

THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF WRITING

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER

III—THE AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

In the preceding article in this series much emphasis was laid upon the importance of developing the critical faculty and of learning to look, first of all, in the books we read for the author's purpose. It is only by acquiring the ability to form an independent judgment of the works of others that a young writer can acquire the essential power of self-criticism; it is only by studying the purposes of other writers that we learn the importance of having a purpose of our own, and of expressing that purpose clearly.



T the moment of beginning this article, which is to concern itself with The Author's Purpose, a memory comes back, very clear and distinct, of a certain Sunday many years ago, and of a rather prim old lady who had been to hear an eccentric and sensational preacher, and who came away shaking her head and murmuring in scandalised wonderment, "Why, he didn't even give out a text!" Now, whether the preacher really had dispensed with a text or whether the bewildered old lady had simply lost sight of it is immaterial; what does matter is that in the sermon we have at least one type of composition in which there is a clearly understood convention that the writer's purpose shall be defined beyond all question and at the very start. In other literary forms, unfortunately, the need of having a purpose is more easily overlooked, because that purpose is more or less disguised, instead of being embodied in a specified chapter and verse. Yet, the mere circumstance that the poet and the novelist, for instance, differ from the preacher in not having to announce in advance the theme of their discourse does not alter the fact that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," is the text of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and that Owen Wister's *Virginian* is an eloquent attempt to reconcile the New England conscience to the rule ethics of Western justice.

Now, the average person who would be very quick to note the omission of a Sunday morning text will quite complacently read a novel or a short story that

does not possess even a rudimentary central idea without being aware that there is anything wrong with it. But wait until some one happens to ask such a reader what the book he chances to be reading is about. If the answer is crisp and concise you may know without reading it yourself

The Paramount Necessity of a Purpose

that the book has something in it that is worth while; if, on the contrary, the answer comes uncertainly and long-drawn out, something to the effect that "It is about a man and a girl and they are talking together and a lot of things have happened," and so on indefinitely, you may be pretty sure that the book has no central idea at all. Now the one way of bringing home to a young writer the necessity of having a definite purpose is to make him form the habit of literary criticism which was urged in the preceding article. After we have once learned to ask ourselves regarding each new poem or essay or novel that comes our way, Did the author know what he was trying to do and has he succeeded in doing it?—then we are in a position to know that the most exasperating of all books is that which apparently has no central idea, no definite purpose—the amorphous, jelly-fish type of book that can no more be measured by a definite standard than we can measure a puff of cigarette smoke. And almost equally hopeless is the book in which the author has confused his purposes, leaving us vaguely guessing between several solutions; or, again, the book in which the author's purpose and form are hopelessly out of proportion—either a little

tuppenny purpose like a seed pearl buried in a gypsy setting, or else a great big ethical principle squandered on a triolet, like a Koh-i-noor set for a little finger-ring. When we learn to recognise what bad workmanship these fundamental faults produce in others, then we are prepared to lay down the following rules for our own work: that we will always begin with a clearly defined purpose, single, not complex; that this purpose shall receive consistent development from the first line of our work to the last; and that we shall strive for a nicely balanced relationship between our central purpose and the setting we have chosen for it.

It is well, however, to understand at the outset just what we mean by this term, The Author's Purpose. It is used in this article in a very broad and elastic sense. It is something far broader than a deliberate intention to teach a lesson or to preach a creed—although these of course are among the subdivisions of the author's purpose. Perhaps the most general, all-embracing definition that may be given is to call it simply the thing which the author has set his heart upon saying, the one main idea that he must get across to his audience whether he succeeds in saying anything else or not. It comes very near to being synonymous with the germ idea, the nucleus or starting point of the whole work—but for the fact that an author's starting-point, the initial incident, the intuitive flash or whatever it may be that sets him moving along a particular path, may in some special cases be altogether lost sight of by the time he is ready to write his opening sentence.

Now it makes no difference when or where or how a writer stumbles upon the idea which is to serve as his central purpose. It may spring from his head at a moment's notice like Athena, full armoured—as was the case with the late Frank Norris, who, as has often been told, came one morning to his publishers' office, pale and trembling all over with excitement, and gasping out, almost inarticulately, "I've got a big idea! A great big idea! The biggest idea ever." It was the outlined

scheme for his trilogy of the Epic of the Wheat. Or, again, the controlling purpose of a work may not be born until the structure has risen some distance toward completion and the author suddenly discovers that he is building better than he knew. But when this happens he must look carefully to his foundations to see if they be stout enough to bear the weight of the heavier structure. Otherwise it would be better to tear it down, stone from stone, and begin all over again. No thumb rule can be given for the discovery or manufacture of the Author's Purpose. If you find yourself compelled to ask, like the little prince in *Les Rois En Exile*, "*Donnez moi des idées sur les choses*," then you had better lay aside your ambition to write.* But perhaps the advice given by Thoreau is as good as any that can be devised for stimulating a sluggish imagination:

It would be a true discipline for the writer to take the least film of thought that floats in the twilight sky of his mind for his theme, about which he has scarcely one idea (that would be teaching his ideas how to shoot), make a lecture of this, by assiduity and attention get perchance two views of the same, increase a little the stock of knowledge, clear a new field instead of manuring the old.

The great trouble is that ideas, real ideas such as are likely to be of any importance or interest to a considerable number of people, are not so plentiful as to be easily found. They frequently represent well-nigh half the battle in a literary achievement of any importance. It is always so much easier to echo than to originate. One thing is certain: the central idea will not come at command; it

*Interesting in this connection is Daudet's own statement of the origin of *Kings in Exile*:

"Of all my books this (*Kings in Exile*) is unquestionably the one which I found most difficulty in standing on its feet, the one which I carried longest in my head in the stage of title and vague outline, as it appeared to me one October evening on Place du Carrousal, in the tragic rent in the Parisian sky caused by the fall of the Tuileries.

"Dethroned princes exiling themselves in Paris after their downfall, taking up their quarters on Rue de Rivoli, and when they woke in the morning and raised the shades at their windows, discovering those ruins—such was the first vision of *Kings in Exile*."

must be patiently hoped for, watched for, struggled for; it usually represents a good deal of hard work and a good deal of discouragement. Gibbon, as the whole world knows, received his inspiration one evening in Rome, as he sat musing among the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter. Yet he records, regarding the subsequent writing of his history:

At the outset, all was dark and doubtful; even the title of the work, the true era of the Decline and Fall of the Empire, the limits of the introduction, the division of the chapters, and the order of the narrative; and I was often tempted to cast away the labour of seven years.

The uncertainty, the false start, the work which must be begun anew and on a different plan, have all been rather eloquently generalised by Mr. Henry James in his preface to *The Awkward Age*:

When I think of my many false measurements that have resulted, after much anguish, in decent symmetries, I find the whole case a theme for the philosopher. The little ideas one wouldn't have treated save for the design of keeping them small, the developed situation that one would never with malice prepense have undertaken, the long stories that had thoroughly meant to be short, the short subjects that had underhandedly plotted to be long, the hypocrisy of modest beginnings, the audacity of misplaced middles, the triumph of intentions never entertained—with these patches, as I look about, I see my experience paved: an experience to which nothing is wanting save some grasp of its final lesson.

Occasionally it may happen that the central idea comes in a sort of miraculous flash, an inspiration, a dream, such as was the case with Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr.*

The Sudden Inspiration

Hyde: "In the small hours of one morning," says Mrs. Stevenson, "I was awakened by cries of horror from Louis. Thinking he had a nightmare, I awakened him. He said angrily, 'Why did you wake me? I was dreaming a fine bogey tale.' I had awakened him at the first transformation scene." So clearly did Stevenson have his germ idea in mind that the tale was written off in all the white heat of inspiration; yet it is re-

corded that that first draft had to be destroyed and the work begun anew, because the original plan lacked what we now think of as the underlying idea of the whole story, namely, the dual nature of the hero. In Stevenson's first conception Dr. Jekyll was equally bad at heart in both his natural and his acquired form.

Now it is quite true that the author's purpose, as a question of craftsmanship, concerns no one but himself; but there is one important reservation. The author's purpose must be suited to the artistic form in which he chooses to work. For instance, if he is a born fighter and his chosen weapons are words, it makes no

difference which side of a controversy he espouses; he may fight for Whigs or Tories, slavery or emancipation, Christian Science or the Church of Rome—but to succeed he must put the whole vigour of his personality into it. Polemics can never be successfully made a matter of art for art's sake. On the other hand, in pure literature, whatever private feelings an author may have, whatever bias he may let us guess at, he has no business to intrude it deliberately into his written text. Mr. Frederic Harrison in his *Memories and Thoughts* has expressed this same important truth in a way that makes for remembrance*:

Mark Pattison, of Oxford, used to say to a pupil who happens now to be both a brilliant writer and a leading statesman: "My good friend, you are not the stuff of which men of letters are made. You want to make people do something or you want to teach something. That is fatal to pure literature."

Once or twice in my life I have taken up the pen in a vein of literary exercise, as a man turns to a game of billiards or to gardening after his day's work. But the demon soon

*And Lord Macaulay, writing of poetry in his *Essay on Milton*, comes curiously near saying the same thing in slightly different words: "Analysis is not the business of the poet. His office is to portray, not to dissect. His creed . . . will no more influence his poetry, properly so called, than the notions which a painter may have conceived respecting the lachrymal glands or the circulation of the blood will affect the tears of his Niobe or the blushes of his Aurora. If Shakespeare had written a book on the motives of human actions, it is by no means certain that it would have been a good one."

arises and I find myself in earnest, trying to bring men over to one side. It is hopeless to make a man of letters out of a temper like that. Literature is art, and the artist should never preach.

And similarly Marion Crawford in his little monograph on *The Novel: What It Is*, writes as follows:

In art of all kinds the moral lesson is a mistake. It is one thing to exhibit an ideal worthy to be imitated, though inimitable in all its perfection, but so clearly noble as to appeal directly to the sympathetic string that hangs untuned in the dullest heart; to make man brave without arrogance, woman pure without prudishness, love enduring yet earthly, not angelic, friendship sincere but not ridiculous. It is quite another matter to write a "guide to morality," or a "hand-book for practical sinners" and call either one a novel, no matter how much fiction it may contain. Wordsworth tried the moral lesson and spoiled some of his best work with botany and the Bible.

It is the disregard of this important axiom of literature that has produced that hybrid monstrosity, the so-called Novel with a Purpose. Of all the purposes which by any chance may actuate

**The Novel
with a
Purpose**

a writer the most mistaken purpose and the one most destructive to good art is that of forcibly bringing people over to think as he does by a deliberate and conscienceless distortion of life as we see it around us. There was not merely a degree of grotesqueness in the old-fashioned Sunday-school story of the good little boy who had plum pudding and the bad little boy who went fishing and was drowned. There was an immorality about it as well, the immorality that always attaches to a deliberate perversion of our experiences of life. And the same immorality attaches to any novelist who takes upon himself the privilege of the Deity and says "Vengeance is mine," forgetful of the fact that in this world at least rewards and punishments of human acts are meted out quite inexorably in accordance with the laws of nature.

Having digressed to this extent upon the special subject of the purpose novel, we must in fairness go a little further in order to make clear a distinction about

which a good deal of confusion exists in the minds of many readers and writers. It may be defined as the distinction between the Novel-with-a-Purpose, on the one hand, and the Author-with-a-Purpose, on the other. There is no logical reason why an author should not have the strongest sort of prejudices, convictions, enthusiasms; only, he must not be trying to force them down the reader's throat. He may believe, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, that slavery is a crime; he may agree with Zola that race suicide is a national menace. A sincere belief of that sort is the surest guarantee of powerful workmanship so long as the author records only what he sees, so long as he remembers that life itself is the most potent teacher of its own lessons. But so soon as he becomes mistrustful or impatient of life and tries dishonestly to magnify the facts and distort statistics, then his book becomes a Novel-with-a-Purpose, more potent to antagonise than to convince. A good object lesson on the distinction between the Novel-with-a-Purpose and the Author-with-a-Purpose is afforded by the Russians. Owing to the Russian censorship writers with strong doctrines to preach found themselves driven to the form of fiction as the only vehicle in which the lessons they wished to teach could reach the public. But they were wise enough to recognise that the existing conditions around them, the conditions they were most eager to correct, would speak for themselves without any perversion or interference on their part. As Mr. Howells in *My Literary Passions* forcefully puts it:

When I remembered the deliberate and impatient moralising of Thackeray, the clumsy exegesis of George Eliot, the knowing nods and winks of Charles Reade, the stage-carpeting and limelighting of Dickens, and even the fine and impotent analysis of Hawthorne, it was with a joyful enthusiasm that I realised the great art of Tourgenief . . . here was a master who was apparently not trying to work out a plot, who was not even trying to work out a character, but was standing aside from the whole affair and letting the characters work the plot out.

But whatever a writer's purpose may be, and whatever type of literature he

has chosen in which to express it, he has got to do something more than idly say to himself one fine day, "I think I will write (let us say) a sonnet about a pearl, or a novel about the beef trust,"—and then on another fine day formulates his first line or his opening sentence without the slightest idea what is coming next or where he eventually proposes to arrive. He must take the time and trouble to sit down and work out in detail just precisely what he is trying to do and what is the best way of doing it. It is not only in the department of the drama that a scenario is indispensable. Every piece of writing that aspires to be anything more than ephemeral is as much in need of a detailed ground plan as a Gothic cathedral or a modern office building. All beginners who cherish the dangerous fallacy that a masterpiece of prose or verse can be flung off in a white heat of inspiration would do well to commit to memory a large part of Poe's essay on *The Philosophy of Composition*, of which the following are perhaps the most weighty and apposite paragraphs:

Most writers,—poets in especial,—prefer to have it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition; and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes at the elaborate and vacillating conditions of thought, at the true purposes seized only at the last moment, at the innumerable glimpses of ideas that arrived not at the maturity of full view, at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable, at the cautious selection and rejection, at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions, the tackle of scene-shifting, the step-ladders and demon-traps, the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred constitute the properties of the literary *histrion*.

For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor at any time the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions; and since the interest of an analysis or reconstruction, such as I have considered a *desideratum*, is quite independent of any real

or fancied interest in the things analysed, it will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the *modus operandi* by which some one of my own works was put together. I select *The Raven* as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition; that the work proceeded step by step to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.

Poe, of course, is an extreme case. A poem or a story that develops with the rigid consequence of a mathematical problem is necessarily too artificial to pass as a transcript from life. But a study of Poe's analysis of *The Raven*—quite aside from the question whether he actually wrote the poem, as he says he did, or merely succeeded in making himself think he did so*—compels us to face, for ourselves, in all our own work, the artistic demand for unity of effect, simplicity of means, singleness of purpose. Learn to do as much as possible of the sheer drudgery of composition at the start; every hour spent in careful drafting should save two in the actual writing. An extreme case, which none the less is a case in point, is contained in the following anecdote given by Mr. A. E. Davidon in his *Life of Alexandre Dumas*:

Dumas often declared that, when once he had mapped out in his mind the scheme of a novel or a play, the work was practically accomplished, since the mere writing of it presented no difficulty, and could be performed as fast as the pen could travel. Some one begged leave to dispute this assertion, and the result was a wager. Dumas had at that time in his head the plan of the *Chevalier de Maison Rouge*, of which he had not yet written a word, and he now made a bet of one hundred louis with his sceptical friend that he would write the first volume of the novel in seventy-two hours (including the time for meals and sleep). The volume was to be formed by seventy-five large foolscap pages, each page containing forty-five lines and each line fifty letters. In sixty-six hours Dumas had done

*Poe wrote the *Raven*, later the genesis of this *Raven*. This—the after-stroke—American pleasantry, no doubt, but admired and emulated by our young school. The devil of the thing is to find the raven, the dry sob, the foreboding *nevermore*.—DAUDET, *Notes from Life*.

the work,—3375 lines—in his fair, flowing hand, disfigured by no erasures,—and the bet was won with six hours to spare.

Dumas, however, was a striking exception in being able to dispense with **The Wholesome vision.** Alternate **Discipline of** ination and expansion is **Plot Con-** the method by which **struction** great works of literature have usually reached their final form—and it is far easier to expand and cut, expand and cut again, in the mere rough outline than in the fully developed book. Don't shirk your plot construction—and here I am using the phrase in an all-embracing sense—an essay or a sermon deserves careful plotting as much as a novel—plot construction is a wholesome discipline, and while there is not one chance in a hundred that you will overdo it, there is every chance that you will all the time be teaching yourself some new and useful trick, some clever short-cut, some way of knitting your whole structure more firmly together. It would be well if every young writer were to reduce to a ten-word limit his central idea before even starting to plot his story; keep those ten words inscribed upon a cardboard hanging above his desk, and ask himself, with each incident, each character, each shift of scene, "To what degree does this help on my central idea? Is it essential, or only a digression? If not actually related, has it a symbolic significance that justifies it structurally? In any case, is it the best, the very last and best thing I can do?" If not, then cut it out ruthlessly and try again, and yet again, until you are sure that the best of which you are capable is found.

Of course, it is quite easy for some one to object that many of the greatest masters of the past have not composed in this manner; that Fielding and Smollett, Dickens and Thackeray were notoriously loose in plot construction, and that Trollope himself acknowledges, "I have never troubled myself about the construction of plots and am not now insisting on thoroughness in a branch of work in which I myself have not been very thorough." And the objector might go a step further

**The Right
to Break
the Rules**

and ask: Did Shakespeare, when he was writing *Hamlet*, inscribe above his desk, "To be or not to be, that is the question," as a reminder that his theme was the tragedy of a vacillating nature; or similarly, when he wrote *Othello*, "A man not easily jealous but, when roused, perplexed in the extreme"; or again for *Macbeth*, "Vaulting ambition that o'erleaps itself, and falls on the other"? And of course the answer is obvious enough: that the masters of literature are great enough to break the rules; that had Shakespeare constructed as Ibsen did, English literature would have been robbed of some of its noblest lines; and that when we speak of the craftsmanship of writing we are speaking of rules that must be mastered before one has earned the right to break them.

Remember, also, in choosing the authors who are to be your models, to exercise discrimination regarding the particular qualities that you will copy from each of them. Go to Dickens and Thackeray for character drawing, if you choose, but not for plot. And similarly, remember that Trollope was able to say of his characters:

There is a gallery of them, and of all that gallery I may say that I know the tone of the voice, and the colour of the hair, every flame of the eye, and the very clothes they wear. Of each man I could assert whether he would have said these words or the other words; of every woman, whether she would then have smiled or so have frowned. When I shall feel that this intimacy ceases, then I shall know that the old horse should be turned out to grass.

But if you want a model of careful construction from among the early novelists, you can do no better than turn to Hawthorne. "Hawthorne's method," says Andrew Lang, "is revealed in his published note-books. In them he jotted the germ of an idea, the first notion of a singular, perhaps supernatural situation. Many of these he never used at all; on others he would dream and dream till the persons in the situations became characters and the thing was evolved into a story. Thus he may have invented such a problem as this: 'The effort of a great, sudden sin on a simple and joyous nature,' and thence came all the substance

of *The Marble Faun*." As a matter of fact, *The Marble Faun* is a very wonderful example of close construction admirably disguised. It has all the effect of a vast canvas, a prodigality of material in character, and incident, and panoramic scene; but under examination, it reveals little by little the nice balance of all its parts, the rigid economy of its means, the fine art that has subordinated every part to a consistent development of the central idea, a conservation of the unity of purpose.

Second only in importance to having a purpose is the necessity of clothing that purpose in a suitable form. Some themes lend themselves to a variety of different treatments. A great war may

The Appropriate Form give us both an epic and an *opéra-bouffe*, an *Iliad* and *La Belle Hélène*.

The sin of intemperance finds expression at one time in a *L'Assommoir* and at another in a *Tam O'Shanter*. And in general the rule may be laid down, that the form in which any central idea is to be clothed depends less upon the idea than upon the individual ability of the author. But the practical distinction of this is really not great. You may have conceived some light, frothy little idea, such as would make a graceful triolet; it makes no difference whether a triolet is the biggest thing lurking in that idea, or whether some one else might take it and develop it into something of much greater dignity—in either case it is an error of judgment on your part to give that little idea the misplaced dignity of an elegy or a sonnet. Or perhaps you have hit upon a really big situation deserving of the broad treatment of a Hardy or a Meredith; if you are able to see it in that big, broad way be careful not to squander it on a short story or hammock novel, no matter how many other writers might, with more limited vision, have chosen to do the smaller thing.

Just precisely what literary form is the best possible form in which to clothe a central idea is another of those many things that cannot be taught, because it is so peculiarly personal to each writer. My own conviction is that it is something largely instinctive; that a short-story

theme usually presents itself to the mind in the first instance as a short story, a dramatic theme as a

The Importance of Versatility drama, and the material for a long novel as a long novel and nothing

else. The Anglo-Saxon writer, however, both in England and America, is very largely a writer of one or at most two literary forms. This is in marked contrast to the Continental habit. In France and Italy it is quite in the ordinary course of things for a young writer to begin with a volume of verse,* follow it up with collected essays, usually of literary criticism, then a novel or two, a four-act play—and by that time he has reached a point where he feels at liberty to confine himself to whichever form he finds most congenial. A man with this sort of training may, of course, have wasted himself to some extent in misplaced efforts, in attempting certain things for which he was not temperamentally fitted; but he seldom makes the mistake of trying to fit an idea into the wrong literary framework. It is the other type of craftsman, so common in this country: the man who starts with a fixed idea that he is to be a dramatist and nothing else, or a lyric poet and nothing else, or an essay writer and nothing else—who is all the time trying to force his ideas into a shape for which they were not meant. If, for instance, a man cannot and will not write anything but a sonnet; if he is unable to think in any other terms than those of a sonnet, then whenever an idea comes to him that is not a sonnet idea, he must either reject it altogether or else produce a sonnet that had better not have been written. For these reasons it cannot be too forcibly urged upon young writers to keep their minds open by the practice of several different forms at once. You are sure to be eventually a better dramatist for having had some practice in narrative fiction; and you will

*Maupassant began by writing verses; that seems to be the rule, the versified form being the inevitable one for the dawn of literature and for the budding writer as well. Nearly all the masters of contemporary prose have begun by writing verse, even M. Alexandre Dumas himself. Later they have proved their critical taste by not repeating the experiment.—René Doumic, Essay on Maupassant.

probably write a better short story if you have occasionally done a little literary criticism. There is more common sense than appears on the surface in the casual confession by Mr. A. C. Benson in his lightful volume *From a College Window*:

The two things I have found to be of infinite service to myself in learning to write prose have been keeping a full diary and writing poetry.

In other words, in literature as well as in life, there are some occasions when the longest way round is the shortest way home, and one of them is the art of acquiring a particular branch of literary form by the practice of forms that are radically different.

Lastly, a point that cannot be too strongly insisted on is that of clearness. Remember always that your book is to be judged largely by the underlying purpose, not as you have that purpose formulated

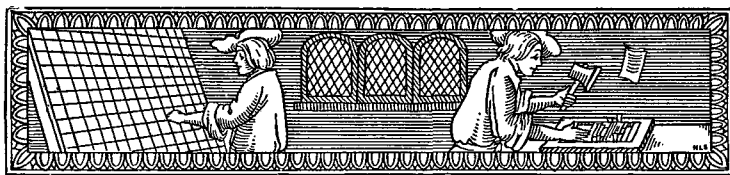
The Necessity of Clearness

in your own mind, but as you have expressed it in your written words. There is no use in having any underlying purpose at all unless you are able to make that purpose clear. Of course, you cannot write clearly unless you have learned to think well; and one-half your battle is won in advance if you practise that careful preliminary structure building so strongly urged in a preceding paragraph. But this whole question of clearness has been so admirably expounded by Anthony Trollope in his autobiography that I cannot do a greater service to young writers than by quoting it in its entirety:

Any writer who has read even a little will

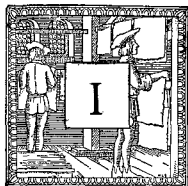
know what is meant by the word intelligible. It is not sufficient that there be a meaning that may be hammered out of the sentence, but that the language should be so pellucid that the meaning should be rendered without an effort of the reader;—and not only some proposition of meaning, but the very sense, no more and no less, which the writer has intended to put into his words. What Macaulay says should be remembered by all writers: “How little the all-important art of making meaning pellucid is studied now! Hardly any popular author except myself thinks of it.” The language used should be as ready and as efficient a conductor of the mind of the writer to the mind of the reader as is the electric spark which passes from one battery to another battery. In all written matter the spark should carry everything; but in matters recondite the recipient will search to see that he misses nothing, and that he takes nothing away too much. The novelist cannot expect that any such search will be made. A young writer, who will acknowledge the truth of what I am saying, will often feel himself tempted by the difficulties of language to tell himself that some one little doubtful passage, some single collocation of words, which is not quite what it ought to be, will not matter. I know well what a stumbling-block such a passage may be. But he should leave none such behind him as he goes on. The habit of writing clearly soon comes to the writer who is a severe critic to himself.

Clearness is so inseparable a quality of all good writing that many a critic has held it as a term equivalent to style. Be that as it may, there can be no question that between the two evils it is much better to have clearness without style than style at the cost of clearness.



THE CASUAL READER

BY F. M. COLBY



The Usual Writer

SUPPOSE I should sadly miss New York's best Society if it ever vanished from our books. It is only in American satire and fiction that I shall ever visit those expensive places, where, as a distinguished novelist has recently said, "proud beauty hides its eyes on the shoulder of haughty commercial or financial youth while golden age dips its nose in whatever symbolises the Gascon wine in the paternal library." In Cornville, Massachusetts, where I live, the people do not do such things. And I like to think as I shake the furnace down of nights how different those upper people are, and how remote from life's realities and coal-bins, and especially how shallow, up there on the silly surface of the earth, compared to a deep person like myself, good old truepenny, down at the bottom of things, *tenax propositi* beneath the cellar stairs. Probably there are not two fine minds in that entire class, said the distinguished novelist. I like to doubt if there is even one good soul. Noodles and Jezebels, say I, the whole pack of them; and I like to think that the Cornville circle in which I move is full of plain people but profound, hearts of oak with no nonsense about them, or people of "Culture"—the real thing, not from Chautauqua but from Cambridge—or people at once instructive and blithe, giant minds at play, gay astronomers, bubbling palæontologists. And I like to look down from these people of my fancy on that other kind of people whom I do not know, and to hate the Persic apparatus and that symbolic Gascon wine, and to feel that I am intellectual and *integer vitæ* and other things that money cannot buy.

So I try and cherish the simple faith, built on the writings of some sixty years, from George William Curtis downwards, that New York Society is made up, not of people, but of types, each with a moral

meaning no less plain than the personages in *Pilgrim's Progress*. But it is not easy to believe in types as compounded by the usual writer—phrase-haunted, fiction-rooted creature that he is, athirst for moral contrasts—and it so happens that no unusual writer has ever written of our best Society. Your true novelist does not stop with type; he completes an individual, having some momentum of his own, doing or saying the unexpected thing, often irrelevant; and I suppose if New York had had a Thackeray or Meredith her fashionable folk might have seemed more probable. As it is we have only Mrs. Potiphar, the Reverend Cream Cheese, the Settum Downes, Minerva Tattle, Timon Cræsus, and later their derivatives with hyphenated names, abstractions whose daughters marry English lords, metaphors who run away with one another's wives, Van This, a virtue, and Van That, a vice, and the sad tale of some figure of speech who lost all his money and then shot himself. In books the authentic Vanity Fairs all seem to come from foreign parts.

Exposed as I am to only potato patch temptations I should like to realise these moral perils of our gilded halls, but in our native writings this is difficult. No story of damnation is complete without a man, and no writer on our best Society has created one. For the usual literary mind is, as is well known, lined with a kind of wall-paper running a pattern not its own. Novelists do not invent or observe; they rearrange their literary memories. Satirists borrow not only their scorn but even the objects of it. And surely no fashionable group is more subdued to precedent. They have their pen-fashions and their etiquette with goodness knows what literary gentilities, pass-words, *cachets*, literary class distinctions, horrors of the unaccustomed, rules of who's who and what's what and the proper thing in heroes and the proper thing in thoughts.

A hundred years of precedent will rule the action of a woman's face, especially the heroine's. It must be a face in which