

IN BEHALF OF THE GENERAL READER

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

LORD CHESTERFIELD once warned his son against "the communicative and shining pedants who adorn their conversation, even with women, by happy quotations of Greek and Latin." And he added the excellent advice to shun empty display: "If you would avoid the accusation of pedantry, on the one hand, or the suspicion of ignorance on the other, abstain from learned ostentation. Speak the language of the company you are in; speak it purely and unladen with any other."

It is a pity that Chesterfield's suggestion to his son has not produced more impression upon certain of the writers of our time. There is one prolific British author who might be cited as a horrible example and whose pages are a rag-bag of allusions and quotations in any and every language, including his own. The assumption of this writer seems to be that all the readers of any of his works are as familiar with these languages as he is himself and that they will recognize the most recondite allusions collected during his own multifarious reading. This is most intolerable and not to be endured; it is nothing less than the superfluity of naughtiness. It is akin to the arrogant insolence of the bishop who quoted Hebrew in a sermon to a remote and rustic congregation, and who justified himself with the airy explanation that "everybody knows a little Hebrew."

Now, everybody does not know a little Hebrew. Everybody does not know even a little French or German. Every one has not had even a little Latin to linger indistinct and doubtful in the recesses of his memory. And those who happen to have Hebrew and Latin may not have any French or German, just as those who are on speaking terms with these modern tongues may never have been introduced to the ancient and honorable languages. No author has any

right to assume that any reader is possessed of precisely his own equipment; and such an assumption is at bottom simply impertinent. And, therefore, every author would do well to ponder Chesterfield's command to "speak the language of the company you are in; speak it purely and unlarded with any other."

The presumption that an author is at liberty to do as he pleases in his own book is contrary to the fundamental and eternal principle that books are written for the benefit of the readers—or at least that books are published for the benefit of the readers. The author, after having composed his work for his own delight, to express himself, is under no compulsion to give it to the world. He is justified in so doing only if he conceives that his writing has a purpose to accomplish—that is, if he believes that it will bestow either pleasure or profit upon those who may peruse it. If he refuses to consider his readers, then the publication of his book is for the sake of the writer himself, not of these readers. It becomes an exhibition of essential selfishness, mere vanity and vexation of spirit. A book ought to be rich with the full flavor of the author's personality; primarily it ought to express him—but secondarily it is for the sole benefit of the reader.

A book which is worth while is a special message from its writer to the readers; and the reception of the message is, and must be, in proportion to the skill with which this message has been phrased to appeal to all who are willing to hear it. To say this is not to suggest that the author must write down to the level of "the man in the street"; and yet many of the masterpieces of literature—Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Whitman's *O Captain, My Captain* and Kipling's *Recessional*, Voltaire's *Charles XII.*, and Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*—are not elevated above the easy comprehension of those whose educational opportunities have been but scant. The author need not "write down," but he ought to "write broad"—if the word may be ventured. He ought to be possessed of a sympathetic understanding of the state of his readers' minds, of their previous knowledge of the subject, of their opinions, and even of their prejudices. He may choose the class of readers whom he wishes to reach, and then he must ever keep in mind the capabilities and the limitations of all the members of this group.

It is the good fortune of the drama that it is the most democratic of the arts, since it must direct itself to the people as a whole. It has been called "a function of the crowd"; and the duty of the dramatist is to find the greatest common denominator of the throng. Yet this appeal to the multitude has never debased the drama. "Hamlet" and "Tartuffe" are most popular plays, and they are also masterpieces of dramatic art. Shakespeare and Molière did not condescend to the public; they gave that public the best they had in them, but with the utmost care to give it also what they knew it relished. Of course very few plays have ever had the breadth of appeal of "Hamlet" and "Tartuffe"; and the modern dramatist, when he is building his play, is likely to have in mind some subdivision of the throng, the larger segment that craves the fierce joys of melodrama, or the smaller cross-section that is ever eager to discuss the problem play.

It is a choice of this sort that the writer of books is bound to make before he starts in on his work—and especially the writer of history, of biography and of criticism. Is he going to write for the general reader, for the average man and woman of average intelligence and of average education, or is he resolved to limit the circulation of his work to himself and to the tiny knot of his fellow-specialists? In other words, shall he follow the example of the French or the example of the Germans? Will he make his book readable by all, as the French try to do, or shall he be satisfied to have it hopelessly unreadable, except by a sharply restricted circle of like-minded students, as the Germans very often prefer to do? It is true, of course, that there are French books which are hopelessly unreadable, and it is sad to see that their number has been increasing of late. It is equally true that there are also German books which are as readable as the best of the French. Yet the distinction holds good in the main; and there is no denying that the German is inclined to address himself mainly to his fellow-scholars, whereas the Frenchman deliberately devotes himself to the task of interesting the general reader. The Germans insist on scientific thoroughness, and they are willing to pay a heavy price for it. The French are governed by the social instinct which urges them to endeavor to please and to attract. "Your scientific critic is usually a wearisome creature," said John Burroughs; and the Teutonic

investigator is often pitiless in his stern resolution to approve himself a scientific critic. The French view is scarcely overstated in an early letter of Taine's in which he dared the assertion that "at bottom books are not books unless they are amusing; the others are only library furniture."

Where the German toils like a man of the cloister, a secluded Benedictine, aiming to be appreciated only by those whose training has been as arduous as his own, disdainful of the plaudits of the vulgar, and almost suspicious of any outside popularity, the Frenchman remains a man of the world, interested in life as much as in literature, not neglectful of the latest accretions of knowledge, but holding these to be valuable only as they can be co-ordinated into a more comprehensive consideration of the subject in its larger relations. Where the German scholar is likely to be solitary the French scholar is social and sociable. The late Gaston Boissier, who combined Teutonic thoroughness with Gallic clarity and charm, once declared the principles which underlie French literature and which explain its universality. The French author is rarely a solitary dreamer, so Boissier tells us. "Like the orator, he seeks to convince and to persuade. He addresses himself to the public. He takes pains to be clear so that he may be understood, whatever the subject he may be treating. He arranges his matter carefully; he develops his ideas into generalities; he wants to be comprehended by all."

It is because this has been the ideal of the French man of letters that French literature has won its way all over the world and that French is still the second language of every educated man, whatever his native speech. French literature has the element of universality. Intensely national as it may be, it is not narrowly local; it appeals to humanity at large. One of my colleagues at Columbia has told me that he once heard a professor in a German university advise his students to buy rather the French translation of his own monumental work than the German original — because the French version was clearer and therefore more easily read. Transparent clarity is the dominant characteristic of French literature. This may account in part for the inadequacy of French poetry, but it is an inestimable profit for French prose. A French book is widely read in its own language outside the borders of France, and it lends itself easily to translation into a host of strange tongues.

To Germany we have to go for the army of books which extend the confines of knowledge, and yet not a few German books almost force us to conquer that knowledge for ourselves. The facts we are seeking are contained in the works of the German author or they are concealed there, entangled with a heterogeny of other facts which cumber the pathway to our goal,—we cannot see the forest for the trees. We are stunned by the noise of the apparatus which intimidates us from the approach to the essential product. The facts are there somewhere, if we can only find them, and the ideas also which interpret those facts, but they are likely to be inextricably commingled with other facts and other ideas, with endless quotations and endless citations and endless references. As a result we cannot help regretting that Dr. Holmes did not carry out a humorous suggestion he once let fall: “I sometimes feel as if I should like to found a chair to teach the ignorance of what people do not want to know.”

Here in the United States of late years many of our historians and biographers and not a few of our literary critics have gone to school to the Germans, to their abiding profit. They have learned the needed lesson of scientific solidity of knowledge. Unfortunately they have often imbibed from their Teutonic teachers not only a taste for absolute precision of information, but also a relish for parading the results of their praiseworthy industry. They insist upon setting forth the minutest details of their investigations. In their recoil from the quagmire of belleslettristic trifling they have fallen into the abyss of pedantry. They are making books which are not only unreadable by the average reader, but which are frankly not intended to be read by anybody, except by a circle of fellow-specialists. They discuss the least important technical details and indulge in interminable controversy over questions of no vital interest. They even assume in every reader an acquaintance with the preceding stages of the discussion. Perhaps the attitude of these Teutonified Americans was reduced to the absurd not long ago by an American professor of history who declared that a recent publication was his ideal of what a book ought to be, because its pages contained but two or three lines of text at the top, the remaining space being surrendered to unending foot-notes stuffed with references and citations. Such books are contributions rather to science than to lit-

erature; they are honorable and necessary; they are definite contributions to scholarship.

Plainly enough, the author of any book built upon this plan must have renounced in advance all hope of attracting any readers other than those who were as strictly scientific as himself. His book was not a book; it was only library furniture, to be consulted on occasion, but never to be enjoyed. It may have all the scientific virtues, but it is devoid of all artistic attributes. Its defects are intentional, no doubt, but they are none the less deplorable. They are due to a mistaken standard—or at least to the adoption of a standard which the greatest historians have rejected. Gibbon, for example, built his monument more enduring than brass; and for nearly a century and a half this massive work has withstood the ravages of time and the assaults of those who have been unwilling to accept his opinions. His *Decline and Fall* has scientific thoroughness and also artistic fascination. The ample narrative flows unimpeded through his pages, and his foot-notes do not obstruct the current, even if they are often as good reading as the text itself.

More than half a century later Mommsen put forth his history of Rome, constructed by a mighty effort of historic interpretation and only occasionally weighted down by a foot-note which might distract the attention of the general reader, for whose benefit it had been directly prepared. Apparently the great German historian felt that to vaunt his own researches and his own original interpretations and to thrust forward the sources of his extended knowledge would be an act akin to that of the architect of a towering cathedral who should insist on leaving up the scaffolding which had facilitated its erection. Mommsen conscientiously addressed his history of Rome to the general readers, and took his measures accordingly, not to repel, but to attract those readers. His constitutional history, on the other hand, from the very nature of its subject, could not appeal to the general reader, but only to the specialist in political science. Therefore, this later work was very properly prepared upon a different plan; it was designed for the more limited group of professional students, and for their sake it was buttressed with quotations, citations, and references.

There is no warrant for the prevalent belief that there is a necessary conflict between scientific thoroughness in preparation and artistic attractiveness of presentation. The

scientific historian may very properly despise the essential falsity of Carlyle's *French Revolution*, but the only sound basis for their contemptuous dislike must be sought in the Scotch humorist's wilful neglect of necessary information of which he might easily have availed himself, and not in the interpretative imagination he displayed in evoking the striking figures of that strange turmoil. Carlyle is to be discredited not because he had the skill of a literary artist, but because he was wanting in scientific integrity. And this is also the verdict which must be rendered upon the histories of Carlyle's disciple, Froude. The two British historians have fallen out of favor with serious students not on account of their possession of art, but on account of their lack of science. As Gibbon proved, and Mommsen also, science and art are not incompatible or even hostile.

Perhaps there is no better example of the skilful driving of science and art harnessed to the same wagon than can be found in Gaston Boissier's illuminating studies of Roman life and character in the last days of the Republic and the early days of the Empire. In this great scholar's pages Cicero and his friends stand out as they lived; the springs of their actions are laid bare and the temper of their minds. These vital portraits are the result of the utmost intimacy with the records they have left and with the latest researches of the humblest investigators. No doubt has ever been cast upon the solidity of Boissier's scientific knowledge of the period or of the persons he presented to us. Boissier is as scientific as Gibbon or as Mommsen, and like them he refrained from all wanton parade of his scholarship. When he composed one of his interpretative resuscitations he abided by his own explanation of the French point of view. Like the orator, he sought to convince and to persuade; he addressed himself to the general public; he took pains to be clear; he arranged his matter carefully; he developed his ideas into generalities; he wanted to be comprehended by all. And in thus achieving art he did not forego science; that was the solid support of his alluring essays; that was the steel frame, hidden within and yet supporting the external beauty of his marble arches.

In Gaston Boissier's books art is always visible and science is ever concealed. There is rarely a Latin quotation or even a Latin word; and this foreign term, when it does occur, is invariably elucidated for the benefit of those un-

familiar with the language of the Romans. There is scarcely a foot-note, except now and again the citation of an authority or a courteous reference to the explanation put forth by some other scholar. Indeed, Boissier's foot-notes are fewer than Mommsen's and far fewer than Gibbon's; and when he traces for us the intricate complexities of the opposition under the Cæsars our attention is never distracted from the pellucid narrative in which he has distilled the results of his indefatigable study. Above all, his writings are wholly free from all controversy over the opinions of other scholars with whom he has failed to find himself in accord, and we are never detained or annoyed by acrimonious wranglings or by discourteous personalities. He is as unpedantic as may be. He writes like a man of the world, familiar with all that has happened since the period he is dealing with, and apt in recalling modern instances to illuminate ancient opinions. He is continually explaining the present by the past and the past by the present. His attitude is always that of a courteous host who welcomes us by setting before us his best wine, but who never insists on our inspecting the ample cellars whence this choice vintage has been drawn.

There is an old saying that a good workman is known by his chips; yet the accomplished craftsman does not send these chips to the customer to certify his workmanship. He lets the product of his labor speak for itself, and he is never tempted to invite the rest of us into the workshop that we may spy into the secrets of his trade. Now this is just what many modern craftsmen persist in doing, seduced by the bad example of the Germans and neglecting the good example of the French. They demand that we take notice of the skeleton, overlooking the fact that only the tortoise wears his backbone on the outside and that the higher vertebrates prefer to conceal it. This scientific skeleton ought to sustain the body, no doubt, but there is no need to force it into view. Perhaps this parade of his necessary apparatus may be pardoned in young scholars; here it is the outward and visible sign of adequate preparation. But it is no longer needed when the neophyte has won his spurs. The more mature writer may dismiss his list of authorities and all his paraphernalia of bibliography to the harmless and necessary appendix, which may serve as a reservoir of information for the benefit of those who wish to drink

deep. When his prentice years are left behind him, he need not feel called upon to prove his acquaintance with the tools of his trade. This is, then, to be taken for granted; and there is no necessity to flaunt it in the face of the general reader.

That it is possible to unite scientific thoroughness and artistic presentation has been proved by Gibbon and Mommsen and Boissier—an Englishman, a German, and a Frenchman. The ability to do this is not the exclusive possession of the scholars of any one nationality, although it is more common among the French, since they are franker in their recognition of the social instinct. It can be discovered in the *Attic Orators* of Jebb and in the *Aspects of Greek Genius* of Butcher. It is as evident in the biological essays of Huxley as in the psychologic studies of William James. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a better example of the combination of science and art than can be discovered in the iridescent pages of James. His discussions of the complex problems of physiological psychology—discussions rich in speculative suggestions, wealthy with original inquiry, supported by imaginative ingenuity—are yet so simply stated that they can be understood by the people. They were contributions to science which only his fellow-scientists could properly appreciate, but none the less did they appeal to the average reader of average education and of average intelligence.

To write so as to satisfy one's equals and so as to appeal also to those who are not specialists—that is not easy. Yet it can be achieved by taking thought, and it is worth all the pains it costs. That way wisdom lies, and the sooner American scholars recognize this truth the better it will be for the future—if our literature is to be enriched with books that are books and not merely library furniture.

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THE PRESENT STATE OF POETRY

BY ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

WHEN in the fifteenth century the Italian poet Politian called poetry "the solace of men and the everlasting joy of the Gods," he spoke with an assurance that might have failed him could he have had a momentary forward glimpse across four hundred years of literary history. It is inevitable that his eloquent words should gain, for us, a perplexing commentary from the state of poetry in our day. For though it is somewhat difficult to say, with any show of authority, what amount of joy the Gods may be deriving at present from this art, one may assert without much hesitancy that men are getting from it very little solace. And however distasteful Politian might have found such an admission, he would probably have been honest enough to agree that modern life has forgotten the uses of the poets.

It is very curious that this condition of atrophy should exist for poetry, in view of the fact that just now there appear to be more writers of verse than there have been at any time in the history of literature. An English critic conservatively calculates that there are fifty-two minor poets at liberty on his island, and our prosperous land can probably double the count. No one of these so far has proved himself a Goethe, but a considerable number of them are imaginative artists of high distinction. Whatever their powers, and though they may be reckoned by scores, the product of their art appears, if we measure it by its influence, as an insignificant detritus around the bases of the real mountains of modern thought—a thing ignored by those who sit upon the heights—a negligible element in the story of the intellectual life of our epoch. *O quæ mutatio rerum!* Once Lorenzo de Medici could turn from the task of governing Florence to the reading of Petrarch and the