

АРТУР ШОПЕНГАУЭР

THE ESSAYS OF ARTHUR
SCHOPENHAUER; THE
ART OF LITERATURE

Артур Шопенгауэр

**The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer;
The Art of Literature**

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Шопенгауэр А.

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Arthur Schopenhauer

The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer; The Art of Literature

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The contents of this, as of the other volumes in the series, have been drawn from Schopenhauer's *Parerga*, and amongst the various subjects dealt with in that famous collection of essays, Literature holds an important place. Nor can Schopenhauer's opinions fail to be of special value when he treats of literary form and method. For, quite apart from his philosophical pretensions, he claims recognition as a great writer; he is, indeed, one of the best of the few really excellent prose-writers of whom Germany can boast. While he is thus particularly qualified to speak of Literature as an Art, he has also something to say upon those influences which, outside of his own merits, contribute so much to an author's success, and are so often undervalued when he obtains immediate popularity. Schopenhauer's own sore experiences in the matter of reputation lend an interest to his remarks upon that subject, although it is too much to ask of human nature that he should approach it in any dispassionate spirit.

In the following pages we have observations upon style by one who was a stylist in the best sense of the word, not affected, nor yet a phrasemonger; on thinking for oneself by a philosopher who never did anything else; on criticism by a writer who suffered much from the inability of others to understand him; on reputation by a candidate who, during the greater part of his life, deserved without obtaining it; and on genius by one who was incontestably of the privileged order himself. And whatever may be thought of some of his opinions on matters of detail – on anonymity, for instance, or on the question whether good work is never done for money – there can be no doubt that his general view of literature, and the conditions under which it flourishes, is perfectly sound.

It might be thought, perhaps, that remarks which were meant to apply to the German language would have but little bearing upon one so different from it as English. This would be a just objection if Schopenhauer treated literature in a petty spirit, and confined himself to pedantic inquiries into matters of grammar and etymology, or mere niceties of phrase. But this is not so. He deals with his subject broadly, and takes large and general views; nor can anyone who knows anything of the philosopher suppose this to mean that he is vague and feeble. It is true that now and again in the course of these essays he makes remarks which are obviously meant to apply to the failings of certain writers of his own age and country; but in such a case I have generally given his sentences a turn, which, while keeping them faithful to the spirit of the original, secures for them a less restricted range, and makes Schopenhauer a critic of similar faults in whatever age or country they may appear. This has been done in spite of a sharp word on page seventeen of this volume, addressed to translators who dare to revise their author; but the change is one with which not even Schopenhauer could quarrel.

It is thus a significant fact – a testimony to the depth of his insight and, in the main, the justice of his opinions – that views of literature which appealed to his own immediate contemporaries, should be found to hold good elsewhere and at a distance of fifty years. It means that what he had to say was worth saying; and since it is adapted thus equally to diverse times and audiences, it is probably of permanent interest.

The intelligent reader will observe that much of the charm of Schopenhauer's writing comes from its strongly personal character, and that here he has to do, not with a mere maker of books, but with a man who thinks for himself and has no false scruples in putting his meaning plainly upon the page, or in unmasking sham wherever he finds it. This is nowhere so true as when he deals with

literature; and just as in his treatment of life, he is no flatterer to men in general, so here he is free and outspoken on the peculiar failings of authors. At the same time he gives them good advice. He is particularly happy in recommending restraint in regard to reading the works of others, and the cultivation of independent thought; and herein he recalls a saying attributed to Hobbes, who was not less distinguished as a writer than as a philosopher, to the effect that "*if he had read as much as other men, he should have been as ignorant as they.*"

Schopenhauer also utters a warning, which we shall do well to take to heart in these days, against mingling the pursuit of literature with vulgar aims. If we follow him here, we shall carefully distinguish between literature as an object of life and literature as a means of living, between the real love of truth and beauty, and that detestable false love which looks to the price it will fetch in the market. I am not referring to those who, while they follow a useful and honorable calling in bringing literature before the public, are content to be known as men of business. If, by the help of some second witch of Endor, we could raise the ghost of Schopenhauer, it would be interesting to hear his opinion of a certain kind of literary enterprise which has come into vogue since his day, and now receives an amount of attention very much beyond its due. We may hazard a guess at the direction his opinion would take. He would doubtless show us how this enterprise, which is carried on by self-styled *literary men*, ends by making literature into a form of merchandise, and treating it as though it were so much goods to be bought and sold at a profit, and most likely to produce quick returns if the maker's name is well known. Nor would it be the ghost of the real Schopenhauer unless we heard a vigorous denunciation of men who claim a connection with literature by a servile flattery of successful living authors – the dead cannot be made to pay – in the hope of appearing to advantage in their reflected light and turning that advantage into money.

In order to present the contents of this book in a convenient form, I have not scrupled to make an arrangement with the chapters somewhat different from that which exists in the original; so that two or more subjects which are there dealt with successively in one and the same chapter, here stand by themselves. In consequence of this, some of the titles of the sections are not to be found in the original. I may state, however, that the essays on *Authorship* and *Style* and the latter part of that on *Criticism* are taken direct from the chapter headed *Ueber Schriftstellerei und Stil*; and that the remainder of the essay on *Criticism*, with that of *Reputation*, is supplied by the remarks *Ueber Urtheil, Kritik, Beifall und Ruhm*. The essays on *The Study of Latin*, on *Men of Learning*, and on *Some Forms of Literature*, are taken chiefly from the four sections *Ueber Gelehrsamkeit und Gelehrte*, *Ueber Sprache und Worte*, *Ueber Lesen und Bücher: Anhang*, and *Zur Metaphysik des Schönen*. The essay on *Thinking for Oneself* is a rendering of certain remarks under the heading *Selbstdenken*. *Genius* was a favorite subject of speculation with Schopenhauer, and he often touches upon it in the course of his works; always, however, to put forth the same theory in regard to it as may be found in the concluding section of this volume. Though the essay has little or nothing to do with literary method, the subject of which it treats is the most needful element of success in literature; and I have introduced it on that ground. It forms part of a chapter in the *Parerga* entitled *Den Intellekt überhaupt und in jeder Beziehung betreffende Gedanken: Anhang verwandter Stellen*.

It has also been part of my duty to invent a title for this volume; and I am well aware that objection may be made to the one I have chosen, on the ground that in common language it is unusual to speak of literature as an art, and that to do so is unduly to narrow its meaning and to leave out of sight its main function as the record of thought. But there is no reason why the word *Literature* should not be employed in that double sense which is allowed to attach to *Painting*, *Music*, *Sculpture*, as signifying either the objective outcome of a certain mental activity, seeking to express itself in outward form; or else the particular kind of mental activity in question, and the methods it follows. And we do, in fact, use it in this latter sense, when we say of a writer that he pursues literature as a calling. If, then, literature can be taken to mean a process as well as a result of mental activity, there can be no error in speaking of it as Art. I use that term in its broad sense, as meaning skill in the display

of thought; or, more fully, a right use of the rules of applying to the practical exhibition of thought, with whatever material it may deal. In connection with literature, this is a sense and an application of the term which have been sufficiently established by the example of the great writers of antiquity.

It may be asked, of course, whether the true thinker, who will always form the soul of the true author, will not be so much occupied with what he has to say, that it will appear to him a trivial thing to spend great effort on embellishing the form in which he delivers it. Literature, to be worthy of the name, must, it is true, deal with noble matter – the riddle of our existence, the great facts of life, the changing passions of the human heart, the discernment of some deep moral truth. It is easy to lay too much stress upon the mere garment of thought; to be too precise; to give to the arrangement of words an attention that should rather be paid to the promotion of fresh ideas. A writer who makes this mistake is like a fop who spends his little mind in adorning his person. In short, it may be charged against the view of literature which is taken in calling it an Art, that, instead of making truth and insight the author's aim, it favors sciolism and a fantastic and affected style. There is, no doubt, some justice in the objection; nor have we in our own day, and especially amongst younger men, any lack of writers who endeavor to win confidence, not by adding to the stock of ideas in the world, but by despising the use of plain language. Their faults are not new in the history of literature; and it is a pleasing sign of Schopenhauer's insight that a merciless exposure of them, as they existed half a century ago, is still quite applicable to their modern form.

And since these writers, who may, in the slang of the hour, be called "impressionists" in literature, follow their own bad taste in the manufacture of dainty phrases, devoid of all nerve, and generally with some quite commonplace meaning, it is all the more necessary to discriminate carefully between artifice and art.

But although they may learn something from Schopenhauer's advice, it is not chiefly to them that it is offered. It is to that great mass of writers, whose business is to fill the columns of the newspapers and the pages of the review, and to produce the ton of novels that appear every year. Now that almost everyone who can hold a pen aspires to be called an author, it is well to emphasize the fact that literature is an art in some respects more important than any other. The problem of this art is the discovery of those qualities of style and treatment which entitled any work to be called good literature.

It will be safe to warn the reader at the very outset that, if he wishes to avoid being led astray, he should in his search for these qualities turn to books that have stood the test of time.

For such an amount of hasty writing is done in these days that it is really difficult for anyone who reads much of it to avoid contracting its faults, and thus gradually coming to terms of dangerous familiarity with bad methods. This advice will be especially needful if things that have little or no claim to be called literature at all – the newspapers, the monthly magazine, and the last new tale of intrigue or adventure – fill a large measure, if not the whole, of the time given to reading. Nor are those who are sincerely anxious to have the best thought in the best language quite free from danger if they give too much attention to the contemporary authors, even though these seem to think and write excellently. For one generation alone is incompetent to decide upon the merits of any author whatever; and as literature, like all art, is a thing of human invention, so it can be pronounced good only if it obtains lasting admiration, by establishing a permanent appeal to mankind's deepest feeling for truth and beauty.

It is in this sense that Schopenhauer is perfectly right in holding that neglect of the ancient classics, which are the best of all models in the art of writing, will infallibly lead to a degeneration of literature.

And the method of discovering the best qualities of style, and of forming a theory of writing, is not to follow some trick or mannerism that happens to please for the moment, but to study the way in which great authors have done their best work.

It will be said that Schopenhauer tells us nothing we did not know before. Perhaps so; as he himself says, the best things are seldom new. But he puts the old truths in a fresh and forcible way;

and no one who knows anything of good literature will deny that these truths are just now of very fit application.

It was probably to meet a real want that, a year or two ago, an ingenious person succeeded in drawing a great number of English and American writers into a confession of their literary creed and the art they adopted in authorship; and the interesting volume in which he gave these confessions to the world contained some very good advice, although most of it had been said before in different forms. More recently a new departure, of very doubtful use, has taken place; and two books have been issued, which aim, the one at being an author's manual, the other at giving hints on essays and how to write them.

A glance at these books will probably show that their authors have still something to learn.

Both of these ventures seem, unhappily, to be popular; and, although they may claim a position next-door to that of the present volume I beg to say that it has no connection with them whatever. Schopenhauer does not attempt to teach the art of making bricks without straw.

I wish to take this opportunity of tendering my thanks to a large number of reviewers for the very gratifying reception given to the earlier volumes of this series. And I have great pleasure in expressing my obligations to my friend Mr. W.G. Collingwood, who has looked over most of my proofs and often given me excellent advice in my effort to turn Schopenhauer into readable English.

T.B.S.

ON AUTHORSHIP

There are, first of all, two kinds of authors: those who write for the subject's sake, and those who write for writing's sake. While the one have had thoughts or experiences which seem to them worth communicating, the others want money; and so they write, for money. Their thinking is part of the business of writing. They may be recognized by the way in which they spin out their thoughts to the greatest possible length; then, too, by the very nature of their thoughts, which are only half-true, perverse, forced, vacillating; again, by the aversion they generally show to saying anything straight out, so that they may seem other than they are. Hence their writing is deficient in clearness and definiteness, and it is not long before they betray that their only object in writing at all is to cover paper. This sometimes happens with the best authors; now and then, for example, with Lessing in his *Dramaturgie*, and even in many of Jean Paul's romances. As soon as the reader perceives this, let him throw the book away; for time is precious. The truth is that when an author begins to write for the sake of covering paper, he is cheating the reader; because he writes under the pretext that he has something to say.

Writing for money and reservation of copyright are, at bottom, the ruin of literature. No one writes anything that is worth writing, unless he writes entirely for the sake of his subject. What an inestimable boon it would be, if in every branch of literature there were only a few books, but those excellent! This can never happen, as long as money is to be made by writing. It seems as though the money lay under a curse; for every author degenerates as soon as he begins to put pen to paper in any way for the sake of gain. The best works of the greatest men all come from the time when they had to write for nothing or for very little. And here, too, that Spanish proverb holds good, which declares that honor and money are not to be found in the same purse —*honora y provecho no caben en un sacco*. The reason why Literature is in such a bad plight nowadays is simply and solely that people write books to make money. A man who is in want sits down and writes a book, and the public is stupid enough to buy it. The secondary effect of this is the ruin of language.

A great many bad writers make their whole living by that foolish mania of the public for reading nothing but what has just been printed, – journalists, I mean. Truly, a most appropriate name. In plain language it is *journeymen, day-laborers*!

Again, it may be said that there are three kinds of authors. First come those who write without thinking. They write from a full memory, from reminiscences; it may be, even straight out of other people's books. This class is the most numerous. Then come those who do their thinking whilst they are writing. They think in order to write; and there is no lack of them. Last of all come those authors who think before they begin to write. They are rare.

Authors of the second class, who put off their thinking until they come to write, are like a sportsman who goes forth at random and is not likely to bring very much home. On the other hand, when an author of the third or rare class writes, it is like a *battue*. Here the game has been previously captured and shut up within a very small space; from which it is afterwards let out, so many at a time, into another space, also confined. The game cannot possibly escape the sportsman; he has nothing to do but aim and fire – in other words, write down his thoughts. This is a kind of sport from which a man has something to show.

But even though the number of those who really think seriously before they begin to write is small, extremely few of them think about *the subject itself*: the remainder think only about the books that have been written on the subject, and what has been said by others. In order to think at all, such writers need the more direct and powerful stimulus of having other people's thoughts before them. These become their immediate theme; and the result is that they are always under their influence, and so never, in any real sense of the word, are original. But the former are roused to thought by the

subject itself, to which their thinking is thus immediately directed. This is the only class that produces writers of abiding fame.

It must, of course, be understood that I am speaking here of writers who treat of great subjects; not of writers on the art of making brandy.

Unless an author takes the material on which he writes out of his own head, that is to say, from his own observation, he is not worth reading. Book-manufacturers, compilers, the common run of history-writers, and many others of the same class, take their material immediately out of books; and the material goes straight to their finger-tips without even paying freight or undergoing examination as it passes through their heads, to say nothing of elaboration or revision. How very learned many a man would be if he knew everything that was in his own books! The consequence of this is that these writers talk in such a loose and vague manner, that the reader puzzles his brain in vain to understand what it is of which they are really thinking. They are thinking of nothing. It may now and then be the case that the book from which they copy has been composed exactly in the same way: so that writing of this sort is like a plaster cast of a cast; and in the end, the bare outline of the face, and that, too, hardly recognizable, is all that is left to your Antinous. Let compilations be read as seldom as possible. It is difficult to avoid them altogether; since compilations also include those text-books which contain in a small space the accumulated knowledge of centuries.

There is no greater mistake than to suppose that the last work is always the more correct; that what is written later on is in every case an improvement on what was written before; and that change always means progress. Real thinkers, men of right judgment, people who are in earnest with their subject, – these are all exceptions only. Vermin is the rule everywhere in the world: it is always on the alert, taking the mature opinions of the thinkers, and industriously seeking to improve upon them (save the mark!) in its own peculiar way.

If the reader wishes to study any subject, let him beware of rushing to the newest books upon it, and confining his attention to them alone, under the notion that science is always advancing, and that the old books have been drawn upon in the writing of the new. They have been drawn upon, it is true; but how? The writer of the new book often does not understand the old books thoroughly, and yet he is unwilling to take their exact words; so he bungles them, and says in his own bad way that which has been said very much better and more clearly by the old writers, who wrote from their own lively knowledge of the subject. The new writer frequently omits the best things they say, their most striking illustrations, their happiest remarks; because he does not see their value or feel how pregnant they are. The only thing that appeals to him is what is shallow and insipid.

It often happens that an old and excellent book is ousted by new and bad ones, which, written for money, appear with an air of great pretension and much puffing on the part of friends. In science a man tries to make his mark by bringing out something fresh. This often means nothing more than that he attacks some received theory which is quite correct, in order to make room for his own false notions. Sometimes the effort is successful for a time; and then a return is made to the old and true theory. These innovators are serious about nothing but their own precious self: it is this that they want to put forward, and the quick way of doing so, as they think, is to start a paradox. Their sterile heads take naturally to the path of negation; so they begin to deny truths that have long been admitted – the vital power, for example, the sympathetic nervous system, *generatio equivoca*, Bichat's distinction between the working of the passions and the working of intelligence; or else they want us to return to crass atomism, and the like. Hence it frequently happens that *the course of science is retrogressive*.

To this class of writers belong those translators who not only translate their author but also correct and revise him; a proceeding which always seems to me impertinent. To such writers I say: Write books yourself which are worth translating, and leave other people's works as they are!

The reader should study, if he can, the real authors, the men who have founded and discovered things; or, at any rate, those who are recognized as the great masters in every branch of knowledge. Let him buy second-hand books rather than read their contents in new ones. To be sure, it is easy

to add to any new discovery —*inventis aliquid addere facile est*; and, therefore, the student, after well mastering the rudiments of his subject, will have to make himself acquainted with the more recent additions to the knowledge of it. And, in general, the following rule may be laid down here as elsewhere: if a thing is new, it is seldom good; because if it is good, it is only for a short time new.

What the address is to a letter, the title should be to a book; in other words, its main object should be to bring the book to those amongst the public who will take an interest in its contents. It should, therefore, be expressive; and since by its very nature it must be short, it should be concise, laconic, pregnant, and if possible give the contents in one word. A prolix title is bad; and so is one that says nothing, or is obscure and ambiguous, or even, it may be, false and misleading; this last may possibly involve the book in the same fate as overtakes a wrongly addressed letter. The worst titles of all are those which have been stolen, those, I mean, which have already been borne by other books; for they are in the first place a plagiarism, and secondly the most convincing proof of a total lack of originality in the author. A man who has not enough originality to invent a new title for his book, will be still less able to give it new contents. Akin to these stolen titles are those which have been imitated, that is to say, stolen to the extent of one half; for instance, long after I had produced my treatise *On Will in Nature*, Oersted wrote a book entitled *On Mind in Nature*.

A book can never be anything more than the impress of its author's thoughts; and the value of these will lie either in *the matter about which he has thought*, or in the *form* which his thoughts take, in other words, *what it is that he has thought about it*.

The matter of books is most various; and various also are the several excellences attaching to books on the score of their matter. By matter I mean everything that comes within the domain of actual experience; that is to say, the facts of history and the facts of nature, taken in and by themselves and in their widest sense. Here it is the *thing* treated of, which gives its peculiar character to the book; so that a book can be important, whoever it was that wrote it.

But in regard to the form, the peculiar character of a book depends upon the *person* who wrote it. It may treat of matters which are accessible to everyone and well known; but it is the way in which they are treated, what it is that is thought about them, that gives the book its value; and this comes from its author. If, then, from this point of view a book is excellent and beyond comparison, so is its author. It follows that if a writer is worth reading, his merit rises just in proportion as he owes little to his matter; therefore, the better known and the more hackneyed this is, the greater he will be. The three great tragedians of Greece, for example, all worked at the same subject-matter.

So when a book is celebrated, care should be taken to note whether it is so on account of its matter or its form; and a distinction should be made accordingly.

Books of great importance on account of their matter may proceed from very ordinary and shallow people, by the fact that they alone have had access to this matter; books, for instance, which describe journeys in distant lands, rare natural phenomena, or experiments; or historical occurrences of which the writers were witnesses, or in connection with which they have spent much time and trouble in the research and special study of original documents.

On the other hand, where the matter is accessible to everyone or very well known, everything will depend upon the form; and what it is that is thought about the matter will give the book all the value it possesses. Here only a really distinguished man will be able to produce anything worth reading; for the others will think nothing but what anyone else can think. They will just produce an impress of their own minds; but this is a print of which everyone possesses the original.

However, the public is very much more concerned to have matter than form; and for this very reason it is deficient in any high degree of culture. The public shows its preference in this respect in the most laughable way when it comes to deal with poetry; for there it devotes much trouble to the task of tracking out the actual events or personal circumstances in the life of the poet which served as the occasion of his various works; nay, these events and circumstances come in the end to be of greater importance than the works themselves; and rather than read Goethe himself, people prefer

to read what has been written about him, and to study the legend of Faust more industriously than the drama of that name. And when Bürger declared that "people would write learned disquisitions on the question, Who Leonora really was," we find this literally fulfilled in Goethe's case; for we now possess a great many learned disquisitions on Faust and the legend attaching to him. Study of this kind is, and remains, devoted to the material of the drama alone. To give such preference to the matter over the form, is as though a man were to take a fine Etruscan vase, not to admire its shape or coloring, but to make a chemical analysis of the clay and paint of which it is composed.

The attempt to produce an effect by means of the material employed – an attempt which panders to this evil tendency of the public – is most to be condemned in branches of literature where any merit there may be lies expressly in the form; I mean, in poetical work. For all that, it is not rare to find bad dramatists trying to fill the house by means of the matter about which they write. For example, authors of this kind do not shrink from putting on the stage any man who is in any way celebrated, no matter whether his life may have been entirely devoid of dramatic incident; and sometimes, even, they do not wait until the persons immediately connected with him are dead.

The distinction between matter and form to which I am here alluding also holds good of conversation. The chief qualities which enable a man to converse well are intelligence, discernment, wit and vivacity: these supply the form of conversation. But it is not long before attention has to be paid to the matter of which he speaks; in other words, the subjects about which it is possible to converse with him – his knowledge. If this is very small, his conversation will not be worth anything, unless he possesses the above-named formal qualities in a very exceptional degree; for he will have nothing to talk about but those facts of life and nature which everybody knows. It will be just the opposite, however, if a man is deficient in these formal qualities, but has an amount of knowledge which lends value to what he says. This value will then depend entirely upon the matter of his conversation; for, as the Spanish proverb has it, *mas sabe el necio en su casa, que el sabio en la agena* – a fool knows more of his own business than a wise man does of others.

ON STYLE

Style is the physiognomy of the mind, and a safer index to character than the face. To imitate another man's style is like wearing a mask, which, be it never so fine, is not long in arousing disgust and abhorrence, because it is lifeless; so that even the ugliest living face is better. Hence those who write in Latin and copy the manner of ancient authors, may be said to speak through a mask; the reader, it is true, hears what they say, but he cannot observe their physiognomy too; he cannot see their *style*. With the Latin works of writers who think for themselves, the case is different, and their style is visible; writers, I mean, who have not condescended to any sort of imitation, such as Scotus Erigena, Petrarch, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, and many others. An affectation in style is like making grimaces. Further, the language in which a man writes is the physiognomy of the nation to which he belongs; and here there are many hard and fast differences, beginning from the language of the Greeks, down to that of the Caribbean islanders.

To form a provincial estimate of the value of a writer's productions, it is not directly necessary to know the subject on which he has thought, or what it is that he has said about it; that would imply a perusal of all his works. It will be enough, in the main, to know *how* he has thought. This, which means the essential temper or general quality of his mind, may be precisely determined by his style. A man's style shows the *formal* nature of all his thoughts – the formal nature which can never change, be the subject or the character of his thoughts what it may: it is, as it were, the dough out of which all the contents of his mind are kneaded. When Eulenspiegel was asked how long it would take to walk to the next village, he gave the seemingly incongruous answer: *Walk*. He wanted to find out by the man's pace the distance he would cover in a given time. In the same way, when I have read a few pages of an author, I know fairly well how far he can bring me.

Every mediocre writer tries to mask his own natural style, because in his heart he knows the truth of what I am saying. He is thus forced, at the outset, to give up any attempt at being frank or naïve – a privilege which is thereby reserved for superior minds, conscious of their own worth, and therefore sure of themselves. What I mean is that these everyday writers are absolutely unable to resolve upon writing just as they think; because they have a notion that, were they to do so, their work might possibly look very childish and simple. For all that, it would not be without its value. If they would only go honestly to work, and say, quite simply, the things they have really thought, and just as they have thought them, these writers would be readable and, within their own proper sphere, even instructive.

But instead of that, they try to make the reader believe that their thoughts have gone much further and deeper than is really the case. They say what they have to say in long sentences that wind about in a forced and unnatural way; they coin new words and write prolix periods which go round and round the thought and wrap it up in a sort of disguise. They tremble between the two separate aims of communicating what they want to say and of concealing it. Their object is to dress it up so that it may look learned or deep, in order to give people the impression that there is very much more in it than for the moment meets the eye. They either jot down their thoughts bit by bit, in short, ambiguous, and paradoxical sentences, which apparently mean much more than they say, – of this kind of writing Schelling's treatises on natural philosophy are a splendid instance; or else they hold forth with a deluge of words and the most intolerable diffusiveness, as though no end of fuss were necessary to make the reader understand the deep meaning of their sentences, whereas it is some quite simple if not actually trivial idea, – examples of which may be found in plenty in the popular works of Fichte, and the philosophical manuals of a hundred other miserable dunces not worth mentioning; or, again, they try to write in some particular style which they have been pleased to take up and think very grand, a style, for example, *par excellence* profound and scientific, where the reader is tormented to death by the narcotic effect of longspun periods without a single idea in them, – such as

are furnished in a special measure by those most impudent of all mortals, the Hegelians¹; or it may be that it is an intellectual style they have striven after, where it seems as though their object were to go crazy altogether; and so on in many other cases. All these endeavors to put off the *nascetur ridiculus mus* – to avoid showing the funny little creature that is born after such mighty throes – often make it difficult to know what it is that they really mean. And then, too, they write down words, nay, even whole sentences, without attaching any meaning to them themselves, but in the hope that someone else will get sense out of them.

And what is at the bottom of all this? Nothing but the untiring effort to sell words for thoughts; a mode of merchandise that is always trying to make fresh openings for itself, and by means of odd expressions, turns of phrase, and combinations of every sort, whether new or used in a new sense, to produce the appearance of intellect in order to make up for the very painfully felt lack of it.

It is amusing to see how writers with this object in view will attempt first one mannerism and then another, as though they were putting on the mask of intellect! This mask may possibly deceive the inexperienced for a while, until it is seen to be a dead thing, with no life in it at all; it is then laughed at and exchanged for another. Such an author will at one moment write in a dithyrambic vein, as though he were tipsy; at another, nay, on the very next page, he will be pompous, severe, profoundly learned and prolix, stumbling on in the most cumbrous way and chopping up everything very small; like the late Christian Wolf, only in a modern dress. Longest of all lasts the mask of unintelligibility; but this is only in Germany, whither it was introduced by Fichte, perfected by Schelling, and carried to its highest pitch in Hegel – always with the best results.

And yet nothing is easier than to write so that no one can understand; just as contrarily, nothing is more difficult than to express deep things in such a way that every one must necessarily grasp them. All the arts and tricks I have been mentioning are rendered superfluous if the author really has any brains; for that allows him to show himself as he is, and confirms to all time Horace's maxim that good sense is the source and origin of good style:

Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons.

But those authors I have named are like certain workers in metal, who try a hundred different compounds to take the place of gold – the only metal which can never have any substitute. Rather than do that, there is nothing against which a writer should be more upon his guard than the manifest endeavor to exhibit more intellect than he really has; because this makes the reader suspect that he possesses very little; since it is always the case that if a man affects anything, whatever it may be, it is just there that he is deficient.

That is why it is praise to an author to say that he is *naïve*; it means that he need not shrink from showing himself as he is. Generally speaking, to be *naïve* is to be attractive; while lack of naturalness is everywhere repulsive. As a matter of fact we find that every really great writer tries to express his thoughts as purely, clearly, definitely and shortly as possible. Simplicity has always been held to be a mark of truth; it is also a mark of genius. Style receives its beauty from the thought it expresses; but with sham-thinkers the thoughts are supposed to be fine because of the style. Style is nothing but the mere silhouette of thought; and an obscure or bad style means a dull or confused brain.

The first rule, then, for a good style is that *the author should have something to say*; nay, this is in itself almost all that is necessary. Ah, how much it means! The neglect of this rule is a fundamental trait in the philosophical writing, and, in fact, in all the reflective literature, of my country, more especially since Fichte. These writers all let it be seen that they want to appear as though they had something to say; whereas they have nothing to say. Writing of this kind was brought in by the pseudo-philosophers at the Universities, and now it is current everywhere, even among the first literary notabilities of the age. It is the mother of that strained and vague style, where there seem to be two or even more meanings in the sentence; also of that prolix and cumbrous manner of expression,

¹ In their Hegel-gazette, commonly known as *Jahrbücher der wissenschaftlichen Literatur*.

called *le stile empesé*; again, of that mere waste of words which consists in pouring them out like a flood; finally, of that trick of concealing the direst poverty of thought under a farrago of never-ending chatter, which clacks away like a windmill and quite stupefies one – stuff which a man may read for hours together without getting hold of a single clearly expressed and definite idea.² However, people are easy-going, and they have formed the habit of reading page upon page of all sorts of such verbiage, without having any particular idea of what the author really means. They fancy it is all as it should be, and fail to discover that he is writing simply for writing's sake.

On the other hand, a good author, fertile in ideas, soon wins his reader's confidence that, when he writes, he has really and truly *something to say*; and this gives the intelligent reader patience to follow him with attention. Such an author, just because he really has something to say, will never fail to express himself in the simplest and most straightforward manner; because his object is to awake the very same thought in the reader that he has in himself, and no other. So he will be able to affirm with Boileau that his thoughts are everywhere open to the light of the day, and that his verse always says something, whether it says it well or ill:

Ma pensée au grand jour partout s'offre et s'expose, Et mon vers, bien ou mal,
dit toujours quelque chose:

while of the writers previously described it may be asserted, in the words of the same poet, that they talk much and never say anything at all —*quiparlant beaucoup ne disent jamais rien*.

Another characteristic of such writers is that they always avoid a positive assertion wherever they can possibly do so, in order to leave a loophole for escape in case of need. Hence they never fail to choose the more *abstract* way of expressing themselves; whereas intelligent people use the more *concrete*; because the latter brings things more within the range of actual demonstration, which is the source of all evidence.

There are many examples proving this preference for abstract expression; and a particularly ridiculous one is afforded by the use of the verb *to condition* in the sense of *to cause* or *to produce*. People say *to condition something* instead of *to cause it*, because being abstract and indefinite it says less; it affirms that *A* cannot happen without *B*, instead of that *A* is caused by *B*. A back door is always left open; and this suits people whose secret knowledge of their own incapacity inspires them with a perpetual terror of all positive assertion; while with other people it is merely the effect of that tendency by which everything that is stupid in literature or bad in life is immediately imitated – a fact proved in either case by the rapid way in which it spreads. The Englishman uses his own judgment in what he writes as well as in what he does; but there is no nation of which this eulogy is less true than of the Germans. The consequence of this state of things is that the word *cause* has of late almost disappeared from the language of literature, and people talk only of *condition*. The fact is worth mentioning because it is so characteristically ridiculous.

The very fact that these commonplace authors are never more than half-conscious when they write, would be enough to account for their dullness of mind and the tedious things they produce. I say they are only half-conscious, because they really do not themselves understand the meaning of the words they use: they take words ready-made and commit them to memory. Hence when they write, it is not so much words as whole phrases that they put together —*phrases banales*. This is the explanation of that palpable lack of clearly-expressed thought in what they say. The fact is that they do not possess the *die* to give this stamp to their writing; clear thought of their own is just what they have not got. And what do we find in its place? – a vague, enigmatical intermixture of words, current phrases, hackneyed terms, and fashionable expressions. The result is that the foggy stuff they write is like a page printed with very old type.

² Select examples of the art of writing in this style are to be found almost *passim* in the *Jahrbücher* published at Halle, afterwards called the *Deutschen Jahrbücher*.

On the other hand, an intelligent author really speaks to us when he writes, and that is why he is able to rouse our interest and commune with us. It is the intelligent author alone who puts individual words together with a full consciousness of their meaning, and chooses them with deliberate design. Consequently, his discourse stands to that of the writer described above, much as a picture that has been really painted, to one that has been produced by the use of a stencil. In the one case, every word, every touch of the brush, has a special purpose; in the other, all is done mechanically. The same distinction may be observed in music. For just as Lichtenberg says that Garrick's soul seemed to be in every muscle in his body, so it is the omnipresence of intellect that always and everywhere characterizes the work of genius.

I have alluded to the tediousness which marks the works of these writers; and in this connection it is to be observed, generally, that tediousness is of two kinds; objective and subjective. A work is objectively tedious when it contains the defect in question; that is to say, when its author has no perfectly clear thought or knowledge to communicate. For if a man has any clear thought or knowledge in him, his aim will be to communicate it, and he will direct his energies to this end; so that the ideas he furnishes are everywhere clearly expressed. The result is that he is neither diffuse, nor unmeaning, nor confused, and consequently not tedious. In such a case, even though the author is at bottom in error, the error is at any rate clearly worked out and well thought over, so that it is at least formally correct; and thus some value always attaches to the work. But for the same reason a work that is objectively tedious is at all times devoid of any value whatever.

The other kind of tediousness is only relative: a reader may find a work dull because he has no interest in the question treated of in it, and this means that his intellect is restricted. The best work may, therefore, be tedious subjectively, tedious, I mean, to this or that particular person; just as, contrarily, the worst work may be subjectively engrossing to this or that particular person who has an interest in the question treated of, or in the writer of the book.

It would generally serve writers in good stead if they would see that, whilst a man should, if possible, think like a great genius, he should talk the same language as everyone else. Authors should use common words to say uncommon things. But they do just the opposite. We find them trying to wrap up trivial ideas in grand words, and to clothe their very ordinary thoughts in the most extraordinary phrases, the most far-fetched, unnatural, and out-of-the-way expressions. Their sentences perpetually stalk about on stilts. They take so much pleasure in bombast, and write in such a high-flown, bloated, affected, hyperbolical and acrobatic style that their prototype is Ancient Pistol, whom his friend Falstaff once impatiently told to say what he had to say *like a man of this world*.³

There is no expression in any other language exactly answering to the French *stile empesé*; but the thing itself exists all the more often. When associated with affectation, it is in literature what assumption of dignity, grand airs and primeness are in society; and equally intolerable. Dullness of mind is fond of donning this dress; just as an ordinary life it is stupid people who like being demure and formal.

An author who writes in the prim style resembles a man who dresses himself up in order to avoid being confounded or put on the same level with a mob – a risk never run by the *gentleman*, even in his worst clothes. The plebeian may be known by a certain showiness of attire and a wish to have everything spick and span; and in the same way, the commonplace person is betrayed by his style.

Nevertheless, an author follows a false aim if he tries to write exactly as he speaks. There is no style of writing but should have a certain trace of kinship with the *epigraphic* or *monumental* style, which is, indeed, the ancestor of all styles. For an author to write as he speaks is just as reprehensible as the opposite fault, to speak as he writes; for this gives a pedantic effect to what he says, and at the same time makes him hardly intelligible.

³ *King Henry IV.*, Part II. Act v. Sc. 3.

An obscure and vague manner of expression is always and everywhere a very bad sign. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it comes from vagueness of thought; and this again almost always means that there is something radically wrong and incongruous about the thought itself – in a word, that it is incorrect. When a right thought springs up in the mind, it strives after expression and is not long in reaching it; for clear thought easily finds words to fit it. If a man is capable of thinking anything at all, he is also always able to express it in clear, intelligible, and unambiguous terms. Those writers who construct difficult, obscure, involved, and equivocal sentences, most certainly do not know aright what it is that they want to say: they have only a dull consciousness of it, which is still in the stage of struggle to shape itself as thought. Often, indeed, their desire is to conceal from themselves and others that they really have nothing at all to say. They wish to appear to know what they do not know, to think what they do not think, to say what they do not say. If a man has some real communication to make, which will he choose – an indistinct or a clear way of expressing himself? Even Quintilian remarks that things which are said by a highly educated man are often easier to understand and much clearer; and that the less educated a man is, the more obscurely he will write —*plerumque accidit ut faciliora sint ad intelligendum et lucidiora multo que a doctissimo quoque dicuntur... Erit ergo etiam obscurior quo quisque deterior.*

An author should avoid enigmatical phrases; he should know whether he wants to say a thing or does not want to say it. It is this indecision of style that makes so many writers insipid. The only case that offers an exception to this rule arises when it is necessary to make a remark that is in some way improper.

As exaggeration generally produces an effect the opposite of that aimed at; so words, it is true, serve to make thought intelligible – but only up to a certain point. If words are heaped up beyond it, the thought becomes more and more obscure again. To find where the point lies is the problem of style, and the business of the critical faculty; for a word too much always defeats its purpose. This is what Voltaire means when he says that *the adjective is the enemy of the substantive*

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