

STYLE AND THE MAN

By

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FOREWORD

THE following pages contain the notes of an address which I have delivered on various occasions. Some of the allusions and criticisms are obviously frivolous, and others were introduced merely to provoke discussion.

STYLE AND THE MAN

AT the word style the critics at once sit up and take notice. We are all sensitive to style; we either like to drift with an easy, lazy current, or we prefer to fight a turbulent, resisting tide; we enjoy contemplating the moonlight upon tranquil waters, or we find our greatest pleasure in watching the ruffian billows breaking against rough shores. These are largely matters of temperament or of mood. The attitude of many of us changes from day to day, from book to book; but at heart we all have a preference, a prejudice in favor of certain methods of writing, while others awake our antagonism. It has probably^[2] been the experience of all of us that books that reach the library table often lie unopened for many days; and then to our own surprise we some day take them up, read them with delight, and wonder why we approached them so reluctantly. In the same whimsical fashion we recur to volumes that we knew in old times, impelled by some instinct that makes us long to experience the same emotion, the same thrill, the same peace that gladdened our souls in happier days. There are books that fit into moods of sorrow, of loneliness, of anxiety; and others are equally identified with moods of happiness, elation and hope. There are in all our libraries, great or small, stern Gibaltars that rise gloomily before us on shelves to which we never turn with pleasure.

Great writers have rarely written of style, perhaps because it is so individual, so intimate a matter; and the trick of the thing may not, except in rare cases be communicated to the tyro. The convenient methods of absent treatment advertised by correspondence schools

of authorship are of no avail in the business of style; style can no more be taught than the shadows of clouds across June meadows, or the play of wind over wheat fields can be directed or influenced by the hand of man. To grasp style much is inevitably presupposed,—grammar, sensibility, taste, a feeling for color and rhythm,—of such things as these is the kingdom of style. In children we often observe an individual and distinctive way of saying things; we all have correspondents whose letters are a joy because of their vivid revelation of the writer. In every community there are persons much quoted for their wit or wisdom, whose sayings have a raciness and tang.

The bulk of English is so enormous and increases so rapidly that we have a right to pick and choose and to hang aloof from all that does not please us. The fashion changes in literary style as in clothes, and yet,—to shift the figure,—the snows of yesteryear linger on the far uplands and high peaks, and they are there forever. It is a common impression that popular taste in literature is bad and growing worse. I do not myself sympathize with this idea. The complaint smells of antiquity: every age has had its literary Jeremiahs; the wail that of making many books there is no end is older than American literature; for is it not written: “Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together and burned them before all men; and they counted the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.”

It would be instructive, if there were time, to review the labors of those who have first and last written on the subject of style. We might with profit and entertainment discuss the general superiority of English poetry to English prose; but this is a matter conceded, I believe, by sounder critics than your orator; we might linger by the golden coasts of Greece and harken to the voice of Plato who—

says Frederic Harrison, alone is faultless; we might follow Cæsar's eagles into Roman territory and hear, at the Sabine farm, *Ars Poetica* read by a most competent witness on this question of style. Here is a man to our liking, this Horace, and we find him eminently modern in his attitude toward the dictionary: "Mortal works must perish," he says, who was born two thousand years ago; "much less can the honor and elegance of language be long-lived. Many words shall revive which now have fallen off; and many words which are now in esteem shall fall off, if it be the will of custom, in whose power is the decision and right and standard of language." Other witnesses speaking many tongues crowd the door, but we must stick to our text. It is our mother English that now concerns us, and only a few may be allowed to testify at this session of the court. You will not, I pray, take my *obiter dicta* too seriously. I beg you to deal leniently with my stupidity when I say that such prose as Addison's or Steele's has little charm for me; it is, as Mr. James might say, *nice*; but it lacks variety, flash, ginger; and if I prefer Swift, Defoe or Carlyle to Milton, pray do not deliver me to the lions. As an advocate of the open shop in criticism I insist on my right to punch and hammer at my own bench in the corner beside yours. In thus frankly divulging my likings and aversions, I hope—to quote Doctor Johnson, that "I am not preparing for my future life either shame or repentance." Let us assume that all the authoritative testimony on this subject is in evidence and a part of the *res gestæ*,—Newman on Language in "The Idea of a University"; Spencer's "Philosophy of Style"; certain passages from George Henry Lewes' "Principles of Success in Literature"; De Quincey's eloquent and stimulating essay on "Style"; and discussions of the same fascinating subject by Stevenson, Pater and Frederic Harrison, and by Antoine Albalat in French,—these we file with the clerk. And not to know Professor

Walter Raleigh's essay on Style is to have missed a discussion of the subject which is in itself a model of graceful, melodious writing, guiltless of preciosity.

There must always be a difference between the style of genius and that which proceeds from ordered, controlled and directed talent. The dead level of mediocrity is easily attained in both prose and poetry, but even persons of little cultivation feel the lure of captivating speech. The world has been swayed by the power of phrase. The trumpet and drum may take hold of man's emotions, but words only can touch his mind with truth. The words of Jesus are marvelously simple; there were undoubtedly those among his contemporaries who could contrive more splendid orations; there were citizens of the Roman empire of which he was a humble citizen who were richer in learning.

Antoine Albalat, in "The Travail of Style," discusses in separate chapters the literary methods of such writers of supreme rank as Pascal, Bossuet, Buffon, Montesquieu, Rousseau, La Fontaine, Racine, Balzac, Chateaubriand, Victor Hugo and Flaubert. And he conducts this discussion in an immensely interesting and original way, namely, by reproducing the actual manuscripts of the great writers themselves, with the countless erasures and substitutions of words, phrases and whole passages they made. What toilers, what galley slaves of the pen, they were! one cries in amazement! The first draught is as nothing. It serves simply as a point of departure, to blot, to cover with spider tracks of erasures and emendations.

"Is this the work of inspiration, this galley-slave toil at the dull mechanic pen?" demands a critic. "Yes," the writer of the book replies. "When Buffon declared 'Genius is but infinite capacity of patience,' do you take him for a fool who meant to say: 'If the

veriest dolt sits long enough on a chalk egg he will hatch out a phoenix”? No, he meant that as much inspiration of genius goes into thoughtful correction and brooding revision as into the first jet of composition. When the now more fiery, more pathetic word suggests itself, it is even more a flash of inspiration than the primary suggestion of the older and poorer one.” Ah! if ever there was a book to confirm the current saying, “Easy writing makes hard reading,” it is this.

There is, as every one knows, an apparent happy luck in writing,—the *curiosa felicitas* that puts the inevitable word into your ink pot. I offer the suggestion that composition does not begin with the taking up of the pen; that there are untraceable sub-conscious processes that are never idle, whose results illuminate many a treasured book. He were a rash author who would attempt to set apart his conscious felicities from his inadvertent graces. How long do you suppose Shakespeare pondered that most stupendous incident in all literature—the knocking at the gate in Macbeth? Tennyson when questioned as to his own power over words once solemnly answered: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God”—implying a belief in inspiration.

Veracity is the final test in all art. It makes no difference how trifling or unimportant the thing that we would utter, or whether we express ourselves in the cadences of the symphony, in the militant splendor of the epic, in the careless fling of some vagrant poet’s tavern catch; or whether the artist writes a landscape in colors upon canvas, the test of beauty and strength is first of all the test of truth. We measure the far-shadowing spear of Achilles and weigh the gleaming sword of Arthur by the things we know to be beautiful and strong. Words may lie before us like green meadows by

peaceful streams, but we must feel the softness of the turf and hear the bubble of the stream or they fail as a vehicle; or, in other departments of literature, they must sweep toward us like a cavalry charge, and we must hear the rattle of scabbards and the pounding of hoofs until we draw back struck with fear at the onset, or the artist, who is like a captain over his troop, has failed of his purpose. "My love for thee," wrote the poet; "my love for thee shall march like armed men."

The power of the printed word has always been tremendous; the authority of type is often excessive and unjustified; yet this only makes more exacting the inevitable standard of truth. Style will forever be challenged by truth, that austere higher critic whose method is so searching and whose judgments are so inexorable. The mere bows and ruffles, the chiffon flounces of composition are easily flung off by the literary milliner, but unless they are essential to the investiture of character they crumple and pass to the garret. It is not enough to communicate to the eye the sense of form, the outward and visible outline of a man; the shop keeper can do that with a dummy in his show-window; but words must go further and produce bone and sinew; we must be able through the writer's magic to clasp a hand that is quick with red blood; whose contact thrills us at a touch.

This is as true in those characterizations that are the veritable creatures of realism as of those that are wrought in the mood of romance. The burden upon your romancer lies, in fact, more heavily, for in his work the spectator, the auditor, the reader, can assist him little. Silas Lapham, for example, is within the range of our common experience; what the author may omit we supply; whereas D'Artagnan rides in from a strange and unexplored land, and we must be convinced of his cleverness, his courage, his skill

with the sword. When Beatrix comes down the stair to meet Esmond we must hear the rustle of her skirts, feel the fascination of her smile, and be won by the charm of her voice;—we must hear the pretty click of her slippers on the stairs. And we may say, in passing, that Thackeray carried style as an element of English fiction higher than it was ever carried before and no one since has shaken his supremacy.

Few writers of the Victorian period wielded a more flexible English than Matthew Arnold, and few writers of any period have shown greater versatility. His power of direct statement was very great and he plunged forward to the chief facts he wished to present with the true journalist's instinct for what is interesting and important. As a controversial writer he had few equals in his day, and many philistines went down before his lance. The force of repetition was never more effectively illustrated than in the letters he launched against his assailants. He was a master of irony, and irony in skilled hands is a terrible weapon.

The vivacious Mr. Birrell complains of the jauntiness of Arnold's style in "Literature and Dogma," and we must confess that Arnold pinned his tick-tack on the palace windows of the bishops of Gloucester and Winchester rather too often. But Arnold had, too, the touch of grace and melody. He was a master of the mournful cadence, as witness the familiar and oft quoted paragraph on Newman at Saint Mary's with which he opens his lecture on Emerson; and even more beautiful is that passage in one of the most appealing and charming of his literary essays—the paper on Keats—in which he thus plays upon Keats' own words: "By virtue of his feeling for beauty and of his perception of the vital connection of beauty with truth, Keats accomplished so much in poetry, than in one of the two great modes by which poetry

interprets, in the faculty of naturalistic interpretation, in what we call natural magic, he ranks with Shakespeare. 'The tongue of Kean,' he says, in an admirable criticism of that great actor and his enchanting elocution; 'the tongue of Kean must seem to have robbed the Hybla bees and left them honeyless. There is an indescribable *gusto* in his voice;—in Richard, "Be stirring with the lark to-morrow, gentle Norfolk!" comes from him as through the morning atmosphere towards which he yearns.' This magic," says Arnold, "this 'indescribable *gusto* in the voice,' Keats himself, too, exhibits in his poetic expression. No one else in English poetry, save Shakespeare, has in expression quite the fascinating felicity of Keats, his perfection of loveliness. 'I think,' he said humbly, 'I shall be among the English poets after my death.' He is; he is with Shakespeare."

The great distinction of Newman's style lies in its extraordinary clarity. He wrote for a select audience; his sermons even were for the scholars of his university, and dealt usually with the fine points of religious philosophy. He was under scrutiny, the chief spokesman of one of the most remarkable movements that ever shook the Protestant world, and of necessity he expressed himself with scrupulous precision. After crystal clearness a certain cloistral composure follows naturally as a second characteristic of his style. He was engaged upon a serious business and never trifled with it. It is unfortunate for literature that he confined himself so closely to theological controversy or to kindred subjects that have lost their hold on popular interest, for in the qualities indicated—clearness and precision, and in melody—he is rarely equaled in the whole range of English prose. Religion in his case was not a matter of emotion but of intellect. Personal feeling flashes out so rarely in his pages that we hover with attention over those few lines in

which he tells us of his good-by to Oxford, and of his farewell to Trinity College: "Trinity, which was so dear to me, and which held on its foundation so many who had been kind to me both when I was a boy, and all through my Oxford life. Trinity had never been unkind to me. There used to be much snap-dragon growing on the walls opposite my freshman's rooms there, and I had for years taken it as the emblem of my own perpetual residence even unto death in my University."

But there for a moment he was off guard: and for an instance of his more characteristic manner—for an example of that mournful music which Arnold, in the familiar paragraph to which I have referred, caught so happily,—we do better to dip into such a sermon as the famous one on The Theory of Development, and I read from the page as it falls open:

"Critical disquisitions are often written about the idea which this or that poet might have in his mind in certain of his compositions and characters: and we call such analysis the philosophy of poetry, not implying thereby of necessity that the author wrote upon such a theory in his actual delineation, or knew what he was doing; but that, in matter of fact, he was possessed, ruled, guided by an unconscious idea. Moreover, it is a question whether that strange and painful feeling of unreality which religious men experience from time to time, when nothing seems true, or good, or right, or profitable, when faith seems a name, and duty a mockery, and all endeavors to do right, absurd and hopeless, and all things forlorn and dreary, as if religion were wiped out from the world, may not be the direct effect of the temporary obscuration of some master vision, which unconsciously supplies the mind with spiritual life and peace."

Here in America style was first greatly realized by Hawthorne. Changing tastes and fashions have not shaken his position. He was our first, and he remains our greatest creative artist in fiction, and it were idle to dispute his position. His work became classic almost in his own day. He was no chance adventurer upon the sea of literature, but a deliberate, painstaking artist. Fiction has rarely been served by so noble a spirit; and fortunate were we indeed could we pluck the secret of style from his pages. In his narrative there may sometimes be dull passages; his instinct for form and proportion may seem at times, by our later tastes, to fail him; but his command of the language is never lost; his apt choice of words moves an imitator to despair; and felicity of phrase, balance, movement and color were greatly his. The cumulative power of "The Scarlet Letter" is tremendous,—and it is a power of style not less than of intense moral earnestness. There is something awe-inspiring in the contemplation of that melancholy figure, in whose mind and heart the spirit of Puritanism dwelt as in a sanctuary; and yet he was always and above everything else an artist. He was as incapable of an inartistic idea as he was of a clumsy sentence. Sitting at the receipt of custom in the grim little village of Salem he took toll of stranger ships than ever touched Salem wharves. Other figures in American literature must be scrutinized through the magnifying glass; Hawthorne alone looms huge;—as Mr. James so happily said of Balzac, Hawthorne's figure is immovable and fixed for all time. To mention Irving, Poe or Cooper on the same page is but to betray our incompetence for the office of criticism. There are kindlier and cheerfuller figures among American prose writers, but Hawthorne alone is commanding, noble, august.

After Hawthorne, the prose of Lowell affords, I should say, the highest mark reached by any American writer. The main difference,—and it is a difference of height, breadth, depth,—the difference between them as prose writers lies in the fact that one was a creative artist and the other a critic. And criticism must always be secondary. The enduring monuments of the literature of all the ages were built before criticism was born. The great originals in all literature have paid little heed to criticism. The creator must plow and sow and reap; the critic may only seek the garnered harvest, nibble the hay and chew his cud. The persistent efforts of critics to magnify their own importance proves their sensitiveness and the jealousy with which they guard their self-conferred prerogatives. The criticism of literature is the only business in which the witness is not called upon to qualify as to his competency. Failures at any game naturally turn critic. In science we demand the critic's credentials: in literature we all kick the sleeping lion and inadvertently twist his tail.

Lowell wrote with remarkable knowledge, skill and effectiveness on many subjects, and his political and literary essays are models of form and diction. He was perhaps the most cultivated man we have produced; he drew from all literatures, and not less from human experience; and he was singular among American scholars in his life-long attention to politics. He saw American history in the making through years of great civil and military stress. He was one of the first to take the true measure of Lincoln. He wrote a magnificent prose essay on Lincoln before our martyred chief passed to the shadows; and the postscript to that essay touches, it seems to me, the higher altitudes possible in prose, and deserves to be remembered and repeated side by side with his Commemoration Ode:

“On the day of his death this simple Western attorney, who, according to one party was a vulgar joker, and whom the doctrinaires among his own supporters accused of wanting every element of statesmanship, was the most absolute ruler in Christendom, and this solely by the hold his good-humored sagacity had laid on the hearts and understandings of his countrymen. Nor was this all, for it appeared that he had drawn the great majority, not only of his fellow-citizens, but of mankind also, to his side. So strong and so persuasive is honest manliness without a single quality of romance or unreal sentiment to help it! A civilian during times of the most captivating military achievement; awkward, with no skill in the lower technicalities of manners, he left behind him a fame beyond that of any conqueror, the memory of a grace higher than that of outward person, and of a gentlemanliness deeper than mere breeding. Never before that startled April morning did such multitude of men shed tears for the death of one they had never seen, as if with him a friendly presence had been taken away from their lives, leaving them colder and darker. Never was funeral panegyric so eloquent as the silent look of sympathy which strangers exchanged when they met on that day. Their common manhood had lost a kinsman.”

Lowell's prose like his verse was enriched from the soil of many lands, but more and more as he grew older he wore his learning lightly. The self-consciousness of the young professor, ever anxious not to be tripped by the impertinence of some recalcitrant student, gave way toward the end to the easy discourse of a man sure of his ground. A certain tendency to superficial cleverness,—the stinging ironies of a yawning professor with a dull class flash out of his pages disagreeably at times, in odd contrast with his true and always delightful humor. Style must proceed from something

solider than mere cleverness. Your *tour de force* performer is lucky to be remembered in a book of quotations; his definitive edition goes to the back shelf of the second-hand shop. Language with Lowell was a ready and flexible instrument. I have said that he knew men and books; he knew nature also, and he observed the passing pageant of his New England seasons with a shrewd and contemplative eye. The spring sunshine touching the old historic trees at Elmwood; the flashing gold of the oriole, the spendthrift glory of June days,—these things communicated an imperishable sunniness and charm to his writings. How happily, in one of the best of his papers—the essay on Walton—he has constructed for us the character of the delightful old angler. Walton, he darkly hints, is not the artless old customer we have always believed him; and you may be sure that only a lover of letters and a believer in style for the style’s sake would chuckle—as we find Lowell doing,—at seeing the angler hesitating between two or three forms of a sentence, solicitous to preserve only the best. In his charming life of Herbert, after quoting a poem of Donne’s, Walton adds a few words of characteristic comment. They wear a naïve air; they seem to have slipped carelessly from the pen. Walton wrote: “These hymns are now lost to us, but doubtless they were such as they two now sing in Heaven.” “Now”—continues Lowell—“on the inside cover of his Eusebius, Walton has written three attempts at this sentence, each of them very far from the concise beauty to which he at last constrained himself. Simplicity, when it is not a careless gift of the Muse, is the last and most painful achievement of conscientious self-denial.”

By the usual tests of style we might easily deal harshly with Emerson; but nothing could be idler than any attempt to buckram ourselves in the rules of the schoolroom in studying the qualities

that make for style. Emerson's diction was happily adapted to the needs of his matter. His essays are like the headings for homely lectures or jottings from notebooks, and are almost as good reading when taken backward as forward, so little was he concerned with sequence or climax.

The roaring, steaming style of his grim old friend Carlyle never wakened any desire for emulation in the sage of Concord. Carlyle drives or drags you under the hot sun of mid-day, and if you falter or stumble he lays on the lash with a hard, bony Scotch hand. He was what Sydney Smith called Daniel Webster—a steam engine in trousers; but Emerson addresses you with a fine air of casualty when he meets you in the highway; and if the day be fine, and if you are in the mood for loitering, he will repeat to you the Socratic memoranda from his notebook. He is benignant, sanguine, wise, albeit a trifle cold with the chill of winter's last fling at the New England landscape. His usual essay reminds me of a string of icicles on the eaves of a white, staring New England house, aglitter but not yet adrip in the March sun. He is as careless of your attention as Walt Whitman when the good gray poet copies the names of "these states" from a geographical index. In spite of his fondness for references to the ancients he suggests Plato and Socrates far less than Poor Richard or Abe Martin. He contrived no new philosophy but he was a master-hand at labeling guideposts on the dusty highway of life. He could not build a bridge to carry us across the stream, but he could paint a sign—"no thoroughfare" or "A fine of ten dollars for driving faster than a walk": and happy is the youth who heeds these amiable warnings. Proverbs fell as naturally to his pen as codfish balls to his Sunday morning breakfast. He is as wholesome as whole wheat bread; but he has a

frugal method with the bread-knife and the slices at his table are thin.

The more genial Lowell produces a cobwebbed bottle from his cellar and takes care to push it to your plate; he plies you with cakes spiced from far lands, and rises anon to kick the logs upon the hearth into leaping flame that the room may be fittingly dressed for cheering talk. Emerson patronizes you and advises a sparing draught from the austere-lipped pitcher of icy spring water. At seventeen (I give you my personal experience for what it may be worth), there is something tonic in the very austerity of his style,—his far-flung pickets that guard the frosty hills. Later on, when the fires of youth have cooled somewhat, and we march beside the veterans in the grand army;—when proverbs have lost their potency and the haversacks hang empty on our lean and weary backs, we prefer, for the campfires, authors of more red blood, and pass our battered cups for literary applejack that is none the worse for us if it tear our throats a little as it gurgles down. Once he might throw up his windows and call to us: Virtue is the soul's best aim; adjust your lives to truth; and so on. But now that we have tasted battle and known shipwreck, we present arms only to the hardier adjutants of the army of life who gallop by on worn chargers and cry: "Courage, Comrade, the devil's dead."

Eloquence of the truest and finest sort we find in Ruskin at his happiest. He could be as wayward and as provoking as Carlyle; but he founded a great apostolic line of teachers of beauty, and when he was most abusive he was at least interesting, and when he was possessed, as so often happened, by the spirit of lovely things, and color and form and light wove their spell for him and he wrought in an abandon of ecstasy, we are aware of eloquence in its truest sense and see style rising to its noblest possibilities. His

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