

CHAPTER 1

Language and the Victorians

In an essay written in 1835 and republished in the year of *The Origin of Species* (1859), Reverend Richard Garnett makes an observation that might be taken as a bellwether of Victorian considerations of language: “The knowledge of words is, in its full and true acceptation, the knowledge of things, and a scientific acquaintance with a language cannot fail to throw some light on the origin, history, and condition of those who speak or spoke it.”¹ In one sense, Garnett exhibits a kind of updated Adamicism when he asserts that the knowledge of words is tantamount to the knowledge of things; however, the thrust of his remark is more anthropological than theological. He not only evinces the optimism voiced by Farrar (and Lucius Mason) but also anticipates two of the primary preoccupations of Victorian language study. The first is a philosophical interest in the relation of words to the world, and, the second, a linguistic concern with scientific and historical methods, especially as they might illuminate larger issues of human evolution and social development.

Although the focus of this chapter is exclusively on language, both points are relevant to the subsequent consideration of promising: the former, because the gap between words and things is precisely what those engaged in promising agree to overlook. Indeed, insofar as promisers assert that present words are directly translatable into future actions, they exhibit a form of Adamicism distinctly out of step with their skeptical age. The latter is important because of the general significance accorded to promises as a vehicle of civilized progress, for example, by scholars like Sir Henry Sumner Maine. As language is increasingly understood to be part of a living and evolving process, it becomes easier for writers to envision promising as a flexible and variable use of words rather than as a reifying and reified social institution. The evolutionary turn of language studies thus provides an intellectual context for novelists’ representations of and experiments with the language of promising.

Three pairs of language scholars—Locke and Tooke, Coleridge and Mill, and Trench and Müller—are used to establish key attitudes concerning the efficacy and limitations of language. These otherwise diverse figures are linked by three general motifs: linguistic relativism and the

recognition that language is a fractious and unreliable medium; skepticism about words in general and intense mistrust of figurative language and rhetoric in particular; and insistence that linguistic meaning is established pragmatically, not theoretically, and that the knowledge of language is best served by empirical methods directed toward historical objectives. Whereas the first two points are quite familiar both in and outside of the philosophy of language, their connection to the third is particularly suggestive with regard to novelists' representations of language. If words are invariably subjective and frequently unreliable, then it is understandable that verbal communication must be studied (or depicted) in fairly specific contexts. While an empirical bias is common to both language studies and literary realism, novelists can do more than map dialects or describe sound changes. They do, of course, reflect prevailing attitudes, such as the desires of Mrs. Garth and Elizabeth-Jane Henchard to speak socially prestigious dialects, but they are also free to depict language working in "nonstandard" or new ways. Their versions of the vernacular, therefore, may challenge such "languages" as the promissory code of the Tullivers in *The Mill on the Floss*, the example with which this chapter ends.

THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Throughout the nineteenth century, considerations of language shift gradually from the theoretical to the scientific, from the philosophy of language to linguistics. The British philosophical approach to language is characterized by linguistic relativism and a growing suspicion that the babel of human languages applies to individual speakers no less than to entire nations. Many trace this position to John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.² Turning from philosophy to etymology, John Horne Tooke nevertheless builds directly upon Locke in *EPEA PTEROENTA or the Diversions of Purley* (1798), announcing to the new century that words are the active agents of thought and not simply the passive vehicles of expression—an ominous augury for the Victorians because it implies that speakers may be at the mercy of their own language. Through the "contrivances" of language in Tooke's terms (or "fictions" in Jeremy Bentham's), which are useful but misleading conventions of ordinary discourse, words deceive us about the world that they purportedly reflect.³ The most benign consequence of this view, even for those who stop short of Tooke's ironic observation that Hermes "put out the eyes of Argus: and I suspect that he has likewise blinded philosophy" (*DP* 15), is an uneasy yet persistent consciousness of language itself. This awareness explains why both Coleridge and

Mill, fearing myopia if not blindness, find that philosophical inquiry is impossible without a preliminary and extensive consideration of language.

The scientific approach to language study is characterized by historicism and the belief that language acquires meaning in use and, as a consequence, must be studied empirically. The turn to history is stressed by Max Müller, perhaps the most influential and widely known of Victorian linguists, who unfavorably contrasts the "mere theorizers" of the past with the comparative philologists of his own scientific age: "Such systems [as were erected by Locke, Voltaire, and Rousseau], though ingenious and plausible, and still in full possession of many of our handbooks of history and philosophy, will have to give way to the spirit of what may be called the *Historical School* of the 19th century."⁴ Müller doubtlessly overestimates the scientific consistency and rigor with which the historical school conducts its research; nevertheless, from the mid-nineteenth century on, linguistic analysis is typified by the general reconsideration of language from empirical perspectives and in pragmatic terms—a reconsideration evidenced by the formation of groups like the Etymological Society at Cambridge (1832) and the Philological Society of London (1842). Tooke is an important forerunner of this historicism, which finds eloquent partisans in Richard Chenevix Trench on etymology and Müller himself on philology.

Whether philosophically or scientifically oriented, language study in Victorian England reflects the larger intellectual controversies of the period. The new philology introduced by Bopp, Rask, and Grimm gradually gains widespread acceptance and generally eclipses, without entirely effacing, the romantic linguistics of Herder and Humboldt. Foucault summarizes this linguistic revolution in *The Order of Things*, which traces the broad outlines of an encompassing epistemic shift in Western culture during the nineteenth century. In linguistics, the new episteme produces a fundamental reconception of language, which is now "ceasing to be transparent to its representations because it is thickening and taking on a peculiar heaviness."⁵ This generalization, however, can be qualified in two important, if seemingly contradictory, ways. It both underestimates and exaggerates the epistemic shift, at least insofar as it is manifest in England: the former, because elements of the modern episteme are heard well before the nineteenth century, and, the latter, because acceptance of the new language theories is anything but universal, even by their proponents.

The change located by Foucault in the nineteenth century can be seen in embryonic form much before this time. Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke all famously warn of the dangers of opaque language and the muddy thinking it occasions. Müller prefaces his 1861 *Lectures on the*

Science of Language with this quotation from Bacon: “Men believe that their reason is lord over their words, but it happens, too, that words exercise a reciprocal and reactionary power over our intellect”—a view that sounds very much like Foucault’s description of the modern episteme: “men believe that their speech is their servant and do not realize that they are submitting themselves to its demands.”⁶ Indeed, part of the attraction of scientific methods and historical research to Müller and his contemporaries is the promise that they hold of escaping the linguistic relativism associated with British empirical philosophy and symbolized by Locke. In his study of language and law, Peter Goodrich acknowledges that “the nineteenth century as a whole was dominated by historical linguistics” and goes on to point out that the

concept of science at work in this early nineteenth-century philology was strongly influenced by the highly successful models of natural science, especially those of mechanistic physics and latterly Darwinian evolutionary theory. A set of universal, deterministic, laws drawn from the highly successful studies in philology, and especially Indo-European phonetics, could provide a set of regularities, a protolanguage, which naturalistic abstraction could explain away all individual variations and irregularities.⁷

The comfort of a rational explanation of language and the promise of fixed and stable verbal meanings do not come without a cost, however, for philology poses a new threat to human autonomy. The power of language over the intellect can no longer be understood as “reciprocal and reactionary,” as in Bacon’s formulation; rather, it has become radical, rational, and relentless. Laws take over where doubts reigned before, and determinism becomes a no less troubling philosophy than skepticism. Even the most progressive scholars, therefore, are as likely to resist as to embrace the new science of language and to search for a compromise between human skepticism and scientific certainty, between individual freedom and ineluctable law.

As a result, the change described by Foucault in monolithic terms occurs at best fitfully throughout the period. Whereas comparative philology does initiate a revolution, it is important to recognize that Victorian linguists like Trench and Müller not only promulgate but also resist, modify, and occasionally co-opt the new linguistic science for more conservative agendas. Language study in nineteenth-century Britain is both impelled to consider the new philology, with the possibility that language is a self-enclosed system whose workings can be described by uniform principles, and repelled by the possibility that something so personal as language is blindly driven by laws, phonetic and otherwise, that are not subject to individual control. In *The Lan-*

guages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century, Maurice Olender points out that many linguists “joined romanticism with positivism in an effort to preserve a common allegiance to the doctrines of Providence”:

[t]hough they cast aside the old theological question, they remained attached to the notion of a providential history. Although they borrowed the techniques of positivist scholarship, took inspiration from methods perfected by natural science, and adopted the new perspective of comparative studies, they continued to be influenced by the biblical presuppositions that defined the ultimate meaning of their work.⁸

The nineteenth century thus constitutes a crossroads in linguistic theory, one that looks ahead to Saussure but also back to Adam. *Genesis*, in fact, provides the one account with which all subsequent theorists, including Locke, must contend, and it is to Locke that I first turn in order to gain further insight into Victorian thinking about language.

LOCKE AND TOOKE

While decrying the absence of “inductive research” among his forebears, Müller nevertheless acknowledges Locke in particular as one of the few who “have so clearly perceived the importance of language in all the operations of the human mind, [and who] have so constantly insisted on the necessity of watching the influence of words on thought.” He concludes: “there are no books which, with all their faults—nay, on account of these very faults—are so instructive to the student of language as Locke’s *Essay*, and Horne Tooke’s *Diversions*; nay there are many points bearing on the later growth of language which they have handled and cleared up with greater mastery than even those who came after them.”⁹ Although Tooke’s philosophy is tainted by his linguistic shortcomings (many of his etymological proofs are more speculative than scientific), Locke remains the dominant influence upon the philosophy of language in nineteenth-century England.

Locke casts the biblical account of language in a distinctly secular light. He asks readers to imagine Adam “in the State of a grown Man, with a good Understanding, but in a strange Country, with all Things New, and unknown about him; and with no other Faculties, to attain the Knowledge of them, but what one of this Age has now” (III.vi.44).¹⁰ This Adam is an Everyman, who confronts problems of communication not essentially different from those facing Locke and his contemporaries (III.vi.51). Posing the problem in profane rather than sacred terms enables Locke to make an argument that will lead directly to Victorian fears about language and indirectly to the (post)modern paralysis artic-

ulated by Foucault. Of course, Foucault's conclusions about the new episteme go well beyond the practical objectives of Locke's *Essay*. The seventeenth-century reminder that "the very nature of Words, makes it almost unavoidable, for many of them to be doubtful and uncertain in their significations" (III.ix.1) seems modest compared to the twentieth-century insistence that "we are already, before the very least of our words, governed and paralyzed by language."¹¹ While Locke hopes to improve communication by exposing the dangers to which speakers are subject, Foucault rejects the notion of language as a communicative tool fully under human control. Words are elements of a self-referential system that functions primarily in relation to itself. Despite the obvious contrast with the argument and objective of the *Essay*, this view follows from Locke's association of words with ideas rather than with things. The rerouting of linguistic reference from things to ideas of things detaches language from external reality and prevents words from simply providing a map of Creation. Once language is channeled through individual minds, dubious directions, detours, and dead ends are the inevitable result. To understand what language can do and how it might be improved, Locke foregoes the search for the first language and turns to the verbal behavior of latter-day Adams.

Locke does not begin the *Essay* with the intention of considering language. He soon realizes, however, that language and understanding are so intricately related that it is impossible to consider the latter without taking up the former, and he concludes, first, "that unless their [words'] force and manner of Signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently concerning Knowledge," and, second, "that they interpose themselves so much between our Understandings, and the Truth, which it would contemplate and apprehend, that like the *Medium* through which visible Objects pass, their Obscurity and Disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our Eyes, and impose upon our Understandings" (III.ix.21). The repeated association of language with mist (e.g., III.x.6 and 13) makes it obvious that speech cannot be understood simply as the transparent or neutral medium of thought. Locke does not suggest that thinking depends upon language, or that words speak us, but he does make it impossible not to consider the impact of words on ideas and their communication. His mistiness and obscurity are not quite the thickness and loss of transparency that Foucault attributes to language in the modern episteme; nevertheless, Locke does make language itself an epistemological problem. He makes words visible. Truth can be approached only through the distorting mists of words, and thought becomes visible only in the misrepresentations of language.

While the *Essay* examines the nature and use of language with the

intention of making it a more reliable medium of philosophical thought and a more sound base for social intercourse, this effort to free speakers from verbal entanglements has ironic consequences. First, it inextricably connects thought with language, and, second, it leads to a compelling argument for the irremediable weakness of words. Locke ultimately concludes that language is characterized by a number of “inconveniences” (III.ix.6) that are treated in separate chapters “On the Imperfection of Words” (III.ix) and “On the Abuse of Words” (III.x). The former describes “the Imperfection that is naturally in Language”; the latter elaborates the “*wilful Faults and Neglects*, which men are guilty of” (III.x.1); their combined effect is a legacy of suspicion and skepticism whose impact is fully felt by the Victorians.

Words are unreliable in Locke’s view because they are active; they do more, therefore often accomplish less, than speakers intend. One reason for this liability lies in the power of names to abbreviate and to generalize—a power that makes discourse functional and communication possible but that also raises the possibility of mistaken meanings. Locke compares the names of complex ideas to knots that tie together bundles of associated ideas.¹² While necessary to expedient and efficient communication, these names, or knots, are prone to unintended entanglements. A single name may tie together so many different ideas that an individual cannot be aware of all of them. When ideas, words, speakers, and interlocutors proliferate, such names are likely to become Gordian. Even the most vigilant speakers cannot help but find themselves entangled in “a curious and unexplicable Web of perplexed Words” (III.x.7).

Both the opacity and the unreliability of speech lead Locke to consider not what language ideally should be but how it functions as an actual and flexible set of social practices.¹³ He looks to common usage as the basis of meaning, reminding readers that most words “received their Birth and Signification, from ignorant and illiterate People, who sorted and denominated Things, by those sensible Qualities they found in them” (III.vi.25). Meanings may change, but they remain a function of ordinary use. “Words,” Locke writes, are “no Man’s private possession, but the common measure of Commerce and Communication” (III.xi.11). And, although quotidian speech is the source of a great many errors and is typically used with even less care than philosophical discourse, Locke reluctantly admits that ordinary language should be consulted in cases of semantic confusion: “Tis true, *common Use*, that is the Rule of Propriety, may be supposed here to afford some aid, to settle the signification of Language; and it cannot be denied, but that in some measure it does” (III.ix.8). This vernacular turn in Locke’s philosophizing explains the importance that he places upon a scholarly project that he himself is understandably unwilling to undertake—one that is

not begun for another two centuries and that once started will take almost a half a century to complete, *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

When Locke stresses the need for a natural history of language, he anticipates a central element of Victorian scholarship: “to define their Names right, natural History is to be enquired into; . . . we must, by acquainting our selves with the History of that sort of Things, rectify and settle our complex *Idea*, belonging to each specifick Name” (III.xi.24). Lacking such a dictionary, “we must content our selves with such Definitions of the Names of Substances, as explain the sense Men use them in” (III.xi.25). This emphasis upon ordinary language anticipates the importance of etymology in subsequent linguistic theory and of dialect in literature. It might be said with some justification that the nineteenth century is virtually ushered in with an appeal to a poetics of ordinary usage (Wordsworth’s “Preface”) and that its dominant literary form, the novel, is characterized by verisimilar dialogue and conversational narration.

Locke’s call for a “natural history” of words acknowledges the inevitability of unstable meaning and expresses a desire for a lexical standard with which to limit subjective usage. “Common Use,” he admits, is “a very uncertain Rule” and “a very variable Standard” (III.xi.25). Furthermore, because words and ideas are often confusingly connected by individual speakers, speech might conform to accepted usage as well as to grammatical principle and still generate confusion. As Locke points out, “Men speaking the proper Language of their Country, *i.e.*, according to Grammer-Rules of the Language, do yet speak very improperly of Things Themselves” (III.xi.25). Idiosyncratic speech cannot be restricted to national languages or even regional dialects. A more radical subjectivism is apparent among speakers of the same language or dialect. Locke implies that individuals seem almost to have private languages:

Sure I am, that the signification of Words, in all Languages, depending very much on the Thoughts, Notions, and *Ideas* of him that uses them, must unavoidably be of great uncertainty, to Men of the same Language and Country. This is so evident in the Greek Authors, that he, that shall peruse their Writings, will find, in almost every one of them, a distinct Language, though the same Words. (III.ix.21)

In this formulation, linguistic relativism takes a step toward skepticism, if not solipsism. Locke’s position, amplified by Condillac and Herder in the eighteenth century, echoes resoundingly throughout the nineteenth.¹⁴ These reverberations are the ironic result of an effort to make the language of secular Adams at least a serviceable approximation of their nominal ancestor’s, and they set the tone of Victorian speculations

about our human—and verbal—nature. George Eliot, for example, notes that “among the peasantry it is the race, the district, the province, that has its style; namely, its dialect, its phraseology . . . which belong alike to the entire body of the people.”¹⁵ Among the Victorians, the linguistic relativism for which Locke lays the philosophical foundation is often reformulated in terms of class, with the same potential for miscommunication. The language of Eliot’s peasantry, for example, is so different from that of other social groups that, in the words of noted Victorian linguist A. J. Ellis, “real communication between class and class is impossible.”¹⁶

There is another aspect of Locke’s treatment of language that bears consequences for nineteenth-century novelists. It might be taken as significant, or at least suggestive, that Locke does not take up the subject of the arts—even as it is admitted that aesthetic questions fall outside of his primary consideration. The *Essay* is concerned with philosophy, not poetics, and with linguistic efficiency: words should express ideas “with as much ease and quickness, as is possible” (III.x.23). This utilitarian bent disinclines Locke to consider the complexities of metaphor or the difficulties of poetic style. When he does refer to literature, for instance, it is only to use Sancho Panza as an example of one insufficiently anchored in empirical reality (III.iv.11). Nevertheless, the little that is said of poetic or figurative language in the *Essay* contributes to a specific form of linguistic mistrust that will resonate among the Victorians: the fear of figurative language.

This fear is playfully exploited by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* when the narrator insists that he uses the word “nose” literally and not as a phallic trope. Tristram, of course, encourages readers’ prurient speculations by pretending innocence of them: “In books of strict morality and close reasoning, such as this I am engaged in,—the neglect [of defining terms] is inexcusable; and heaven is witness, how the world has revenged itself upon me for leaving so many openings to equivocal strictures,—and for depending so much as I have done, all along, upon the cleanliness of my reader’s imaginations.”¹⁷ Sterne delights in the double entendre enabled by the nasal metaphor and employs it in a parody of the seriousness of philosophical and other discourse. Locke might agree with Tristram’s sentiment that “to define—is to distrust” (*TS* 218), but he would do so with the hope of delimiting rather than expanding signification. In his view, metaphor and simile are readily turned to devious purposes by smooth talkers—or, as in the case of Sterne, turned to mischievous ends by witty authors. Furthermore, tropes, by calling attention to themselves, contribute to the detrimental opacity of language and to the proliferation rather than the clarification of meaning. Proper in its place, figurative language nevertheless adds to the tendency

inherent in all language to private and multiple meanings.

Locke thus passes on to the nineteenth century not only a fear of the relativity and concomitant fallibility of language in general but also a pronounced skepticism about figurative speech in particular. The latter concern is heard, for instance, in Wordsworth, who voices his own protest against “the gaudiness and inane phraseology” of poetry, opting instead for the “real language of men.”¹⁸ His flight from figuration, however, is no protection against the associative madness exploited for comic purposes by Sterne. In the “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*, for instance, Wordsworth attributes possible “defects” in the poems to the fact

that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general, and that, consequently, giving to things a false importance, I may have sometimes written upon unworthy subjects; but I am less apprehensive on this account, than that my language may frequently have suffered from those arbitrary connections of feelings and ideas with particular words and phrases, from which no man can altogether protect himself.¹⁹

Wordsworth fears that he will be the victim of his own lexical idiosyncrasies. His anxieties may have been substantiated, since he later writes that words “hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts.”²⁰ Misused—and misuse seems inescapable—language becomes a “counter-spirit,” and proves to be “an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on.”²¹ The shirt of Nessus is not simply a mythological symbol; in linguistic terms, it is a human birthright.

The second of Locke’s legacies of skepticism receives a forceful impetus at the beginning of the century, less surprisingly from a philosopher and not a poet. Jeremy Bentham claims even more insistently than Locke that all poetry is misrepresentation. Bentham warns that any use of figuration is liable to elicit “disgust” or to promote “confusion,” especially when “a quality which belongs only to one of these images . . . is inadvertently ascribed to another. In this way, perhaps, before the discourse is come to a close . . . the state of things originally meant to be designated has been forgotten, and is dropt out of sight, and thus the whole become a tissue of nonsense.”²² Bentham decries a kind of “association of figures” that is potentially no less chaotic than the association of ideas that isolates characters from each other in *Tristram Shandy*.

That Locke figures so prominently in a discussion of nineteenth-century attitudes to language is partially due to John Horne Tooke. A transitional figure, Tooke builds upon the *Essay* in ways especially impor-

tant to utilitarian thinkers like Bentham and James Mill. He also anticipates the scientific approach to language of the mid- and late nineteenth century. *The Diversions of Purley* is a direct response to Locke's *Essay* and opens on a familiar note: "I very early found it, or thought I found it, impossible to make many steps in the search after *truth* and the nature of *human understanding*, of *good* and *evil*, of right and wrong, without well considering the nature of language, which appeared to me to be inseparably connected with them" (DP 12). Tooke, however, goes well beyond Locke in attributing the actions of the mind to the processes of language. He claims that the "business of the mind, as far as it concerns Language, appears to me to be very simple. It extends no further than to receive impressions, that is, to have Sensations of Feelings. What are called its operations, are merely the operations of Language" (DP 51). By making thought a function of language rather than the other way around, Tooke raises the possibility of the anthropocentric displacement soon to be effected by Darwin and later to be articulated in linguistic terms by Foucault. While this aspect of Tooke's theory prompts many including Coleridge (after initial enthusiasm) to reject it, *Winged Words* remains an important work well into the nineteenth century.

One reason for Tooke's appeal despite his radical philosophy is the attention he brings to language study as important not only to philosophical discourse but also to many aspects of practical life. For Tooke, the operative principle of language formation and use is abbreviation. Abbreviations are single terms that take the place of many other words. They are "the *wheels* of language, the *wings* of Mercury" (DP 25). By virtue of these "artificial wings" (DP 27), however, both philosophers and grammarians have been misled. The failure to recognize the function of abbreviation leads to the mistaken belief that all words refer directly either to things or, as in Locke, to ideas. Tooke argues, on the contrary, that "many words are merely *abbreviations* employed for dispatch, and are the signs of other words" (DP 27). Words make sense only in relation to other bundles of words. Locke's error, therefore, has been to attribute to thought that which is merely a function of language. Had he understood "the inseparable connexion of words and knowledge," he

would not have talked of the *composition* of *ideas*; but would have seen that it was merely a contrivance of Language: and that the only composition was in the *terms*; and consequently that it was as improper to speak of a *complex idea*, as it would be to call a constellation a complex star: And that they are not ideas, but merely *terms*, which are *general* and *abstract*. (DP 36–37)

At this point, we can see language beginning "to fold in upon itself," as Foucault will later put it. Having found the key to Locke, Tooke turns

to etymology as the sword with which to cut through the “knots” of language, without perhaps fully anticipating etymology’s Saussurean effect: signs, or words, are shown to refer only to other words. The radical implications of Tooke’s philosophy, however, are avoided by his successors, in part, because his empirical turn is inconsistently and partially executed. Many of his etymologies are entirely fictional—imaginative constructions of an a priori notion of language—and provide ample ammunition with which to refute his theories.²³

Nevertheless, he at least appears to ground the study of language in empirically verifiable fact, therefore, to elevate linguistics to the status of natural science. Tooke, for instance, compares etymology to a microscope, and as early as 1825, William Hazlitt credits him for treating “words as the chemists do substances; he separated those which are compounded from those which are not decomposable. He did not explain the obscure by the more obscure, but the difficult by the plain, the complex by the simple. This alone is proceeding upon the true principles of science.”²⁴ The appeal of positivism is one reason for Tooke’s influence. He brings etymology to the forefront of language studies, and in the hands of his successors, it becomes a more reliable antidote to hazy speculation and abstract philosophizing.

Another reason for Tooke’s importance is that he brings authority and respect to the historical analysis of modern and vernacular languages. Since he considers both early English and “common speech” as worthy of study, he contributes to the rise of Anglo-Saxon studies and is responsible, in Olivia Smith’s view, for redirecting the attention of linguists to “human life and public exchanges. The value of words depends on their temporal evolution to facilitate a necessarily and strictly human exchange.”²⁵ In stressing etymology as a practical tool, therein providing incentive for the dictionary of natural history thought impractical by Locke, Tooke opens the door to the scientific study of language and brings attention to vernacular English. The reasons for Tooke’s appeal, even after his etymologies are discredited, may lie precisely in his contradictions: on the one hand, he offers a recognizable connection with the philosophical traditions of the past, and, on the other hand, he champions a scientific method for the future—one that will dispel the old uncertainties, rendering philosophical discourse more functional and ordinary language more accurate.

COLERIDGE AND MILL

The promise of rigor and precision is especially attractive to Coleridge and Mill, who otherwise represent diametrically opposed reactions to

the legacies of Locke and Tooke. While Tooke translates Locke's philosophy into grammatical theory, Coleridge returns and reverses the favor by suggesting that Tooke's system itself ought to be philosophized.²⁶ In pursuing this suggestion, Coleridge ultimately rejects Tooke's sensualist orientation for a more idealistic conception of language. Mill, on the contrary, remains much closer to the empirical tradition, especially as expressed in the utilitarianism of Bentham and his father, James Mill. Despite this basic difference, Coleridge and Mill have important points in common with each other and with Locke. These commonalities suggest that underlying contradictory ideas of language in the nineteenth century is a set of common themes. Both Coleridge and Mill emphasize that words are active and predisposed to error. They do so in works whose ostensible purposes are quite different from linguistic analysis. Language seems almost to force its way into both Coleridge's *Logic* and Mill's *A System of Logic* and to do so for the same reason compelling Locke to address this issue in the *Essay*. Each alludes to the confusions and carelessness of everyday speaking and warns that philosophy must be ever vigilant against these errors. At the same time, however, both defend ordinary language as the true test of meaning and find themselves, like Locke, in the contradictory position of suggesting that vernacular usage cannot yet must be trusted. They recognize the need for a historical dictionary of English, and Coleridge actually begins one. Finally, both see figurative language as a threat to clarity and a source of semantic deviation—a circumstance ultimately welcomed by Coleridge and condemned by Mill.

Coleridge's *Logic* has a lengthy history leading to an ironic conclusion: it is not published in his lifetime. The work, planned in 1817 as a "practical Logic for the use of the student," evolves by 1822 into *Elements of Discourse*. Several years later, the still incomplete manuscript appears to be taking on the contours, if not the specific arguments, of Locke: it will be "one large Volume of the Power and Use of Words, including a full exposition of the Constitution & Limits of the Human Understanding."²⁷ The second section of *Logic* emphasizes accuracy in language use and aims at eliminating the "utter logomachy" of disputes that are essentially no more than "a mere difference of words" (*L* II.i.15). Coleridge blames such disputes less on the faulty resources of language than on the faulty thinking of those employing them (*L* II.i.21a). In addition to "logomachy," for example, he coins the term "logodaedalism" to describe "verbal sleight-of-hand and word-trickery" (*L* II.i.20). These neologisms imply that words have wings not by nature but as a result of the forgeries of latter-day Dedaluses. Thus of the two chapters devoted to language problems by Locke, Coleridge would emphasize "On the Abuse

of Words” rather than “On the Imperfection of Words.”

By including a commentary on language in his discourse on logic, Coleridge seeks to remedy quite practical problems. The result of this prefatory analysis, however, is once again to remind readers of the opacity of language, of its tendency to ambiguity, and of the necessity to consider it pragmatically. On several occasions Coleridge quotes Hobbes’s warning: “Notice how easily men slip from improper use of words into errors about things themselves.”²⁸ He exaggerates Locke’s figurative expression for the obscurity of language—mistiness—into a virtual tempest: “Alas, what great calamities have misty words produced, that say so much that they say nothing—clouds, rather, from which hurricanes burst, both in church and state” (*BL* II.31). He laments the “vicious phraseology which meets us every where, from the sermon to the newspaper, from the harangue of the legislator to the speech from the convivial chair,” and alludes to a future work—presumably the *Logic*—that will “prove the close connection between veracity and habits of mental accuracy; the beneficial after-effects of verbal precision in the preclusion of fanaticism, which masters the feelings more especially by indistinct watch words; and to display the advantages which language alone . . . presents to the instructor of impressing modes of intellectual energy . . . as to secure in due time the formation of a second nature” (*BL* II.22). “Watch words” for Coleridge are consciously constructed examples of what Locke would pejoratively subsume under the category of rhetoric. For instance, in the mouths of politicians, “[s]ome unmeaning Term generally becomes the Watch-word, and acquires almost a mechanical power over his frame” (*L* II.i.21a). This power, however, is more often the result of indolence than of intention. Careless speakers and insentient interlocutors, with “their habitual passiveness of mind to the automatic trains of the memory and the fancy” (*L* II.i.21a), are more responsible for linguistic confusion than are practiced logodaedalists.

Coleridge urges that everyone “think and reason in precise and steadfast terms, even when custom, or deficiency, or the corruption of language will not permit the same strictures in speaking.”²⁹ Language itself, however, militates against such precision and steadfastness. It becomes a source of ambiguity or mistiness when, as a result of a kind of verbal conditioning, words attain subjective significance that persists despite the corrective of experience:

For as words are learnt by us in clusters, even those that most expressly refer to Images & the Impressions are not learnt by us determinately; and tho’ this should be wholly corrected by . . . experience, yet the Images & Impressions associated with the words become more & more dim, till at last as far as our consciousness

extends they cease altogether; & Words act upon us immediately, exciting a mild current of Passion & Feeling without the regular intermediation of Images.³⁰

Words acquire through time and use the power to act upon consciousness. They may become, no less than human agents, a source of verbal confusion. Coleridge ultimately rejects Hartley's associative psychology along with Tooke's linguistic philosophy; nevertheless, he maintains that a verbal "second nature" plays an active and a potentially detrimental role in human experience and communication.

Following Locke, Coleridge appeals to ordinary language as a check upon winged words and logodaedalism. One means of identifying and achieving "a coincidence between the thought and the word" is to turn to "common usage" (*L II.i.8b*). The "experimental philosopher" may require more precise means and meanings than the "rude and ponderous masses," but there should be no "wantonly deviating even from the common usage" (*L II.i.8b*). This recourse to ordinary language explains his interest in projects like Locke's proposed natural history of language. Coleridge himself plans a number of dictionaries and glossaries, including the *Encyclopedia Metropolitana*, "a kind of history of English words, with citations arranged chronologically, yet with 'every attention to the independent beauty or value of the sentences chosen . . . consistent with the higher ends of a clear insight into the original and acquired meaning of every word.'"³¹ For Coleridge, as for Tooke, the origin of a term provides a key to its correct meaning. Thus in *Aids to Reflection*, he writes:

Language (as the growth and emanation of a People, and not the work of any individual Wit or Will) is often inadequate, sometimes deficient, but never false or delusive. We have only to master the true origin and original import of any native and abiding word, to find in it, if not the *solution* of the facts expressed by it, yet a fingermark pointing to the road on which this solution is to be wrought.³²

Coleridge's reference to language as an organic product of "a People" invokes the romantic language theory of his day; nevertheless, his intimation of etymology is itself a fingermark, pointing, first, in the historical direction of language studies to come and, second, to the use of regional dialect in the novels of writers like Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Coleridge's philosophy of language to subsequent novelists lies in his emphasis upon the creative resources of language itself. He identifies two processes, neologism and desynonymization, that exhibit the creative potential of language at the same time that they dispel some of its mistiness. The former responds to

the moribund circumstance of a language that is structured so as to “be impeded by its want of a verbal symbol, paralyzed by its not daring (in that formed state of language) to invent or rather to *generate* a symbol.”³³ The latter reverses the direction of the former, moving back in time to distinguish two terms that have been collapsed into one, thereby eliminating the confusion occasioned by combining separate meanings in single words.³⁴ As we might expect of a person who is a poet as well as a philosopher, Coleridge does not share Locke’s notion of figurative speech as a “perfect cheat.” In literary terms, winged words represent the creativity that Joyce identifies with Dedalus rather than the deceit that Coleridge associates with politicians. While warning of the dangers inherent in language use, Coleridge also sees significant creative potential in the active force of language. Words are living entities because, beyond merely referring to the outside world, they share in the active consciousness of the speaker. In making this point, he refers to Tooke’s famous work, substituting “living” for “winged” in the title.³⁵ The vitality of language makes *Living Words* a more apt expression, as Coleridge’s amanuensis explains:

In Coleridge’s judgment it [*The Diversions of Purley*] might have been much more fitly called *Verba Viventia*, “living words,” for words are the living products of the living mind and could not be a due medium between the thing and the mind unless they partook of both. The word was not to convey merely what a certain thing is, but the very passion and all the circumstances which were conceived as constituting the perception of the thing by the person who used the word.³⁶

Described in these terms, language is creative, not moribund, and illuminating rather than deceiving. Indeed, the “mistiness” so antithetical to philosophy may be a virtue in poetry. Coleridge, for example, places a new twist on Tristram Shandy’s distrust of definition, wondering “[w]hether or not the too great definiteness of Terms in any language may not consume too much of the vital & idea-creating force in distinct, clear, full made Images & so prevent originality—original thought as distinguished from positive thought.”³⁷ In this regard, Coleridge differs considerably from Locke and from his contemporary, John Stuart Mill, who would very likely find in Coleridge’s notion of “originality” further justification of his own life-long suspicion of novels.

However different their attitude to figurative language, Mill, like Coleridge, begins his consideration of logic with an account of language, also for quite practical reasons: “those who have not a thorough insight into the signification and purposes of words, will be under chances, amounting almost to certainty, of reasoning or inferring incorrectly.”³⁸ For Mill, words cannot be used with “too great definiteness,” and cor-

rect thinking is impossible without studied attention to exact speaking: "Language is evidently, and by the admission of all philosophers, one of the principal instruments or helps of thought; and any imperfection in the instrument, or in the mode of employing it, is confessedly liable, still more than in almost any other art, to confuse and impede the process, and destroy all ground of confidence in the result" (SL I.i.1). Mill's position is that language is a "help" to, but not a means of, thought. He rejects the extreme view that thought is entirely dependent on language, although he does so in qualified terms: "this opinion must be held to be an exaggeration, though of an important truth" (IV.iii.2). Recognizing this "important truth" leads Mill to focus his attention upon "any imperfection in the instrument" more than upon those using it. Mill, therefore, is more likely than Coleridge to blame language itself for logical errors, and of Locke's two chapters, he would stress "On the Imperfection of Words" rather than "On the Abuse of Words."

Mill maintains that language over time acquires a distorting opacity. He compares words to eyeglasses that fail in their intended objective to "assist not perplex . . . vision" (SL I.i.1). This account of verbal obfuscation suggests that, whatever the difference in emphasis, Mill's pragmatic objectives are quite similar to Coleridge's:

When it is impossible to obtain good tools, the next best thing is to understand thoroughly the defects of those we have. . . . Philosophical language will for a long time, and popular language still longer, retain so much of vagueness and ambiguity, that logic would be of little value if it did not, among its other advantages, exercise the understanding in doing its work neatly and correctly with these imperfect tools. (SL I.iii.2)

An example of imperfect tools or foggy lenses is the category of general names. Mill offers as an illustration the word "civilization," which "conveys scarcely to any two minds the same idea. No two persons agree in the things they predicate of it; and when it is itself predicated of anything, no other person knows, nor does the speaker himself know with precision, what he means to assert" (SL IV.iv.3). Even with simple phenomena or experiences, speakers necessarily imply much more than they say: "The perception is only of one individual thing; but to describe it is to affirm a connexion between it and every other thing which is either denoted or connoted by any of the terms used. . . . An observation cannot be spoken of in language at all without declaring more than that one observation; without assimilating it to other phenomena already observed and classified" (SL IV.i.3). Interconnected experience, associated ideas, and ambiguous words mean that no thing can be one thing. Conceptually as well as experientially, language is

inevitably expansive and militates against precision and specificity.

As with the “knots” described by Locke, Mill points out that “mere words” may launch unexpected and unintended semantic flights. “Very often, indeed,” Mill writes, “when we are employing a word in our mental operations, we are so far from waiting until the complex idea which corresponds to the meaning of the word is consciously brought before us in all its parts, that we run on to new trains of ideas by the other associations *which the mere word excites*” (SL IV.iv.6, my emphasis). Mill, no less than Coleridge, is wary of mechanical influences of words upon people, and, no less than Locke, he holds language responsible for this “sort of Madness” (II.xxxiii.2). The tendency of words to instigate associative mayhem is most readily apparent in accounts of personal experience and in casual observations (a view that perhaps contributes to Mill’s hostility to the novels, which depend so heavily on such accounts). These subjective connections result not only from the arbitrary associations of words but also from the singular experiences of individuals. In this regard, Mill emphasizes precisely the fear expressed by Wordsworth concerning *Lyrical Ballads*: singular associations will, at the least, lead to miscommunication and, at the worst, elicit derision.

The antidote to such madness is to be found, surprisingly, in non-philosophic speech. While warning of the “trammels of every-day phraseology” (SL V.iii.6), Mill also insists that philosophy “must begin by recognising the distinctions made by ordinary language” (SL I.i.3). He repeatedly cautions against affixing new connotations to old words, insisting that “the meaning of a term actually in use is not an arbitrary quantity to be fixed, but an unknown quantity to be sought” (SL IV.iv.4,6)—and sought, he claims, in the history of the term’s usage. This is not to say that a word’s true meaning is to be found in its original meaning. He writes in *Utilitarianism*: “I am not committing the fallacy, imputed with some show of truth to Horne Tooke, of assuming that a word must still continue to mean what it originally meant. Etymology is slight evidence of what the idea now signified is, but the very best evidence of how it sprang up.”³⁹ Meaning is a function of present and past usage. Mill thinks of language as a kind of savings bank of human history. It is “the depository of the accumulated body of experience to which all former ages have contributed their part, and which is the inheritance of all yet to come” (SL IV.iv.6). Conventional dictionaries being “so imperfect an exponent of . . . real meaning,” informed speakers should turn to the history of a word, which is “a better guide to its employment than any definition” (SL IV.v.1). In addition to amplifying the call for a historical dictionary of English, Mill’s *System of Logic* adds to the scientific momentum to view language as a “depository”—later a fos-

sil—as well as to the thrust of the novel toward colloquial, regional, and class dialects.

“Real meaning” remains an elusive entity in Mill’s view, and in this regard, he is closer to Locke than to Coleridge. Emphasizing the defects of “mere words” more than those of mere speakers, Mill is left with an irresolvable dilemma: how is the meaning of a word to be clarified when there are only other, possibly equally unclear, words with which to do so? Each person “is thrown back upon the marks by which he himself has been accustomed to be guided in his application of the term: and these, being merely vague hearsays and current phrases, are not the same in any two persons, nor in the same person at different times” (*SL* IV.iv.3). Individual “marks” invariably efface what Coleridge calls the “fingermarks” of original meaning. Even while setting out to improve language, therefore, Mill can ultimately be no more optimistic about the chances of overcoming its fundamental weakness than is Locke (III.xi.1).

Mill’s appreciative essays on Wordsworth and Coleridge make clear that to a certain extent he overcomes the hostility to literature and figurative language initially shared with Bentham. An appreciative reader of poetry, Mill nevertheless retains narrowly circumscribed ideas of its place and purpose, and he continues to hold a strong bias against narrative literature. He exemplifies, indeed is partly responsible for, the double bind confronting novelists. Fiction, Mill maintains, panders to the appetite for storytelling so apparent in children and so valued by primitive societies. Hence “the shallowest and emptiest . . . are at all events, . . . not those least addicted to novel-reading. . . . The most idle and frivolous persons take a natural delight in fictitious narrative.”⁴⁰ Novels indulge infantile inclinations and induce insensibility in weak-minded adults. The metaphor of addiction, with the implication of narrative narcosis, expresses Mill’s personal distaste and moral condemnation.⁴¹ Hostility to the novel compounds his more general mistrust of language, and the combined effect places Victorian novelists in a doubly compromised position—they stand accused of employing an unreliable medium toward an unethical end.

TRENCH AND MÜLLER

Coleridge and Mill exemplify philosophical approaches to language; Richard Chenevix Trench and Max Müller illustrate the emergence of linguistics from philosophy and the establishment of the science of language as an independent discipline. In the second half of the nineteenth century, language studies shift in emphasis from the theoretical to the empirical—from logic to etymology and from philosophy to philology.