

THE CENTRAL PROBLEM OF STYLE*



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STYLE is a quality of language which communicates precisely emotions or thoughts, or a system of emotions or thoughts, peculiar to the author. Where thought predominates, there the expression will be in prose; where emotion predominates, the expression will be indifferently in prose or poetry, except that in the case of overwhelming immediate personal emotion the tendency is to find expression in poetry. Style is perfect when the communication of the thought or emotion is exactly accomplished; its position in the scale of absolute greatness, however, will depend upon the compre-

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hensiveness of the system of emotions and thoughts to which the reference is perceptible.

It is impossible to avoid ambiguities and vagueness in such a definition: the material does not admit of definition in the ordinary sense of the word. I hope, however, that I have avoided using any term that has not had some content at least given to it in the course of my previous lectures. There is, nevertheless, one phrase of which, I know, I cannot fairly say this. The phrase is vital; everything depends upon it. There, if anywhere, is hidden the secret of the mystery.

I have spoken 'of language which communicates precisely thoughts and emotions'; I have spent a good deal of time in trying to elucidate some of the various forms that emotions and thoughts may take in the author's mind: and I have left without investigation, as though it were the most ordinary occurrence in the world, this activity of 'precise communication'. Believe me, I did this without any intention of burking the issue, but simply because to postpone the crucial discussion seemed the only way of keeping a sense of proportion about it. For style wholly depends upon this precise communication; where it is not, style does not exist; yet the danger of trying to grapple with it immediately is that we are left with no criterion to distinguish between the excellences of style. It seems to me a fundamental fact that there is a hierarchy in literature, and therefore in literary style; any critical attempt which affects to ignore this fundamental fact (as a great deal of even the best recent literary criticism has done) is incomplete and unsatisfactory.

After all, you may feel that 'the precise communication of emotion and thought' is really a simple matter. For some obscure reason, it sounds simple; and perhaps in the case of pure thought it is not so difficult. I suppose that Euclid, once he had conceived the forty-seventh proposition of the first book, found it easy enough to write it out. The difficulty lay in conceiving the thing at all. But with this kind of communication of thoughts, or communication of this kind of thoughts, literature has very little to do. Sometimes it is necessary to the articulation of a great work of literature, as the logical argument is necessary to the structure of Plato's *Republic*; but regarded in and for itself it falls outside the scope of the

literary art. I am aware that there is such a thing as style in a purely logical argument, and even more perceptibly in the solution of the more abstruse problems of mathematics—Lord Rayleigh's style was elegant, I am told, while Henri Poincaré's had the dazzling brilliance of a flash of lightning—but, having little logic and no mathematics, I am incompetent to discuss these things, so that even though I feel that a competent examination of them might help not a little to an understanding of literary style, they must perforce be left aside.

In literature there is no such thing as pure thought; in literature, thought is always the handmaid of emotion. Even in comedy and satire, where the interposition of thought is most constantly manifest, emotion is the driving impulse; but in these kinds the emotion is restricted, because it has a conventional basis. It is not the less real for that, of course, but it is of a peculiar kind, and needs to be mediated in a peculiar way. But the thought of which we are talking when we speak of it as predominant or subordinate in a work of literature has nothing to do with the pure thought of the logician, the scientist, or the mathematician. The essential quality of pure thought (as far as I understand it at all) is that it should lend itself to complete expression by symbols which have a constant and invariable value. Words, as we all know, are not symbols of this kind; they are inconstant and variable; and I believe that it is rapidly coming to be accepted that the metaphysician who uses ordinary words is merely a bad poet, or a good one. Plato and Spinoza were good poets; Hegel a rather poor one.

The thought that plays a part in literature is systematized emotion, emotion become habitual till it attains the dignity of conviction. The 'fundamental brain-work' of a great play or a great novel is not performed by the reason, pure or practical; even the transcendental essayist is merely engaged in trying to get his emotions on to paper. The most austere psychological analyst, even one who, like Stendhal, really imagined he was exercising *la lo-gique*, is only attempting to get some order into his own instinctive reactions. In one way or another the whole of literature consists in this communication of emotion. How is it done? Let us see what we can do with a simple instance.

At the moment I am writing these words, I am distinctly depressed. I have left the composition of these lectures too long, and I am pressed for time; I am very doubtful whether I shall be able to systematize my emotions. The place where I am living is supposed to be in perpetual sunshine. That is the only reason for living there. The wind is howling; the sky is overcast; and there has not been a really fine day for a fortnight. . . .

I could have gone on for a page or two in this way, and I doubt very much whether I should have given any more definite idea of my emotional state at the moment I wrote those words than I have already done. But what does my reader know of it really? He knows some of the circumstances; by exercising his imagination he can evoke in himself an emotional condition that may be similar to mine; but there is no telling. I have not communicated my emotion to him, for to communicate an emotion means, in fact, to impose an emotion. To do this, I have to find some symbol which will evoke in him an emotional reaction as nearly as possible identical with the emotion I am feeling. Do not mistake me when I say symbol; I use the word because I cannot think of a better at the moment; I mean to include in it any device of expression that is not merely descriptive. The method I used in those few lines was to recapitulate the circumstances, my assumption being that like conditions will produce like effects. But on both sides there is unfortunately an unknown quantity: my temperament is an x , my reader's is a y . The product that results from the combination of those given circumstances with x may be, probably will be, very different from the result of their combination with y . There are only two guarantees that the emotional effect will be approximately the same: the one, that there is a general average of temperament on which similar conditions will produce similar effects; the other, the general limitation of the emotion by the words: 'I am depressed'. Both are vague; both are risky. The mesh of my net, in fact, has been made so wide that it is all Lombard Street to a china orange that the particularity of the emotion is lost.

This, I think, is the central problem of style, as it presents itself to the writer. The question is, how shall he compel others to feel the peculiarity of his emotion? In this example

the emotion is quite simple and quite personal; there is nothing profound or comprehensive about it: we are discussing a most elementary case. But the same principle is involved, the same problem is to be solved in the most complicated cases of all, where the writer's emotions have been systematized into a self-consistent whole, and are being projected on to an appropriate plot that has been formed in his mind. Each separate emotion has to be conveyed in its particularity.

The only definition of style I know which formulates the problem as it presents itself to the writer is that of Henri Beyle (Stendhal), which I have already quoted. It may be said, 'Is not that fact itself rather suspicious—only one?' I replied, 'Not at all.' The fact is that writers, when they deliver themselves upon the subject of style, are hardly ever grappling with the process of their own activity. The conception of style, itself, is a little alien to the mind of the creative writer; it is not a term which he uses naturally. He thinks to himself in a curious, analogical language; he asks himself, 'Is this alive?'; he says, 'I think that's *solid*'; or he wonders, 'Does that make its effect?' Even for a writer who is consciously and deliberately preoccupied with the question of style, there is something awkward and unnatural in confronting his problem under that name. It is as though he had to put on his dress-clothes to talk about a job he does habitually in his oldest jacket. So it is that when writers make pronouncements on, and give definitions of, style, they are usually moved to do so by some particularly nauseating critical clap-trap that is going the rounds at the time. Some harmless and well-meaning lady at a dinner party repeats something she has read (she has forgotten where) to the effect that Mr. X has a beautiful style. The rather reticent professional writer at her side tries to swallow his indignation and fails: it goes to his head: his cheeks flush a bright pink. 'Style', he says, 'is the man himself.' It may have been meant as a withering insult to Mr. X; it may have been intended as a profession of faith: no one knows exactly, not even the author.

Most of the famous statements on style belong to this kind; they are protests. Their obvious bearing is negative, though their implications are positive. Generally they mean, 'Don't talk to me about style: there ain't no sich person. There's good

writing and there's bad writing.' To attempt to separate the element of style in good writing—well, remember *The Tale of a Tub*: 'Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe how much it altered her person for the worse.' The fact is that nine times out of ten, when a serious author makes use of the word Style, he is trying, as thousands of his tribe have tried before, to correct the heresies of the critics: style is not an isolable quality of writing; it is writing itself. And, of course, the author is right.

The only thing to do is to drop the word altogether—I am afraid it has a trick of disappearing from the surface of these lectures—and turn on the writer, and ask him: 'What is good writing?' The odds are heavy that he will think gloomily for a minute or two, then wave his hands, and let loose a flood of discourse in which you will perceive—'rari nantees in gurgite vasto'—phrases of the kind I have described. 'Well, it has to be solid . . . alive . . . economical . . . you must get your effect across.' Each of these phrases is, if you can interpret it, extremely valuable; each has a whole semi-conscious theory of artistic creation behind it; but their significance is not on the surface. And it is in the nature of things very seldom that you find a writer whose intelligence is sufficiently cool, or whose power of analysis steady enough, for him to formulate his meaning in terms that are at all precise. Generally you have to be content with casual *obiter dicta*, little examples that linger much longer in the memory than you would have expected of them; as when Anton Tchekhov wrote to a writer friend of his who had sent him a story for his opinion: 'Cut out all those pages about the moonlight, and give us instead what you feel about it—the reflection of the moon in a piece of broken bottle'; or when Dostoevsky, in a similar case, said to a writer who had described the throwing of pennies to an organ man in the street below, 'I want to hear that penny *hopping and chinking*'.

Stendhal is the only writer I know who formulated the general proposition of which these are particular instances; and Stendhal was a very peculiar writer indeed. He wrote two of the greatest of all French novels; yet his style—in the most familiar sense of the word—was nonexistent. It is absolutely bare, and in many ways astonishingly careless; for instance, he even dared to write that a lady sent her lover *une lettre*

infinie. He professed—and I do not think it was a mystification—to spend his mornings studying the Code Napoléon as a model of clear expression; that same Code Napoléon which was to send young Flaubert into a delirium of rage—‘quelque chose d’aussi sec, d’aussi dur, d’aussi puant et platement bourgeois que les bancs de bois de l’école où on va s’endurcir les fesses à en entendre l’explication’.¹ Yet, with an instrument shaped after this pattern, Stendhal wrote two novels which belong to the same class as *Madame Bovary*. I do not think that anyone has ever more resolutely reduced the art of writing to essentials than Stendhal. He had an analytical and critical mind; there was some reason to expect that he would give us the best of all the definitions of style. He did so. Naturally, since Stendhal was the author, it reads *like* a definition. He says in *Racine et Shakespeare*: ‘Le style est ceci; Ajouter à une pensée donnée toutes les circonstances propres à produire tout l’effet que doit produire cette pensée.’ ‘Style is this: to add to a given thought all the circumstances fitted to produce the whole effect that the thought ought to produce.’

The first thing to remember in examining this definition is that ‘thought’ (as I have said before) does not really mean ‘thought’; it is a general term to cover intuitions, convictions, perceptions, and their accompanying emotions before they have undergone the process of artistic expression or rejection. A man like Stendhal, brought up in the French sensationist philosophy of the late eighteenth century, lumps them all together under the name of thoughts. For instance, the feeling of depression in my simple instance of the practical problem of style cannot by any courtesy be called a thought; but Stendhal means such things as these; Tchekhov’s vision of the moonlight, Dostoevsky’s of the sounding penny—these are ‘thoughts’. The second point is in the phrase, ‘the whole effect which the thought ought to produce.’ A more truly accurate translation, I think, would be: ‘the whole effect which the thought is intended to produce.’ At all events, the French hovers between the two meanings. It may occur to someone that a perception, an emotion, a thought naturally will produce the effect it ought, or is intended to,

produce; it may seem that it cannot help itself. Express your thought, and it is bound to produce its proper effect. It depends upon what is meant by expression. To return to my crude example: when I wrote ‘I am depressed’, I may fairly claim to have ‘expressed’ my thought; but we all know it does not produce its effect. Ah, but it has to be expressed *precisely*. But mark what happened when I began to try to express it precisely; I did exactly what Stendhal tells me to do. I began to add circumstances. I knew instinctively that I could not give my feeling any more precise *definition*: depression is an ultimate or primary conception in psychology. To communicate the particular quality of my depression, I simply had to try to enable my reader to recreate it for himself.

Now, perhaps, if I were to persevere in that road, I might, after a few pages of laborious analysis, succeed in putting before him enough of the attendant circumstances, enough details of my temperament and environment, for him to appreciate my emotional condition fairly exactly. But life is short, and so is his forbearance; my narrative—for we will suppose that I am at the beginning of a narrative—hangs fire. The proportion will be absolutely lost. The effect of the whole thought, of which this particular emotional incident is only a tiny fragment, would be ruined. The method of simple enumeration may possibly do if I am writing sentimental autobiography (which Heaven forbid!), but it certainly will not do for anything else. The exhaustive method may produce a sort of style, but it is style in deliquescence. I may say that Stendhal’s own style was highly concentrated: one might almost call it a tabloid style.

No, the circumstances I have to look for must be somehow charged with the maximum of significance; they must be compact. This emotion has its place in my supposed narrative, but it must not exceed its place: I must on no account shoot beyond my mark—all the effect the thought ought to produce—no less and no more. ‘Selection’, murmurs the critic. Oh, bother ‘selection’; show me what to select, and how. Besides, Stendhal, who had at least the advantage of having written a couple of masterpieces, says ‘Add’. Ah, but you have to select what you will add. Select from what? From among the nine hundred and ninety-nine attendant circumstances my laborious analysis would have provided me with.

¹ *Correspondance*, i., p. 42.

I cannot even wait to review them all; I should lose all contact with the emotion which I trust is to inspire my narrative as a whole. Selection is a broken reed; it is a stout staff only in the belief of those critics who imagine that style is produced by a painful re-polishing of the surface. We know that it is something more intimate and vital than that.

I trust to my mother wit, and try to write my opening paragraph again:

'I am depressed; depressed by the prospect of crowding the work of a year into three weeks; by living sunless in a house and town that were built only for sunshine. A cold wind prowls round the windows. The peach-tree in the garden came into flower too soon; the cold and the wind have stripped it. I too have been premature.'

Please do not imagine that I have the hardihood to present you with that as an achievement of style. The making of specimens to order is bound to be unsatisfactory; but I can see no better way of reducing vagueness to a minimum.

In technical language, the second redaction differs from the first by having been made 'more solid'. It has been pulled together. The period has been compressed and given a little more shape. The effort has also been made to give it a little more life. The wind no longer 'howls', it 'prowls'; which, at any rate, gives one a better idea of the particular beastliness of the wind with which I was afflicted. And I have tried to use the fate of my peach-tree as a sort of symbol of my own mental condition; I have, if you like, 'selected' that from the host of attendant circumstances, though I assure you I *did nothing* of the kind. The peach-tree seemed to fit my case pretty well; it simply rose up before my mind when I determined to make the attempt to convey the particular quality of my feeling. I was so satisfied with the likeness that I practically identified myself with the tree, and so slipped more or less unconsciously into a metaphor to clinch my period.

From this hot-house specimen of the process of writing one may derive some idea of what Stendhal meant by 'adding to a given thought all the circumstances fitted to produce the whole effect the thought is intended to produce'. Incidentally, this adding of circumstances has involved the adding of at least two metaphors. 'The wind howls' was once a meta-

phor; but it is so no longer, it has passed into current speech. 'The wind prowls' is a metaphor; but it was not deliberately introduced as one. I was simply in search of a more exactly descriptive word. Precisely the same thing happened with 'I have been premature'. The vision of the tree as typical of the desolating and depressing weather suggested the use of 'premature' as a word more exactly descriptive of my condition than 'depressed', and by the chance it happened that I restored to a word whose metaphorical significance had been lost, its metaphorical freshness. 'Premature' had a picture to give it back its meaning.

I shall return to the subject of metaphor; but, as it is in its natural place here, I should like to emphasize what I previously said in protest against the conception that metaphor is in any useful sense of the word an ornament. A metaphor is the result of the search for a precise epithet. It is no more ornamental than a man's Christian name. For most of the things whose quality a writer wishes to convey there are no precise epithets, simply because he is always engaged in discovering their qualities, and, like the chemist, has to invent names for the elements he discovers. Moreover, I suppose, three-quarters of the epithets we have are old metaphors. Try to be precise, and you are bound to be metaphorical; you simply cannot help establishing affinities between all the provinces of the animate and inanimate world: for the volatile essence you are trying to fix is quality, and in that effort you will inevitably find yourself ransacking heaven and earth for a similitude. That is the simple truth which underlies the Aristotelian dictum on the importance of metaphor; so long, moreover, as we remember that metaphor is essential to precision of language, we shall not be tempted to abuse it. Where a metaphor adds nothing to the precision with which a thought is expressed, then it is unnecessary and to be sacrificed without compunction.

Let us return to our definition. It is, I hope, by now apparent, that the circumstances which a writer must add to his thought to make it completely effective are descriptive and precise, but in a peculiar, and not very obvious way; that the descriptive precision at which he aims is not so much expository as creative. He is not really defining, that is, enabling you to think, but compelling you to feel, in a certain

way. If he is a very deliberate artist he will employ all kinds of resources in his effort; he will, for instance, endeavour to give his sentences or his verses a rhythm that will co-operate in and intensify the feeling he is trying to produce. There are some rather hackneyed examples of this device—'The murmuring of innumerable bees', 'The moan of doves in immemorial elms'. Honestly, I don't think much of them. They seem to me clumsy, not very subtle, or very effective. But here is one from Shakespeare that is masterly:

Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises,
 Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt too:
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,
 That if I then had waked after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop on me, that when I wak'd
 I cried to dream again.²

The musical effect of the dominant falling rhythm, caused by the hypermetrical syllable, is perfect: the complete effect of the thought is produced, and with the more astonishing success, because this little speech of Caliban's is suddenly flung into the drunken scene between Stephano and Trinculo. It is a simpler case of the complex harmony of contrast which we found in *Antony and Cleopatra*. A still more striking example from Shakespeare—more striking because the contrast is achieved completely in two lines—occurs at the end of *Hamlet*:

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
 To tell my story.³

As the now forgotten Daniel Webb pointed out in the middle of the eighteenth century, it is impossible to speak the second line distinctly without drawing one's breath in pain. Coming from the lips of the dying Hamlet, and following the perfectly liquid 'Absent thee from felicity awhile', its

² *Tempest*, III. ii. 147.

³ *Hamlet*, V. ii. 361.

effect is doubled; it is the subtle device of a poetic and dramatic genius.

And here is a beautiful example from *Madame Bovary*; Flaubert is describing one of Emma's early meetings with Charles at the Rouault's farm:

Elle le reconduisait alors jusqu'à le première marche du perron. Lorsqu'on n'avait pas encore amené son cheval, elle restait là. On s'était dit adieu, on ne se parlait plus; le grand air l'entourait, levant pêle-mêle les petits cheveux follets de sa nuque, ou secouant sur sa hanche les cordons de son tablier, qui se tortillaient comme des banderoles. Une fois, par un temps de dégel, l'écorce des arbres suintait dans la cour, la neige sur les couvertures de bâtiments se fondait. Elle était sur le seuil; elle alla chercher son ombrelle, elle l'ouvrit. L'ombrelle, de soie gorge-de-pigeon, que traversait le soleil, éclairait de reflets mobiles la peau blanche de sa figure. Elle souriait là-dessous à la chaleur tiède; et on entendait les gouttes d'eau, une à une, tomber sur la moire tendue.

How the slight echo of those drops falling on the tightened silk is prolonged in the memory by the sound of the phrase!

But these devices—an inadequate name for them—though they can be used with superb effect by the masters, are subsidiary. Style does not depend upon them, though it is perfected by them; and in the hands of writers beneath the rank of masters they are very dangerous tools indeed. How many ambitious writers of prose and poetry do we see drowning their effect under the waves of a monotonous and deliberate rhythm? In order that rhythmic effects should be successful they must be differentiated with certainty; and to manage contrasts of rhythm—without contrast there is no differentiation—with so much subtlety that they will remain subordinate to the intellectual suggestion of the words, is the most delicate work imaginable. It is so easy to allow the sound of a phrase to overpower the sense, even when the sense is fairly clear; for when a strong, decided rhythmical movement is running in one's head, it is very hard not to submit to its influence and blunt the edge of one's phrase by continually replacing the less by the more sonorous word. The emotional suggestion of a word does not primarily reside in its sound, but much rather in the imagery and lit-

erary associations it evokes; and *ii.* the vast majority of those words which can be said to have an independent musical value, the musical suggestion is at odds with the meaning. When the musical suggestion is allowed to predominate, decadence of style has begun. I think you will find a great many examples of this sacrifice of the true creativeness of language in Swinburne, and not a few in that much, and within limits rightly, admired modern master, Mr. Conrad.

'Distinctness', says Keats, 'should be the poet's luxury.' The essential quality of good writing is precision; that must be kept at its maximum, and the writer who sacrifices one per cent. of precision for a gain of one hundred per cent. in music is on the downward path. After all, it is only reasonable that it should be so. Every art has its peculiar qualities; an artist in language must do everything in his power to realize the unique possibilities of that medium before he summons in the aid of another medium. Music is a superb and self-sufficient art; its unique possibilities are utterly beyond the range of spoken language. The writer who allows himself to be distracted by the musical possibilities of language is like the dog who dropped the bone for the watery shadow.

On the other hand, just as the author must abstain from following after the mirage of an impossible musical perfection, he must not allow himself to be corrupted by trying to emulate the art of painting. If anything is more wearisome than a long passage of so-called musical prose or poetry, it is a long passage of laborious pictorial description: and the two heresies are about equally prevalent.

The difficulty of trying to expose the pictorial heresy is this. It is true that a most valuable quality—an essential quality—of creative writing is something which may be called 'concreteness'. The writer, in his effort after precision, as we have seen, is continually looking for similitudes in *other* spheres of existence for the thing that he is describing; he is constantly giving as it were a physical turn to the spiritual, and the general effort of metaphor is in this direction. Take for instance, two beautiful Shakespearean metaphors describing that most elusive activity of the mind, thinking in silence. First, the sonnet:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past.

Then, the Queen's description of Hamlet:

Anon, as patient as the female dove
When that her golden couplet are disclosed,
His silence will sit drooping.⁴

In each of these a concrete image is evoked to give definition to the silent thought. There is a crystallization, but it stops as it were half-way. The image is made to rise not before the vision but the imagination. You do not *see* silent thought sitting on the bench; you do not *see* silence in the shape of the drooping dove. The images are bathed in the virtue of the immaterial condition they define. What has happened is not what seemed at first—that the spiritual has been brought down to the physical—but the physical has been taken up to the spiritual. The lofty but vague reality of the spiritual world has been suddenly enriched by something of the infinite, concrete variety of the material world.

This 'crystallization' is central to the effort after precision; it made its appearance, naturally and inevitably, in that somewhat artificial example of my own invention. The forms in which it appears are manifold: sometimes in metaphor, sometimes in a genuine image which we are intended to visualize, as when, at the end of the voyage to Lilliput, Gulliver relates that the king gave him 'his picture at full length, which I immediately put into one of my gloves to keep it from being hurt'—thus Swift sends us away from Lilliput with a perfectly precise notion of the size of the inhabitants and of Gulliver. Again, you have it in that recommendation of Tchekhov's which I quoted, that his friend should 'cut out all those pages about the moonlight and give us what you really feel about it—the reflection in a piece of broken bottle'; you get it in Baudelaire's phrase: '*ces affreuses nuits qui compriment le cœur comme un papier qu'on froisse*'; you get it, in one form or another, in all good writing that is creative, because it is the chief of those circumstances which have to be added to a thought in order that it may be completely effective.

In whatever form it occurs, whether metaphor, image, or significant detail, it appears first as a kind of solidification.

⁴ *Hamlet*, v. i. 308.

And writers, in their anxiety to emphasize the supreme importance of this element in a living style, have often been inclined to say that a writer must be 'plastic'. The phrase sometimes occurs in Flaubert's letters, and Flaubert has had, perhaps, a greater influence than any other single person on the ideas of writers during the last thirty years; it occurs in the letter which Tchekhov wrote to Gorky, when that writer first appeared: 'You are an artist, you feel superbly, you are plastic; that is, when you describe a thing you see it and touch it with your hands: that is real style.' Though we know what these two writers mean when they speak of being plastic, that is, possessing this power of imaginative 'crystallization', the effect of the phrase has been unfortunate; for it needs only a slight distortion to become positively misleading. And a great many people have been misled. There have been those who have thought that the best way to be 'plastic' is for the poet actually to describe works of plastic art: quite a number of the French Parnassians suffered under that hallucination. There have been others who have imagined that they could become plastic by imitating what they (mistakenly) believed to be the process of the plastic artist, the laborious transcription of all the detail seen by the eye: quite a number of Realists have suffered under that hallucination.

So the old misreading of *ut pictura poesis* has been revived, and still lingers on. It has its origin, in the nineteenth century at all events, in the misunderstanding of such phrases as 'solid' and 'plastic' applied by great writers to the products of their own craft. One would have thought it fairly obvious that these epithets could, in the very nature of the case, only be metaphorical; and that nothing in the way of practical precept could be built upon them. But the understanding of them was made difficult by the fact that an essential element in the best kind of writing is, as I have tried to explain, a kind of crystallization, because that is the only method there is of obtaining the maximum of precision. These two really quite separate notions became confused: a metaphor describing the quality of good writing was confused with the actual process of making metaphors, with unsatisfactory results.

The subject is intricate, and, since I wish to disentangle a

further thread from this confusion, I will try to put the matter so far in brief: thus. 'Solid' is a metaphorical epithet applied to writing: it conveys several things—complete economy, complete precision, and over and above these it is understood to imply that the piece of writing has been completely ejected from the author's mind. One of the chief means by which this 'solidity' is achieved is this faculty for discovering a concrete image or a symbol to convey the unique quality of the emotion or thought the writer is trying to communicate. You can see that the critic needs his most delicate instrument in order to keep these conceptions separate, without having a third to complete the tangle. The third distinct conception that insinuates itself is that of 'impersonal' art. A piece of writing from which the recognizable personality of the author is deliberately excluded—and this, again, was promulgated as a necessary ideal by Flaubert in counterblast to the Romantics—may reasonably be, and frequently is, called 'objective'. From 'objective' to 'solid' is a short step, and the step is often taken unconsciously, although there is no reason at all why 'personal' writing should not be every bit as 'solid' as 'impersonal' writing; Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'Outre-tombe* is quite as 'solid' as *Salamambo*. But from the conception of impersonality, you quickly get the notion (by one of those slight distortions that continually recur in the history of literary theories) that the author should lavish, or rather immolate, himself upon the description of inanimate objects; you get, in the last resort, the quite sublime inconsequence of Verlaine's 'Est-elle en marbre ou non, la Vénus de Milo?'

Once more the digression has been long and, I fear, complicated: but the notion of an analogy between literature and the plastic arts is generally so dangerous, and yet, in one or two particular figurative usages, so valuable, that it seemed worth the pains to try to separate the entangled threads, above all, since one of the most distinguished of modern French critics, Remy de Gourmont, has roundly declared that the essence of all style worthy the name is the power to visualize. Sooner or later, that very rudimentary half-truth may become part of the English critical stock-in-trade; it is as well to be on our guard against it.

For the endeavour to reduce the gift of style to the faculty of visualization is really a characteristic French attempt after

a simple hypothesis to explain very complicated facts. It seems to me that the truth is not so much that an author must himself possess a great power of visualization—even where his gift is mainly descriptive—as that he must possess the power of making his readers see things on occasion. I should have thought that those faculties were very different. If anything, I should say that a writer would be embarrassed by an exceedingly exact visual memory. For a visual memory is, in the nature of things, indiscriminating, and what the descriptive writer has to do is to record some salient feature of what he has seen, which will recreate in the mind of his reader something akin to his own vivid emotional impression.

Moreover, from our brief consideration of the nature of metaphor, it seems fairly clear that the precise visual image plays a very small part in it. What happens, I think, is that a perceived quality in one kind of existence is transferred to define a quality in another kind of existence. To hark back to our examples from Shakespeare, there is no precise visual image of the 'sessions', no definite picture even of 'the drooping dove' evoked; there is an evocation of just so much visual background as will enable us to feel the quality that is being transferred.

What I think we may say is that a great creative writer must have a vast store of these perceptions of quality upon which to draw at will. The more he has, the more precise will his writing be; the more exactly will he be able to communicate the quality of his own emotion, and to arouse a kindred emotion in his readers. In other words, it is necessary, in order that a writer should become a writer of the first rank, that his capacity for sensuous experience of every kind should be practically unlimited. But this is not because his greatness as a writer directly depends upon the range of that experience. His emotional experience, refined into a system of emotional conviction, is of a different kind from sensuous experience; the apprehension of the quality of life as a whole, the power to discern the universal in the particular, and to make the particular a symbol of the universal, which is the distinctive mark of the great writer and is apparent in all great style, is derived not from sensuous perceptions but from emotional contemplation. But sensuous perceptions

are necessary for the complete expression of this contemplative experience. The great writer has to carry the articulation of the material world into the world of the spirit; he has to define the indefinable. This is the truth expressed in the familiar lines of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, which deserve to be more closely examined than they usually are. Shakespeare did not often speak of his art: when he did, it was to the point:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

For this task, which Science and Logic alike pronounce impossible, the writer needs an accumulation of vivid sensuous experiences, of perceived qualities with their little fragments of context. This is the magical language of literature with which the poet, in prose or verse, utters secrets which the language of Logic and Science and the converse of everyday were never designed to convey.

Poetry alone can tell her dreams,
With the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable chain
And dumb enchantment.⁵

But these words are not inherited, neither can they be learnt. Every work of enduring literature is not so much a triumph of language as a victory over language: a sudden injection of life-giving perceptions into a vocabulary that is, but for the energy of the creative writer, perpetually on the verge of exhaustion.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY AND WRITING

1. On the basis of what Murry says in his first paragraph, distinguish between prose and poetry.
2. What stylistic evidence can you offer to show that this selection was originally a lecture.

⁵ Keats, *The Fall of Hyperion*.

3. Compare Murry's view of metaphor with that of Herbert Read.
4. Why does Murry *have* to quote Flaubert in French? Can style be translated?
5. Examine Murry's analysis of the nature of metaphor; write several metaphors in the light of his comments. Write a few brief paragraphs on abstractions using metaphor and simile to make the abstract concrete.

PROJECTS FOR STUDY AND WRITING

General Topics

1. "Style is the man himself," is a statement often quoted in this book. If the statement is true, you should—at least to some extent—be able to say something about the writer's character (persona) on the basis of his style. Characterize the writers represented in this anthology on the basis of their styles.
2. Study your own writing, present and past. What does *your* style tell you about yourself?
3. What is the relationship between a writer's style and the end to which the writing is directed? Man is not a one-dimensional creature who expresses himself in only one style. What differences do you note in your writing and the writing of others as the purposes of composition shift, say, from a letter to a teacher, a parent, an intimate friend, girlfriend; a diary; an editorial; an essay for an English class or one for a history class?
4. Compare the different definitions of style proposed by some or all of the writers included in this book. Note the similarities and differences. Classify your findings. Prepare a documented essay analyzing your research into the meanings and uses of the word *style*.
5. Write a paper defining and illustrating what *you* mean by *style*.

A Selective Bibliography