïc + ed*, ' laicatus '), has passed through the following transitions of meaning : (1) lay, not clerical ; (2) unclerkly, unlearned ; (3) ignorant, low, base ; (4) ill-conditioned, wicked ; (5) lascivious.]

were the ruling conquering people, honourably distinguished from the Gauls and degenerate Romans, among whom they established themselves, by their independence, their love of freedom, their scorn of a lie ; they had, in short, the virtues which belong to a conquering and dominant race in the midst of an inferior and conquered one. And thus it came to pass that by degrees the name ' frank ' indicated not merely a national, but involved a moral distinction as well ; and a ' frank ' man was synonymous not merely with a man of the conquering German race, but was an epithet applied to any man possessed of certain high moral qualities, which for the most part appertained to, and were found only in, men of that stock ; * and thus in men's daily discourse, when they speak of a person as being ' frank,' or when they use the words ' franchise,' ' enfranchisement,' to express civil liberties and immunities, their language here is the outgrowth, the record, and the result of great historic changes, bears testimony to facts of history, whereof it may well happen that the speakers have never heard. Let me suggest to you the word ' slave,' as one which has undergone a process entirely analogous, although in an opposite direction.†

* [But " frank " may very well come direct from old Fr. *franc*, old Ger. *franko*, meaning free, from which the Franks obtained their name.]

† See Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, c. 55. [Gibbon understood slave, a Slavonian, to be derived from *slava*, glory, as if the glorious people. Many more recent scholars take the name to be from *slovo*, a word, as if it meant " the speakers," those who (in their own estimation) can speak intelligibly in contrast to foreigners who seem to them dumb or unintelligible ; e.g. Niemec, " dumb " used for the Germans. Compare " barbarian " and " Welsh "]

Having given by anticipation this handful of examples in illustration of what in these lectures I propose, I will, before proceeding further, make a few observations on a subject, which, if we would go at all to the root of the matter, we can scarcely leave altogether untouched—I mean the origin of language ; in which however we will not entangle ourselves deeper than we need. There are, or rather there have been, two theories about this. One, and that which rather has been than now is, for few maintain it still, would put language on the same level with the various arts and inventions with which man has gradually adorned and enriched his life. It would make him by degrees to have invented it, just as he might have invented any of these, for himself ; and from rude imperfect beginnings, the inarticulate cries by which he expressed his natural wants, the sounds by which he sought to imitate the impression of natural objects upon him, little by little to have arrived at that wondrous organ of thought and feeling, which his language is often to him now.

It might, I think, be sufficient to object to this explanation, that language would then be an *accident* of human nature ; and, this being the case, that we certainly should somewhere encounter tribes sunken so low as not to possess it ; even as there is no human art or invention, though it be as simple and obvious as the preparing of food by fire, but there are those who have fallen below its exercise. But with language it is not so. There have never yet been found human beings, not the most degraded horde of South African bushmen, or Papuan cannibals, who did not employ this means