ARLO BATES

TALKS ON WRITING ENGLISH

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Talks on Writing English

Bates A.

Talks on Writing English / A. Bates — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Arlo Bates
Talks on Writing English / First Series

PREFACE

These talks were given in the autumn of 1894 as a course on Advanced English Composition in the Lowell Free Classes, and that they are now printed is largely due to the fact that they were so well received by those who then heard them. In preparing them, I consulted whatever books upon composition came to my hand. I examined some with profit, some with pleasure, and some, it must be confessed, not wholly without amusement, or even impatience. Doubtless, I owe something to many of these books; but I am not conscious of much obligation to any save the “Principles of Rhetoric,” by Professor A. S. Hill, “English Composition,” by Professor Barrett Wendell, and “English Prose,” by Professor John Earle.

I have conscientiously endeavored to make the lectures as practical as possible, stating as clearly as I could those things which would have been most helpful to me had I read and heeded them twenty years ago. The necessity of holding an audience made fitting some effort to render the talks entertaining; but I have never consciously said anything for the mere purpose of being amusing, and I have never been of the opinion that a book gains either in dignity or in usefulness by being dull. My purpose has throughout been sincerely serious, and if the book shall prove helpful, I shall have attained the object for which it was written.

A. B.

I
THE ART OF WRITING

Into all productive art enter two sorts of power, that which is communicable and that which is incommunicable, – in other words, that which may be taught and that which is inborn. Upon this fact is based the distinction between the mechanical and the fine arts, although since both kinds of power have a share in all production nobody has ever been able to draw a sharp and definite line at which the mechanical arts end and the fine arts begin. The power which is incommunicable is that of imagination, that indefinable grace and skill, that enchantment of creative ability which is born with rare individuals, and for which he who is not dowered with it by nature struggles in vain. It is this which has given rise to that saying as profound as it is terribly hackneyed which declares that a poet is born and not made. It is this which distinguishes genius from talent; and it is this which has so dazzled the eyes of the world as to produce the mistaken notion that since imagination is not to be learned nothing is to be learned in the realm of art.

This incommunicable power is the soul of fine art; yet into fine art no less than into the mechanical arts comes also that power which may be learned. This communicable power is commonly spoken of as the technical, or as technique. This any person of intelligence and perseverance can and may master if he choose, every man according to his ability; and this every artist must acquire, no matter how richly he may have been gifted by nature with the magic power which transcends and dominates it. It is this that musicians, painters, sculptors, architects, dancers, and writers are set to learn when they are said to study art. The world has long recognized that in painting, music, sculpture, and architecture it is indispensable that technique shall be acquired; but – absurd as it may seem – it is only recently, comparatively speaking, that it has been practically recognized that this is as true of poetry as of painting, as true of literature as of any other art. It is in truth only in our own day that there has been anything like a general acceptance of the fact that in literature as in the other arts technical skill must be laboriously acquired before any successful and permanent work can be produced. The masters have of course known this; but the idea that to be an author nothing is needed but pen, ink, and paper used to hold undisputed sway over the popular mind, and is by no means extinct yet. Not long ago I heard a learned professor in one of the leading American colleges declare that he could not see what there is to learn in composition. Last summer a gentleman of really wide reading, but who was brought up under the old system, said to me: “By teaching composition, I suppose you mean chiefly correcting the grammar and punctuation.” He was somewhat surprised when I explained that students were supposed to have mastered both grammar and punctuation before the teaching of composition as such could begin.

The truth is that there has never been anything like a popular understanding of the difference between spoken and written speech. Anybody is supposed to be able to talk, and to learn to do so unconsciously, – a doctrine to which I do not wish to be understood as giving assent! – and it has been held to follow that anybody could write. To write was merely to talk with the pen, and that has commonly been held to be all there is to the matter save for the fact that some persons were born to write and some were not.

A personal experience of my own illustrates this, if its introduction may be pardoned. I have never forgotten the general bewilderment with which my friends met my announcement when I left college that I meant to study literature. That one should follow literature as a profession was not entirely unintelligible, if it did suggest a dire mental weakness on the part of the young man who was rash enough to take such a resolution; but how one studied literature as a profession was beyond ordinary understanding. “You mean that you are going to write books,” some said tentatively. My reply that such a possibility was presupposed in the study of literature just as the pleading of cases

might be presupposed in the study of law only increased the difficulty of the confusing puzzle. It was of course understood that there was in the law something to study; but what, in the name of common sense, was there to study in literature? Books one sat down and wrote, and that was the whole of it; and I soon found the idea gaining ground that I only put the matter in this way for the sake of producing an impression, or perhaps of covering a fixed and reprehensible intention of doing nothing.

I thought then that I had some idea of what the study of literature really meant, and I gave such explanations as I could; but, alas, the incessant work of years has chiefly served to show me how inadequate my idea was, and how much more there is to be learned than I then had any notion of! Some of the things which experience has taught me I think may be of value to you; and in these lectures I shall try to state them, although I realize but too well how far I am from being able to cover or exhaust the subject. I shall, of course, say some things which all of you know already, and many things which some of you know. I hope, however, to say also some things which you have not thought of, and by arrangement and system to give fresh value and force to old ideas. It is not impossible that experience has shown me things which will be practically helpful to others. Any man who has wrought long at a craft is likely to be able to give suggestions valuable to those who have not. The sluggard is by the Scriptures referred to the ant not on account of her intellectual superiority, but solely because of her great practical training.

All discussion must begin with definition, either expressed or understood. There is of course no doubt that each of us has an idea what composition is, yet to be sure that we are agreed, it is necessary to state the meaning in which we use the term. Let us say, then: —

Composition is the art by which ideas and mental impressions are conveyed in written language.

Nothing could sound more simple; few things are more difficult of achievement. It is not hard to convey ideas, but it is by no means easy to be sure that they will arrive at their destination in good order. Impressions and ideas are delicate things, and are most liable to be injured in the passage. There are writers whose methods suggest an attempt to get eggs to market by shooting them from a cannon, – the eggs may arrive, it is true, but in what condition? The means must be adapted to that with which one is dealing. It is folly to attempt to carry soap-bubbles in a mealsack or leaden bullets in a lace handkerchief. The student of the art of writing has to learn to suit his means to the end sought. He must train himself to judge what manner of expression, of style, or treatment, will best serve to transfer ideas from his own mind to that of the reader. He must study the effect of words and of combinations of words; the value of suggestion, and of all the emotional effects possible in written words. He must train himself to be able to use language as a skillful swordsman uses his rapier, adapting it to every emergency, master of it always; he must learn to be dexterous, adroit, and full of resources.

Exactly to impart an idea or an impression to another human being is manifestly impossible. The character of the mind of the receiver necessarily affects and modifies whatever comes to it. The thing which we say to our closest friend strikes him in a way somehow and somewhat different from that which we intend. A poem by John Boyle O'Reilly expresses this so fully that I take leave to quote it: —

AT BEST

The faithful helm commands the keel,
From port to port fair breezes blow;
But the ship must sail the convex sea,
Nor may she straighter go.

So, man to man; in fair accord,

On thought and will, the winds may wait;
But the world will bend the passing word,
Though its shortest course be straight.

From soul to soul the shortest line
At best will bended be;
The ship that holds the straightest course
Still sails the convex sea.

I do not quote this merely as a matter of sentiment, but because it phrases one of the most insistent and practical difficulties with which every writer must contend. The study of literary art, and indeed of all art, is in one sense an effort at approximation. Perfect expression can never be reached, and the thing after which a writer strives is to approach more and more closely toward that complete transmission of meaning which is forever unattainable while the barriers of human individuality stand between mind and mind.

We recognize this fact as soon as we reflect. Bob, thinking of Betty, remarks to Jack that he does admire a pretty girl; and Jack, fondly recalling the features of Jane, receives the idea with all the variations which belong to an altogether different idea of feminine loveliness. Tom, Dick, and Harry, returning from the races, declare to one another that it has been a jolly day. Each accepts the statements of his companions according to his individual experiences, and no one has imparted precisely the thought which was in his own mind. We praise a picture, a piece of music, a sunset, and the friend to whom we speak listens with a temperament and cultivation so different from our own that our words inevitably mean one thing to us and another to him. The ear which hears has always its share in the impression produced as surely as has the tongue that speaks.

The result might be much the same whether the words in these cases were spoken or written; but there is another element which makes an immense difference between oral and written communication. The speaker adds to his words a language of emphasis, of inflection, of facial expression, of gesture, of mien. He modifies what he says by what he looks; his bearing has as important a share in the work of conveying impressions as have his words. Two actors taking the same text will give characters so different as hardly to seem to have anything in common. A speaker may so contradict and override his speech that his hearer believes not the tongue that speaks, but the personality and manner which declare the contrary. You remember how Emerson puts this: “What you are stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary.”

Now the writer is confronted by the necessity of making himself intelligible without the many aids by which the speaker may help out or modify his oral communication. The novelist, it is true, may avail himself of the simple device of describing the manner in which his characters speak. He tells us that this was said with a sly look of coquetry, while that was uttered in a voice of utter misery, and the other thundered forth in tones of overmastering determination. My washing came home in London last summer wrapped in a newspaper containing an installment of a blood-curdling tale which began thus: “Eleanore shot at Reginald from under her pellucid brows a lingering look of lurid hate.” All this, however, is at its best ineffective and unsatisfactory, even when heroines have pellucid brows and the author is master of the art of alliteration. Some things are within the province of language and some are not.

Words may describe form, color, sound, and motion, but they can reproduce none of them. What they can do is to call up in the mind of the reader something which he has seen; or aid him to construct from material in his memory some new image. If one read a description of a landscape, for instance, he unconsciously selects bits of nature which he remembers and arranges them as nearly as may be after the pattern which the author gives. On the first page of “Westward Ho!” there is a description of —

> the little white town of Bideford, which slopes upward from its broad tide-river paved with yellow sands, and many-arched old bridge where salmon wait for autumn floods, toward the pleasant upland on the west. Above the town hills close in, cushioned with deep oak woods, through which juts here and there a crag of fern-fringed slate; below they lower, and open more and more in softly-rounded knolls, and fertile squares of red and green, till they sink into the wide expanse of hazy flats, rich salt marshes and rolling sand-hills, where Torridge joins her sister Tor, and both together flow quietly toward the broad surges of the bar, and the everlasting thunder of the long Atlantic swell.

The reader constructs the picture as he goes on; but unless he has actually seen "the little white town of Bideford" the picture in his mind is likely to bear no very close resemblance to the reality. The broad tide-river which his fancy sees is some stream of his boyhood's home, and far enough from North Devon; the many-arched old bridge may be one which he knows or which comes to his memory from a picture, – perhaps from a photograph that a friend has brought from abroad of some hoary stone structure spanning a French river or a stream of Italy. The hills and the fern-clad cliffs are recalled in the same way, their outlines identical with the curves of some spot in the Catskills, in Wales, in Brittany, or wherever the reader is most familiar or has been most impressed. It is evident that the most carefully elaborate verbal description could not enable the artist to reproduce a scene; and herein is manifest the limitation of words in this direction.

The inadequacy of words becomes the more evident when it comes to matters intellectual. Who has not, even in conversation, experienced that baffled and hopeless feeling which comes from not being able to make another understand? Who does not know the sensation of being shut in as by walls of stone, so that it is impossible to reach the comprehension of the one addressed? Yet the speaker has a hundred advantages over the writer. He has at command all the resources of gesture, of look, accent, tone, mien. No man has written much and written earnestly without experiencing moments of complete despair in regard to being able to convey to his readers that which it is in his heart to say.

How far it is possible to overcome the obstacles which hinder communication is the study of the literary – as of every – artist. We human beings are prisoned in the solitary confinement of the body, and must needs devise means of sharing our thoughts, as political convicts in the Russian prisons strive to communicate by rapping on the walls. Every device by which intelligence may be carried more safely and surely is an addition to the intellectual resources and strength of the race. On this power of mutual transference and understanding of thought depends the whole intellectual progress of men, and on individual mastery of it rests the ability to share that progress.

It is only by the most careful and patient labor, the most rigid self-discipline, that advance can be made in a matter so difficult and so delicate. If you have supposed that the art of composition is one easily acquired, I beg you to lay aside that idea at the start. It is true that any person who has had an ordinary school training may write a poor letter or a badly bungled paragraph. Some even attain to a respectable facility in the superficial expression of ordinary ideas. To go beyond this, however, to arrive at being able really to write, to be capable of expressing with the pen genuine thoughts and real emotions with a reasonable hope that these will reach the reader not entirely distorted out of all resemblance to what they were when they left the mind of the writer, – this requires labor long and strenuous. The devils of incoherence, obscurity, and incompetency go not out save by untiring striving and watching.

This is strikingly illustrated by the great gulf between amateur and professional work. Many newspaper reporters are ignorant and intellectually untrained; yet merely from continuous and earnest practice they become so dexterous in the use of words as to be able to serve their needs with surprising facility. I have had well educated and cultivated men come into my office when I was an editor, and spend an hour in trying satisfactorily to phrase some simple announcement which they wished

printed. All that there was to do was to say that such a charity needed funds, that a subscription had been opened, or some learned society was to meet at such a time and place; yet the amateur would struggle with the paragraph in an agony of ineptitude which was alike pathetic and farcical. When at last the conflict between mind and matter ended from the sheer exhaustion of the mind, there would be handed to me a scrawled sheet, recrossed and rewritten, and in the end a miracle of obscurity and awkwardness, – the art of how not to say it illustrated to perfection. Then after the visitor had taken himself off, in a condition not far from nervous exhaustion, it was only necessary to say to a reporter: "Make a paragraph of these facts." In a couple of minutes the slip would be ready to send to the printer, written in English not elegant, but easy and above all clear. The reporter had very likely not a hundredth part of the information or the experience of life of the amateur, but he had had continued business-like drill. He had written as a matter of steady work, with the improving consciousness of an editorial blue pencil ever before his mind. I have seen many definitions of the difference between amateur and professional work. To my own mind it has always seemed sufficient to say that the professional is one who has learned how to do a thing while the amateur is one who has not.

Closely connected with the difficulty of saying a thing is the difficulty of knowing when it is said. Anybody may write, but only the trained writer is able to be sure that what he has written says what he supposes it to say. This is of course doubly true from the need that there is of making words impart mood as well as meaning, the atmosphere as well as the facts. If it is hard to express ideas, it is doubly hard to embody also the state of mind from which they spring and which must be understood before their real value and significance can be appreciated. Not only is it far from easy to know when the written word will express what is meant; it is no less hard to be sure how much of a thought is actually on paper. It requires great effort to realize that the sentence or the paragraph which we write will not mean to the reader all that we wish him to understand. The thought in our mind is so vivid, so poignant, so vital, that for us the words brim over with significance as a full honeycomb drips with honey. The emotion which we feel in writing seems to belong inevitably to what is written, and to be inseparable from it. It is of all things most difficult for the author, especially in an impassioned mood, to put himself in the place of the cool and unmoved public; yet in no other way is it possible to judge how that public will be affected; in no other way is it possible to compare what is written with what is intended; to estimate the power of those poor black conventional signs there on the paper to express the thought and the mood, the glow and the fervor of head and of heart which it is their mission to carry vibrating and alive to the mind and the spirit of the reader.

It has often been remarked that authors are apt to be most fond of works which are not their best, and it is notorious that the most passionately poetic mood may be that in which a writer produces his least effective compositions. It is easy to see how this is connected with the point under consideration. In the aroused, imaginative, ecstatic mood every word is suggestive, every phrase full of meaning, each sentence rich with emotion. The writer who is carried away by his feelings is apt to go beyond the range of his judgment. He puts down the sign of his mood in language intelligible only to himself. He writes a sort of emotional shorthand, illegible to every eye except his own. To him it may remain beautiful because to him it recalls the exalted mood which produced it. To him it is the significant and sufficient memorandum of a thing beautiful and sublime; to others it is but a mass of words left by the elusive

Fancies which broke through language and escaped.

Dr. Holmes has said, with that quaint mingling of wit and wisdom which made him unique, that writing a poem is like pouring syrup out of a pitcher, – some of it always sticks to the pitcher. The principle holds good of all composition, and by no means the smallest thing to be learned is to judge how completely the syrup has been poured out. Often it is necessary to let the mood pass away entirely before one can estimate work. It is frequently well to let a manuscript lie by until the original enthusiasm of creation has faded fully, whether this process requires more or less time than

the nine years which Horace recommended as the proper period during which a poem should remain unpublished.

It is perhaps not necessary to speak much of the value of a mastery of the art of composition; but there is one point which needs to be touched upon. There is a prevalent if not generally spoken idea that while this skill is an excellent thing, it is really necessary to nobody save professional writers; that while persons who give their lives to writing must of course master technique, it is not at all worth while for others to bother about a thing so difficult. That this error is less wide-spread than of old is evident from the increased attention which is everywhere given to composition in all modern schemes of education; but it survives in popular misapprehension. The truth is, on the contrary, that as society is organized to-day it is essential that every man or woman who hopes to make his or her way, at least to anything like eminence even comparative, shall be able to write fairly good English. In a world so largely dominated by the printing-press as is ours in these modern days, not only has the man who can express himself in ink a manifest advantage, but he who cannot is hampered from the start. The highest skill in composition which can be acquired is of instant practical value in every profession. Students of technical and scientific subjects seem to me to be as truly acquiring practical training when they are improving their skill in writing as when they are performing experiments in the laboratory or smelting ores at the furnaces. In reports to corporations, papers on sanitary engineering addressed to city officials, schemes for railroads or telegraphs laid before legislative committees, they will have need of all the literary cleverness that they can compass, all the literary skill which they are able to acquire. Competition is fierce all along the line, and facility in the use of the pen counts in every trade and in every profession no less truly than it does among avowed writers.

Nor is this the whole of the matter. Into every-day, common experience has the modern habit of life brought the need of being master of expression; and even he who does not put pen to paper – if it is possible to suppose such a person to exist among intelligent people – is under the necessity of cultivating his knowledge of the art of expression to the end that he may read more intelligently and more sensitively. There is great need of establishing communication with our fellow-men; there is hardly less need of learning to establish communication with ourselves. It seems sometimes as if our beings were like those Chinese carved balls which Tennyson calls

> Laborious orient ivory sphere in sphere.

We strive to make our different selves know one another, but we find it hard. We are conscious of feelings, of ideas, of emotions, which some sphere of our manifold being knows, yet which to us – to the outer sphere, to the external Ego, so to say – are vague and distant however keenly we long to understand. The ability to phrase for others is soon found to be ability to phrase for ourselves. By no means the least of the advantages, as it is one of the greatest of the delights, of conquering expression, is the power of interpreting ourselves to ourselves.

There is a crude popular idea that the refinements of literary art are wasted, at any rate upon the general reader. So many books succeed, at least temporarily, which can make no slightest pretense to any grace of manner, and which have not even the merit of reasonable accuracy, that the student is apt to feel that these things are superfluous.

Of course the ordinary reader does not perceive delicate shades of expression, fine distinctions of phrase, or subtile beauties of style. Very likely he does not pause to consider whether a style is good or bad; and certainly he would be unable to analyze its merits if he attempted this. It does not follow that these graces do not touch him. It is by means of them that deep and lasting effects are produced. Susceptibility to artistic beauty is not necessarily conscious. Frankly, it is to be admitted that for the instant, evanescent, lurid success of sensational popularity it is not necessary to write good English. Books outside of the furthest stretch of charity in workmanship and style have, each in its day, the dazzling, however transient, success of a Roman candle or a rocket. In far too many

newspapers one may see how flippant pertness and vulgar sharpness can dispense with the smallest shred of good style, may ignore syntax, scorn accuracy, and outrage decency itself.

Once for all it must be allowed that whoever seeks this sort of success need not waste his time in the study of English composition. The author of the latest scandalous novel never experiences the necessity of any exhaustive acquaintance with rhetoric, or even of knowing much more than the outside of the English grammar. The young women who are employed by enterprising journals to scramble around the world in the briefest possible time with a hand-satchel for luggage are apt to be as little encumbered with syntax as with trunks. The purveyors of gossip to society papers are not in the least obliged to know the language in which they attempt to convey their precious information. If they can discover that Mrs. Cholmondely-Jones is at the Sea View House, their readers are not troubled at the declaration that this leader of fashion is "stopping at the hotel for a week;" – confusingly impossible as such a feat may appear.

All this has been said over and over, and I repeat it here simply by way of reminder that there is no claim that popular success is not to be won without literary merit; any more than it could be claimed on the other hand that popular success is insured by it. It is certain that no permanent literary work can be accomplished without the mastery of a good English style; and it is equally certain that command of written language is of the highest value and use. Sensational books make their way not because of their crudities of style and their inaccuracies, but in spite of them. If to the qualities which have given them vogue had been added literary merit, they might have reached to permanent in place of temporary success. Certainly if a writer desires to impress, to persuade, to move, to arouse; if he have a report to write which he hopes may be adopted, a theory to state which he is in earnest to have received; a history to relate that he would have believed; an appeal that he longs to have heeded, a creation of the imagination by which he aims to touch the emotions of his fellow-men, he cannot too carefully cultivate the art of communicating it. In any of these cases mastery of literary technique is as essential to success as is air to breathing or light to seeing.

II
METHODS OF STUDY

The question remains: How is skill in composition to be gained? The general principle is as simple as the details of the craft are complicated. The way to write is to write. Perhaps the most exact image of the process is that of piano-playing. Just as one acquires skill in the use of the piano by innumerable exercises and continual practice, so one attains to mastery in written language only by writing and writing and writing. It is necessary to compose and recompose; to write all sorts of things, to prune them, recast them, polish them; to elaborate and to simplify; to weigh each word and phrase; and when all is done to destroy the result as ruthlessly as we would destroy anything else which has become rubbish by outliving its usefulness.

This last point needs to be insisted upon. Personal vanity and that interest in self which is so naturally and so universally human, work constantly to persuade the beginner that his poorest trials are worth preservation. In the case of the pianist, the sound of the five-finger exercise dies on the air, and there is luckily an end of it. The player cannot gather it up and send it to a magazine. He cannot even without great risk of encountering personal violence impose it upon the friend whom he has invited to dine. With the writer it is unhappily different. His first verses he sends cheerfully and a little condescendingly to a magazine. His second he distributes on privately printed slips to his friends, – and any acquaintance will serve as a friend in the distribution of privately printed poems! His third effort is apt to go to some overworked man of letters, accompanied by a note delicately hinting that the inclosure is better than anything which the recipient has done, and requesting him to have it published at once in one of the leading magazines.

It is a thousand pities that the work of writers who are learning their art is not written in ink fading over night, or which would at least vanish as soon as the manuscript had undergone revision. The next best thing is for the would-be author to accustom himself to phrasing thoughts in his mind without setting them down upon paper at all. This habit is of great value from the constant training that it gives, and it is of value also because it takes its place as the study of form for the sake of form; the effort to attain technical excellence unhampered by any consideration of producing compositions permanent in themselves.

The best technical training is that which is entirely disassociated from any idea that permanent work is being done. No one can get on very well or very far in English composition who is not able patiently and faithfully to do a great deal of work simply for the sake of learning how to do it, entirely realizing that the thing produced is of no value when it is done. It is as absurd to preserve or to attempt to publish these crude experiments as it would be to practice the five-finger exercises in public, and to attempt to persuade music-lovers to pay to come and hear them. Every editor knows what need there is of saying this. Each mail carries to the office of every magazine scores of manuscript which are nothing but the crude exercises produced in more or less unintelligent struggles with the art of composition. The soul of the editor faints within him, while on the other hand the misguided, sensitive, self-conscious writer is smitten to the heart when his or her exercise is sent back with a printed card declining it with a hollow mockery of thanks. It is ludicrously pathetic; and I dwell upon it a little because in my time I have been foolish enough to offend in this manner; because as an editor I suffered enough from this cause to square the account beyond the cavil of the most exacting fate; and because in the course of my literary life I have seen so much of this sort of thing that I realize how general the experience is. It would be of less moment were it not for the depth of despair into which would-be authors are plunged by the return of these exercises. There is no despair like the despair of youth, and it makes my heart tingle now to recall the utter anguish with which I have received rejected early manuscripts – which should never have been sent to a publisher. Would to

heaven that there were some one eloquent enough to persuade the world once and for all that literature is as surely a profession which must be learned as is law or medicine. No delicate woman or sensitive man, thrown suddenly upon her or his own resources, turns to law or medicine, expecting to gain a livelihood by practicing these professions uninstructed; yet this would be hardly less logical than to expect to make a way in literature without long preparation and study. Nobody seems to believe this. It is probably disbelieved now, as I say it; and examples of persons who have succeeded in writing with no apparent training come to mind at once. It would be idle to retort to objections of this sort that quacks have succeeded in all professions; and I must content myself with insisting that whether what I have been saying is believed or not, it is true, and the proofs are heart-sickeningly familiar to every man of literary experience at all extended.

It is important to remember that the best technical training is that in which nothing is considered but technical excellence. The student should write with his entire attention fixed upon the technical excellence of the work. He must think not of what he is doing, but of how he is doing it. It is a long time before the student has a right to look upon himself as a producer at all; and the more completely he can preserve the attitude of a learner, the better will be the results of his self-training.

Guy de Maupassant, one of the most finished masters of literary art, pure and simple, who have written in this century, – a writer who achieved so much, and who lacked only a supreme ethical ideal to do so much more, – indicates something of what is meant by technical training in composition in his account of his studies under Flaubert: —

> Flaubert, whom I saw sometimes, conceived a friendship for me. I ventured to submit to him some of my attempts. He kindly read them, and said to me: "I cannot tell whether you have talent. What you have shown me proves a certain intelligence; but you must not forget this, young man, – that talent, in the phrase of Buffon, is only long patience. Work." … For seven years I made verses, I made tales, I made novels, I even made a detestable play. Of them all nothing remains. The master … criticised them, and enforced upon me, little by little, two or three principles, which were the pith of his long and perfect teaching. "If one has not originality," he said, "it is necessary to acquire it." Talent is long patience. It is a question of regarding whatever one desires to express long enough and with attention close enough to discover a side which no one has seen and which has been expressed by nobody. In everything there is something of the unexplored, because we are accustomed to use our eyes only with the thought of what has been already said concerning the thing we see. The smallest thing has in it a grain of the unknown. Discover it. In order to describe a fire that flames or a tree in the plain, we must remain face to face with that fire or that tree until for us they no longer resemble any other tree or any other fire. This is the way to become original.
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> Having, moreover, impressed upon me the fact that there are not in the whole world two grains of sand, two insects, two hands or two noses absolutely alike, he forced me to describe a being or an object in such a manner as to individualize it clearly, to distinguish it from all other objects of the same kind. "When you pass," he said to me, "a grocer seated in his doorway, a concierge smoking his pipe, a row of cabs, show me this grocer and this concierge, their attitude, all their physical appearance; suggest by the skill of your image all their moral nature, so that I shall not confound them with any other grocer or any other concierge; make me see, by a single word, wherein a cab-horse differs from the fifty others that follow or precede him." … Whatever may be the thing which one wishes to say, there is but one word for expressing it; only one verb to animate it, but one adjective to qualify it. It is

> essential to search for this verb, for this adjective, until they are discovered, and never to be satisfied with anything else. —*Pierre et Jean*, Introduction.

I have given this long quotation because it puts the case so strongly, because it has the weight of authority so high in technical matters, and because it touches upon several points which will come up later. There are dangers in this method of which we shall speak in the proper place, but here the thing to be emphasized is the absolute indispensability of rigorous training when one is struggling to acquire the art of verbal expression.

Robert Louis Stevenson, that beautiful master of words, has also told us how he trained himself to that dexterity and grace which have been the delight of so great a company of readers: —

> All through my boyhood and youth, I was known and pointed out for a pattern of an idler; and yet I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write. I kept always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in. As I walked, my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; when I sat by the roadside, I would either read, or a pencil and a penny version-book would be in my hand to note down the features of the scene or commemorate some halting stanzas. Thus I lived with words. And what I wrote thus was for no ulterior use. It was written consciously for practice. —*A College Magazine.*

It is well in learning to write to select uninteresting subjects; themes which depend for their effectiveness not upon what they are but upon the way in which they are presented. It is the natural tendency of any inexperienced writer to set to work to find something to write about which is in itself attractive. In the daily themes which I receive from students I find that the almost inevitable course of things is that the student writes upon whatever romantic or striking incidents have occurred in his life, and that when these are exhausted he is utterly at a loss for something to write about. It is not easy to persuade students that they will get training far more valuable out of careful attempts to express the commonplace. It is hard for eager young writers to follow the advice which Flaubert gave to De Maupassant. They are not willing to put their most strenuous efforts into the attempt to present vividly the grocer or the cab-horse. Yet there is nothing more valuable in training than to be thrown entirely upon one's own literary skill, be it much or little. When one deals with a subject fascinating in itself it is difficult to determine how much of the force of what is written depends upon the theme and how much may fairly be attributed to the treatment. In training which is purely technical it is essential to make this distinction, and it follows that the learner is wise to choose for his 'prentice efforts matters little attractive in themselves.

I have said that the way to learn to write is to write. It would perhaps be better to say that the way to learn to write is to rewrite. In the careful revision, the patient reconstruction, the unsparing self-criticism of the student who is determined to be satisfied with nothing short of the best of which he is capable, lies the secret of success. Here, as in everything else connected with the study of technique, patient, painstaking, untiring work is the essential thing.

In regard to revision it is necessary to call attention to the fact that it must extend to the revision of paragraphs and whole compositions. We are apt to confine ourselves to the remodeling and the polishing of sentences, or, if we get so far as to revise paragraphs, to take each separately. It is essential that we train ourselves to consider sentences as part of paragraphs and paragraphs as but portions of a whole. This it is especially hard for untrained writers to do. Those who have taught will recognize how difficult it is to make students realize that the sentences of a theme may all be individually right while yet the theme as a whole is all wrong.

As a matter of practical work it is well to make a schedule of chapters by paragraphs and of the whole composition by chapters, if the work be on so extensive a scale. It is one of the tests of a properly constructed paragraph that it can be roughly summed up in a single sentence, and a longer division may consequently be reduced in substance to as many sentences as there are paragraphs. It

is an excellent plan thus to summarize work, and a little practice enables a writer to do this in his head without the trouble of putting the abstract upon paper.

It is evident that to learn the art of composition is no small undertaking, but it is to be kept in mind that this art, being the means of human expression, underlies all study and all thought no less than it underlies all communication. It aids one to understand what one reads, what one studies, what one thinks, no less than it aids one to compose a poem, to produce a novel, to write a letter, or to relate the latest bit of piquant gossip. Do not make the mistake of supposing that it is outside of your other intellectual pursuits, save in the sense that all the rest of your education is inclosed in it. We fully understand only that which we are ourselves capable of; and to comprehend the literature of the world it is necessary to come as near to being able to have produced it as is possible to our individual capabilities.

III
PRINCIPLES OF STRUCTURE

Since it is the object of this book first of all to be practical, it is well, before passing to matters more intricate, to consider for a little the elementary principles of composition.[1] Written language, to repeat what everybody knows, consists of words arranged in sentences, which in turn are grouped into paragraphs, these again being placed together to form whole compositions. In all composition, it may be remarked, it is necessary to remember that the punctuation is as integral and as important a part of what is written as are the words. It is often more easy to forgive the careless printer for altering a word than for changing punctuation, since the reader more easily corrects an error of diction than of pointing. The student has not mastered even the preliminary stages of composition who is not as sure of the punctuation of a page as he is of its grammatical construction.

There is a general vagueness on the subject of the mechanical forms employed in written or printed language which affects the nerves as if it were connected with the moral laxity of the age. There is probably no real connection between the frequency of bank defalcations and a failure to recognize the relative values of the comma and the semicolon, but to a literary man this ignorance is so culpable as almost to seem likely to lead to crime. When an inexperienced writer gets the words down he is apt to suppose that all is well, and frequently he does not even know when to put in a period. It is necessary not only to close a sentence when it is done, but also to bear in mind that if it is not finished putting a period in the middle does not really make two sentences of it. When a tyro finds that his pen is getting out of breath, he has a tendency to set down a period, and then to go on with a conjunction, supposing, in the innocency of his heart, that he is beginning afresh. He is really only setting up the divorced better half – for the latter portion of a sentence should be the better half – in a sort of separate maintenance. The period in such a case has not even the power of a divorce, since it cannot make the separation legal. A sentence is like an ingot: if it be chopped in two, each piece is half of the original whole. It must be melted and recast to make individual ingots of smaller size.

It is also to be noted that students too often fail to recognize the fact that there are reasons as definite and as binding for the divisions of sentences into paragraphs as for the division of words into sentences. A teacher recently told me of the definition of a country schoolboy which, if not over-elegant, represents pretty fairly, it seems to me, the attitude of the common mind toward the paragraph. “A paragraph,” this lad said blunderingly, when called upon to define, “why, a paragraph – a paragraph – it’s – it’s a gob of sentences!” I fancy that most teachers have encountered plenty of pupils who think of a paragraph as merely a “gob” of sentences, – a lump accidentally broken off from the rest of the composition, but possessed of no structural qualities of its own.

The analysis of sentences is common in schools, but, so far as I know, there is little analysis of paragraphs. To my thinking there is more to be gained from the latter than from the former. The analysis of the paragraph calls for a wider view, for a better comprehension of subject, and for a more developed idea of form. I do not wish to be understood as endeavoring to invent a new torture for pupils or one more device for further overburdening teachers already overloaded. I merely call attention to the value as a means of mental and literary training of the study of paragraph structure in the works of the masters of style, and to the fact that such study is an indispensable part of a literary training.

Of course the ultimate appeal in all that concerns the mechanics of composition is to what is commonly called Good Use. All written symbols by which intelligence is conveyed from man to man

[1] In this chapter and the next three I am so greatly indebted to Professor Barrett Wendell’s “English Composition” that this part of my book might almost be called a summary of his, although I have of course omitted much and have introduced some things upon which he has barely touched.

are arbitrary. It is merely because it is agreed that the character "I" shall represent a sound and that this sound shall stand for an idea, that we are able to bring up the idea in the mind of others simply by writing the sign. That there is nothing innate in the symbol is evident from the fact that other signs have been used to represent this sound, and that other syllables have stood for the pronoun in the first person singular. The examples which might be given to illustrate this point are limited only by the number of words in existence. Consciously or by tacit consent – oftener, of course, by the latter – it has been agreed to attach sounds to ideas and to represent those sounds by definite symbols. It follows that he who wishes to communicate an idea in writing has no resource outside of the means which have been agreed upon by the consent of his fellow-men. A writer may decide to have a new vocabulary and to write it in novel characters. The difficulty is that it will be understood by nobody. He is forced to use the language of men, and to use it in the fashion in which it is employed by others. He is bound by the habit of men who write, established by custom and defined by common acceptance. In other words, he is constrained to follow Good Use.

Good Use is the general agreement in regard to conventions by means of which ideas are conveyed. It is the basis of all composition, and without an intimate knowledge of it no one can write successfully. What the best general agreement is, is to be determined by the practice of the most eminent and widely recognized authors. The fact of their general indorsement and recognition is a sufficient proof that their use is intelligible to their public, and that it is therefore safe to follow them. Their custom decides not because of their authority, but because their reputation proves that their use is the one which is tacitly accepted by intelligent readers, and which is therefore the only one that will insure comprehension.

There are certain things which in writing it is necessary to keep constantly in mind until they are observed unconsciously and instinctively. Always a writer must hold to three Principles of Structure and three Principles of Quality. The division is of course arbitrary, but it is logical and convenient. The three Principles of Structure, – the mechanical principles, so to say, those which direct most obviously the mechanics of language, – are Unity, Mass, and Coherence. The three Principles of Quality – those which govern the inner and more intellectual character of a composition – are Clearness, Force, and Elegance.

The first principle of structure, Unity, has to do with the substance of a sentence or a composition. It is the law which requires that every composition shall be informed with a general intention, shall centre around one fundamental idea; that every paragraph and every sentence shall be dominated by one essential thought or purpose. It is the principle which produces the difference between a well-ordered whole and an unorganized collection of scraps; between a rich embroidery and a sampler, a mosaic and a crazy-quilt. Without Unity as a whole a composition becomes as disjointed as a dictionary, without attaining to the instructiveness of that necessary book; and in degree only less from the proportionate importance of a part to the whole, the lack of Unity in a sentence destroys the value and effectiveness of the entire work.

The second principle, that of Mass, concerns the external arrangement of what is written. It is the rule which enjoins the putting of the chief parts of the composition, of the paragraph and of the sentence, in the places which most readily catch the eye or the ear. This is sometimes spoken of as Emphasis, but the term is hardly comprehensive enough. All questions of proportion come of course under the head of Mass, and so does whatever in the outward form of a composition appeals to the eye.

Coherence, the third principle of structure, is the law of internal arrangement. The relation of each part to the others must be made clear and unmistakable. We are all but too familiar with the style of writing which resembles the valley of dry bones of the prophet's vision, composition wherein the relation of one fragment to another is to be discerned only by the most careful research. Coherence is as the inspired prophecy of Ezekiel, whereby the bones came together, bone to bone, so that the valley was filled with an exceeding great army.

Unity is at once the simplest and the most easily secured of these three requirements. It is within the power of any writer of reasonable judgment to tell when the matter contained in a sentence concerns a single idea or several ideas so closely connected that they must belong together. It is a matter of perception, and for avoiding incongruous constructions there is perhaps no other rule so good as the simple injunction: Be sure that sentences have Unity. Every text-book upon rhetoric warns against this fault and contains examples of it. The writer who accustoms himself to realize vividly what he is saying is not likely to fall into the error.

The danger attending upon the effort to secure Unity is that of Dryness. The writer who is excessively careful about confining every sentence to a single thought and every paragraph to a single group of thoughts dominated by a central idea is sometimes likely to fail of variety and richness of structure. He becomes timid about admitting even proper ornaments, and gives to his style an air of being constructed upon the model of a wall of brick masonry. Variety is as essential to composition as is Unity, and it is necessary to be careful lest in securing one the other be lost. Every student should become sufficiently self-critical to know in which direction he is more likely to err, and to direct his efforts for improvement accordingly.

The question of Mass is more difficult. This principle governs the places of words and clauses in the sentence, of sentences in paragraphs, of paragraphs in longer compositions. The whole matter is admirably and succinctly put by Mr. Wendell: —

> In any composition the points which most readily catch the eye are evidently the beginning and the end. From which, of course, it follows that, broadly speaking, every composition – sentence, paragraph, chapter, book – may conveniently begin and end with the words which stand for ideas that we wish to impress on our readers… Broadly speaking, the office of punctuation is to emphasize, – to do for the eye what vocal pauses and stress do for the ear, – to show what parts of a composition belong together, and among these parts to indicate the most significant. It is clear that periods emphasize more strongly than semi-colons; and semi-colons than commas. From this, of course, it follows that in an ideally massed sentence the most significant words come close to the periods, the less significant close to the lesser marks of punctuation, the least significant in those unbroken stretches of discourse where there is nothing but words to arrest the eye. The test of a well-massed sentence, then, is very simple: Are the words that arrest the eye the words on which the writer would arrest your attention?

The application of this principle to books is easily seen, and perhaps is especially obvious in fiction. In an effective novel it will generally be found that some interesting and striking situation has been chosen for the beginning. Frequently the author makes a bold plunge into the very heart of the story in order to find an impressive passage with which to begin. The more important emphasis, that of the conclusion, must be properly employed or the entire effect of the work as a whole is sacrificed.

A good example of the ill effect of failing to employ the emphatic points of a book properly is afforded by Stanley J. Weyman's pleasing story, "My Lady Rotha." The first seven chapters are occupied with an account of the rebellion of a village against its chatelaine and of her flight from her castle to avoid their rage. Once the Lady Rotha is free of the castle, however, the book is devoted to her adventures in a country where the King of Sweden, the great Wallenstein, and numerous other leaders are filling the land with war and danger and bloodshed. To the very end of the tale the reader expects that the narrative will return to the castle, and that there will appear some better excuse for the opening chapters than the need of starting the heroine on her perilous travels; but the novel finishes without going back to the castle or telling how matters were settled there. The book is so badly massed that the very force of its beginning injures instead of aiding the effect of the whole.

In another and better tale by the same author, “A Gentleman of France,” the first emphasis is given to the poverty and undeserved ill fortune of the hero; so that when in time fate leads him to better things the later joy is heightened by contrast with the earlier gloom. I take these two books because they have been widely read of late, but any novel that comes to hand is an illustration of one sort or another.

The danger to be avoided in endeavoring to secure effective massing of compositions is that of artificiality. This is especially obvious in the construction of sentences. In an uninflected language, like English, wherein the relative places of words are necessarily fixed more or less absolutely, it is not easy to re-order the arrangement without giving to the style an appearance of artifice. Dexterously to overcome this difficulty is one of the things which the student has to learn, and perhaps more upon the success with which he is able to do so than upon any other single thing will depend the effectiveness of what he writes.

The third principle of structure, Coherence, is one of which the lack is easily perceptible, but the securing of which is often difficult. The rule is that words closely related by their share in the thought to be conveyed shall be kept together, – and so stated is simple enough. No one, however, is likely to have written even a page upon any subject at all intricate without having to pause to rearrange the clauses of some involved sentence or of some confused paragraph. A great hindrance in the struggle for Coherence, it should be added, is a want of clear perception of what one wishes to say. The position of words is often determined by the choice of shades of expression which are extremely delicate, and unless the writer has an accurate and acute perception of these he cannot be sure of the order of his words and clauses.

It is easy enough to see how the phrases are misplaced in the stock examples of incoherence which are given in the books of rhetoric. Any novice could improve a sentence of this sort: —

> He left off his old coat to marry a lady with a large Roman nose which had been worn continuously for ten years.

It takes only a little thought to see the error in the phrase: —

> The crowd turns, departs, disintegrates;

where it is evident that the connection is between “turns” and “disintegrates,” and that the crowd departs after it has broken up. Not less obvious, when attention is called to it, is the fault here: —

> Lothair was unaffectedly gratified at *not only* receiving his friends at his own castle, *but* under these circumstances of intimacy.[2]

It is not hard to see the difference of meaning between these two sentences: —

> So long as men had slender means, whether of keeping out cold or checkmating it with artificial heat, Winter was an unwelcome guest, especially in the country.
>
> So long as men had slender means, especially in the country, of keeping out cold or checkmating it with artificial heat, Winter was an unwelcome guest.

It requires a more trained perception to feel the variations which result from altering in the following example the position of “only.”

> The theory that the poet is a being above the world and apart from it is true of him as an observer only who applies to the phenomena about him the test of a finer and more spiritual sense. – Lowell: *Life and Letters of James Gates Percival*.

[2] Disraeli: *Lothair*. Quoted by Professor Hill.

If we say “is true only of him who as an observer,” we shall mean one thing, – and I confess to a suspicion that this is the thing which Lowell intended! – whereas the passage as it stands asserts that the theory is true considering the poet as merely an observer.

It is not necessary to multiply examples. Every student who attempts careful expression will come upon illustrations enough in his own work. The important thing is to be clearly aware of what is to be said, and then to be sure that it is said, and said unmistakably.

In the construction of sentences the coherent arrangement of words is frequently hindered by the grammatical relations; no such limitation prevents the proper placing of sentences in the formation of paragraphs. In the construction of paragraphs, however, even more than in the construction of sentences, is necessary the utmost clearness of ideas. It is here essential to know not only what one has to say, but the relative strength which should be given to each link in the chain of thought. The question of proportion must here have the fullest answer. The relative stress which is to be given by position and the relative stress which is to be imparted by proportion are alike of the greatest importance in the making of the paragraph.

Something of this may be shown by an example. The following is a paragraph from the essay by Jeffrey on “The Characters in Shakespeare’s Plays:” —

> Everything in him [Shakespeare] is in unmeasured abundance and unequaled perfection, – but everything so balanced and kept in subordination, as not to jostle or disturb or take the place of another. The most exquisite poetical conceptions, images, and descriptions, are given with such brevity, and introduced with such skill as merely to adorn without loading the sense they accompany… All his excellences, like those of nature herself, are thrown out together; and instead of interfering with, support and recommend each other.

Let this now be read with a transposition of sentences: —

> Although in Shakespeare everything is so balanced and kept in subordination as not to jostle or disturb or take the place of another, and is in unequaled perfection, yet everything is in an unmeasured abundance. He gives with such brevity and introduces with such skill as to adorn without loading the sense they accompany, the most exquisite poetical conceptions, images, and descriptions. All his excellences, although they support and recommend instead of interfering with each other, are thrown out together like those of nature herself.

The words and phrases are identical in these two paragraphs, save for the slight alterations and changes of connectives made necessary by transposition; and yet the effect is distinctly different. The first, as Jeffrey intended, remarks that in spite of the great luxuriance of Shakespeare’s work it is always well ordered; the second declares that although well ordered the poet’s work is as luxurious as nature herself.

If the proportion were changed, the effect would be varied again. Cutting out a few clauses from the original, we have: —

> Everything in Shakespeare is so balanced and kept in subordination as not to jostle or disturb or take the place of another. The most poetical conceptions are given with such brevity and introduced with such skill as merely to adorn without loading the sense they accompany. All his excellences are thrown out together, and instead of interfering with, support and recommend each other.

Here Shakespeare’s fine ordering of his style is made more emphatic than in the original, and a glance will show how, by the suppression of other phrases, the luxuriance of his work could have been given the more prominence. A writer must know which of many possible shades of meaning is the one which he desires to convey, and he is likely to be successful in his work or the reverse

according to the sharpness of his own apprehension of what he is aiming at. The gunner who shuts his eyes when he fires is more likely to hit the mark than is the writer who vaguely endeavors to say something likely to succeed in accurately saying anything.

IV
DETAILS OF DICTION

The student who endeavors to apply to words the tests of Good Use finds himself confronted with some questions which are very easily answered and with others so difficult that even the experts of language may disagree concerning them. It is of course to be supposed that we have all mastered the canons which forbid the use of Barbarisms, Improprieties, and Solecisms, – however much we allow ourselves to be influenced by the newspapers into the habit of violating them. We have not got through our early school years without having our attention called to the difference of effect produced by long and short words. Most of us have had more or less confusing instruction on the subject of the use of Latin words and words which are somewhat inexactly termed Anglo-Saxon. We have all known brief but bewildered intervals during which we endeavored to live up to a noble resolution to make our vocabulary strongly Anglo-Saxon; and we are most of us conscious in our secret hearts that we neither did this ever, nor ever for a moment knew how to set to work to do it.

It is as well for the written language of to-day that there has never been possible a practical revision of the tongue by the dropping of words of Latin origin. It is a most mistaken notion which turns attention to the race origin of words instead of directing study to their actual force in use. It sounds admirably learned to talk of a diction which is too strongly Latin or which is markedly Anglo-Saxon; it is possible enough to see that in general a preponderance of classical words imparts dignity and that an abundance of Saxon gives terseness to a style; but the man who in desiring to secure the one effect or the other goes to work to select his language on this basis is utterly ignoring the very first principles of practical composition. Words are to be chosen with reference to a desired effect, and their pedigree is of no more consequence than is that of the players on a foot-ball team. The boys of one descent may do better than those of another, and words of one or of another derivation may produce a desired effect, – but the contrary may be true, so that such a principle of selection is as absurd in one case as in the other.

Of long and short words much the same might be said. We are pretty well out of the days when it was still needful to insist upon the admonition of Frere: —

> And don't confound the language of the nation
> With long-tailed words in *osity* and *ation*.

The childish love of fine words which belongs to the infancy of literature is generally outgrown. It is recognized that words are to be selected solely for their effect, and not for extraneous pretensions. In this way is to be made the choice between words general and specific, and of words literal or figurative.

A consideration which is of importance in the choice of words, and one with which we shall be concerned later on, is that of denotation and connotation. A word denotes what it expresses directly; it connotes what it expresses indirectly; it denotes the idea which it names, and connotes the idea that it implies; it denotes what it says, and connotes what it suggests. The word "Washington" denotes a particular man, whose history we know, but with that history go so many suggestions and associations that the name connotes the idea of patriotism, military skill, and devotion to the nation from the very hour of its birth. The word "treason" denotes a specific offense against the government; while it connotes all the shame with which men regard one who betrays his country. In the familiar line of Wordsworth, the words denote a certain common flower beside a stone covered with another common and ordinary vegetable growth; they connote all the beauty of the azure blossom, the sweetness of the springtide, the quietude of a sylvan scene, all those lovely and touching associations which can

be expressed only by suggestion. It is in the fact that certain sentiments can be conveyed by indirect means only that the value of connotation lies. To suggest by the choice of words those delicate and subtle ideas which are like a fragrance or like the iridescent sheen of nacre is one of the highest triumphs of literary art; and the nice artist in words is certainly not less careful in regard to the connotation of words than he is of their denotation.

A violet by a mossy stone,

One of the things which often puzzles beginners is how to increase their vocabulary. Of course reading is one of the most effective means of enlarging one's knowledge of the language, – but it is only careful reading, reading in which are studied the force and the color of terms as well as their literal meaning, that is of any marked value in this direction. It is said that Thackeray was in the habit of studying the dictionary with a frank purpose of adding to his knowledge of words. I have known two literary men who followed this practice, but they both deliberately selected unusual and bizarre examples with the avowed object of adding a unique and whimsical flavor to their journalistic work. Such an example is of course to be shunned, but in general there is far too little stress laid upon the use of the dictionary. There should be in every preparatory school a regular exercise in the use of the dictionary, and in it all students should be required to join. The teacher should read an extract or a sentence, or should give out words to the class, and have the meanings and derivations actually looked up at the moment. The differing values of synonyms should be examined; and if possible something of the history of the words given. The aim should be to encourage the student in the habit of having a lexicon at hand and of using it constantly.

Another important means of increasing one's command of language is conversation, and the value of conversation in this respect as in every other is in direct ratio to its character. To talk is not enough; it is necessary that the talker exert himself to do his best. Chatter is of no value as intellectual training; it is the exercise of the mind which tells. The subject of conversation may be as light as possible; but it is important that whatever is said is said well, whether it be a compliment to a mistress' eyebrow, a discussion of the deepest philosophy of life, or the latest bon-mot of the clubs. "Every variety of gift," Emerson says truly, – "science, religion, politics, letters, art, prudence, war, or love, – has its vent and exchange in conversation," and it follows that conversation properly conducted helps to the power of expression in all of these.

Better than all other means of increasing the vocabulary, however, is writing. Always the way to learn to write is to write. The way to increase one's power of expression is to strive to express. The habit of seeking constantly for the right word results in ability to find the right word. It acts not only directly, widening one's domain in the realm of language, but it renders a hundred-fold more effective the use of reading and of talk. It puts the mind into an attentive mood so that when a new term is met with it is remembered. The perception on the alert for words becomes susceptible to them, so that they are appreciated and retained. Cultivate the habit of putting things into words and the words will come unconsciously; practice phrasing thought and the means of phrasing it will not long be wanting.

When we go on from the consideration of words to that of sentences we find that here Good Use is more clearly defined. The rules for the construction of sentences are to a large extent more formal than those which govern the choice of terms, and the most obvious of them are conveniently collected and arranged under the name of Grammar.

Grammar is the account-book of custom; it is in reality a reckoning up of the popular suffrages in regard to verbal proprieties. In other words, grammar is the formal statement of the decisions of Good Use in so far as they apply to the relative forms of words. It is of course not necessary to speak here in detail of these. I only wish to call attention to the rules of the grammarian as a particularly well defined example of the supremacy of Good Use in all matters relating to language and its employment in literature. It is because the general consent has decided that a certain form of the verb shall be

plural that the grammarian declares it to be in that number. Grammars follow and formulate custom; they neither precede nor dictate.

The inability of the grammarian to dictate to custom is made especially evident when we consider that thing more subtle than syntax and in composition no less important, which we call Idiom. That a writer shall be idiomatic is as essential to writing well as the avoidance of solecisms, yet every student of the language knows how elusive and difficult of attainment is a sound understanding of the idioms of any tongue.

An idiom is the personal – if the word may be allowed – the personal idiosyncrasy of a language. It is a method of speech wherein the genius of the race making the language shows itself as differing from that of all other peoples. What style is to the man that is idiom to the race. It is the crystallization in verbal forms of peculiarities of race temperament – perhaps even of race eccentricities.

It is customary to define an idiom as the form of language which cannot be translated into another tongue; and the example which is commonly given is the habit English-speaking peoples have of saying: "You are right," whereas the Latin form – literally translated – would be: "You speak rightly," the French: "You have reason," and the German: "You have right." An idiom is independent of grammatical rules, – sometimes is in distinct violation of them. It makes us say: "A ten-foot pole," "A two-dollar bill," "A five-acre lot," – where a plural adjective modifies a singular substantive, or to speak more accurately is compounded with it. It decides that we shall write: "More [friends] than one friend has told me," – although the subject of "told" is "friends" understood. An idiom boldly ignores the derivation of words. Since "circumstances" means "things standing around," it is evidently logical to use the phrase, "in these circumstances." The genius of the language decides that the form shall be, "under these circumstances;" and whoever writes "in" for "under" not only uses unidiomatic English, but lays himself open to the charge of pedantry. Untranslatable and above rules, Idiom is as inviolable as the laws of the Medes and the Persians, and for him who sins against it there is no pardon.

For idioms there is no law save that of Good Use, and perhaps in the discernment of no other rules is required so critical and so nice a discrimination. English which is not idiomatic becomes at once formal and lifeless, as if the tongue were already dead and its remains embalmed in those honorable sepulchres, the philological dictionaries. On the other hand, English which goes too far, and fails of a delicate distinction between what is really and essentially idiomatic and what is colloquial, becomes at once vulgar and utterly wanting in that subtle quality of dignity for which there is no better term than distinction. The grammarian, moreover, wageth against Idiom a warfare as bitter as it is unceasing. It is distinctly idiomatic to use in certain cases what is known as the "flat adverb," – the adverb in the adjective form without *ly*. The man who writes "speak loudly," "speak more loudly," "speak plainly," "walk fastly," "drink deeply," "speak lowly," "the moon shines brightly," "the sun shines hotly," may have the applause of grammarians and his own misguided conscience, but he is not writing idiomatic English. His virtue must be its own reward, since he can never win the approval of lovers of sound, wholesome, living English. Those who use the language idiomatically write "speak loud," "speak louder," "speak plain," "walk fast," "drink deep," "speak low," "the moon shines bright," and "the sun shines hot." Yet these idiomatic distinctions are often very delicate. An adverb is sometimes properly used in its flat form with an imperative when in other cases the form in *ly* is proper. We say, for instance, "walk slow, walk slower;" but "He walked slowly across the field and more slowly over the bridge." Nothing but the careful training of the perceptions avails for distinctions such as these.

Another idiomatic construction against which the purist waggeth his tongue and gritteth his teeth is the ending of a sentence with a particle. Instead of the good old idiomatic "Where does it come from?" he would have us say "Whence does it come?" For "Where is it going to?" he offers "Whither is it going?" Both of his phrases are eminently respectable, but there is sometimes a lack of vitality in too eminent respectability! Do not be afraid to say: "The subject which I spoke to you about;" "The conclusion that we came to;" "The man whom I talked with;" "This is a cause to stand

up for;" "It is worth living for;" "A name to conjure with;" and the allied phrases which would never have been tolerated for an instant if the language had been made in libraries instead of having grown up in the lives of peoples and on the tongues of breathing men.

Professor Reed, of the University of Pennsylvania, admirably says: —

> The false fastidiousness which shuns a short particle at the end of a sentence is often fatal to a force which belongs to the language in its primal character.

He points out that only the misapplication of analogies from Continental languages has brought into discredit this characteristic English idiom. He quotes Bacon, "Houses are built to live in, and not to look on;" Donne, "Hath God a name to curse by?" and Burke, "The times we live in." He might have gone to contemporary authors, and cited Stevenson, "After expedients hitherto unthought of," "He was all fallen away and fallen in;" James, "The different bedrooms she has successively slept in," "There is almost literally nothing he does not care for;" Newman, "The elect are few to choose out of;" Lowell, "In accomplishing what he aimed at," "The words are chosen for their value to fill in," "The soil out of which such men as he are made is good to be born on, good to live on, good to die for and be buried in." It would not be difficult to extend the list until it should include all the writers of idiomatic English.

It is necessary, however, to add here a word of warning. Allowing a particle to come at the end of a sentence or clause because it belongs there idiomatically is one thing; letting the particle drag loosely along behind from a lack of skill or energy sufficient to manage the construction properly is quite another. Idiom is a cloak which may be made to cover as many vices as virtues. The beginning and end of clause or sentence are the emphatic parts, and to give the close to an unimportant word is to waste an opportunity and weaken the effect of the whole. The reason why the idiomatic final particle is permissible is because it really belongs to the emphatic idea or is practically a part of the verb which precedes it. In the phrase "the times we live in," it is evident that "in" is in intention part of the idea expressed by the verb, so that the sentence does not close with the particle "in" but with the verb "live in;" and so on for the other examples which have been quoted.

A common instance of unidiomatic use of a particle at the end of a sentence is that of closing with the sign of the infinitive. "Do as you have a mind to" is bad English because the words "mind" and "to" do not in idea belong together. Either the verb should be expressed, – "Do as you have a mind to do," or the sentence should be recast. However strong colloquial precedent may seem, do not allow that forlornly orphaned sign of the infinitive to come trailing along alone as a last word.

The idiomatic use of conjunctions is one mark of a finished and careful style. It is perhaps too much to say that if a writer takes care of his particles the other parts of speech will take care of themselves, but it is at least true that no style can be lucid and polished in which the particles – and especially the conjunctions – have not been looked to most carefully. Amateur writers are apt to seem aware of the existence of only two conjunctions, " and" and "but;" while they are especially careful to omit the conjunction "that." It has been remarked that one of the important means by which the French masters secure that wonderful clarity and vivacity of style which so few English authors have been able to approach is a careful and explicit discrimination of the value of connectives. A stylist might be not very inaccurately defined as a writer who is always conscientious in his choice of conjunctions. Coleridge's remarks on this point have often been quoted: —

> A close reasoner and a good writer in general may be known by his pertinent use of connectives. Read that page of Johnson; you cannot alter one conjunction without spoiling the sense. It is in a linked strain throughout. In your modern books for the most part, the sentences in a page have the same connection with each other that marbles have in a bag; they touch without adhering. —*Table Talk*, May 15, 1833.

This is impatiently inexact, it may be, but the modern tendency, especially in careless newspaper work, is to do away with connectives for the sake of securing briskness. The result is abruptness always and confusion generally. Insignificant as they seem, connectives are the articulations of the skeleton of a composition, and unless they be flexible and delicately adjusted there is no possibility of freedom of movement in the whole.

Certain weak idioms which are common in conversation are apt to creep into the writings of those not over sensitive to literary effects, but these colloquialisms are religiously avoided by careful writers. An example of this sort of thing is the detestable use of "got" – as a substitute for "have" or as a superfluous appendage to it, – which is so conspicuous a vice in England. In America this is at least theoretically frowned upon, and indeed it is protested against by the best authorities on the other side of the water.

Of course I have not space to take up one by one all the idiomatic expressions of the language. These given will serve as examples, and I have but to add that there is perhaps no better way of becoming sensitive to idiom than by conversing with rustics and reading the English classics. Neither method is of value without the restraining and enlightening influence of sound good judgment, but the student who is able to criticise his own work and compare it with that of the masters will find the talk of country folk and the works of the old masters alike helpful in the formation of an idiomatic style.

The matter of long sentences or short sentences is practically the same as that of long or short words. The question is what effect the writer wishes to produce. If he desires to treat a subject with dignity, to impress by gravity of manner, or to produce a mood of solemnity or melancholy, it is all but essential that his sentences shall be long. If on the other hand it is his object to produce an effect of lightness, to induce a feeling of gayety, of briskness, to make the blood run swiftly in the veins, his style will be crisp with short sentences. With even a limited amount of literary training the choice of length in sentences becomes almost instinctive.

Something of the same principle is to be applied to sentences loose and sentences periodic. A loose sentence is one in which the meaning and the grammatic structure are complete at some point before the end; a periodic sentence is one in which sense and sentence end together. If I say, "We all praise periodic sentences, but few of us write them," I have given an example of the truth of the statement. The sense and the grammatic construction are both complete at the middle of the sentence. If this be rewritten so as to read, "Although we all praise periodic sentences, few of us write them," we have a periodic form in which sense and construction are alike incomplete until the close.

That closeness of structure which in an inflected language is imparted by the form of words must in English depend upon word arrangement; and from this it follows that the question of making the sentence periodic must be subordinate to the matter of bringing the right words together. The tendency of the language is toward a loose structure; but between the two sorts of sentences that we are considering there is the difference that there is between giving to a person a thing in pieces and giving it to him whole. In the loose sentence you present to him one portion after another, often in a way which leaves him uncertain at the end of the different parts whether there is or is not more to come; in the periodic, you offer to him the whole at once. Evidently the latter is the more definite, the more precise, the more finished. It is, however, so often impossible to make a sentence periodic without apparent effort that no style could be wholly periodic without seeming elaborately and even painfully studied; hence as a matter of fact all good style consists of a judicious mingling of the two kinds of sentence.

The danger in a style too uniformly periodic is that of appearing stiff and formal; and it seems to be true that the best and most flexible English contains a larger portion of loose sentences than of periodic. Reaching out my hand for volumes which chance to be within arm's length of my writing-table, I find that of the first fifteen sentences in Lowell's essay on Chaucer, ten are loose and five periodic; of the same number at the beginning of Henry James' essay on Balzac, nine are loose and six periodic; at the commencement of Stevenson's paper on Burns the loose are to the periodic

eight to seven; Saintsbury's essay on De Quincey begins with the same proportions; while that by the same author on Sydney Smith opens with thirteen loose relieved but by two periodic. Of course such examples are not conclusive, but they are at least illustrative.

In all these matters the important thing is to train one's self to do whatever it seems well to do, by the use of the form most apt for the effect desired. Since the natural tendency of the untrained writer is towards loose sentences, it is well to conquer the art of writing periodically. In this, as in all points of the study of composition, the thing aimed at is to be able to do with language whatever is desired; to become as absolutely master of it as the cunning sculptor is master of the modeling-clay, which is as plastic under his hand as if it were a part of his very thought.

V
PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY

When an architect builds a palace, or an edifice no matter how much humbler, he first attends to the unity, the proportions, and to the strength of the structure; after that he has to consider the harmony, the finish, and the adornment. According to the nature and purpose of the building, it may be given a coat of mineral paint, such as that which made the transient fortune of Silas Lapham, it may be set with clustering statues like an Old World cathedral, or it may be jeweled with precious marbles and flower-bright mosaics like the Taj Mahal.

The analogy between this process and that of the writer is close enough to excuse the somewhat florid comparison. First is to be considered the mechanical form of what is written; unity, proportion, and texture must be looked to, and afterward there must be thought of the harmony, finish, and adornment. When we have studied the Principles of Structure, – Unity, Mass, and Coherence, – we have next to do with the Principles of Quality.

Whatever work interests a reader may be said to touch him in one of three ways: it may appeal to his understanding, to his emotions, or to his imagination. In other words, it may affect him by its intellectual, by its emotional, or by its imaginative or æsthetic quality. Bearing in mind that any nomenclature is a matter of convenience, and that we use names chiefly as a means of dividing the subject into portions which may be handled less awkwardly than the whole, we may call these three qualities Clearness, Force, and Elegance.

If we examine our feelings in regard to anything which we read, we find that it has been easily intelligible, or that it has bothered our comprehension; it has interested us, stirred us, or has left us indifferent or bored; and it has or has not produced in us a sense of beauty and elevation of mood. Neither these sensations nor the qualities which produce them are sharply separable; but the distinctions perceptibly exist, so that for purposes of study the qualities may conveniently be treated one at a time. It is easy to see that in understanding the meaning of a thing we most markedly use the intellectual faculties; that in liking or disliking we respond to an appeal to the emotions; and that in feeling beauty and appreciating the æsthetic, we necessarily employ the imagination. The first is a question of comprehension; the second of feeling; and the third of taste. Clearness is the intellectual principle of style; Force the emotional; and Elegance the æsthetic.

The Principles of Structure must precede and underlie those of Quality. Speaking broadly, we may say that it is idle to attempt to give to a composition or to a sentence Clearness, Force, or Elegance, unless it is already satisfactory in Unity, Mass, and Coherence. The closest attention to the laws of mechanical form, however, is not sufficient to secure quality. For the secret of that it is needful to go further.

It is in Clearness that the Principles of Quality are most obviously associated with those of Structure. If an author has carefully considered the Unity of his composition, if he has massed it properly in parts and as a whole, if he has looked well to its Coherence, – it is hardly possible that he should fail of being readily understood. Close attention to the mechanics of style will generally make a writer intelligible, provided always that he wishes his meaning to be apprehended easily, and that he himself knows what he is attempting to say.

These two considerations are of much practical importance. Sometimes writers do not choose to be clear. George Meredith seems often to write with the deliberate intention of forcing the reader to go slowly, – as if from the feeling that what can be read rapidly is in danger of being merely skimmed over. There are others, like Thomas Carlyle, who deliberately obscure what they write, apparently in the hope of adding by complexity an air of mystery to commonplaces and a meretricious dignity to wisdom.

Take, for instance, this sentence: —

> If for the present, in our Europe, we estimate the ratio of Ware to Appearance of Ware so high even as One to a Hundred (which, considering the Wages of a Pope, Russian Autocrat, or English Game-Preserver, is probably not far from the mark), – what almost prodigious saving may there not be anticipated, as the Statistics of Imposture advances, and so the manufacture of Shams (that of Realities rising into clearer and clearer distinction therefrom) gradually declines, and at length becomes all but wholly unnecessary! – Carlyle: *Sartor Resartus*, ii. 3.

Here the lack of lucidity is intentional. The author has sacrificed it to the particular effect which he wished to produce. He sought to give to what he wrote an air of bizarre and piquant individuality, and it is for this that he so distorts and convulses his sentences. The purpose is as conscious as that which informs the gyrations of an acrobat. There is the same relation between a page of "Sartor Resartus" or the "French Revolution" and a page of ordinary prose that there is between the marvelous distortions of a contortionist and the walk of a gentleman, – each, of course, being well in its place.

Compare with the sentence just given, this passage from an undergraduate's theme: —

> Chaucer's influence on the language was great, and he helped to put the language before the people in a way that had not been done before, so that it is evident that there was a great result from this. This was because he helped to change the English language, and in this way he was very influential in affecting the language.

Here an unhappy youth, engaged in all but mortal combat with an examination paper, was endeavoring to say something when he had nothing to say. Of course he could not but fail, since it is impossible to show clearly what one does not see clearly.

With these put also this, which again is from an undergraduate's theme: —

> If the student respects a professor, as many do, he can show his respect in many ways; if he does not, and there are teachers who do not command the respect of students (I do not consider the question to be confined to this school, and in some colleges there are men on the Faculty who are not respected, nor do they deserve to be) and I think a man should raise his hat only to ladies or to gentlemen that have ladies with them.

Here the writer knew fairly well what he wished to say, although he had not taken the trouble to think it out very sharply. His difficulty was that he lacked technical skill in expression.

These examples illustrate the causes from which obscurity may arise. The first is legitimate. Whether we agree that Carlyle or George Meredith or Browning has carried obscurity beyond the farthest limit at which it is permissible has nothing to do with the fact that there are times when it is the right of an author to sacrifice Clearness to some other effect which he seeks. It is, however, fair to say that in ordinary experience these emergencies are pretty nearly as rare as the appearance of white blackbirds; and that at least no writer has a right to discard Clearness until he has secured it. Certainly no one can successfully employ obscurity as a means of producing literary effect until he has acquired the art of writing with transparent simplicity.

Of the second cause it is sufficient to say here that no outward aid can enable the student to overcome it. To think sharply and lucidly is the result of self-discipline. It is a matter of mental exercise, and while a student may be sent to a mental as to a physical gymnasium, all strengthening of the mind as of the muscles must be the result of individual exertion. There has as yet been discovered no system of intellectual *massage*, by means of which the understanding may attain to the benefits of work without doing anything.

While rules or wise maxims help little in this matter of mental clearness, it is a thing so important and so universally essential in all intellectual training that it is difficult to pass it without a word more. If a new Dante were to people a new Inferno with sinners guilty of crimes intellectual, as the stern old Florentine peopled his with those who violated moral laws, the most populous circle would be devoted to those who mistakenly think themselves to think. There is a discouragingly large portion of mankind whose mental processes are apparently those of the oyster. They are mentally so indolent or incapable that the labor of reflecting is entirely beyond them. No student can afford to remain in doubt as to whether he really thinks, or merely indulges in vague mental impressions which are to genuine thought as is the dull smouldering of a heap of wet leaves in a November fog to a brisk beech-wood fire on a wide hearth in a winter night.

Macaulay is right when he says: "Propriety of thought and propriety of diction are commonly found together… Obscurity of expression generally springs from confusion of ideas." He might have added that it is of great importance that the writer be able to think of his subject as a whole. It is easy for the mind to grasp a small thing and it is proportionately harder for it to seize upon a greater; yet upon the power to hold work in the mind in its entirety must as surely depend success in writing as does all vigorous mental development.

The third cause of obscurity, inability to express the thought which one has, is at once the most common, and the most inexcusable. Here we are dealing with a tangible thing, to a great extent a matter of rule, and, at most, largely a question of study. There is no reason why a person of ordinary intelligence should not be able to express whatever he is able to think. Indeed, whoever has fully thought out an idea has already phrased it, and if he has even a moderate amount of training in composition should have no difficulty in expressing it on paper if he will but take the necessary pains.

It is evident that what is clear to one reader may be obscure to another. It follows that the first question to be decided is to what audience a composition is to be addressed. Few of us can understand this sentence from a treatise on comparative embryology.

> The inner wall of each of the paired cavities forms a splanchnopleuric mesoblast, and the outer wall of the whole the somatic mesoblast.

This is clear to readers who understand the technical language of embryology; and for them the author wrote. Parallel examples might be given which would show how many sorts of writing there are which are clear to a limited audience only. The reports of base-ball games are unintelligible to the average English reader, while to the American the notes on cricket are equally meaningless. The criticisms of artists upon pictures seldom convey a definite impression to those not versed in the technical language of painting; and the same principle holds throughout all sorts of literature.

The whole matter then resolves itself into the simple maxim: Use the language of those addressed. There is somewhere a story of a lady who always spoke to her maid in French, because in taking the situation the girl had wrongfully claimed to know that tongue. The mistress held stubbornly to the position that the maid should understand, and she endured the discomforts of never being well served rather than abandon it. Much writing and not a little talking is all but as absurd. Constantly authors address themselves to the general public in language which they know or might know the general public will not understand. Whatever else the human race may be, it is not logical; there are few of us free from the fault of sometimes acting upon assumptions which we know to be false; and nowhere is this fact more strikingly illustrated than in composition.

This question of using the language of those addressed is one which meets every teacher at the very threshold of the class-room. The best instructor is not he who knows most, but he who imparts most; and he imparts most who most perfectly speaks the language of his pupils. It is of no use daily to fire over the heads of children all the wisdom of Solomon if it be embodied in a language which is not theirs. The teacher who really teaches does not take the attitude of the lady whose maid should have known French; he does not assume that pupils should understand what he says; he simply considers

whether as a matter of fact they do understand. If they do not, he sets himself with patience to re-phrase it, and, if need be, re-phrase again, until he has put it into language which the children cannot fail to comprehend. It is not a question of what might be understood but of what must be. It is true that this calls for a patience which is almost divine, and there are teachers in the common schools to-day who are only preserved to us because the age of translation to heaven is past. There are unhappily others who do not understand that this patient and laborious seeking after the intellectual dialect of the pupil is the only possible means of imparting instruction; and thus it happens that some schools are taught in a language which, while it is English, is yet hardly more intelligible to the students than would be Choctaw or the speech of Borrioboola-Gha.

In writing, the safest guide in this respect is sound, homely common sense. Write without nonsense in the way of self-consciousness or affectation. Make it always a rule in general composition to aim at the simple, average man; to write so that the traditionally foolish wayfaring man need not err therein. Remember that the aim is not to write so that one may be understood, but to write so that one cannot be misunderstood.

Absurdly enough, human vanity comes in here. Untrained writers are apt to feel that they lower themselves if they condescend to write for the intellectual bourgeoisie. Many a clever young author has come to grief because he could not bring himself to use simple language lest it should seem that he had not command of a more elaborate diction. He has failed because he could not be willing to address the ordinary reader lest he thereby might appear to show that he had not the gift of speaking to the learned. The great writers are men who are free from this weakness; who are intent upon making their message understood, and not upon preserving a foolish appearance of superiority. Shakespeare did not disdain to write for the London apprentices brawling in the pit, or Homer to sing for semi-barbarians half-drunken at the feast. The masterpieces of literature which have been addressed to the educated few are revered; those which have been confessedly for the many have been read and lived upon. To take as instances two works written at about the same time: “Paradise Lost” has been commended by critics and admired by scholars; “Pilgrim’s Progress” has been and is the favorite book with thousands. The one has always been profoundly admired and the other has been loved. I do not mean that this is all that might be said of these classics, or that there are no other considerations in determining their worth, but they do serve to make more clear the fact that to reach the general reader it is necessary to write for the general reader.

Speaking the language of the average man includes also the confining of allusions to the range of his probable knowledge, the taking for granted nothing which he may not reasonably be supposed to know. The temptation to show erudition is at the elbow of every writer. When, near the beginning of this lecture, I referred in an easy manner to the Taj Mahal, I was instantly conscious that I had used the comparison with a pleasant sense of the air of superior knowledge which it might give. However it may be with you, the probabilities are that the ordinary reader would not be sufficiently familiar with the elaborate ornamentation of that wonder of the East to make my comparison to its jewelled walls effective, and I left it only because I wanted to use it here as an illustration.

It is no less needful to appeal to the average emotional experiences of mankind in order to be clear to the general reader. It must be remembered that all art is based on the assumption of a community of human feelings; in other words, upon the theory that the fundamental emotions are shared by all mankind. The more closely a writer holds to common humanity, to common human experience, the more wide will be the range of his work, and the more clear will he be in those very matters where clearness is most difficult of attainment. The more subtile and remote from ordinary human life are the emotions and the passions to be portrayed, the more absolute is the necessity of conveying them in terms of simple and common experience. Analyze one of the tragedies of Shakespeare or of the old Greek dramatists, and you will find that its tremendous effects are produced by means essentially simple. By keeping always within the range of the sympathies and feelings

common to humanity, the masters are able to make every stroke tell; and this method is in the nature of things the only possible one. Common humanity can comprehend only what it has felt.

To gain Clearness it is necessary first to avoid all vagueness of thought and all vagueness of expression. It is needful to shun ambiguity of word or of phrase, and that more subtle ambiguity which may arise from ill-considered paragraphing, from misproportion, or from bad arrangement of the parts of a composition. It is no less important to write with a constant remembrance of the audience addressed; to use their language, and to appeal to the emotions and experiences which are likely to be common to the average individual of the class for which one writes. Inexperienced writers may make the mistake of supposing that this is the rule by which mediocrity is to be reached; but as a matter of fact these are the principles upon which have been written the masterpieces of the world.

VI
PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY CONTINUED

Force has been defined as the quality which appeals to the emotions. Obviously, what we read interests us or it does not. Persons who are conscious that they are not qualified to judge of the value of work, yet who are secretly convinced that their judgment must be of value despite this fact, are rather apt to take refuge in the annoying phrase, "I am no judge, but I can tell what I like." Even this qualified statement is often conspicuously untrue, but in so far as they really can tell what they like, they are judges of the force of what they read, their own emotions being the standard; and in so far as they can tell why they like or fail to like, they are judges also of the means by which force has been secured, or for want of which it has been lost.

We are accustomed to associate with the term which is here used a signification more narrow and more intense than that which is given to it in this connection. Generally, when we speak of a piece of literature as having force, we mean that it has the power to move us to an unusual degree. We think at once of the cyclone-swept pages of Carlyle, of the penetrating mysteriousness of Kipling, or of the fate-pervaded realism of Hardy; at least, of something moving and intense. In discussing force as a quality of style, we must make the term wide enough to cover whatever power a literary composition has of arousing interest by what it is. An accidental circumstance – the antiquity of a book, the fact that it was written by a particular person, the part which it has played in an important event, and so on – might arouse a certain sort of interest in it, but this would have nothing to do with the force of the composition. Those things which certain magazines bring out, written by the notoriety of the hour, – the prize-fighter, the woman who has made herself most conspicuous in ways decent or indecent, – have not in themselves anything that can be called Force in the proper sense of the term. They may attract much attention, but it is by accidental circumstances, and not by their quality.

"The secret of Force," Mr. Wendell writes, "is connotation;" and he goes on to exemplify this thus: —

> Compare these three simple statements: "I found him very agreeable one afternoon;" "I found him very agreeable one wet afternoon;" "I found him very agreeable one wet afternoon in a country house." Now all that the word "wet" says is that the afternoon was watery; but it clearly implies that it was an afternoon when you would not care to be out of doors. All that the words "in a country house" state is a simple fact of locality; but they imply that you were in a place where not to be out of doors was probably a serious trial to the temper. So the last statement as a whole, "I found him very agreeable one wet afternoon in a country house," suggests, though it does not state, that the person spoken of was one whose charms could overcome a pretty bad temper. At the same time it is a phrase which I fancy anybody would admit to hold the attention more strongly than either of its predecessors; and its superiority in force lies not so much in the bare facts which it adds to the first statement as in the thoughts and emotions it suggests. Still again, take this sentence from one of M. de Maupassant's stories: "It was the 15th of August – the feast of the Holy Virgin, and of the Emperor Napoleon." He states only two facts about the 15th of August, and these in the simplest of words. Neither by itself would hold one's attention enough to remain long in memory. But put them together; think what the Holy Virgin means to Catholic Europe, and what the Emperor Napoleon means to those who are not subdued by the magic genius of Bonaparte, – and you have a sentence that when mid-August comes about will hover in your head. Yet the force of this – so greatly superior to the force of either statement by itself – lies not in what

> is actually said, but wholly in what is implied, suggested, connoted, in this sudden, unexpected antithesis.

The thing which the writer has caused the reader to think – or even to suppose himself to think – is sure to interest him. The dullest of bores is absorbed in his own words, and in effect that which the reader receives by suggestion is his own thought. What is denoted is the word of the writer; what is connoted is for the time being the thought of the reader.

It is not difficult to see that Clearness is an aid to Force; or, to put it more exactly, that a lack of Clearness will interfere with Force. Yet the one is by no means essential to the other. The diction of "The Ordeal of Richard Feverel," that book so strong that it wrings the heart almost like a fierce personal sorrow, is in passages so obscure as to have given rise to the rather cheap *mot* that the novel would be successful if it were translated into English. Almost any page of Carlyle might also be cited in illustration; while that Clearness may fail to secure Force is proved by the pellucidly stupid lucubrations of an innumerable company of authors whom nobody could fail to understand if it were possible to keep awake to read them.

Connotation may be the result of various causes. It may be produced by a swiftness and briskness of motion which so awakens and quickens the mind that the reader is aroused to thought, and seizes each idea presented as if he had himself originated it. It is this sort of force that we mean when we speak of the vivacity or the brilliancy of a work. The secret lies chiefly in passing quickly from one significant point to another. This involves, it is apparent, the power of selecting the significant, and of bringing this out while avoiding the unessential.

The effectiveness of the sensational story depends largely upon a quality closely allied to this, although here it is a matter not so much of style as of material. The tale which moves rapidly from situation to situation, so that the reader seems to share the adventures of the characters, often owes as much to the swiftness of its progress as to the nature of the story told. It owes more, as a general thing, to the vividness with which the exciting situations are imagined and presented. The more real a thing seems to the reader, the more suggestive it must be to him, and the more likely is he to share the sensations set down, so that for the moment it seems as if he were actually experiencing them. In other words, the more real the narrative, the more suggestive it becomes.

One great means of producing this sense of reality either in narrative or in any other kind of composition, whether in the setting forth of thoughts, or in the telling of events, is in making what is written specific. The specific term is apt to be more suggestive than the general from the fact that it presents to the mind an idea which can be grasped readily. When one reads that the Indians are on the war-path and are ravaging the country, one has a vague feeling of horror; but if one is told that the Red Men have crossed the bounds of Big Lick Reservation, have murdered and scalped a settler named John Thing, have burned his cabin, and carried off his wife and children, there is no vagueness about it. The impression becomes at once vivid and forceful in what it denotes, and stirring in what it connotes.

It is from a misapplication of this fact that modern fiction has fallen into that vice which has been known as Realism – perhaps because it is less real than any other sort of fiction ever devised. It is apparently by a perception of the effectiveness of the specific, that Realists have been led into the error of believing in the effectiveness of the minute.

Before leaving the quality under discussion it is well to say a word about what is called "reserved force." Our respect for a writer is always increased by feeling that he might do more than he is doing. We are led on by a desire to see what greater things he will accomplish. The feeling in reading an author who is evidently doing his utmost is not unlike that felt in crossing a bridge which shakes with the footfall. It may carry us over the stream, but on the other hand it may break under us. I once heard a lady explain her dislike for a certain youth by saying: "I never could endure a man who is always doing his darnedest!" The expression is unhappily vulgar, but it does seem to me to be humanly expressive. We do not like to feel that we have come to the end of the resources of a friend or of an author.

How then does a writer produce an impression of reserved force? The phrase meets one in book reviews, and to inexperienced writers is apt to convey little but bewilderment. One way in which the finished literary craftsman secures the impression of reserved power is by deliberately making the minor parts of his work weaker than those more important. In other words, he gains the effect of reserved strength by reserving strength. Often it is well in the revision of a composition to lessen the stress of expression in unimportant passages; to soften down, as it were, all portions except the high lights. The natural tendency of every earnest writer is to express himself as vigorously as possible, and in the first draft this is well, – provided always that he has the self-control and the skill so to modify in revision the less important parts that the emphasis shall be properly proportioned. Shading in literature is a matter which it is not easy to explain without examples much longer than it is possible to use here. It must be learned by the study of masterpieces. It is well to keep in mind, however, that it is oftener the result of a clever softening of minor passages than of a heavier emphasis upon important portions; and above all that the secret of shading and of reserved force as well is proportion. It is rather comparative than absolute stress which is effective. Vehemence is not vigor. Make up your mind clearly what points you wish to bring out most sharply; that is half of the process: then see to it that the remaining parts of the composition are kept subordinate to these; that is the rest of it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.