DE QUINCEY, DICTIONARIES, AND CASUISTRY

BY J. MARK SMITH

“There is nothing old under the sun.”

—Thomas De Quincey, "James's History of Charlemagne"

In what follows, I explore Thomas De Quincey's fascination with lexicography, glancing at several of his essays on dictionaries and on such linguistic matters as standards of pronunciation and the extemporaneous quality of conversation. All of these essays circle around the question of current usage and its sovereignty in determining what is right and wrong in speech and writing, but also around the fact that norms of usage change over the decades in ways that are mostly imperceptible to speakers of a language. De Quincey, in addition to being obsessed by perishability and ruin—by the way that the things and actions of men date themselves—was also a champion of the power of reflective judgment to recognize and savor the singular entity or phenomenon over against the infinitely complex and intricate universe of natural and human-made things. The practice of such judgment he calls casuistry; the first part of my argument wrestles with De Quincey’s idiosyncratic use of this term.

De Quincey’s journalistic career over four decades coincided with, and was unquestionably touched by, the great age of European philology, a time of ever more sophisticated research into historical context. In that vein, the middle part of this essay explores the “evolution-theory” contemporaneous with De Quincey’s lexicographical essays—not in order to declare him a spirit of the age, but to show how his casuistical principles cause him to diverge from the triumphant paradigm of mutability in the crown of linguistics: from that procedure for reconstructing the branching trees of linguistic derivation that we call, after the nineteenth-century philologists, etymology. To better understand De Quincey’s rejection of etymology, in its eighteenth- as well as nineteenth-century forms, I glance at the dictionary of the day—Charles Richardson’s *A New Dictionary of the English Language*—that for all its strengths was fatally weakened by
the idea that usage is derivative in every instance from the primal sense of a word. De Quincey, despite his personal eccentricity and unruliness, was a principled and consistent casuist (in his sense of that word); when this prose stylist and involution-theorist ran up against the lexicography and linguistics of the day, the result was some of the most suggestive thinking in the modern era about that dimension of language known as usage.

I. CASUISTRY

The word casuistry to this day carries a pejorative sense—roughly equivalent to sophistry—but can be used in a range of ways, on a spectrum (as James Chandler has put it) from “the high generality of the grammatical case form” to the historical specificity of the Catholic tradition of “ethical discipline and discourse.”3 Chandler, in England in 1819, employs casuistry as “a general term for doctrines and disciplines of decision-making that are designed to handle ‘cases’”: his interest is in the historical case of one’s own time versus the case(s) of another time.4 Chandler points to “the [word’s] root sense of ‘befallings,’ configurations of circumstances identified as such in relation to some normative domain[.]”5 He quotes a sentence from De Quincey’s “The Casuistry of Duelling” to show the relation between a grammatical and an ethical case: “[A]s a case, in the declension of a noun, means a falling away, or a deflection from the upright nominative (rectus), so a case in ethics implies some falling off, or deflection from the high road of catholic morality.”6 (An example in the field of moral judgment: De Quincey’s discussion in “Casuistry” of such mitigating circumstances as might be considered in the case of Napoleon Bonaparte’s slaughter of 4,000 Turkish prisoners-of-war at Jaffa in 1799.)

David Clark, in a recent article on De Quincey, Immanuel Kant, and addiction, makes a penetrating tangential remark about the philosophical power of casuistry if it is taken seriously as a discipline of decision-making. Clark calls the “casuistical question” Kant asks himself in Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals concerning opium-users and the ethical permissibility of opium-eating a prompt for reflective judgment: “But who can determine the measure for someone who is quite ready to pass into a condition in which he no longer has clear eyes for measuring?”7 Asking such questions—“how to judge? Am I that judge?”—“locat[es] the metaphysician-moralist amid the unsettled and unsettling dust of events, actions, and opinions from whence he came and to which he must return with each act of judgment.”8

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In an essay first published in the October 1839 and February 1840 issues of *Blackwood* magazine, and titled “Casuistry,” De Quincey’s opening move is to broaden the popular, Protestant understanding of casuistry—“that the main purpose and drift of this science was a sort of hair-splitting process, by which doubts might be applied to the plainest duties of life”—and of the casuist: “a kind of lawyer or special pleader in morals.” Instead, he claims, “[c]asuistry . . . is the science of cases, or of those special varieties which are for ever changing the face of actions as contemplated in general rules. The tendency of such variations is, in all states of complex civilization, to absolute infinity” (“C,” 350). Wherever there is complexity of action, complexity of lived context or historical situation, and a need for judgment, there will be casuistry. If we dislike the original medieval Catholic context of this discipline of decision-making or the post-Reformation prejudices against it, we can evade the word itself, but not the need for such judgments. “As society grows complex, the uses of casuistry become more urgent,” De Quincey writes (“C,” 348). In an essay published 1851, he defines casuistry again, as follows:

A case means a generic class of human acts, but differentiated in the way that law cases are. For we see that every case in the law courts conforms in the major part to the generic class; but always, or nearly always, it presents some one differential feature peculiar to itself; and the question about it always is, Whether the differential feature is sufficient to take it out of the universal rule, or whether, in fact, it ought not to disturb the incidence of the legal rule? This is what we mean by casuistry.10

An opposite of casuistry is deduction, or the subsumption of a particular case to a universal rule. Consider Richardson’s sentence in the preface to an 1839 edition of his *A New Dictionary of the English Language* (a work we will return to): “It is by the just and skilful application of old rules to new cases, that we make advances in knowledge.”11 De Quincey’s understanding of casuistry, in contrast, plays in its root with the grammatical concept of a case always potentially being a falling away or a lapsing or a deviation from a governing rule or definition.

Even where the aspiration to reconstruct in minute detail the whole and complete context around any action or (as I have taken it) around any recorded instance of usage may be practically impossible, casuistry itself is something we cannot do without, De Quincey says, not least in “our daily conversations” (“C,” 351). The work of casuistry, that is, responds to, and is allied with, some quality in conversation.
that De Quincey returns to again and again—that which is perpetually continuing or continual (rather than continuous), infinitely mutable, and always perishing, evanescent, fugacious. It stands, by some metonymic figure, for the synchronic totality of a language in the moment—“the vast tennis courts of conversation, where the ball is flying backwards and forwards to no purpose forever”—as opposed to the fraction of utterance ever registered or recorded or adduced as noteworthy in any way. De Quincey discerned “the same silent arches of continual transition” in electrical currents moving back and forth between the poles and the equatorial regions; and (as he learned through reading the liberal economist David Ricardo) in the “inaudible” movements and modifications of capital.

II. BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES AND CASUISTICAL JUDGMENT

The lexicographer must be aware of those vast tennis courts of daily conversation. For that is where any dictionary will encounter its limits. In his 1839 essay on Roman meals, De Quincey memorably characterizes casuistry as a practice that presents facts that are “ruinous to our dictionaries.” In the immediate context of his discussion, by “ruinous” he must mean that expose the inaccuracies and infelicities of Latin-English dictionaries. In this witty essay, De Quincey slowly exfoliates the occasion, the social situation, to which the Roman words for mealtimes were applied, showing that the Latin word *coena*, though it can be translated by the English idiom “dinner” and belongs to the same generic class of human acts, is, if we mean “by dinner the whole complexity of attendant circumstances,” not identical to the activity and occasion referred to by the English word. What is more, De Quincey points out, the English word “dinner” does not even retain the same meaning between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries.

On further consideration, then, casuistical judgment will be ruinous to all dictionaries not organized so as to show the transformation of meanings and usages through history. The ideal bilingual dictionary would alert a non-native speaker to historical and contextual nuance in both his own and in the target language—that is, not only to current usage but to recent changes in the customary forms and registers of speech. The whole, mutable complexity of attendant circumstances around any given act, any given utterance, in combination with the always changing facts of usage, will ruin (that is, make worthless) all dictionaries that do not open themselves to perpetual amendment and supplement, that do not embrace the “oblique deflexions” of the
case (“C,” 349). De Quincey’s stories about bilingual dictionaries show those brave reference books ruined not so much by casuistry as by the reality of linguistic mutability, as well as by the fact that our judgments about the propriety of particular usages are guided by nuances of social register and context that are resistant to codification.\textsuperscript{16}

A dictionary that allows itself to be guided by De Quinceyan casuistry opens itself to “the tendency” of the case, which is “to absolute infinity”—and so will be, again, but differently, ruined—that is, forced into an impracticable, untenable position (“C,” 350). For what is true of ethics and individual actions is also true of a language and individual speech acts: examples of usage, like other sorts of cases, manifest what De Quincey called an “everlasting depullulation of fresh sprouts and shoots from old boughs” (“C,” 350).\textsuperscript{17} As he put it in his long review of a biography of Charlemagne, “[t]here is nothing old under the sun.”

On the one hand, De Quincey—in his 1823 essay “English Dictionaries”—asserts that a good dictionary will trace back the evolution of meanings and variation of usages in a “chain of true affinities” reaching back etymologically to the primitive sensation-sense (something like the aim of Richardson’s dictionary) (“ED,” 155). And he wants ill-informed usage to be reformed, ill-informed speakers educated. On the other hand, one might with good cause suspect De Quincey of genuinely wishing to ruin dictionaries, which is to say to thwart the lexicographical impulse, at least where it is directed by a pedantic prescriptivism or a flatly irresponsible descriptivism. The stance that he calls casuistry ultimately destabilizes every taxonomy, including those of definition and of etymology. How so? Let me make another detour via Richardson’s dictionary.

A New Dictionary of the English Language, a work De Quincey knew and likely consulted, gives us a working model of what De Quincey implied by the “evolution of successive meaning” (“ED,” 155). The dictionary Richardson compiled and edited was at first a subordinate part of the Encyclopaedia Metropolitana, a project given its impetus by Samuel Taylor Coleridge.\textsuperscript{18} The initial lexicon was meant to be an explanatory index for the vocabulary of philosophical keywords in this encyclopedia. It followed in the tradition of Denis Diderot’s 1755 call for a “universal dictionary” that would provide a foundation for the French Encyclopédie: “[K]nowledge of the language is the foundation of all these grand hopes; they will remain uncertain, if the language is not fixed and transmitted to posterity in all its perfection; and this object is the first of those it would behoove the encyclopedists to take seriously to heart.”\textsuperscript{19} Despite beginning as an adjunct to an encyclopedic
project, *A New Dictionary of the English Language* was eventually published alone, as a complete work, in 1836–37.

In his “Preface” to its 1836–37 edition, Richardson notes: “Etymology . . . seems to admits of two main divisions, first, that which decomposes words into their primal, literal roots; and this is peculiarly the province of the philosophical grammarian or linguist; and secondly, that which (in our own mingled speech more especially) traces their lineal and co-lineal descent from a radical meaning to their present form and use.”20 His own researches, he says, are limited to the latter. When Richardson mentions, in the preface to the 1839 edition of his dictionary, his effort to assemble “a copious deduction of usages”—sentences illustrating usage—he calls it a “deduction” because all particular variations or deviations of use he nevertheless holds to be deviations from an original and primitive sense, and to be deviations that have happened in series (in “lineal and co-lineal descent”).21 Richardson’s assumption here appears to be the same as De Quincey’s in “English Dictionaries”: that the “original and primitive sense of the word will contain virtually all which can ever afterwards arise” (“ED,” 155). Richardson was a disciple of John Horne Tooke and his pre-modern etymologizing, and hence supposed the “original and primitive” sense to be the name of a sensible object, or of the sensation arising from it. The root, the etymon, anchors all subsequent meanings.22 It was both the signature and the fatal flaw of Richardson’s *New Dictionary* that while every entry had a large number of examples of usage ordered historically (the second kind of etymology), its decomposition of words into their “primal, literal roots” (the first kind of etymology) was Tookean, that is, not scientific, not informed by Rasmus Rask and Jacob Grimm’s law of phonological change.

The great age of philology was a time when etymology based in linguistic science drove all other aspects of lexicography before it. These developments soon made it possible to discern parallels between “evolution-theory” in linguistic and biological forms. If we were to ask, what differentiates the linguistic and lexicographical insights of the nineteenth century from the practical wisdom and semantic sensitivity of, say, Horace on linguistic change, the most authoritative answer would surely be to point to the achievements of Rask and Grimm, of Franz Bopp and other comparativists. The dictionaries that followed Richardson’s *New Dictionary* incorporated the new comparative linguistics, and an etymology became part of the standard lexicographical apparatus for every headword. It is often not entirely clear what the relation is, or should be taken to be, between
etymology and illustrative examples, but the relation rarely fails to be suggestive, and so poetic in a certain sense. Philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century only added to the authority and mystique of etymology.

It might be unexpected, then, to find that James Murray, second and most influential editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was somewhat skeptical of the role of etymology in lexicography. Murray gave a lecture in 1900 called “The Evolution of English Lexicography.” In this phrase “evolution” means improvement, refinement, strengthening. He organized his lecture around the identification of a number of key developmental steps achieved by the lexicographers who came before the *OED* team. One of these predecessors was Richardson. Murray comes up with a curious misprision of Richardson’s philological principles, crediting him with extending the function of quotations in dictionaries—and gathering a “valuable repertory of illustrations”—while entirely ignoring Richardson’s attempt to anchor his quotations in the original and primitive sense of the word—that is, in Tookean etymology. Murray has scathing things to say about Noah Webster’s recurring to etymology, however, and these I think we should suppose applicable to Richardson’s (and Tooke’s) speculations about the “radical” or “intrinsic” meanings of words: “Etymology is simply Word-history, and Word-history, like all other history, is a record of the facts which did happen, not a fabric of conjectures as to what may have happened.” It is fascinating to see how Murray misreads Richardson as coming to the meanings of words by way of induction—“quotations will tell the full meaning of a word, if one has enough of them”—when in fact Richardson understands his method as deduction and descent from a radical or intrinsic meaning.

Richardson was certain (following Tooke) that all senses and historical variants of a word’s use could be traced back to a single radical meaning: “[that] each one word has one meaning, and one only; that from it all usages must spring and be derived; and that in the Etymology of each word must be found this single intrinsic meaning, and the cause of the application in those usages.” In his dictionary, the various illustrative quotations that followed the definition of the headword were all subordinated to and anchored in the etymon. Because of this theoretical conviction, Richardson strongly disapproved of certain implications set in motion by the lexicographical method of his great predecessor Samuel Johnson.

Richardson asserted that Johnson’s fine combing out of distinct senses of words led him to confuse the meaning of the single word with
“a portion of the sense pertaining to other words in the sentence.”

The editor of A New Dictionary considered this practice a philosophical error, and supposed Johnson’s lexicographical method to be in error as well. That is, he wrote, everywhere in Johnson’s dictionary one finds “the number of distinct explanations [definitions] continued without restriction, to suit the quotations, where any seeming diversity of application may be fancied.”

If Richardson’s comments show something other than nuanced literary critical appreciation, they do point us helpfully to what is at stake in this discussion. Tooke’s etymologies are considered quaint today, but a more linguistically rigorous version of word derivation continues to be part of the standard apparatus of dictionaries. What is more, one can find neuropsychologists and cognitive scientists in our own time who assume, like Richardson, that individual words hold or “contain” a “core of meaning” (as Steven Pinker puts it in a recent essay on usage).

I want to propound here a strong, De Quinceyan version of what Richardson called the “accidental . . . absurdity” Johnson was led to: namely, that too often his dictionary entries ended up opposing the “authority” (that is, illustrative quotation) to the “explanation” (that is, definition). As Allen Reddick so aptly observes, what is most wonderful about Johnson’s dictionary is the way that “the elements of the entry may take on a dialogic quality,” without clear subordination of one to the other. The quality brought out by Johnson’s art leads us to a more general principle of philosophy of language, which is that the instantiation of utterance can never be fully absorbed or recouped or normed by definition or explanation of meaning. Richardson’s early Victorian doppelganger De Quincey is the disorderly and prodigious champion of this position. When Richardson gets Johnson in his sights, he could be chastising him for exactly the philosophical and writerly stance that De Quincey valued most highly: “There is one general errour pervading the explanations [in Johnson’s entries]. . . . This is to interpret the import of the context, and not to explain the individual meaning of the words.” Richardson dislikes the unruliness of quotations (“authorit[ies]”) that pull against, or unmoor, their definition (“explanation”).

De Quincey was the predecessor of Murray who came closest to thinking through what it might look like to “tell the full meaning of a word”: that is, to gather up all of the quotations one would need to do so. He imagined an English dictionary whose lexicographical practice would be to display a history of each word through “an exact succession of its meanings” (“ED,” 155). De Quincey’s formulation of 1823
sounds curiously like a plan for the Grimms’ *Deutsches Wörterbuch*—the first European dictionary organized along these lines, and begun in 1838. But De Quincey’s communication with Germanic philology was, in fact, superficial. It is true that he was profoundly interested in the philosophical—and so in the linguistic and literary—question of becoming, of the manifold circuits running between potentiality and activation in every aspect of the universe. De Quincey did not, however, make an idol of etymology, neither of the old, fanciful nor the new, scientific variety. He was, instead, a connoisseur and historian of current usage and a theorist of linguistic change. In an essay such as “English Dictionaries,” he may appear to be going down the same lexicographical road as Richardson. But De Quincey was too much of a casuist (in his own sense) to take linguistic systematization seriously. The potential he saw in language was infinite variability.

III. ENGLISH DICTIONARIES AND “EVOLUTION-THEORY”

Even so, let me back up and consider De Quincey’s evolutionary claims for lexicography. I am in particular interested in whether derivation theory can truly be made to harmonize with a kind of linguistic uniformitarianism—that is, the lexicographic principle according to which one should be able to tell the full meaning of a word by amassing examples of its uses over time. Then I will turn back for a closer look at “English Dictionaries,” the essay I have mentioned a number of times already. We will see that its argument, which on the face of it suggests that derivation-theory and the Horatian doctrine of *usus* can be reconciled, in fact reinstates the necessity of casuistry and shows that the lexicographical authority of etymological entries in dictionaries opens itself to ruin in the direction of the past as much as the authority of definitions is left exposed by a dictionary’s move into the future. To that end, I will consider Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s *transformiste* account of the gradual differentiation of organisms as well as the sharp critique to which Georges Cuvier subjected Lamarck’s theory.

The sort of English dictionary that De Quincey imagines in 1823 is one whose lexicographical practice would be to display a history of each word through “an exact succession of its meanings.” His philosophical justification for a dictionary organized on such a basis is to appeal to what he calls evolution-theory:

*It has already, I believe, been said more than once in print that one condition of a good dictionary would be to exhibit the history of each*
word,—that is, to record the exact succession of its meanings. But the
generally reason for this has not been given; which reason, by the
way, settles a question often agitated, viz. whether the true meaning
of a word be best ascertained from its etymology, or from its present
use and acceptation. Mr. Coleridge says, “The best explanation of a
word is often that which is suggested by its derivation.” . . . Others
allege that we have nothing to do with the primitive meaning of the
word; that the question is—what does it mean now? And they appeal,
as the sole authority they acknowledge, to the received—

Usus, penes quem est jus et norma loquendi.

In what degree each party is right may be judged from this
consideration—that no word can ever deviate from its meaning per
saltum: each successive stage of meaning must always have been
determined by that which preceded. And on this one law depends the
whole philosophy of the case; for it thus appears that the original and
primitive sense of the word will contain virtually all which can ever
afterwards arise: as in the evolution-theory of generation the whole
series of births is represented as involved in the first parent. (“ED,” 155)

This concept of evolution, he contends, will settle the question “often
agitated” of how to ascertain the true meaning of a word—by etymology
(“derivation”), or by “present use and acceptation.” De Quincey names
Coleridge in connection with the former, and with the latter the famous
line from Horace’s Ars Poetica.34

What precisely does “evolution” mean in De Quincey’s usage above?
The sentence implies a theory of descent: “[T]he whole series of births
[in a generational line] is represented as involved in the first parent.” De
Quincey, who hears the Latin “unfolding,” “opening out,” “unrolling”
in evolution, uses the word in a way that demonstrates why Darwin
was initially not keen to give this name to his theory of variability and
natural selection.35 The OED defines this sense of the word as follows:
“The action or process of opening out, unfolding, or unrolling; esp.
the unfolding or progression of a series of events in orderly succe-
sion.”36 One of the illustrative quotations is from Erasmus Darwin’s
Zoonomia (1801): “The world . . . might have been gradually produced
from very small beginnings . . . rather than by a sudden evolution of
the whole by the Almighty fiat.”37 The key modulating word there is “sudden”: one can in this sense have sudden evolutions as well as
gradual ones. De Quincey’s use of the word in his essay on English
dictionaries implies a gradual “evolution”: a succession of differentially
“lapsing” or deviating meanings that are nevertheless continuous with
the starting point (“ED,” 155).
For all the prestige won by nineteenth-century etymology, the priority of current usage over derivation in discussions of linguistic norms and transformations was as evident in De Quincey’s day (or our own) as in Horace’s. But is there some way to reconcile current usage with etymology or derivation? At first glance, De Quincey would appear to have found it:

Now, if the evolution of successive meaning has gone on rightly, i.e. by simply lapsing through a series of close affinities, there can be no reason for recurring to the primitive meaning of the word: but, if it can be shown that the evolution has been faulty, i.e. that the chain of true affinities has ever been broken through ignorance, then we have a right to reform the word, and to appeal from the usage ill-instructed to a usage better-instructed. (“ED,” 155)

The problem, however, is that for almost all words “the history of the mode by which its true meaning was lost” has itself been lost (“ED,” 158). De Quincey gives the name schematismus to the hypothetically complete history of that very long chain of “lapsings” or deviations through close affinities of meaning, but then in typical De Quinceyan fashion defers the explanation of the Greek term to another article that he never went on to write. His lexicographical schematismus partakes of Kant’s mathematical sublime, in that it may be possible to approach it only conceptually.

I will turn, then, to two of De Quincey’s pre-Darwinian contemporaries of 1823—Cuvier and Lamarck—for clues about how to reconcile derivation theory and present use. Hans Aarsleff suggests that the accomplishments of the great era of nineteenth century philology (roughly 1800–60) were based upon an understanding of languages as entities subject to natural laws in the way of the physical form of an organism—on the model of Cuvier’s comparative anatomy.38 Hugh Kenner, in The Pound Era, seems to have Cuvier’s reputation in mind when he tells a story of “[philologist Friedrich Diez] displaying with the aid of laws stated by [Jacob] Grimm and others the gradual differentiation of Latin into seven or eight tongues, [and] texts registering this process century by century as fossil bones the differentiation of phylae.”39

Cuvier is famous for having done reconstructive and comparative work on the fossil bones of quadrupeds. He was considerably more cautious than his contemporaries (and than the post-Darwinian Kenner) about moving to inferences about the causes of gradual differentiations in the forms of organisms (what in the early 1800s was known
as *transformisme*). The scientist he criticized most sharply for making such inferences was Lamarck.

In Kenner’s analogy, deduction from “[natural] laws” helps scientists to confirm the structural similarities and tease out the differences between phylae—whether of organisms, or of languages. Cuvier, in fact, made the more restricted claim that “the laws that govern the coexistence of the forms of the different parts of organisms” make it possible for the comparative anatomist to “reconstruct the whole animal” from “any fragment of its parts.”40 “[D]ifferentiation” has another meaning in Kenner’s sentence, however, one that Cuvier had no truck with. Kenner refers to “the gradual differentiation of Latin into seven or eight tongues.” In this phrase, Kenner suggests that a “process” has been at work: a process that brings about a gradual differentiation of entities derived from a single source. This is of course a common late eighteenth century—and modern—sense of the word “evolution.” That latter sense is not yet Darwinian evolution: indeed, evolution understood as “gradual differentiation” would describe Lamarck’s transformist theory as well as Darwin’s, in addition to the nineteenth-century philological theories concerning phonological shifts, roots and derivation, and *ur*-tongues that Kenner alludes to.

Lamarck’s career, according to Cuvier (in his “Biographical Memoir of M. de Lamarck” of 1832), was mostly an object lesson to other scientists on why one should avoid baseless speculations, and stick to empirical observations and rational deductions. Lamarck is remembered today, where he is known at all, as the one who asserted that acquired characteristics could be inherited. But the larger question he was seeking to explain was the extant diversity of organic forms, and also to explain why so few of the animals preserved as fossils were still upon the earth. He was a uniformitarian, meaning that in his theorizings about the causes of changes to organisms he was not persuaded by the postulate of catastrophes and extinctions on a global scale. What was uniform, according to Lamarck, was slow change.41 Given enough time, changing circumstances could account for all of the earth’s organic diversity. He was the theorist of constant change, who gave explanatory prominence of place to habit and to use (we might even say, in its pre-lexicographical sense, to “usage,” to habitual or customary mode of life). Local environmental circumstances, Lamarck argued, alter an organism’s habits, and so alter the patterns of use and disuse of its organs.

Something that was much ridiculed in Lamarckian theory by Cuvier and others was the notion that an organism’s wishing or wanting or
willing could bring about change in its physical organization: that (in Cuvier’s words) “efforts and desires may engender organs.” Lamarck did indeed (in his “Introductory Lecture for 1800”) write: “[T]he bird of the shore, which does not at all like to swim, and which however needs to draw near to the water to find its prey, will be continually exposed to sinking in the mud. Wishing [voulant] to avoid immersing its body in the liquid, [it] acquires the habit of stretching and elongating its legs” (Z, xxx). That is the easily caricaturable version. In his Zoological Philosophy, first published in 1809, Lamarck put it this way: “[B]y the sole instrumentality of needs, establishing and controlling habits, [nature] has created in animals the fountain of all their acts and all their faculties” (Z, 41). But Cuvier and other scientists were no more persuaded by this formulation.

Let me return to Kenner’s analogy drawn between the process that gradually differentiates the bodily forms of organisms and the process that gradually differentiates the forms and uses and meanings of words. Wishing or willing variation or innovation is, I would contend, less ridiculous on the latter side of the analogy than the former. As De Quincey observes in 1857 about the passing into currency of “ignore” in its common rather than grand jury usage: “it [that is, the new meaning of the word] was wanted.” His implication is that a need for the word brought it into use.

Lamarck’s hypotheses about change in living organisms went hand in hand with the assertion (against widely held eighteenth-century beliefs) that none of the earth’s extant species are “as old as Nature” and that not all of these have been in existence for an equal period (Z, 36). Moreover, he noted, as zoologists fill the collections of natural history museums with the diversity of living beings, “the greater becomes our difficulty in determining what should be regarded as a species, and still more in finding the boundaries and distinctions of genera” (Z, 37). That is, once the naturalist begins to arrange individual organisms “according to their natural affinities [rapports]” sequences of variation—and almost perfectly continuous ones—become visible (Z, 37). To demarcate the lines between distinct species within those sequences, Lamarck says, involves a necessarily “arbitrary decision” (Z, 37). His commitment to the inevitability of slow change leads him to take what looks at first like a nominalist view of speciation, and of the concept of a species. Though he did fieldwork himself (identifying species of mollusks and shellfish), he drew the ire of taxonomists. But if Lamarck was comfortable with biological categories merging and metamorphosing, he was no nominalist. Passages in Zoological

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Philosophy show his metaphysical commitment to continuity, to gradual serial transformation in the physical and habitual organization of living things. Lamarck might as well have used the Latin phrase De Quincey was fond of. The gradual differentiation of species, the deviation of one organism from the line of its predecessors, can never happen per saltum—can never happen, that is, at a bound or a leap.

**IV. PERISHABILITY AND IRREVOCABILITY**

I now take up the question of the ephemeral, the fugacious, that which quickly perishes, a quality that De Quincey associates with conversation, to which he ascribes in turn some generative, synchronic power that is constantly altering the state of the language. In a remarkable play on words—a deep philosophical pun—he points out the strange way that for their readers books and newspapers can appear to be permanent. With the possibility of cheap mass printing comes the illusion that what is published will become “public,” that these sentences will not perish, will continue, without even being taken up in the mouths and/or minds of others:

[W]hat is printed seems to every man invested with some fatal character of publicity such as cannot belong to mere MS. Whilst, in the meantime, out of every thousand printed pages, one at the most, but at all events a very small proportion indeed, is in any true sense more public when printed than previously as a manuscript; and that one, even that thousandth part, perishes as effectually in a few days to each separate reader as the words perish in our daily conversation. 44

De Quincey’s conception of the way that words become available to the speakers of a language is very different from the view given widest credence in our own time, namely that a certain part of each individual brain (or a neurological potentiality spread through the brain) stores the lexicon of words used by that particular speaker to form sentences in speech or writing. For De Quincey, words belong to a vast discursive system composed of speakers who are always acting and reacting upon one another (who are in conversation) and that is always operating in the present moment. This system has a diachronic quality but it lives or dies synchronically, which is why usus determines the fate of every language: words must be used, or they will fade away. As the German philosopher of language Wilhelm von Humboldt put it in 1836, “The vocabulary of a language . . . is a continuous generation and regeneration of the word-making capacity, first in the stock to which the
language owes its form, then in the learning of speech by children, and lastly in daily usage.”

So, perishability, or potential perishability. But De Quincey sees everything double. He notices, late in life, that words also have an irrevocable quality: irrevocable is a Latinate word that means cannot be called back. In the 1856 edition of his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (but not the 1821), the Whispering Gallery passage, he explores the idea of words that cannot be called back by citing another passage from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*: “[A] word once uttered is irrevocable.” While remembering it, De Quincey seemingly forgets its original context. Horace had been making a distinction between what is published—not published in the modern sense; but made available to a public of readers in one form or another—and what kept in a drawer. (Horace urged poets hungry for fame and overly flush with the pride of recent creation to wait nine years before making their work public.)

De Quincey, however, mashes up Horace’s *nescit vox missa reverti* with his own conceit (from *Suspiria de Profundis*) of the palimpsest of memory or perhaps with the claim from elsewhere in the *Confessions* that the (individual) mind forgets nothing. How can that be? Again, De Quincey is not pointing here to the neurological capacity of any one brain to store information. The Whispering Gallery metaphor is not about the working of individual memory, nor is it about memory considered as a sort of impersonal storage space (as we cannot help but do in the digital era). It concerns the latency of that which has been spoken but seems to have disappeared—its potentiality for return, as speech.

The author inserted this passage in the 1856 edition of his *Confessions* at that moment early in his narrative, when the 16-year-old De Quincey, an unusually gifted student of classics, chafing at the mediocre instructors at his boarding school and at the lack of sympathy for his situation shown by his mother and the trustees of his father’s estate, decides to run away. He borrows 10 guineas from a wealthy friend of the family, and prepares to sneak away in the middle of the night. Just before he leaves for good, without any foresight of “the perfect hail-storm of affliction which [would] soon fall upon me” (that is, a year of homelessness and hunger wandering through southern England, Wales, and London), he has misgivings about his plan. He recalls that he has already asked a servant, the headmaster’s groom, for assistance in escaping the house—those are the words he has uttered and cannot take back. Then, his resolve wavering, he remembers his visit in 1800 with a friend to the Whispering Gallery of St. Paul’s Cathedral:

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At the earlier end of the gallery had stood my friend, breathing in the softest of whispers a solemn but not acceptable truth. At the further end, after running along the walls of the gallery, that solemn truth reached me as a deafening menace in tempestuous uproars. And now, in these last lingering moments, when I dreamed ominously with open eyes in my Manchester study, once again that London menace broke angrily upon me as out of a thick cloud with redoubled strength; a voice, too late for warning, seemed audibly to say, “Once leave this house, and a Rubicon is placed between thee and all possibility of return.”

De Quincey’s first concern in the Whispering Gallery passage is moral—with how “acts of choice change countenance . . . at varying stages of life,” how their meanings “shift with the shifting hours.” The Gallery’s power of amplification, moreover, in addition to changing meanings makes what was (thought to be) private public.

It’s a marvelously suggestive passage. But I would argue that the Whispering Gallery passage lights up even more in the context of some of the other writings from the early 1820s through the 1850s, where we see De Quincey set the slowly unfolding consequence of individual decision or judgment within, and sometimes against, a larger social and linguistic matrix, namely the unconscious or semi-conscious drift of usage, verbal and non-verbal. In the opening of his 1850 essay “Pronunciation,” for instance, while striking a mildly misanthropic attitude in which he laments the very necessity of talking—“the impertinence of questions, . . . the intolerable labour of framing and uttering replies through a whole life, and, above all (oh, foretaste of Paradise!) . . . the hideous affliction of sustaining these replies and undertaking for all their possible consequences”—De Quincey makes these mock calculations concerning the relation between a language as lexicon and its synchronic existence in daily usage:

[T]hat day must be a very sulky one, and probably raining cats and dogs, on which a man throws away so few as two thousand words, not reckoning what he loses in sleep. A hundred and twenty-five words for every one of sixteen hours cannot be thought excessive. The result, therefore, is, that, in one generation of thirty years, he wastes irretrievably upon the impertinence of answering—of wrangling, and of prosing, not less than twice eleven thousand times a thousand words; the upshot of which comes to a matter of twenty-two million words. So that, if the English language contains (as some curious people say it does) forty thousand words, he will have used it up not less than five hundred and fifty times. Poor old battered language! One really pities it. Think of any language in its old age being forced to work at that rate; kneaded, as if it were so much dough, every hour of the day into millions of fantastic shapes by millions of capricious bakers!
The essay is aimed (purportedly) at the ordinary man, he who is possessed of the ambition to speak “his own language with propriety.” The ironic preamble lays out the difficulties, and underscores the author’s appreciation of the serious social stakes involved for the upwardly aspiring man of the lower classes. The essay will fizzle out in a typically De Quinceyan mode, in which he retreats from the impossibility of teaching correct pronunciation for the 40,000 words of English by offering again the guidance of Horace’s line about *usus*, the “supreme law in every language.”

To archly state a preference for not speaking at all is De Quincey’s way of flagging the public quality of speech—what he elsewhere calls conversation. When he writes of “the mischief caused” by talking, it is not primarily misunderstanding between individuals that he refers to, but to the way that the repetitive use of words in daily speech by “millions of capricious bakers” will slowly but surely alter the constitutive stuff of the language itself. This particular figure emphasizes (as does the Humboldt sentence I have quoted) the generation and regeneration everyday of a language in its synchronic totality. In the simile of the bakers we can, moreover, see how the perishability of words—the way the most common of them must be perpetually called up again in “answering” and “wrangling” and “prosing”—and the irrevocability of words turn out to be different faces of the same time-bound phenomenon.

The De Quinceyan figure of irrevocability points to a truth about language in its synchronic dimension: to the fact that utterance happens always in a present moment. One can disavow what one has spoken or written, but one cannot make it as if it never happened, never take it back entirely (or only in the figurative sense that to take back one’s words is to admit error or fault and to apologize). Irrevocability combined with shifting context may indeed fret the security of individual utterance and responsibility, but, understood as the indelibility of that which has been made public, irrevocability is a figure as well for the way that the dormant potentiality of a language and the usages of the past may spring back to life again, though never exactly in the same way again. “There is nothing old under the sun.”

Written in 1845, a year after the essay on Ricardo, De Quincey’s conceit of the palimpsest in *Suspiria de Profundis* works out still another way to find perishability and irrevocability in the same linguistic phenomenon, this time textual rather than oral. His elaborate figure famously acknowledges the perishability or the recordless fate awaiting almost all experience, and by analogy, awaiting almost all speech and

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writing. De Quincey here works a change upon Horace’s even more famous figure—it occurs early in the sequence of the *Ars Poetica* to which the *usus* passage belongs—comparing the words of a language to the leaves in a wood. In the Earl of Roscommon’s translation of 1680,

> Men ever had, and ever will have leave
> To coin new Words well-suited to the Age:
> Words are like Leaves, some wither every year,
> And every year a younger Race succeeds.\(^5^3\)

De Quincey turns Horace’s simile toward his own preoccupations: “[L]ike the annual leaves of aboriginal forests or the undissolving snows in the Himalaya, or light falling upon light, the endless strata have covered up each other in forgetfulness.”\(^5^4\) De Quincey’s emphasis is less on the falling of old and budding of new as it is on the way that the fallen leaves cover up and hide that aboriginal forest floor—cover over all that has come before, like the layers of a palimpsest.

At one level, De Quincey’s conceit has in its sights the imperishability of formative childhood experiences. But the parts of the figure go in various directions, some psychological, some literary critical and literary historical. He notes for instance the way that the structure of signification in an actual palimpsest will to some degree be determined by historical context, indeed by the genres of particular periods. (“The Greek tragedy, the monkish legend, the knight’s romance, each has ruled its own period.”)\(^5^5\) Personal memories too, the conceit suggests, are given form by generic narratives. For the purposes of this analysis, I want to separate out the metaphor’s tenor—sensations, impressions, thoughts fallen in layers upon the brain—from its vehicle—the imagined narratives of different historical periods written over top of one another on vellum. Over time, De Quincey writes, the exchange value of each narrative falls to nothing (as does the “ministerial value” of the vellum).\(^5^6\) But the use-value of the vellum remains—in fact it is most valuable because it is blank, or can be made blank (as a reused physical medium). Words must be the same. Their use-value consists in being available, and being, in a qualified sense, blank. As De Quincey puts it, “At length . . . this relation between the vehicle and its freight has gradually been undermined . . . the burden of thought, from having given the chief value to the vellum has now become the chief obstacle to its value; nay, has totally extinguished its value, unless it can be dissociated from the connexion.”\(^5^7\) The brain itself, De Quincey asserts (perhaps over-confidently), allows no experience to fall into incoherence or irrelevance, loses none of its layerings, forgets nothing; the “vellum

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palimpsest,” on the other hand, must have lost its freight of meaning if it is to take on new significance—if it is not to fall into disuse.\textsuperscript{58}

Such dissociation of semantic and use-value happens commonly enough, and not only to vellum. Consider De Quincey’s favorite example of drifting meaning and usage, the verb “ignore” (mentioned at least twice in his essays and once in a footnote). In an essay of 1850, reflecting on neologisms of various origins, he writes:

There are . . . large cases of innovation, in which no process of coinage whatever is manifested, but perhaps a simple restoration of old words, long since obsolete in literature and good society, yet surviving to this hour in provincial usage; or, again, an extension and emancipation of terms heretofore narrowly restricted to technical or a professional use; as we see exemplified in the word ignore, which, until very lately, was so sacred to the sole use of grand juries, that a man would have been obscurely suspected by a policeman, and would indeed have suspected himself, of something like petty larceny in forcing it into any general and philosophic meaning; which, however, it has now assumed, with little offence to good taste, and with yeoman service to the intellect.\textsuperscript{59}

In 1857, he would again note that ignore had been “raised” from a rare and specialized use by grand juries “to a popular and universal currency.”\textsuperscript{60} De Quincey doesn’t suppose the word to have been introduced in a moment of poetic inspiration or even by any particular person. Instead, he once again points to it having arisen out of some generative principle in the totality of “our daily conversations” (“C,” 351). The word was “much wanted”; everyone, he wrote, now finds it indispensable.\textsuperscript{61} And only a pedant, he jokes (in 1857), would now ignore it—that is, fail to recognize its currency, fail to extend the possibilities of his or her own speaking by making use of it too. (The \textit{OED}, by the way, bears out De Quincey’s sense of altered usage in these decades. And Richardson’s 1836–37 dictionary gives examples of the oldest sense of the word, and of the grand jury special usage, but none of the most current meaning.)\textsuperscript{62}

\section{V. Versions of Pedantry}

Mostly we are hardly conscious of whatever is habitual in our speech. De Quincey liked to use the phrase “yeoman service” to evoke any unnoticed but indispensable element in a larger gestalt. “Ignore,” he writes (in the passage quoted above), has assumed its new English meaning with “yeoman service to the intellect.” De Quincey points to something like a constitutive principle of language. Consider every
physical and linguistic element providing yeoman service to speech and intellect, from phonemes to vocal organs.

In an essay published in *Blackwood’s* in 1840, De Quincey makes the more unsettling observation that we are hardly conscious of mutability in usage:

Every one of us would have felt, sixty years ago, that the general tone and coloring of a style was stiff, bookish, pedantic, which, from the habituation of our organs, we now feel to be natural and within the privilege of learned art. . . . The eye cannot see itself; we cannot project from ourselves, and contemplate as an object, our own contemplating faculty, or appreciate our own appreciating power. Biases, therefore, or gradual warpings, that have occurred in our critical faculty as applied to style, we cannot allow for: and these biases will unconsciously mask to our perceptions an amount of change in the quality of popular style such as we could not easily credit. 63

He describes an almost Lamarckian habituation of our organs—eye and ear are altered by the changing circumstances and norms of “popular style” or usage. If we could review such changes with “the neutral eye of a stranger,” we could see their reach:

[I]n such cases . . . we cannot see the extent of the changes wrought or being wrought, from having ourselves partaken in them. *Tempora mutantur*; and naturally, if we could review them with the neutral eye of a stranger, it would be impossible for us not to see the extent of those changes. But our eye is not neutral; we also have partaken in the changes; *nos et mutamur in illis*. And this fact disturbs the power of appreciating those changes. 64

Neither eye nor ear is neutral. We are for the most part not aware of the shift in our feeling from unnaturalness—finding some phrase irritating or pedantic—to acceptance.

Sometimes changes happen too quickly for comfort, or naturalness—an interesting phenomenon in itself. De Quincey’s example of the “unconscious pedant” in this same essay is the newspaper-reading landlady and the “deadly action” of her speech, which lacks even the charm of “the malaprop”:

Some eight years ago, we had occasion to look for lodgings in a newly-built suburb of London to the south of the Thames. The mistress of the house . . . was in regular training, it appeared, as a student of newspapers. She had not children; the newspapers were her children. There lay her studies; that branch of learning constituted her occupation.
from morning to night; and the following were amongst the words which she—this semi-barbarian—poured from her cornucopia during the very few minutes of our interview; which interview was brought to an abrupt issue by mere nervous agitation upon our part. The words, as noted down within an hour of the occasion, and after allowing a fair time for our recovery, were these:—first, “category”; secondly, “predicament” . . . thirdly “individuality”; fourthly, “procrastination”; fifthly, “speaking diplomatically, would not wish to commit herself,”—who knew but that “inadvertently she might even compromise both herself and her husband”? sixthly, “would spontaneously adapt the several modes of domestication to the reciprocal interests,” &c.; and, finally,— . . . seventhly, “anteriorly.” Concerning which word we solemnly depose and make affidavit that neither from man, woman, nor book, had we ever heard it before this unique rencontre with this abominable woman on the staircase.65

Some commentators’ hackles have been raised by this humorous passage, finding it marked by an elitist condescension to lower-middle-class readers of newspapers. Cian Duffy writes: “What is remarkable . . . and again this is precisely what the anecdote seeks to disguise, is the extent to which the woman’s language actually resembles De Quincey’s own. . . . In fact, it is her appropriation of this language—‘the artificial dialect of books’ ([Masson ed.] X. 149)—that arms her against him, and that results in his being put to flight.” 66 But this analysis serves neither the landlady nor De Quincey well. De Quincey is, in fact, interested enough by her usage to note the words she uses, and to be struck by the correspondences between her speech and the newspaper prose of his day. He makes a facetious and self-parodic display of being horrified by the landlady because her expressions are striking evidence of the mutability, perhaps the accelerating mutability, of the language; and because with regard to the debates about propriety of usage, particularly novel or anomalous cases, De Quincey, from his own amateur lexicographical observations and in his own writerly practice, falls far more—to cite his own opposition—on the side of Horace than of Coleridge. To repeat the dictum that brings De Quincey’s essay “Pronunciation” to a close, “There is no right, there is no wrong, except what the prevailing usage creates.” The occurrence in the passage I have quoted of the word “malaprop” (from the character of that name in Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s The Rivals [1775]) proves that De Quincey has no animus against coinages that make it possible to express a new thought. As he puts it 10 years later in “On the Present Stage of the English Language” (while throwing in a couple of words imported from Kantian philosophy): “New ideas,
new aspects of old ideas, new relations of objects to each other, or to man—the subject who contemplates these objects,—absolutely insist on new words.”67

Now consider the implicit but powerful distinction he draws between malapropism and journalistic boilerplate. Malapropism—not only a picturesque linguistic phenomenon—is the error of someone who belongs to a colloquial world: that of an unlettered person echoing a word overheard. Children acquire much of their vocabularies this way. The landlady, in contrast, is a reader—a student of newspapers. As De Quincey acknowledges, journalese (as we might call her lingo) involves no incorrectness: the student of newspapers reads well, but listens poorly. The landlady has somehow separated herself and her speech from the lived density of a world in which casuistry has force—from that “whole complexity of . . . circumstances” attendant upon the use of words. To mock the lingo of newspapers is not the same as rejecting slang outright: De Quincey admits the vital power of the vernacular: “[It is no] safe ground of absolute excommunication even from the sanctities of literature that a phrase is entirely a growth of the street.”68

Granted, his approval of the region of slang is not as ringing as that of, say, H. L. Mencken 70 years later; but De Quincey can find a place in his heart for words like “humbug” or “wrangling.” What we are instead asked to notice here is that the irresistible force of prevailing usage may itself carry a speaker into regions of “unconscious pedantry”: it is to be swept along by what is apparently a universal rule but in fact is a normative—perhaps a newly or locally normative—convention of usage. The conscious pedant refuses any case to which a known rule cannot be unproblematically applied. The unconscious pedant does not know—and so is not in a position to care—that she or he is forcing a template for forming an utterance upon a circumstance that would be better served by a deflected or variant usage. The overconfident owner of an inadequate bilingual dictionary or thesaurus is just as much caught in this predicament as is the newspaper-reading landlady.

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NOTES

This essay is dedicated to my teacher J. Hillis Miller, and its argument owes much to the chapter on Thomas De Quincey in The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963).


4 Chandler, 198.

5 Chandler, 198.


15 De Quincey, “Dinner Real and Reputed,” 427.


17 Alice Kuzniar, in a discussion of mid-nineteenth century homeopathic medicine in relation to Romantic theories of reading, identifies one of the four main tenets of homeopathy as “the law of the single remedy”: “[German physician Samuel] Hahnemann . . . criticized allopathic medicine for attempting to reduce all individual cases to one disease, whereas he saw each individual case as unique. Diseases are infinite in number, he wrote, ‘as diverse as the clouds in the sky.’ In striking contrast to medicine as practiced today, he insisted that it was always the person with the disease who was treated, not the disease itself. ‘Each case of the disease that presents itself must be regarded (and treated) as an individual malady that never before occurred in the same manner and under the same circumstance as in the case before us, and will never happen precisely in the same way’” (“*Similia Similibus Curentur*: Homeopathy and Its Magic Wand of Analogy,” in *Literary Studies and the Pursuits of Reading*, ed. Eric Downing, Jonathan M. Hess, and Richard V. Benson [Rochester: Camden House, 2012], 140).


22 According to Richardson, “[t]he lexicographer can never assure himself that he has attained the meaning of a word, until he has discovered the thing, the sensible object—res, quae nostros sensus feriunt:—the sensation caused by that thing or object (for language cannot sever them), of which that word is the name” (New Dictionary [1836–37], 1:43).

23 “Progression from simple to complex forms, conceived as a universal principle of development, either in the natural world or in human societies and cultures” (*OED*, s.v., “evolution, n.”, 10).

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25 Murray, 44.
26 Murray, 45; Murray’s italics.
27 Quoted in Reddick, 1:173.
32 Reddick, 1:163.
33 Quoted in Reddick, 1:172–73.
34 In an influential 1680 translation, “Use is the Judge, the Law, and Rule of Speech” [*Usus, penes quem est ius et norma loquendi*] (Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon, *Horace’s Art of Poetry Made English by the Right Honourable the Earl of Roscommon* [London: Henry Herringman, 1680], 6). De Quincey’s 1850 essay “Pronunciation” contains the following—strongly interpretive—gloss of the same line: “There is no right, there is no wrong, except what the prevailing usage creates. The usage, the existing custom, *that* is the law: and from that law there is no appeal whatever, nor demur that is sustainable for a moment” (in *Works*, 21:102, DeQuincey’s italics). It should be noted that the opposition De Quincey sets up in “English Dictionaries” between Horace and Samuel Taylor Coleridge almost certainly oversimplifies Coleridge’s nuanced views about language change, in particular his concept of desynonymization, which De Quincey seems not to have been acquainted with (see Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross [London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907], 61). See my article “The Rippling of *Verschiedenheit*: Wilhelm von Humboldt on Philology, Usage, and Intra-Linguistic Diversity” (*European Romantic Review*, 20.2 [2009], 237–45) for a discussion of desynonymization and for an accounting of why, insofar as my aim is to shed light on the relation between linguistic mutability and norms of usage, I prefer Wilhelm von Humboldt’s philosophy of language to Coleridge’s. I would contend that Humboldt and De Quincey both were more Horatian in their thinking than Coleridge—more populist, that is, and less impressed by philological expertise as a transformative agency in the realm of language.
35 *OED*, s.v., “evolution, n.,” 3a.
36 *OED*, s.v., “evolution, n.,” 3a.
37 *OED*, s.v., “evolution, n.,” 3a.
39 Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), 111. Kenner’s point is to credit the quasi-scientific work of historical and comparative Germanic scholarship with vanquishing what he calls “the Romantic Indefinite” (123) or “Romantic Time” (554), thus creating the poetic of modernism.

De Quincey, “Style [No. IV],” in Works, 12:76.


De Quincey, Confessions of an English Opium Eater (1856), in Works, 2:156.

De Quincey, Confessions (1821), in Works, 2:16.

De Quincey, Confessions (1856), 156.

De Quincey, Confessions (1856), 156.

De Quincey, “Pronunciation,” 98, 99.

De Quincey, “Pronunciation,” 102.

De Quincey, “Pronunciation,” 98.


De Quincey, “The Palimpsest,” 176.

De Quincey, “The Palimpsest,” 172.

De Quincey, “The Palimpsest,” 176.

De Quincey, “The Palimpsest,” 177.


De Quincey, “Life of Richard Bentley [Part II],” 395n159.5.

63 The 1836–37 edition of Richardson’s dictionary includes the following illustrative sentence from a tract by the seventeenth-century chemist and theologian Robert Boyle under the entry for “ignorant, adj.; ignorant, n; ignore, v.,” but makes no mention of new-fangled usage: “If there be, at this day, any nations (as navigators inform me there are in Brasil, and some other parts of the Indies) that worship not God, they consist not of Naturalists, but brute and irrational barbarians, who may be supposed rather to ignore the being of God, than deny it” (New Dictionary [1836–37], 1:1045).

64 De Quincey, “Style [No. 1],” in Works, 12:17.

65 De Quincey, “Style [No. 1],” 17.


67 De Quincey, “On the Present Stage of the English Language,” 56.

68 De Quincey, “On the Present Stage of the English Language,” 57.

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