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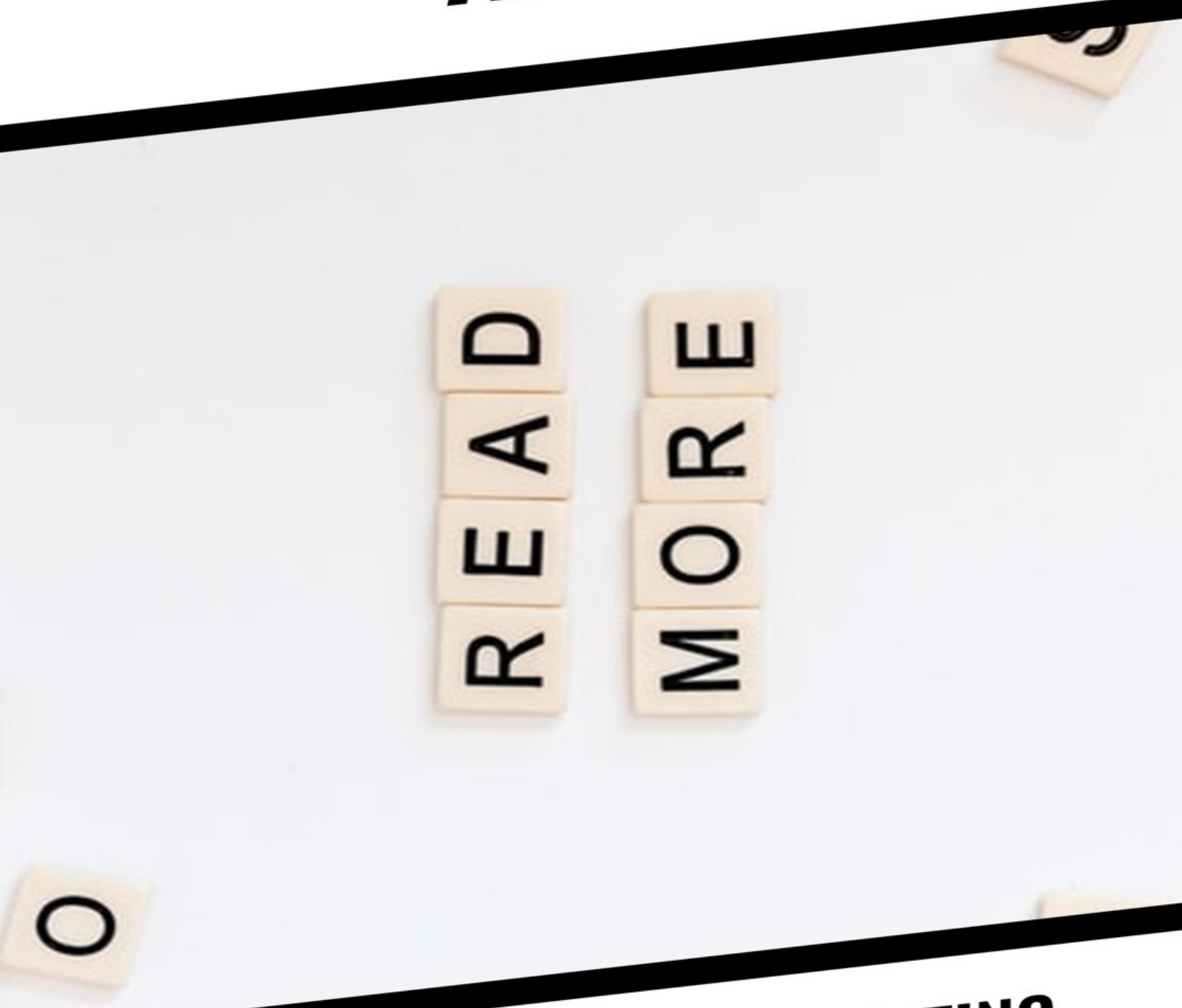

TALKS ON WRITING ENGLISH

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Talks on Writing English

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Table of Contents

PREFACE

Table of Contents

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

Table of Contents

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.

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

Table of Contents

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