

A NOTE UPON STYLE

BY FREDERICK NIVEN

A NOTE upon style, or technique, may not interest the average reader; but it should interest the writer unless his private opinion of his readers be: "Anything will do for them. They cannot tell a Shepherd's Bush White City from a city of marble", and unless his aim be the emoluments accruing from mere circulating-library box-filling.

Yet in this matter of style it is better to be a reader who knows nothing of it, who has never heard the word, than one to whom it is synonymous with the saying of *prunes and prisms*. "The schoolmaster has inevitably come to be the arbiter of what shall or shall not be read," wrote Mr. Gosse, in a recent essay, protesting with his wonted suavity against the fact. The average exponent is omniscient—he knows; the average practitioner goes humbly—he is always learning. Mr. Gosse's "schoolmaster" would advise a Hardy to study a Sully, instead of a Sully to study a Hardy. Practitioners are better guides than exponents. It was the practitioners and the lovers of literature who discovered Joseph Conrad. They discovered him when he wrote "Youth" and "Typhoon". Now the erudite are willing to name him, carefully—and they praise his "Victory" and his "Arrow of Gold" when they receive these for review, telling us that at last Conrad has done big things!

But the craftsman must be sincere. As in the art of painting we find those who cannot draw filling frames, and preaching a new gospel of paint to cover their deficiencies, so do we find authors ready to fill the covers of a book though they have never heard of philology, though the history of a word is of no account to them, and even the laws of grammar are for them made but to be ignored. Should the "schoolmaster" rise up and speak vehemently to such, I am with him. There should be for all writers something sacerdotal, in the finest sense, in the craft of words. It has survived the menace that blighted other crafts with the passing of the guilds. Love and pride in it may continue even in these days when, in other activities, love and pride cannot be expected, and a man spends all his life punching out (let us say) the holes in a hinge by the aid of a machine. It is in vain for that man to rise to the heights of wishing he could make them better. He cannot even fall to the depths of saying: "That will do." The possibility of love and pride is taken out of his life.

"That will do" may serve as a motto for the mere box-fillers above mentioned who, gushing of simple human emotions, have secret contempt for the tastes of the simple human beings for whom they cater. But there are innumerable practitioners of the art of

words to whom that art is of more value even than their own comfort. If they rise up at any moment and vehemently decry the merits of some nominal fellow-craftsman, the implication of jealousy may well be unfounded. They may be rather as members of a guild decrying what they consider meritricious. The more an artist is devoted to his art, the less he is moved by jealousy, the more ready is he to extol a thing well done, even though Destiny may not have granted it to him to be the doer. On the style, or the technique of the writing craft, much has been written, but too much can never be written to fail to interest these—even if to influence negatively!

There is one view of the word *style*—"the style is the man"—according to which all written matter is stylistic. In that sense a letter written from Bedlam is redolent of style. The style is the man—and the style is also the madman. Thus the letter in which we read: "i am wiling to come to you as cook tempy or peramint", and Milton's "Areopagitica" are examples of style.

One hears it said that "no amount of polishing can improve a first draft." One does also often hear it said: "If only I had the time to polish I could be a great writer." Both of these speeches are somewhat misleading, and the latter is not (from one point of view) without pathos. Let us glance at both sides of the question. I recently met, by a whimsical coincidence, one man after another, all preaching the same gospel, with varying expressions. One announced: "The great writers never bothered about style!" Another said: "Plato, Homer, Shakespeare, Milton just wrote as it came." The third declared: "All this searching for the right word, à la Flaubert, is absurd.

The masters just coughed it up." I listened to them as I listen to all, and considered how they had Cobbett on their side, who said: "Never think of mending what you write: let it go: no patching." But happening upon Buxton Forman's Keats I wondered if my informants (and Cobbett) had the truth of the matter for all—noting how slowly, with the changing of a word, the changing of another word, by a series of obvious communings and rejections, many immortal lines had been achieved. I mentioned the subject, which was then engrossing my thoughts, to my friend Professor Hudson-Williams (known outside scholastic circles chiefly for his edition of the Elegiacs of Theognis), he being a "schoolmaster" of the exceptional type, a type different from that gently, but surely rightly, pilloried by Mr. Gosse.

"Plato!" he cried out as I quoted the assertion in which that name had been cited; and turning to his shelves he produced an annotated Plato which he laid before me. There again was evidence against the contention of these gentlemen, ample evidence of Plato's dissatisfaction with many a first draft, with the second attempt, even with the third; and that his ultimate words far exceeded in merit the first there could be no doubt. I have here no axe to grind. I am merely trying to hold the balances. Assuredly I do not mean to say that by rewriting can literature be attained.

Many writers, white-hot with an idea, can scarce make their pens rush over the paper fast enough to capture it. On rereading what they have written they often discover that the capture is in doubt. There are many gaps in the mesh. The balances swing again and we withhold our show of

hands from the exponents of "coughing it up". Sentence after sentence obviously does not express what the author meant. Were he to print that draft as it stood, we would arrive at his meaning instead of having the meaning brought to us.

Here we come to another point. There are those to whom the style that is easy is suspect of being the vehicle of a trite thought; they do not do their author the credit of having taken the trouble to express himself lucidly. Likewise there are those who look upon a tortured delivery as evidence of a profundity of wisdom; not realizing that the deep thought is their own while trying to discover the thought (probably trifling) that their author is unable to express lucidly. It is a stage in these notes where must be quoted and considered: "Easy writing makes damned hard reading"—a dictum which clashes with Cobbett's. A reputation for profound mentality may be made by reason of linguistic laziness, and a trifling writer may be hailed, even by the critics, dazzled a moment, as a "great stylist"—his tinsel taken for gold—in the same way as many a woman has been called beautiful by reason of her knack with rouge and rice powder. But a cosmetic is not a preservative.

It may seem that I write too much of the expression and too little of the thought expressed, but space has to be considered. I must interject, however, that I was greatly with Haldane MacFall in a protest he made to the press a few years ago against a phrase by Thomas Seccombe. Mr. Seccombe had somehow succumbed to a malady common to the yellow-press, the malady of superlatives, and had declared that someone was "the greatest prose writer" of the time. Mr. MacFall replied that he was weary of hearing of these

"greatest"; within a few days he had read of more than one "greatest prose writer of the time", and as for Mr. Seccombe's "greatest" he contended that he could not be, having written no really great book. The greatest prose writer, Mr. MacFall remarked, must be the writer of the greatest work in prose. It was a protest, from one entirely alive to the excellencies of diction, against two menaces: against the menace of esteeming deportment more than character, and against the air of omniscience. Each of us has a view on who is the "greatest"—so far as we know books, that is; for myself I am ignorant of Eskimo poems and of every single volume in the libraries of the scholarly book-collecting traders of Jenne, of whom we read in M. Du Bois's book; but to each of us the greatest book must have thought and manner in perfect poise.

When words are considered beyond what they have to express, we have preciosity. When the high traditions of our language are ignored, and the capacity for taking pains, we get what Stevenson called (seeing as imminent) "the slap-dash and the disorderly". Mention of Stevenson recalls a letter he wrote to Henry James: "May I beg you, the next time 'Roderick' [Hudson] is printed off, to go over the sheets of the last few chapters, and strike out 'immense' and 'tremendous'. You have simply dropped them there like your pocket-handkerchief; all you have to do is to pick them up and pouch them, and your room—what do I say?—your cathedral!—will be swept and garnished." It is a word of advice that most authors must everlastingly be giving to themselves. It is a painful subject, for no writer can note such flaws in books for which he cares without a sense of horror, wondering what is his own dropped handkerchief.

Sir Walter Raleigh (of the nineteenth, not the seventeenth century) speaks of Chaucer as being "unable in prose to save his ear from obsession by the cadences of the pulpit". Not carping at this pronouncement, but using it to lead me on to a brief mention of the voice in literature, it has to be said that these "cadences of the pulpit" have helped to give splendor to English and have taught us to bring the voice upon the printed page. In that celebrated passage by Sir Walter Raleigh (of the seventeenth, not the nineteenth century) upon the stars, we are most moved when, coming to a consideration of plants and herbs, he breaks out: "... for as these were not created to beautify the earth alone, and to cover and shadow her dusty face..." It is a voice! The dead man's voice is in our ears. Such clerics as Jeremy Taylor and John

Donne well repay the study of those who would carry on something of the best tradition of English literature in a jerky age. The clerics had a care for subject, predicate, object, and extension.

Whether we decide to serve under the banner of those who (like Cobbett) advise against revision, or of those who (I think I am safe in saying like Shakespeare, from much intrinsic evidence, and can certainly say like Keats, from the evidence I have here given) were not always content with the first phrase that came, must depend on our phrases! There is no one rule of procedure for all. There is hardly a rule of procedure for any single writer, because of the ebb and flow of nerve tides, and the varying mental fitness. The great secret is love of the craft and reverence for our mother-tongue.

THE LATIN TONGUE

BY JAMES J. DALY

Like a loud-booming bell shaking its tower
Of granite blocks, the antique Latin tongue
Shook the whole earth: over all seas it flung
Tliremes of war, and bade grim legions scour
The world's far verges. Its imperial dower
Made Tullius a god: and Flaccus strung
Its phrases into garlands; while among
The high enchanters it gave Maro power.

Then Latin lost its purple pomp of war,
Its wine-veined laughter and patrician tears:
It cast its fleshly grossness, won a soul,
And trafficked far beyond the farthest star
With angel-cohorts, echoing through the years
In sacred Embassies from pole to pole.