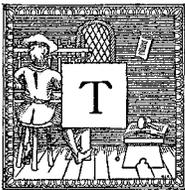


THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF WRITING

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER

VI—THE QUESTION OF STYLE

In the preceding paper in this series, stress was laid upon the fact that there is no royal road to the craftsmanship of writing; that no amount of inborn talent will ever enable you to dispense with a certain amount of patient drudgery; that no great result can be achieved unless you subscribe to the Doctrine of Infinite Pains, and that this doctrine applies to every successive step in your work from the first conception of your central idea down to the last corrections on your page proofs. The present paper discusses the relationship between the Gospel of Infinite Pains and the question of forming a Style.



HERE is, I think, a good deal of unnecessary heartburn experienced by young writers regarding the question whether or not they are beginning to form a style. It indicates a condition of mind akin to that hypochondriacal tendency to believe that one is suffering from various purely imaginary diseases. A sound mind in a sound body is too busy in performing the various activities belonging to each day's work to stop to count the heart beats or rate of respiration. The young writer, with something really worth saying, and a certain driving energy that makes him bent upon saying it in the clearest way possible, ought to be too busy upon the task at hand to be worrying about whether he is forming a style—whether, that is to say, his brave beginnings of to-day are cornerstones in the arch of future fame. We have seen

Definition of "Style"

that what every young writer should strive to acquire is—first a clear-cut idea of what he is trying to accomplish; secondly, a technical skill that will enable him to build the framework of his creation, whatever its form may be, solidly and with the proportions demanded by good art; and thirdly that he must cultivate that infinite patience which will strive to make all parts and all aspects of his work tend toward a unity of effect in subject and structure and language. And when a writer has learned thoroughly to do these things, he need no longer worry about style, for style is nothing else than

the ability to express one's thoughts in the best possible way. Or, as James Russell Lowell has defined it: "Style is the establishment of a perfect mutual understanding between the worker and his material." And Walter Pater expresses very nearly the same thought in somewhat different terms when he writes: "To give the phrase, the sentence, the structural member, the entire composition, song or essay, a similar unity with its subject and with itself:—style is in the right way when it tends toward that."

My advice, then, to the beginner in writing is: Do not worry too much about your style. Try to write

The Method of Imitation

as simply and clearly as you can and without self-consciousness. In learning the rudiments of your art you are like the novice in archery learning to hit a target; concentrate yourself upon the task of making your verbal shafts reach their mark. And if you do this faithfully, ease and grace will follow in their own due time. Certain writers have deliberately set themselves as part of their apprenticeship the task of practising the particular mannerisms of a few recognised models of English style. Stevenson, for instance, is a conspicuous example of this practice, and the rare quality of his own prose is admittedly due to such self-training. Yet where this method succeeds with one man out of ten, it is quite likely to mar the style of the nine others, making them mere copyists—like the young painter who spends his days reproducing a Raphael or a Rubens, instead of remaining under the open sky

learning to express his own thoughts in his own way. To ask one's self continually: "Am I acquiring style?" is like the novice in painting similarly asking: "Am I learning how to mix colours?" A painter does not need to distress himself about the beauty and harmony of all the colours he mixes—the real thing is to be able to obtain the particular colour that he needs for the moment: the whole trick lies there. Be content to have ideas and to develop them to the best of your ability, studying above all things simplicity, the economy of words. Be sure that, for the beginner at all events, the least style is the best style. Do not polish excessively, and always be sure that you have something that is worthy of being polished. It is well to put a lustre on mahogany, but it is foolish to waste energy upon soft pine.

Of course, if you want to go somewhat deeply into the whole question, you might begin by reading what various recognised stylists have had to say upon the subject; you might make yourself familiar with De Quincey's *Essay on Style* and Pater's; and what Lowell has to say, and Stevenson too and half a dozen more besides to whom they will readily guide you. And the chances are that after a few hours, or days, of diligent reading you will come away with a considerable sense of discouragement and confusion; because, while they all fairly agree that style is a question of fitting the method to the material; and that there is not one style but there are many styles, just as there may be many forms of dress to suit different occupations; yet after all they do not lay down rules that are really helpful. Some comfort is to be gained out of Pater, if read understandingly, for he has a broad sanity of outlook that recognises merit in a great diversity of methods. Here, for instance, is a paragraph which embodies the essence of all he has to say on this subject and is well worth pondering upon:

In the highest, as in the lowliest literature, the one indispensable beauty is, after all, truth:—truth to bare facts in the latter, as to some personal sense of fact; diverted somewhat from men's ordinary sense of it, in the former: truth there as accuracy, truth here as expression, that finest and most intimate form of

truth, the *vraie vérité*. And what an eclectic principle this really is! Employing for its one sole purpose—that absolute accordance of expression to idea—all other literary beauties and excellencies whatever: how many kinds of style it covers, explains, justifies and, at the same time, safeguards! Scott's facility, Flaubert's deeply pondered evocation of "the phrase" are equally good art. Say what you have to say, what you have a will to say, in the simplest, the most direct and exact manner possible, with no surplusage: there is the justification of the sentence so fortunately born, "entire, smooth and round," that it needs no punctuation, and also (that is the point!) of the most elaborate period, if it be right in its elaboration. Here is the office of ornament; here also the purpose of restraint in ornament. . . . The seeming baldness of *Le Rouge et le Noir* is nothing in itself; the wild ornament of *Les Misérables* is nothing in itself; and the restraint of Flaubert, amid a real natural opulence, only redoubled beauty,—the phrase so large and so precise at the same time, hard as bronze, in service to the more perfect adaptation of words to their matter.

Literature, by finding its specific excellence in the absolute correspondence of the term to its import, will be but fulfilling the condition of all artistic quality in things everywhere, of all good art.

It is Pater who says of the author of *Madame Bovary*, "If all high things have their martyrs, Gustave Flaubert might perhaps rank as the martyr of literary style"; and in support of this opinion he proceeds to quote the following summary of Flaubert's literary creed:

Possessed of an absolute belief that there exists but one way of expressing one thing, one word to call it by, one adjective to qualify, one verb to animate it, he gave himself to superhuman labour for the discovery, in every phrase, of that word, that verb, that epithet. In this way, he believed in some mysterious harmony of expression, and when a true word seemed to him to lack euphony, still went on seeking another, with invincible pains, certain that he had not yet got hold of the word. . . . A thousand preoccupations would beset him at the same moment, always with this desperate certitude fixed in his spirit: Amongst all the expressions in the world, all forms and turns of expression, there is but *one*

—one form, one mode,—to express what I want to say.

Now, with this creed of Flaubert's in mind, let us proceed to consider in a practical sort of way

The Inevitable Word

just what this particular branch in the craft of writing which we speak of as style really means. Of course, a writer is a craftsman who builds with words of assorted sizes, just as another kind of craftsman builds with bricks and stones. And what we call style comes down in last analysis to a choice between two or more different arrangements of words,—a choice between saying a thing in one way rather than saying it in some other. Now, theoretically Flaubert is right: there are no perfectly equivalent synonyms either of words or phrases,—and even the same phrase will take on shades of meaning when spoken by different lips. Whenever you utter a sentence you have expressed a thought in the only way in which that particular thought down to the last hair-splitting shade of meaning can be expressed. Change a syllable and you change the meaning—that was Flaubert's doctrine and it meant torture to him. And the trouble, of course, was that he tried to practise what can never be more than theoretical. If a writer could really know down to the ultimate shade of thought exactly what he wanted to say and in exactly the tone in which he wanted to say it, and if his brain was so equipped that it had at command the entire contents of the unabridged dictionary then, theoretically, the one inevitable word-sequence ought forthwith to present itself to him. In practice, however, there are a hundred different ways that occur to us for saying even some quite simple thing, each of them not precisely what we want to say, but representing a compromise, a sacrifice, on the side of meaning, or of euphony, or of rhythm. The one perfect way is the dream of a visionary, a forever unattainable ideal. We may come more or less near to it in proportion to our ten talents or our two talents or our one, but it always eludes us. And the finer the artist, the more he is apt to suffer because he sees so clearly how far short he has fallen. Style, then, practically means the ability to

choose the words that will give us just the right meaning, just the right harmony, just the right cadence. And if this is to be done worthily we must attain our results so far as possible without straying far afield for queer, exotic words and phrases. It is, says Lowell, "the secondary intellect which asks for excitement in expression, and stimulates itself into mannerisms, which is the wilful obstruction of self, as style is its unconscious abnegation." And Maupassant, in this well-known preface to *Pierre et Jean*, wrote in similar strain:

There is no need of the bizarre, complicated, extensive and Chinese vocabulary that they force upon us to-day under the name of artistic writing to catch all the shades of thought; but it is necessary to discern with extreme lucidity all the modifications in the value of a word according to the place it occupies. Let us have fewer nouns, verbs and adjectives with meanings almost incomprehensible, but let us have more different phrases.

In regard to vocabulary no better rule has been formulated down to the present day than that old dictum of Quintillian: "Use only the newest of the old and the oldest of the new."

We may, of course, assume in theory that no word is so obsolete that it may not under some special conditions be revived; no slang so recent as to be wholly barred out of print. D'Annunzio, the recognised master of modern Italian style, has ransacked the early writers for so many out-of-the-way words that some of his later prose can be more easily read by a well-educated Anglo-Saxon with a fair knowledge of the language than by an equally intelligent Italian who does not happen to be well grounded in Latin and Greek. And at the opposite scale, we have Mr. Kipling, who fearlessly enriches our language with such words as he thinks it needs. Nevertheless, the safe norm lies in the simple, every-day vocabulary. A good craftsman can accomplish wonderful things with a limited number of tools: an eminent surgeon in this city has been known to perform successfully an operation for appendicitis with no instrument but a simple pair of scissors. One trouble with many of us is that we overwork

just a few words and combinations of words, and neglect equally good combinations; we have the vice of the hackneyed phrase. A well-known American critic once said in conversation that he would rather be caught stealing a watch than saying that a book "filled a long-felt want"—and unquestionably the two offences differ in kind rather than degree. It was Daudet who expressed the philosophy of the hackneyed phrase perhaps rather more felicitously than any other:

What profound disgust must those epithets feel which have lived for centuries with the same nouns! Bad writers cannot be made to comprehend this. They think divorce is not permitted to words. There are people who write without blushing: *venerable trees, melodious accents*. *Venerable* is not an ugly word; put it with another substantive—"your venerable burden," "most venerable worth," etc.—you see the union is good. In short, the epithet should be the mistress of the substantive, never its lawful wife. Between words there must be passing liaisons, but no eternal marriages. It is that which distinguishes the original writer from others.

It is that, an Anglo-Saxon critic finds himself instinctively adding, that distinguishes just a few of the more prominent British writers of the younger school; writers otherwise very wide apart indeed—Rudyard Kipling and Maurice Hewlett, Joseph Conrad and Alfred Ollivant and J. C. Snaith—to mention only a few striking examples. Each of these has a style of his own; some of them, indeed, have a number of styles, to be donned and doffed upon occasion; but the one trait that they all have in common is a frank audacity of new combination, a tendency to take liberties with noun and adjective, and pair them off with as little ceremony as a hostess pairs off her guests for a cotillon—and with as little malice. De Quincey wrote, not without a grain of literary snobbishness:

Like boys who are throwing the sun's rays in the eyes of a mob by means of a mirror, you must shift your lights and vibrate your reflections at every possible angle, if you would agitate the popular mind extensively.

De Quincey, of course, had a certain

ingrained scorn of the popular mind. It was quite unconsciously, while here intending to stigmatise a type of bad rhetoric, that he actually gave us a rather vivid metaphor of the principle upon which language tends constantly to renew itself.

And this brings us to a vital point in the whole question of acquiring style. If you are proposing to learn the craft of building, or pottery making, or carpet weaving, will you be satisfied to know nothing beyond what has been done by England or America? Or will you, just as a matter of business shrewdness, study what has been done in the past in Greece and Rome, in Egypt and Turkey and India? The business man and the scientist always keep a keen eye on the whole world. And the man of letters cannot afford to do less. If you run over the list of the world's great stylists, you will find that they were, relatively speaking, linguists. I use the term, *relatively speaking*, advisedly; because in some countries and at certain epochs, a man who knew one language besides his own passed as a person of learning; while in another, two or three extra tongues carried slight distinction. One of our professional humourists once said that he knew a man who spoke seventeen languages, and never said anything of importance in any of them. There was no wit in the remark, because it was probably quite true. There is a point at which the brain becomes merely acquisitive. But the possession of two or three languages besides one's own is the best of all aids to a distinctive style. It was James Russell Lowell who said: "The practice of translation, by making us deliberate in the choice of the best equivalent of the foreign word in our own language, has likewise the advantage of continually schooling us in one of the main elements of a good style—precision; and precision of thought is not only exemplified by precision of language, but is largely dependent on the habit of it."

The above quotation is useful for two reasons: first, for the emphasis it lays upon the value of the right word; and, secondly, on account of Lowell's obvious

underrating of the value of translation. Because translation, whether from modern languages, or from the classics, is one of the most valuable aids that we possess to an appreciation, not merely of a precision of words, but of new rhythms, new possibilities of linguistic effects—which, after all, is a more important issue. A trained translator of sterling authors soon learns that if he is to preserve anything of importance

The Practice of Translating of the original author's quality, he must convey over into his own language something of the linguistic harmony and the phrase cadence. The present writer knows by experience how hard a task this is, and what hours of labour it sometimes takes, to reproduce in English a single paragraph of French or Italian or Spanish, with even an approximate retention of the original consonant pattern and the original number of syllables. Your professional translator seldom bothers himself about such things; but the craftsman may well waste many a day and week after this fashion, because he will learn a surprising amount of sheer linguistic gymnastics. Translation, whether from Greek, Latin, or some modern tongue, is to the literary writer by profession like chest weights and Indian clubs to the college athlete: it gets his mental muscles into training.

There are, besides, certain advantages to be gained from seeing the purely technical difficulties of language managed with masterly skill in a different medium from our own. We may struggle for years to acquire facility in avoiding harsh combinations of final and initial letters, the exasperating recurrence of some cacophonous but necessary relative pronoun, the jerk and jolt of an awkward rhythm—and at the end of that time we shall not know as much of the philosophy of a fluent and melodious style as could have been learned by one quarter of the effort through examining what can be done in a naturally musical language like Greek; a language in which harsh final mutes have no existence and in which one difficulty of a good prose style was not that of interweaving poetic rhythms, but rather of avoiding them. And similarly we can learn to correct our own

tendencies to carry certain principles of prose writing to excess by seeing these same principles carried to a *reductio ad absurdum*. A good illustration of this point is contained in Zola's account of Turgéneff's amazement as he listened to a discussion between Flaubert and his friends regarding that very point already referred to, the pursuit of the one inevitable word:

Turgéneff opened enormous eyes. He evidently did not understand; he declared that no writer, in any language, had ever refined his style to such an extent. At home, in Russia, nothing of the kind existed. From that day forth, every time that he heard us cursing the *who's* and the *which's*, I often saw him smile; and he said that we were quite wrong not to make a franker use of our language, which is one of the clearest and simplest there are. I am of his opinion, I have always been struck with the justice of his judgment; it is perhaps because, being a stranger, he sees us from the necessary distance and detachment (aloofness).

But whether you accept Turgéneff's view and choose to cultivate the franker use of language; or on the other hand are pleased to pursue endlessly the elusive will-o'-the-wisp of perfection, remember always that style ceases to be good the moment that it is cultivated for its own sake and not simply as an integral part of the whole unified structure. They teach a great deal about the importance of onomatopœia as practised by Homer and Vergil; and I think that a great many young students gather the idea that it is a quality which ought to flaunt itself before the eye and ear so that as one scans certain lines of the *Iliad* or the *Æneid* one's predominating thought should be: How wonderfully the rhythm and the consonant pattern here suggests the poet's meaning. Now this, of course, is a fallacy, and there is no better way of showing that fallacy than by quoting Daudet's delicious little anecdote:

I shall never forget the famous: *Quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit. . .* It was always cited to us as an example of onomatopœia, and my teacher had persuaded me that one might mistake it for the gallop of a horse.

One day, wishing to frighten my little sister, who had a great fear of horses, I came up be-

hind her and cried, "*Quadrupedante putrem*," and so forth. Well, the little thing wasn't frightened!

Onomatopœia, like everything else pertaining to style, is used properly when it does not obtrude itself, when it helps us to form a mental picture without our being aware by what agency the author has attained his result. Take, for instance, one of the most extreme instances in modern writing of an attempt to fit sound to meaning—the libretti to Wagner's *Ring*. When you read the text quietly by yourself you feel that the whole thing has been overdone; the various tricks of alliteration stick out like so many bristles. But when this same text is applied to the pur-

pose for which it was intended, you notice none of this, because the sound and the meaning blend so perfectly with the rhythm of the music.

And in all elements affecting style this same principle applies. Any ornament which is used simply because it is ornament, simply because the author wishes to use his subject to call attention to his manner rather than make his manner do obeisance to his theme, is vulgar ornament, as offensive to good taste as overdress in women. In style, as in everything else pertaining to the craftsmanship of writing, learn to practise "that fine art which so artfully all things conceals."

THE SEAMSTRESS

BY HERMAN HAGEDORN

How dark the night is, dark and damp!
It gets my bones—this cold fall air.
And yet—I just can't light the lamp,
The room—it is so bare.

And down below there—oh, far down—
I see the people, two by two,
Top hat an' stick an' flimsy gown,
Go laughing when the play is through.

I get my points from what they wear,
An' think of life an' men an' love.
They never guess there's some one there
A-watching from above.

Sometimes they kiss—between the lights
Where it's so dark I scarce can see;
An' yet I look,—it somehow rights
The jumbled things in me.

I know that half of them are bad
And that they'll rue it all some day—
An' yet—it seems to make me glad
To know some one is gay;

An' gives me things to dream about
Besides my needles, cold an' white,
A-stitching, stitching in an' out
My heart, the livelong night.