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ESSAY ON AMERICAN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (1815)

Walter Channing

So multiplied are the connexions existing between nation and nation in modern times, that intellectual originality may justly be regarded as one of the greatest phenomena in nature.

Lond. Quart. Review, Oct. 1814

The remark which stands at the head of this article, comes with peculiar force from the work which contains it. It has, with the writer of the following pages, unqualified belief. He has only regretted that the authors of that work have not always written under the influence of so liberal a sentiment. They might have found in its truth, some good reasons for the barrenness of American Literature.

National literature seems to be the product, the legitimate product, of a national language. Literary peculiarities and even literary originality being, the one little more than peculiarities of language, the other the result of that uncontrolled exercise of mind, which a slavery to a common tongue almost necessarily prevents. If then we are now asked, why is this country deficient in literature? I would answer, in the first place, because it possesses the same language with a nation, totally unlike it in almost every relation; and in the second, delights more in the acquisition of foreign literature, than in a laborious independent exertion of its own intellectual powers.

Unhappily, so enslaving are these influences, that it is hardly to be hoped, that we shall ever make our language conform to our situation, our intellectual vigour and originality. But is it true, that a nation of real spirit and character will for ever consent to copy, even though it does not get rid of the language it inherited? would not what we have already accomplished in literature be thought well for a young people, if we wrote in our *own* tongue? Is it not the fact, that when we write we are regarded as Englishmen, and are required to do as well as if we lived in England?—With these inquiries we have at

present no concern, our object is rather the causes why we have done no more.

The remotest germs of literature are the native peculiarities of the country in which it is to spring. These are diversified beyond all estimation, by the climate, and the various other circumstances which produce them.—Next to these are the social institutions, into which the various tribes of intellectual beings resolve themselves, for certain specifick objects. Then follow the relations which issue from these, which consitute the moral, religious, and political states; together with all the other various objects of history. All the circumstances now mentioned as the elements of literature, are essentially peculiar to every nation. And we accordingly find states, even bordering on each other, and the subjects at times of the same government, exhibiting striking peculiarities in their literary character. It will not refute this remark, to point to a celebrated modern poet of Scotland, and ask how he has done so much with a language similar to that, nay the same with that, of a sister kingdom. Mr. Scott has given us a mere translation of his national dialect, and has most happily rendered native beauties of idiom, and even national peculiarities, by another language. But his works do not form the smallest part of the Scotch literature. We look for that in the verses of Allan Ramsay, and in the far sweeter ones of Robert Burns. These authors are essentially original. They not only give us manners, which are but practical, intellectual operations, but give them to us in the language, that we made for them, and which only can give them their true form and pressure.

It will be easy to shew the importance of a peculiar language, to the rise and progress of literature in a country. In the first place, every nation has a strong attachment to its language. This enters into the sum total of its patriotism. Its language is valued, because it is the vehicle of the intellectual state of a country to all others. It is cultivated, that the character it may be the means of establishing, may be exalted. Above all other reasons it is loved because it is peculiar, gives a peculiar national character, and preserves the intellectual labours of man.* Unfortunately for this country, language in itself can never have these attractions, and this importance. The language in which we speak and write, is the vernacular tongue of a nation which thinks it corrupted on every other lip but its own;—of a nation, which has limited its perfection by pronouncing it already perfect;—of a nation whose natural, political, religious, and literary relations and peculiarities are totally unlike our own.

From the *North American Review and Miscellaneous Journal*, Volume First (1815; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1965). The essay first appeared anonymously.

The whole external character of our country is totally unlike that of England. Our descriptions, of course, which must, if we ever have a poetry, be made in the language of another country, can never be distinctive. They can never possess the peculiar claims which those of native individuality teem with; which are more beautiful to a foreigner, because he is willing in reading them, to heighten the beauties of an obscure passage, by lending it the aid of his own imagination. How tame will his language sound, who would describe Niagara in language fitted for the falls at London bridge, . . . or attempt the majesty of the Mississippi in that which was made for the Thames? It is not meant to be even hinted, that the English language is incapable of all that language can do; but that peculiarities of country, especially the great distinctive characteristics, and manners likewise, can be perfectly rendered only by the language which they themselves have given use to. I mean a peculiar language.

If there be nothing peculiar in the language of a country, if it be strictly the same with that of a nation very distant from it, to say the least;—if it be a country, or rather *nation of ease*,* if I may so say, a receptacle in the first place of men who had in view by emigration any thing but a literary speculation, their descendants will have nothing less at heart than the cultivation of their language, and other nations will hardly look to them for literary originality.—The peculiarities of character of his ancestors will more or less tincture the descendant, and if they depended on others for their language, he will be very willing to look to the same source for his literature. If he should presume to write, however, and endeavor to convey the sentiments and emotions which peculiar circumstances have given birth to in his heart, if he should attempt the still harder task of description, how incapable would foreigners to his country and his home, be, to judge of the truth of his feelings or descriptions; and though in his own countrymen the language might excite kindred feelings, to his transatlantic brethren, how little would there be in his labours to admire, but the *American language, and the American literature?*

In matters of science, and especially in those of the fine arts, the new country may even excel the

old. By the pursuit of the first, they improve their physical condition, and original genius may find in the labours of his own pencil, a language which all nations understand, and which none has been daring enough to monopolize as the peculiar vehicle of its own genius. In science, and more especially in the fine arts, America has done its part for the world. If I loved their excellence in these pursuits half as much as Englishmen, or rather English reviewers despise our literary attainments, I would pay a passing compliment to the venerable President of the Academy, and hunt for a sentence of eulogy for the memory of Dr. Franklin.

In nothing perhaps can we so little pride ourselves, on account of our ancestry, as for its entails on our literature. And in the Babel of the revolution, which gave us a different moral and political existence, it is for our literature most heartily to be lamented, that we had not found a confusion of tongues. We might to this day have wanted a grammar, and a dictionary; but our descendants would have made for themselves a literature. Any man at all conversant with other languages besides his own, is perpetually sensible how much the foreign literature depends upon its language. We even read most familiar thoughts, as if they were new. New words, to us, give the old sentiment a new form and spirit. And, I have little doubt, few have read the pleasures of memory, as contained in the Italian of Maffei in his Merope, without pronouncing it original, though he had read the same things before, as well, perhaps, better sung, by another poet.

The importance of a national language to the rise and progress of the literature of a country, can be argued from all we know of every nation which has pretended to originality. All will be found to have attached so much consequence to their own language, as to have despised most heartily, or carelessly regarded, all others but their own. Thus the French, in their best days, slighted the Augustan age of England, and even now regard her best literary productions with but slight admiration. It is also of great importance for a nation to possess and cherish peculiarities. These result from situation, from mind, or rather from the circumstances which most powerfully affect the mind. The institutions of government, &c. in the first instance borrow their peculiarities from the character of the people; and from the government these are transferred to the people, a peculiarity of feeling is thus found at last to result from the government and other various institutions of the country. Unfortunately for this country, there is

*This allusion may not be perfectly familiar to every reader in this country. In Great Britain, as the parishes increase, so that the original parish church will not contain all the parishioners, new chapels are erected, connected with the original parish church, and these are called *Chapels of ease*. . . .

no national character, unless its absence constitutes one: all acknowledge the wisdom which framed its constitution, but how few have been willing to permit its influence over their characters? Their biases have all been foreign. How unlike is this to what exists in other countries? The smaller as well as the largest states of Europe, have regarded all others with a jealousy, which has bound them immovably to their national peculiarities. Hence all that we know of them is original. Hence their literary eminence. Now if the Germans had caught the foppery of France, and the language of England; if they had ever adopted the government of the one, and the mode of religion of the other, we should not have been dazzled with the splendid obscurity of their metaphysics, much less overwhelmed with the power of their drama, or enchanted with their sentimentality. The German government, and the German established faith, gave rise to remarkable character, and their language could alone embody it. The genuine patriotism which the political institutions of this country might have produced, and even with the aid of the English language, might have lent its aid to the rise of literature among us, has been lost in a servile dependence on foreign politicians for political creeds, and the liberality with which nature has ornamented our native scenery, has been unnoticed in a love for the mere descriptions of foreign poetry. That we are not destitute of the materials for the poet, may be gained from what Mr. Campbell has done with them. His *Gertrude* only affords us the mournful reflection of regret, that a foreigner can do as much with all that is peculiar now left us, as one of our own countrymen, and that he has done more than we have any good reason to expect from them.

There is something peculiarly opposed to literary originality, in the colonial existence which was unfortunately so long the condition of America. This is mentioned incidentally under the head of the importance of a peculiar language to national literature. This circumstance precluded the possibility of our possessing such a language. All that can be expected from such a colony, made up of all sorts of materials, speaking not only the dialects of the original language, but the different languages of the three different nations from which it sprung, is to preserve a purity in one of them. It must first choose one, then guard it from even the least corruption to which it would be remarkably liable. It must be for ever jealous to prevent and put down, that adaptation of new terms for new objects, and especially for the new ideas, that

different scenes and new relations might give rise to. It must wait for all improvements from abroad, acquire a literary tone from the mother country, and like the civil jurisprudence of India, should it be as original in literature as that may be in crime, it must wait for a decision on its merits or demerits, from the higher authorities of London. Farther, as a colony, it would never be supposed capable of altering or improving its literature, any more than its political or religious systems. When did England look to the West-Indies for any thing but its sugars, or to Canada for any thing but its furs.

If it should happen, that a mind of superiour capability should find its birth in such a country, the very character of such a mind would drive it from home. It might not find time in its greater operations of thought to preserve the perfection of its language, and it would dread the contamination of an ill educated and strictly economical association. Such minds were phenomena in the American colonies, and the possibility of this occurrence was never admitted: hence the agents of government, and the leaders at the bar, &c. like the institutions themselves, were all transatlantick. The growth of prejudice was the natural production of the country, and in due time this flourished into revolution and independence.

Farther, so far are we from possessing a literature, that men of some considerable poetical merit, men who have cultivated their talents, have shrunk from American publication, and sought in another region for the patrons of genius. This country has a literature notwithstanding all that has been said in this paper to the contrary. But it is not the least indebted for it to the labour of its colonies. I now refer to the oral literature of its aborigines.

In their original language we have names of places, and things, which are but feebly rendered by our own, I should say by the English. Their words of description are either derived from incidents, and of which they are famed to convey most exact ideas, or are so formed as to convey their signification in their sounds; and although so ridiculous in the English dress as to be a new cause for English satire and merriment, are in themselves the very language for poetry, for they are made only for expression, and their objects are the very element for poetry.

The language of the Indian is no less peculiar than his manners. With him as with all other beings, language is but the expression of manner. It was made to express his emotions during his observance of nature, and these emotions were

taught him at a school, in which the master was nature, and a most unsophisticated heart the scholar. Hence it is as bold as his own unshackled conceptions, and as rapid as his own step. It is now as rich as the soil on which he was nurtured, and ornamented with every blossom that blows in his path. It is now elevated and soaring, for his image is the eagle, and now precipitous and hoarse as the cataract among whose mists he is descanting. In the oral literature of the Indian, even when rendered in a language enfeebled by excessive cultivation, every one has found genuine originality. Its beauties are most of them to be traced to its peculiarities. We are delighted with what appears its haughty independence, although we feel conscious at the same time it has never been submitted by its authors to the test of comparison. They have not advanced far enough in the diplomacy of letters to hazard a competition with neighbouring tribes. They are most perfectly contented with their language, and if it may be so called, their literary condition. That this remark is correct I will hazard the following

anecdote. A Lancastrian school was established in one of the English provinces in this country, whose benevolent object it was, to improve the intellectual condition of the neighbouring Indians. One Indian submitted for a few hours to the task of being taught writing. His rude efforts were applauded, and he was asked if he would return to the school the next day. His answer is remarkable, and highly characteristick. 'How much will you pay me for coming.' This anecdote is not introduced with a view to show that the Indian was fearful of the debilitating effects of an English education on his *national literature*, but to shew with what perfect contentment he reposed in the knowledge of that which was peculiarly his own. The length to which this discussion has already extended compels the writer to bring it to a close; and this without entering more fully than has already been done, on what was considered the second cause of the barrenness of American literature, viz. the dependence of Americans on English literature, and their consequent negligence of the exertion of their own intellectual powers.