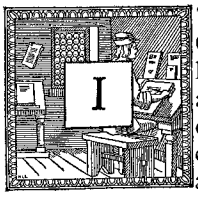
THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF WRITING

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER

V—The Gospel of Infinite Pains

The preceding article in this series emphasised the importance to every young author, not only of having ideas and learning to express them clearly, but of knowing which of the various artistic forms is best adapted to be his medium of expression. Yet ideas, and a clear style and a mastery of the technique of the form best suited to his purpose are not enough to ensure a young writer's success, unless he is willing to submit to a certain amount of drudgery—unless he accepts the Gospel of Infinite Pains.



IT was the Roman poet, Ovid, who once said, at least in substance, "It is a fact that some authors cannot correct. They compose with pleasure and with ardour; but they exhaust all their force. They fly with but one wing, when they revise their work; the first fire does not return."*

What was true in Ovid's day has been equally true in all periods of literary production. There are always certain authors, eminently brilliant some of them, who not only cannot revise, but rather pride themselves on their inability to do so. Byron, for instance, is a striking case in point. "He wrote with astonishing rapidity—*The Corsair* in ten days, *The Bride of Abydos* in four days; while it was printing, he added and corrected, but without recasting:

> I told you before that I can never recast anything. I am like the tiger. If I miss the first spring, I go grumbling back to my jungle again; but if I do it, it is crushing.

Now, the ability to get one's thoughts onto paper with great rapidity is in itself an admirable gift. There is a freshness, a spontaneity, and oftentimes a crude strength in the first rough draft which must inevitably be partly sacrificed in the process of final polishing. There is a great deal of truth in Thoreau's advice:

> Write while the heat is in you. When the farmer burns a hole in his yoke, he carries the iron quickly from the fire to the wood, for every moment it is less effectual to penetrate it. . . . The writer who postpones the recording of his thoughts uses an iron which has cooled to burn a hole with. He cannot influence the minds of his audience.

*Quoted in this form by Disraeli, *Curiosities of Literature,* who goes on to cite numerous interesting cases of industrious revision.

The Fatal Mistake

"Write while the heat is in you" is, so far as it goes, excellent advice. Pages written under great heat and pressure are not unlikely to turn out diamonds in the rough—for that is Nature's way of making diamonds. The trouble with the advice is that it does not go half far enough; it tells only half the truth; it fails to point out that all the fire in the world will never do the effective finishing, or add the final lustre, like a little slow and patient rubbing, after the ideas have grown cold. In other words, one of the most fatal mistakes a young writer can make is in thinking that writing is just a matter of inspiration; that you either have the inborn talent, or you have not; that if you have it, you need only to plunge into a sort of vortex of creative energy, a fine sybilline frenzy—and your inborn talent will do the rest. That, of course, is arrant nonsense, and very disastrous nonsense as well—because, if you once get the idea firmly fixed in your mind that a masterpiece can spring, like Pallas Athene, perfected from its author's brain, then good-bye to all hope for that honest drudgery, that loving patience over infinite detail, which is such an essential accompaniment of the creative gift that it almost justifies that threadbare paradox that genius is the art of taking infinite pains.

Now this, of course, is precisely what genius is not, and never can be, in literature any more than in the other arts. No amount of patient juggling with the contents of unabridged dictionaries will give birth to a great poem, if there is not the inspiration of a great thought back of it.

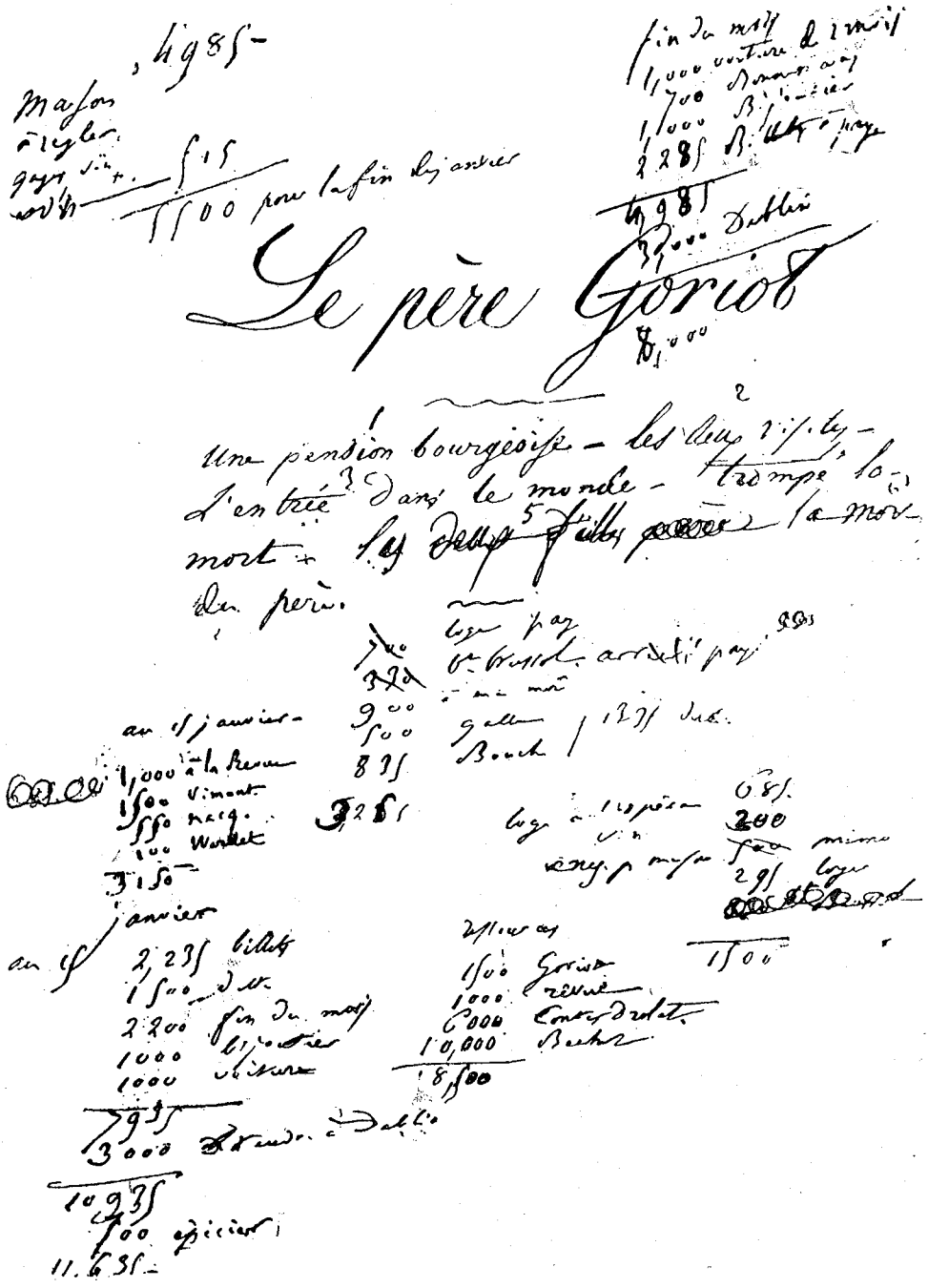
The statement that if, according to the law of permutations, you toss a sufficient number of Greek alphabets up in the air, and keep on doing so for a sufficient number of times, they will sooner or later come down arranged to form the text of the *Iliad,* may be all right in higher mathematics, but it is not helpful to the Craftsmanship of Writing. But just because technique will not produce immortal epics all by itself, there is no sense in leaping to the other extremity, and either shirking it or discarding it altogether. The best laid stone-ballast railway track in the world won't take us anywhere unless we run trains upon it, but that is no reason for expecting our little intellectual railway trains will run themselves without any guide rails at all. Undisciplined genius is an erratic, irresponsible thing that people may admire on occasion, but dare not trust, for they never know what it is likely to do next. As between two artists of equal inborn talent a wise man would every time give preference to the one who, in addition to his inborn talent, shows the best command of that technical part of craftsmanship which comes only from persistent drilling. This, I take it, is the real point of that almost threadbare story of how Pope Benedict IX., wishing to have some paintings executed in St. Peter's, and having heard of the fame of the Florentine, Giotto, sent for some specimen or design by which he might judge Giotto's work; and how Giotto, with a turn of his hand, made a perfectly symmetrical circle and delivered it to the messenger, saying, "This is my design." This perfect circle was no evidence of an inborn talent, for nature does not endow any one of us at birth with the power of making perfect circles—whatever she may do for spiders in regard to equilateral polygons. But it was evidence of a trained hand, a perfect technique; and that is a pretty important matter to be assured of if you are ordering work done by a genius, whether you happen to be Pope Benedict IX. or anybody else.

The Lesson of Giotto's Circle

The whole point of this illustration of Giotto's circle is, not merely that it is something which has to be learned, but that the learning costs an infinitude of practice. It is apparently such a simple thing to do and yet you can keep on trying and trying, day after day, month after month; and probably never in the whole course of your life reach the point where you won't have to say, "Yes, that is pretty good, but I ought to do better." That is precisely the feeling that a conscientious craftsman ought to have in regard to his writing. He may or may not be satisfied with the inspiration behind his work. For that, there is no rule; it depends upon the individual case. But in regard to the technical side, it would be well if he could always feel that it would be possible to do it just a little bit better—always feel that there is some one perfect way of building the structure or rounding the sentence that elusively keeps just beyond his reach.

Consequently, one of the first ideas that every young writer should promptly get into his head is that, whatever degree of talent he may have, there is no escaping a certain amount of tedious drudgery, if he ever expects to accomplish anything of real importance. This does not mean that the man who frankly says that he cannot revise his work after it is once written is necessarily in the second grade of authorship, any more than the man who admits that he cannot map out his whole work in all its details before writing his opening sentence. There is no hard and fast rule as to the point at which the real drudgery of writing shall begin. Some authors have served their time in the ranks, as it were, before their first book has ever seen print; they have learned their craft pretty thoroughly by a thousand abortive efforts that have either never been set down on paper at all or else have gone speedily into the scrap-basket or the furnace fire. This does not mean that they will be relieved of the necessity of pruning and polishing; but it does mean that a long and faithful apprenticeship reduces the amount of such detail work to a minimum. Then again some writers have the trick of doing most of their verbal sand-papering in advance, turning and twisting each sentence a thousand times in their brain, before ever committing it

The Inevitable Drudgery



BALZAC'S FIRST DRAFT OF "LE PÈRE GORIOT"

A very curious and characteristic page, indicating the novelist's life and method of work. In the lines in the middle is outlined the plot of the book as it stands. The figures scratched all over the page epitomise Balzac's gigantic efforts to make his income from his pen keep up with his huge debts.

Photographed for THE BOOKMAN from the collection of the late Vicomte de Lovenjoul.

to paper. That, when we stop to think of it, is the original, the natural way in which literary composition was evolved. The primitive sagas, the early folk tales were all slowly crystallised into shape, not only before they were reduced to writing, but before there was any writing into which to reduce them.

But it makes no difference at what point an author gets in his really hard work; there can be no definite rules laid down for preparation or for revision. There is no magic in a second re-writing or a third, in a fifth or a tenth revised proof. If your first draft of a sentence satisfies you, a second writing is a waste of time. But fifty re-writings are none too much if the forty-ninth still fails to content you. Every writer must in this respect work out his own particular method. A few years ago the statement went the rounds of the literary columns that Mr. Maurice Hewlett made a practice of re-writing all of his stories no less than four times; that each of these drafts was made with all the care that he could bestow upon it and when finished promptly destroyed; that the second would contain only so much of the first, and the third only so much of the second as, by its excellence or its striking and peculiar phrasing, stamped itself upon his memory. Whether or not he really works in that way, such a method would, of course, account for much of Mr. Hewlett's peculiarities of style. But it might prove extremely disastrous to many another author.

No Definite Rules for Revising

Some writers apply the Gospel of Infinite Pains from the first moment of their conception of a plot down to the last revision of the page proofs. Balzac was one of these. His erratic and laboured methods of revision, as recorded by Théophile Gautier in his *Portraits Contemporains,* are such an interesting object lesson of the extent to which the fever for revision may be carried that it seems worth while to quote him here rather extensively:

> His method of proceeding was as follows: When he had long borne and lived a subject, he wrote, in a rapid, uneven, blotted, almost hieroglyphic writing, a species of outline on several pages. These pages went to the printing office, from which they were returned in placards, that is to say, in detached columns in the centre of large sheets. He read these proofs attentively, for they already gave to his embryo work that impersonal character which manuscript never possesses; and he applied to this first sketch the great critical faculty with which he was gifted, precisely as though he were judging of another man's work.
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> Then he began operations: approving or disapproving, he maintained or corrected, but above all he *added.* . . . After some hours, the paper might have been taken for a drawing of fireworks by a child. Rockets, darting from the original text, exploded on all sides. Then there were crosses: simple crosses, crosses re-crossed, like those of a blazon, stars, suns, Arabic figures, letters, Greek, Roman or French, all imaginable signs, mingled with erasures. Strips of paper, fastened on by wafers or pins, were added to the insufficient margins, and were rayed with lines of writing, very fine to save room, and full themselves of erasures; for a correction was hardly made before that again was corrected. . . .
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> The following day, the proofs came back, . . . the bulk of course doubled. Balzac set to work again, always amplifying. . . . Often this tremendous labour ended with an intensity of attention, a clearness of perception of which he alone was capable. He would see that the thought was warped by the execution, that an episode predominated; that a figure which he meant should be secondary for the general effect was projecting out of its plan. Then, with one stroke of his pen, he bravely annihilated the result of four or five nights of labour. He was heroic at such times.

Balzac, of course, was one of the colossals, and all of his methods, whether right or wrong, were colossal like himself. The vast majority of us will never write a *Comédie Humaine* nor overspread our proof sheets with mad pyrotechnics of erasures. Nevertheless, the essence of Balzac's method is a sound one. You can follow no better plan, provided your mind works that way, than to get your whole initial thought down on paper in the first heat of creation; and then, after a day or two, re-write and amplify, and re-write and amplify again, building up, little by little, filling in the details, smoothing the rough places until your

work finally reaches a stage that you are content to keep as its permanent form. Yet even then, if you are a convert to the Gospel of Infinite Pains, you will still find some changes to make in your proof sheets, some further amendment to work into your second and third editions.

Flaubert's Pursuit of Perfection

But, of course, it is possible to carry anything too far, even such an apparently limitless thing as Infinite Pains. Flaubert was the signal instance of this. His pursuit of perfection verged upon mania; his tireless zeal in connection with every detail of whatever work he had on hand for the moment was in the nature of a fixed idea. Zola, in his *Romanciers Naturalistes,* has given an admirably detailed account of Flaubert's methods of work in pursuit of "that perfection which made up the joy and the torment of his existence." When he had once got a rough draft upon paper the "chase after documents" began with as much method as possible:

> He read above all a considerable number of works; or rather one should say that he merely skimmed them, going with an instinct of which he was rather proud, to the one page, the one phrase that would be of use to him. Often a work of five hundred pages would give him only a single note which he painstakingly transcribed; often also such a volume would give him nothing at all. Here we find an explanation of the seven years which he spent on an average on each one of his books; for he lost at least four in his preparatory readings.

And as he read, his notes piled up, overflowed his portfolios, became unwieldy, mountainous. To give some idea of his conscientiousness in gathering material, Zola mentions that before writing *L'Education Sentimentale* he ran through the entire collection of *Charivari,* in order to saturate himself with the spirit of petty journalism, under Louis-Philippe; and that it was out of the words found in that collection that he created the character of Hussonnet. At last an hour would come when, as Flaubert put it, he would feel the "need of writing":

> When he began the work of composition he would first write quite rapidly a piece consisting of a whole episode, five or six pages at most. Sometimes, when the right word would not come, he would leave it blank. Then he would start in again with this same piece, and it would be a matter of two or three weeks, sometimes more, of impassioned labour over those five or six pages. He wanted them perfect, and I assure you that perfection to him was not a simple matter. He weighed each word, examining not only the meaning but the conformation as well. Avoidance of repetitions, of rhymes, of harsh sounds was merely the rough beginning of his task. He went so far as not to allow the same syllables to recur in a phrase; sometimes a single letter got on his nerves and he would search for words in which it did not occur; then again he sometimes had need of a definite number of r's to give a rolling effect to a sentence.

All this is given here not as an example to be imitated by the young literary craftsman but as a sort of ultimate standard by which to measure the extent and the earnestness of his own efforts. Your latest story, perhaps, came back this morning accompanied by its third rejection slip. In writing that story did you take the trouble to work it over for the third or fourth time? Did you erase and rearrange the opening sentence endlessly until you knew all its possible variations by heart? Did you wake up suddenly in the night with a happy idea that would just fit into page seventeen and could not wait till morning?—or did you, on the other hand, simply sit down quite comfortably one day, possessed only of pen, ink and paper and a good working idea, and dash off your five thousand words at top speed while the heat that Thoreau speaks of was still in you? And, as you signed your name, did you say to yourself, "Well, I suppose some of this is a bit ragged, but it will have to go as it is"? If the second is the case, then your collection of rejection slips deserves to multiply. You may be a genius but you are not a craftsman. Better a hundred times the exaggeration, the hair-splittings, the *reductio ad absurdum* of Flaubert's Infinite Pains than such deliberate slovenliness. If you think that your lot is a hard one and that literature at best is a steady grind with slow results, read just one more paragraph on Flaubert's method and perhaps you will readjust your ideas.

One Sunday morning (writes Zola) we found him drowsy, broken with fatigue. The day before, in the afternoon, he had finished a page of *Bouvard et Pécuchet,* with which he felt very much pleased and he had gone to dine in town, after having copied it out on a large sheet of Holland paper that he was accustomed to use. When he returned about midnight, instead of retiring at once, he had to give himself the pleasure of re-reading that page. But he became greatly disturbed, discovering that he had repeated himself within a space of two lines. Although there was no fire in his study and it was very cold, he obstinately set to work to get rid of that repetition. Then, finding other words which displeased him, he gave up the attempt to change them all and went to bed in despair. But once in bed, it was impossible to sleep; he turned and turned again, thinking always of those devils of words. All at once he hit upon a happy correction, sprang to the floor, relighted his candle and returned in his nightshirt to his study to write out the new phrase. After that he crawled back, shivering beneath the coverlets. Three times, he sprang up and re-lighted his candle, in order to change the position of a word or to alter a comma. At last, in desperation, dominated by the demon of perfection, he took his page with him, bundled his muffler around his ears, tucked himself in on all sides in his bed and until daybreak cut and pruned his page, covering it all over with pencil strokes. That was the way Flaubert worked. We all have manias of this sort, but with him it was this sort of mania from one end of his books to the other.

The Value of System

It is somewhat of a comfort to turn from a writer whose efforts were so vastly in excess of the bulk of his actual production and turn to another novelist who holds a fairly eminent position in English literature and who, through long years of remarkable average fertility, succeeded in making the quality of his writing keep steady pace with the quantity—Anthony Trollope. His advice to young writers is not only interesting but valuable, provided it be taken understandingly.

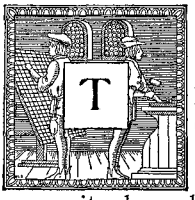
Nulla dies sine linea. Let that be their motto. And let their work be to them as is his common work to the common labourer. No gigantic efforts will then be necessary. He need tie no wet towels round his brow, nor sit for thirty hours at his desk without moving,—as men have sat, or said that they have sat. More than nine-tenths of my literary work has been done in the last twenty years, and during twelve of those years I followed another profession. I have never been a slave to this work, giving due time, if not more than due time, to the amusements I have loved. But I have been constant,—and constancy in labour will conquer all difficulties. *Gutta cavat lapidem non vi, sed saepe cadendo.*

The Honest Labour

Steady, plodding work: that is Trollope's panacea for success in literature. "Let their work be to them as is his work to the common labourer," that is the one phrase to be treasured up and committed to memory. The art of writing—that is the part that savours of genius, the part for which we cannot prescribe rules, the part which makes laws unto itself. But the craftsmanship is a different matter. It may be congenial labour, but labour it must always be, differing in kind but not in degree from that of the hewer of wood or the tiller of the field. The great thing is to make it honest labour, to be quite sure that we are not skimping it or doing it grudgingly. We must each of us find our own best working hours, must decide for ourselves whether we will sit thirty hours at a stretch without moving and then do nothing more for a week or whether we will accept the monotony of systematic daily effort from breakfast until luncheon, day in and day out, whether we feel like it or not. Some men can work that way, and some men cannot and that is all there is about it; they cannot tell you why, they simply find that that is their individual case. Now, there is no virtue in one way more than in another—but whatever method of work you follow remember always that there is no such thing as a royal road to literary achievement, that it always means sooner or later work, work of the hardest, most earnest sort, and often the hardest of all work where it shows the least. For the greatest triumph of writing, as of other arts, is to conceal most carefully those spots upon which you have most conscientiously practised the Gospel of Infinite Pains.

AS A LITTLE CHILD

BY GRACE ISABEL COLBRON



THE Christmas season is indeed a "time of New Talk," of much talk, at least, among the writers of books. And the biggest tree in fiction-land is decked for the little ones, its branches sagging under their weight of gifts. Books for children everywhere, this Christmastide, as every Christmastide. The sheer quantity of them brings the thought, "How many of these books for children are there that have the true quality, that make the lasting appeal to that most honest and sincere class of readers for whom they are designed? And furthermore, wherein does this true quality lie?"

Edwin Pugh, author of *Tony Drum,* in writing once to a reviewer of his book, said: "I went to the children to ask them what they saw, because I think children look at life with their eyes, whilst men and women, as often as not, look at life through their opinions."

Here is a bit of far-reaching philosophy which gives us a measure of value for the quality of children's books. Only such can be deemed truly successful that embody a realisation of the child's blessed power to look at life with his eyes, not with his opinions, as the grown man so often does.

Did you ever enter a strange town after nightfall? Or stop over at a station in such a strange town after dark? Or even wander through its streets between trains, say for an hour or so, and then steam onward to your destination? It is one of the traveller's most delightful sensations, bringing a charm that is always fresh. And the reason for this charm is possibly that you are looking at that town with your eyes alone, with the eyes of the imagination, Nature's great gift to man. Everything that might call into play your preconceived opinions as to what that town, or any town, should be like is cloaked and hidden by the beneficent dark. How fairy-like the most commonplace little hamlet can appear under such circumstances. Anything wonderful or beautiful or deliciously weird and uncanny might be hidden, for aught we know, behind those isolated or clustered points of radiance flaring out of a sable veil of mystery. Now life to the child must be something like a strange town seen after dark. It is mysterious, wonderful, full of delightful possibilities lurking just around every corner. For there are no preconceived opinions to spoil the little traveller's joy, to tell him ruthlessly just what commonplace everyday sort of thing may be expected behind every turn in the road. The eyes that see just so far, the imagination that shivers in delicious wonder at each new discovery to be made—this is the Golden Apple that the good Fairy Fate has thrown into the lap of childhood. It's sad how few of us can keep it bright in later life! It is really only the poet-soul who succeeds in the attempt, who can remain the eternal child and never grow up. And it's a doubtful blessing to grow up, as the good fairies could tell us if we would only listen. The poet never loses his ability to wonder, another of the joys of childhood. For, as Eden Phillpotts says in his fairy story, *The Flint Heart* (one of the best of this season's tales for children): "Everybody ought to be astonished at pretty nearly everything that happens when they are five. The age when nothing astonishes you is eighteen. But after that, as you grow older and older, things gradually begin to astonish you again, until, when you get quite old—say from forty to a hundred—much that happens will amaze you and you'll find the world as puzzling and as wonderful at the end as you did at the beginning." Herein lies the same deep truth as in Edwin Pugh's words.

Life is indeed astonishing and greatly to be wondered at when we look at it through our eyes. It grows commonplace only as we grow mentally lazy and are content to see through cut and dried opinions and to express ourselves in stock phrases. The normal child is never men-