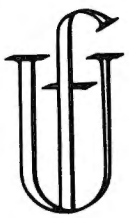
ENGLISH COMPOSITION

Barrett Wendell



FREDERICK UNGAR PUBLISHING CO.
NEW YORK

Republished 1963

First published as "Eight Lectures," 1891

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 63-12917

BARRETT WENDELL

Professor of English at Harvard College, was born in Boston in 1855 and died in Portsmouth, N.H. in 1921. His love for traveling won him the distinction of being a man of the world, as well as a man of letters and a scholar. To his students he was a teacher of rare provocative power, having an original and fertile mind, and an agile, distinctive wit. He was much in demand as a lecturer in England and France. A voluminous writer, a few of his most notable works are *Cotton Mather, A Literary History of America,* and *Stelligeri and Other Essays Concerning America.*

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NOTE.

THESE lectures were given at the Lowell Institute, Boston, in November and December, 1890. Any student of the subject will at once perceive my obligation to the textbooks of Professor A. S. Hill, Professor Bain, Professor Genung, and the late Professor McElroy. My excuse for offering a new treatment of the subject is that I have found none that seemed quite simple enough for popular reading.

B. W.

BOSTON, September, 1891.

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I.

THE ELEMENTS AND THE QUALITIES OF STYLE.

Style is the expression of thought and feeling in written words. All style must impress us, more or less, in three ways, — intellectually, emotionally, and æsthetically; in other words, it must possess or lack Clearness, Force, and Elegance. But all style consists solely of arbitrary signs — letters — which common consent makes symbolic of arbitrary sounds — words — which common consent in turn makes symbolic of the immaterial reality — thought and emotion — which forms our conscious life. In choosing words, we must be governed wholly by this common consent, which we call Good Use. In composing words, we find three distinct stages of composition, — groups of words, which we call Sentences; groups of sentences, which we call Paragraphs; and larger groups, which we call Whole Compositions. In making any of these compositions, we may to advantage observe three general principles. The first, the principle of Unity, concerns the substance of a composition: every composition should group itself about one central idea. The second, the principle of Mass, concerns the external form of a composition: the chief parts of every composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye. The third, the principle of Coherence, concerns the internal arrangement of a composition: the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. In composing sentences, the operation of these principles is greatly limited by good use, in the form of grammar. In composing paragraphs and whole compositions, good use hampers us less and less. And all style may be regarded as the result of a constant conflict between good use and the principles of composition . . . . . *Page* 1.

II.

WORDS.

Words are the names by which good use has agreed that we shall describe ideas. In our choice of words we may never stray beyond the limits of good use. In judging whether a given word be admissible, we may best ask ourselves whether it is a Barbarism — a word not in the language — or an Impropriety, — a word used in a sense not sanctioned by good use. If neither, we may accept it. Within the limits of good use we may produce widely various effects by using, for different purposes, different kinds of words and different numbers. In considering these effects, we should keep in mind three facts: first, that the agreement of good use is not precise, but approximate; secondly, that every word we use does not exhaust its power by identifying the single idea to which good use has attached it; but, thirdly, that at the same time it inevitably suggests a number of other ideas. In choosing words, then, we must always consider two things, — their denotation, what they name; and their connotation, what they suggest . . . . . *Page* 41.

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SENTENCES.

A sentence is a series of words so composed as to make complete sense. In judging whether a given sentence be grammatical, — authorized by good use, — we may best inquire, first, whether it makes good sense, and if not, whether idiom sanctions it; if neither, we may best avoid it as a Solecism. Within the limits of good use we may compose various kinds of sentences. To all these kinds we may apply the principles of Unity, Mass, and Coherence, — principles to which good use apparently is tending to conform. And by varying our kinds of sentences, and applying to all kinds the broadly simple principles of composition, we may indefinitely vary our effects, in both denotation and connotation . . . . . *Page* 76.

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PARAGRAPHS.

A paragraph is to a sentence what a sentence is to a word. The principles which govern the arrangement of sentences in paragraphs, then, are identical with those that govern the arrangement of words in sentences.

And as paragraphs, essentially elements of written discourse, are almost untrammelled by good use, we may now lay down these principles with more decision. A paragraph should generally group itself about one central idea; its chief ideas should generally be in its most conspicuous places; and the relation of each sentence to the context should generally be unmistakable. By varying the arrangement of paragraphs, and by constantly applying these principles, we may indefinitely vary our effects in denotation and connotation alike . . . . . *Page* 114.

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WHOLE COMPOSITIONS.

In composing whole compositions, we are, even more than in paragraphs, free from the hampering influence of good use. We may, then, almost unchecked, apply to our work the principles of composition. And by so doing, we may almost infinitely vary our effects, in denotation and connotation alike . . . . . *Page* 150.

VI.

CLEARNESS.

Clearness is the distinguishing quality of a style that cannot be misunderstood. It is a relative quality; but a generally clear style is a style addressed to the average man. To write with clearness we must of course make ourselves as certain as possible of what we wish to say. Then, remembering that any quality of style can be conveyed to a reader only by means of our choice and composition of the elements, we may ask ourselves whether the elements of style possess any trait distinctly favorable to clearness. And we discover that the secret of clearness lies in denotation . . . . . *Page* 193.

VII.

FORCE.

Force is the distinguishing quality of a style that holds the attention. It consists in such choice and composition of the elements of style as shall not only denote our meaning, but also connote the emotions we have in mind. Tropes, — figures of speech, — which carry the process of forcible selection

one step further, and actually name a connotation, leaving the denotation to be inferred, are the most typical devices we can study with force in view. From a study of them we are brought to see that to cultivate force we must cultivate ourselves in three ways: we must cultivate our perception of what we would express, our knowledge of the human beings we would address, and our mastery of the technical methods at our disposal. We must learn, too, the limits of our powers, lest, straying too near them, we plainly reveal them. And all this means at bottom that the secret of force lies in connotation . . . . . *Page* 234.

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ELEGANCE.

Elegance is the distinguishing quality of a style that pleases the taste. As critics of style we must not concern ourselves with substance, but must grant a writer the privilege of choosing what thought and emotion he would express, and confine ourselves to considering how he has expressed it. So doing, we discover that the secret of elegance lies in the most exquisite possible adaptation of our means to our end. To attain elegance we must strive to develop into mastery both our power of expression and our power of perception in life and in art; for the greater our mastery the greater our power of adaptation. And the secret of elegance lies in adaptation . . . . . *Page* 272.

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I.

THE ELEMENTS AND THE QUALITIES OF STYLE.

During the past ten years I have been chiefly occupied in teaching, to undergraduates of Harvard College, the principles of English Composition. In the course of that time I have been asked a great many questions concerning the art, mostly by friends who found themselves writing for publication. Widely different as these inquiries have naturally been, they have possessed in common one trait sufficiently marked to place them, in my memory, in a single group: almost without exception, they have concerned themselves with matters of detail. Is this word or that admissible? Why, in a piece of writing I once published, did I permit myself to use the apparently commercial phrase "at any rate"? Are not words of Saxon origin invariably preferable to all others? Should sentences be long or short? These random memories are sufficient examples of many hundreds of inquiries.

They have in common, as I have just said, the trait of concerning themselves almost wholly with matters of detail. They have too another trait: generally, if not invariably, they involve a tacit assumption that any given case must be either right or wrong.

These two traits — the one indicative of rather surprising ignorance of the nature of the matter in hand, the other of a profound error — are what has prompted me to prepare this book. Year by year I have seen more and more clearly that although the work of a teacher or a technical critic of style concerns itself largely with the correction of erratic detail, the really important thing for one who would grasp the subject to master is not a matter of detail at all, but a very simple body of general principles under which details readily group themselves. I have seen too that although a small part of the corrections and criticisms I have had to make are concerned with matters of positive error, by far the greater, and incalculably the more important part are concerned with what I may call matters of discretion. The question is not whether a given word or sentence is eternally right or wrong; but rather how accurately it expresses what the writer has to say, — whether the language we use may not afford a different and perhaps a better means of phrasing his idea.

The truth is that in rhetoric, as distinguished from grammar, by far the greater part of the questions that arise concern not right or wrong, but better or worse; and that the way to know what is better or worse in any given case is not to load your memory with bewilderingly innumerable rules, but firmly to grasp a very few simple, elastic general principles. Consciously or not, these principles, I believe, are observed by thoroughly effective writers. Of course,

nothing but long and patient practice can make anybody certain of writing, or of practising any art, well. Of course too if the principles I state be, as I believe them, fundamental, whoever practises much cannot help in some degree observing them; but the experience of ten years' teaching leads me more and more to the belief that a knowledge of the principles is a very great help in practice.

I may best begin, I think, by stating these principles as briefly and as generally as I can. Then I shall try to show how they apply to the more important specific cases that present themselves to writers. Each case, I think, presents them in a somewhat new light. Certainly, without considering them in various aspects we can hardly appreciate their full scope. First of all, it will be convenient to fix a term which shall express the whole subject under consideration. I know of none more precise than Style. A good deal of usage, to be sure, and rather good usage too, gives color to the general impression that *style* means *good style*, just as *criticism* is often taken to mean *unfavorable criticism*, or *manners* to mean *civil behavior*. Very excellent authorities sometimes declare that a given writer has style, and another none; only a little while ago, I heard a decidedly careful talker congratulate himself on having at last discovered, in this closing decade of the nineteenth century, a correspondent who, in spite of our thickening environment of newspapers and telegrams, wrote letters that possessed style. I dwell on this common meaning of the word

style for two reasons: in the first place, clearly to define the sense in which I mean not to use the word; in the second place, to emphasize the fact, which we shall find to be highly important, that in the present state of the English language hardly any word not unintelligibly technical can be trusted to express a precise meaning without the aid of definition. *Style*, as I shall use the term, means simply the expression of thought or emotion in written words; it applies equally to an epic, a sermon, a love-letter, an invitation to an evening party.

This definition brings us face to face with an obvious trait which the art we are considering shares with all the other arts of expression, — painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and indeed those humbler arts, not commonly recognized as fine, where the workman conceives something not yet in existence (a machine, a flower-pot, a sauce) and proceeds, by collaboration of brain and hand, to give it material existence. Thought and emotion, the substance of what style expresses, are things so common, so incessant in earthly experience, that we trouble ourselves to consider them as little as we bother our heads about the marvels of sunrise, of the growth of flowers or men, of the mystery of sin or death, when they do not happen to touch our pockets or our affections. But for all that they are with us from morning till night, and not seldom from night till morning, — for all that together they make up the total sum of what to most of us is a very commonplace affair, our earthly existence, —

thought and emotion, when we stop to consider them, are the most fascinatingly marvellous facts that human beings can contemplate. They are real beyond all other realities. What things are, no man can ever know; analyzed by astronomy, the material universe vanishes in infinite systems of spheres revolving about one another throughout infinitely extended regions of space, in obedience to law that may be recognized, but not comprehended; analyzed by physics, this same material universe vanishes again in infinitely small systems of molecules bound together by the same mysterious forces that govern the stellar universe. The more we study the more we learn that neither the heavens nor the very paper on which I write these words are what they seem, and that what they really are is far beyond the perception of any faculty which the history of the human race can lead us rationally to hope for even in our most remote posterity. But what we think of all these marvels, the forms in which they present themselves to us, we know as we know nothing else. Our whole lives, from the day when our eyes first open to the sunlight, are constant series of thoughts, sometimes seemingly springing from within ourselves, often seeming to come from without ourselves, through the medium of those senses that in careless moods we are apt to think so comprehensive. To each and all of us, the final reality of life is the thought, which, with the endless surge of emotion, — now tempestuous, again almost imperceptible, — makes up conscious existence.

Final realities though they be, however, thought and emotion are essentially things that in our habitual thoughtlessness we are apt to call unreal. As we know them, they are immaterial. No systems can measure their extent or their bulk; and though they are in some degree conditioned by time, it is so slightly that we may almost say — as in a single instant our thought ranges from primeval nebulæ to cosmic death and celestial eternity — they are free from time-limit, as well as from the limits of space. Real at once, then, and unreal, or better, real and intangible, real yet immaterial, each of us who will stop to think must find the thought and the emotion that together make that fresh marvel, — himself. Each of us, I say purposely; for there is one more thing that we must remember here. Like one another as we seem, like one another as the courses of our lives may look, there are no two human beings who tread quite the same road from the cradle to the grave. No one of us in any group has come from quite the same origin as any other; no two, be they twin brothers or husband and wife, can go thence by quite the same path. The laws of space and of time forbid; unspeakably more the still more mysterious laws of thought forbid that any two of us should know and feel just the same experience in this world. If two or three of us, habitually together, suddenly utter the same word, we are surprised. The thought and emotion of every living being, then, is an immaterial reality, eternally different from every other in

the universe; and this is the reality that style must express.

And style, we remember, must express this reality in written words; and written words are things as tangible, as material, as the thought and emotion behind them is immaterial, evanescent, elusive. The task of the writer, then, is a far more subtile and wonderful thing than we are apt to think it: nothing less than to create a material body, that all men may see, for an eternally immaterial reality that only through this imperfect symbol can ever reveal itself to any but the one human being who knows it he knows not how.

When a piece of style — a poem, a book, an essay, a letter — is once in existence, it may perhaps best be considered for the moment from the point of view of readers, of those to whom it is addressed. Any piece of style, we all know, impresses us in a fairly distinct way, which we rarely take the trouble to define. Most readers never know more about it than that it interests or pleases them, or bores or annoys. A little consideration, however, will show, I think, that the undefined impression which any piece of style makes may always be resolved into three parts. Present in widely different degrees in different pieces of style, no one of these factors can ever, I believe, be asserted quite absent. In the first place, you either understand the piece of style before you, or do not understand it, or feel more or less in doubt whether you understand it or not. In the second place, you are either inter-

ested, or bored, or left indifferent. Finally, you are either pleased, or displeased, or doubtful whether you are pleased or not. And the more you analyze your impressions of style the more you will find, unless your experience differs surprisingly from most, that the third state of things I suggest — indifference or doubt — is the rarest. In short, every piece of style may be said to impress readers in three ways, — intellectually, emotionally, æsthetically; to appeal to their understanding, their feelings, their taste. Every quality of style that I know of may be reduced to one of these three classes; and these three — and these three only — are different enough to deserve distinct and careful consideration. Briefly, then, I may say that the qualities of style are three, — intellectual, emotional, and æsthetic. It is convenient to name these qualities; the terms I choose are on the whole the best I have found, — those which Professor Hill, of Harvard College, uses in the most sensible treatment of the art of composition I have yet found in print. To the intellectual quality of style he gives the name "Clearness;" to the emotional, "Force;" to the æsthetic, "Elegance."

To define this generalization, a concrete example is perhaps worth while. In choosing one from personal experience, I commit what many may call a positive sin of egotism. My defence must rest on what I have said already. Style is the expression in words of thought and emotion; each man's thought and emotion differs from every other man's. I confess to a

growing belief that the best thing any one can do, when occasion serves, is to tell us what he himself knows. It may be of small value, but at worst it is not second-hand. When Robert Browning died, then, I found running in my head two lines from a poem of his I had read some years before — the "Grammarian's Funeral," —

> "This is our master, famous, calm, and dead,
> Borne on our shoulders."

I remembered of the poem only that it was a long funeral chorus, if I may use the term, put into the mouths of the pupils of an old Italian professor. At daybreak, one fifteenth-century morning, they are bearing him up to his grave in one of the hill-cities of Central Italy. I turned to the poem and read it through; I was deeply interested from beginning to end. I thought the poem, as I think it still, profoundly characteristic of the writer in that it is among the permanently forcible pieces of our literature. On the other hand, when I had finished the reading, I had very little more notion of what the poem meant in detail than I had had before; again I found it profoundly characteristic of the writer, in that on a single reading it was about as far from clear as human perversity could make it. Finally, in spite of the undoubted fact that there was in it something which not only interested but fascinated me, I found only one passage that at first reading thoroughly pleased me: —

"Sleep, crop and herd. Sleep, darkling thorp and croft,
Safe from the weather!
He, whom we convoy to his grave aloft,
Singing together,
He was a man born with thy face and throat,
Lyric Apollo!"

And even the pleasure I found in the full-throated melody of this refreshingly simple passage was marred by the thought that before I could be sure of what a thorp is or a croft, I should have to consult a dictionary. Elegance, then, save for the splendidly sustained funereal rhythm, I found as notable for its absence as clearness; herein, again, the poem was profoundly characteristic of the writer. But for all its lack of clearness and elegance, the poem had a force I could not resist; I read it over again and again. Each reading made it clearer; each gain in clearness diminished in some degree the annoyance I felt in its apparently deliberate perversity of diction; and now, after some dozens of readings, I think I can understand at least nine lines out of every ten, and I am sure that I find in the poem both an emotional stimulus that constantly strengthens, and a constantly growing if permanently incomplete delight.

In all pieces of style as truly as in this "Grammarian's Funeral," clearness, force, and elegance — or their absence — may readily be detected. The question that naturally presents itself now is how they are produced. To answer this we must approach the subject afresh, and ask ourselves not what

we have experienced, but what we have seen. Clearly, we have seen nothing but written or printed words, — black marks on white paper. It is something inherent in these black marks which has produced the knowledge or the ignorance or the puzzle, the interest or the tedium, the pleasure or the annoyance, of which we are conscious. For the moment, then, we must turn our attention to these written words, these curious black marks, and satisfy ourselves, if we can, what there is in them to produce such notable results.

In themselves, these black marks are nothing but black marks more or less regular in appearance. Modern English type and script are rather simple to the eye. Old English and German are less so; less so still, Hebrew and Chinese. But all alphabets present to the eye pretty obvious traces of regularity; in a written or printed page the same mark will occur over and over again. This is positively all we see, — a number of marks grouped together and occasionally repeated. A glance at a mummy-case, an old-fashioned tea-chest, a Hebrew Bible, will show us all that any eye can ever see in any written or printed document. The outward and visible body of style consists of a limited number of marks which, for all any reader is apt to know, are purely arbitrary.

Whoever knows an alphabet, however, as all of us know the twenty-six letters that compose written English, sees in these black marks, not the marks themselves, but the ideas they stand for. In a rough

way — a very rough way in English — each of these marks is a symbol which stands for one of a limited number of articulate sounds. The sounds for which some of them stand — *b*, for example, *r*, *k*, *s* — are very well fixed; the sounds for which others stand — *c*, notably, and most of the vowels — are various. But in almost any given case, a reasonably trained eye recognizes at a glance what sound a given mark stands for. Now, so far as we can see, there is no relation whatever between the symbol in question and the sound, — not so much as there is between the black marks on a sheet of music and the notes the musician produces in obedience to them, for these at least run up and down the scale as the marks are higher or lower on the written page. What gives to letters the significance which we all understand almost intuitively is simply and solely the tacit agreement of the people who have used them. The only reason why we should not spell *schooner* as a small boy lately spelled it — *squner* — is that the practice of a century or so agrees that it should be spelled otherwise; and that the practice of a number of centuries and languages agrees that in the compound letter *qu*, the *u* has no open vowel-sound. What makes us see in these black marks, then, the sounds the writers mean them to symbolize is exactly what prevents us from seeing in Chinese or Arabic writing anything more than the marks themselves: in the one case we are familiar with the practice on which those who use the letters are tacitly agreed; in the other

we are not. Common consent, general practice, is what makes the English alphabet signify anything. In this fact lies the rather comical hopelessness of the efforts now and then made by innocent dogmatists, not possessed of despotic authority, to reform spelling; for spelling, like other things we shall consider in a moment, is a matter, not of law, but of practice. The question in a given instance is not what ought to be the case, but what is. And to the state of things which enables us to decide in spelling, as in other fashions, what the case is at any given moment, we give, for convenience' sake, the name "Good Use."

I have dwelt on this elementary phase of good use because the reason why the articulate sounds these black marks symbolize are anything more to us than meaningless noises is precisely the same as the reason why letters are anything more than meaningless marks. Language, as the very origin of the word shows, — it means almost exactly what we sometimes express by its synonym *tongue*, — is originally spoken. Utterance, in the history of the human race, indefinitely precedes writing. But language itself consists at bottom only of a limited number of articulate sounds, mostly as arbitrary to our ears as the marks that stand for them are to our eyes. Our own language, and perhaps a few others, we understand so intuitively that we are apt to forget how purely arbitrary they are; but we have only to listen to the talk of foreigners — even of Europeans, far more of grunt-

ing Indians or clicking Hottentots — to be reminded that the sounds we hear and utter are purely symbolic, and that we understand them only because we happen to know what the practice, the common consent, the good use, of those who use them has agreed that they shall stand for.

Perhaps the simplest way of realizing how all language is originally formed is just to recall how we come to know people by name. We meet for the first time a man of whom we know nothing except that he is clothed and to all appearances in his right mind. Somebody tells us that his name is John Jones; thereafter, when we wish to mention him, we utter the monosyllables — in themselves mere arbitrary sounds — John Jones. Pretty soon the syllables in question cease to be arbitrary sounds, and arouse in our minds the extremely specific idea of a human individual, washed, dressed, and amiably disposed, — eternally different too in certain aspects from any other human being on the planet. Or, to take a quite different example: Some years ago I happened to be in a small Sicilian town, infested by contagiously good-humored beggars. When they pressed about me inconveniently, I turned on them, and uttered, among other expressions unhappily not remarkable for politeness, the word *skedaddle*. Somehow it caught their fancy: "Skedaddo!" they shouted in chorus. When I next went out of doors, I was greeted with shouts of "Buon giorno, skedaddo!" The rascals had named me, and called me by the name for the remaining hours of my

stay among them; and a Sicilian gentleman subsequently told me that very probably the word *skedaddo* might become, in the town in question, a permanent generic noun signifying a light-haired foreigner of excitable disposition.

Just as we name or nickname people, our ancestors have named and nicknamed the various ideas which in the course of their history they have had occasion to express. Nowadays there are in the world a great many different languages, many of which, now mutually unintelligible, may easily be traced to a common origin; from Latin, for example, have sprung French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese. But the numerous changes whose accumulation has separated and distinguished these modern languages have all taken place by means of local and increasing differences in use, — in consent as to what a given sound shall mean. Thus, from Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French has sprung the curious hybrid English with which we are chiefly concerned, — the articulate sounds by which the people of England and her dependencies have been agreed, during the past four or five centuries, to express whatever thoughts and emotions they have known.

Now, the first question before any one who would use the English language efficiently — as a vehicle by which thought and emotion may be conveyed to somebody else — is what words are at his disposal. It is clear that we must use the words — the articulate sounds — to which the English-speaking peoples of

the present time agree to attach definite significance; and what these words are we can discover only by such constant observation and care of what is going on about us in the whole English-speaking world as a child or a foreigner would give to a language he was trying to learn. Dictionaries and grammars, to be sure, may codify what exists at any given moment. Regarded as codes, they are invaluable; but at best they are codes of common law, not legislative enactments. The only sanction behind them is that of practice, of usage. Before we can use language with certainty we must understand that beneath all these codes lies the great fact of common human consent. We must learn instinctively to feel this for ourselves, to appreciate it, to judge it. In English, as in every other language, the final test of what words we may use is inevitably the usage of those who speak and write it; the test of what words we should use is the usage of those who speak and write it best, — in other words, good use.

To illustrate this, we may well consider the difference that always exists between the words we ourselves speak and those we write. Closely similar, written language and spoken are yet inevitably different. Whoever says habitually, "He does not," or, "I will not," talks not like a human being, but like a prig; whoever habitually writes, "He does n't," or, "I won't," writes with something like vulgarity. For general purposes we speak the language of the people we address, with all its colloquialisms. In writing,

which we use to communicate thought and emotion to we know not whom nor how many, we must carefully employ only such forms as good use, in its broadest sense, sanctions.

We are now in a position to answer the question we asked ourselves a little while ago. Why is it, we asked, that a certain number of apparently arbitrary black marks on white pages should convey to us all the infinitely varied impressions — intellectual, emotional, æsthetic — that we find in literature? Why is it that style — whose visible body is never anything more or less than these black marks — should impress us primarily as something that possesses or lacks Clearness, Force, and Elegance? Simply and solely because the tacit agreement, the good use of many generations of human beings, who at least linguistically are our ancestors, has consented in the first place that certain articulate sounds shall be fixed as symbols for certain distinct ideas, and in the second place that certain arbitrary marks shall be fixed as symbols for certain distinct sounds. Good use, and good use alone, is the basis on which all style rests. A knowledge of good use so familiar as to be practically instinctive is the basis on which any writer who would be certain to write with clearness, force, and elegance must ultimately rest his own style. The limits of good use are wide and flexible; but finally they grow rigid. Whoever strays beyond them errs; whoever keeps within them may write, for various reasons, ineffectively, but cannot be convicted of positive error.

Every question of positive right and wrong in style is a question concerning nothing whatever but good use.

Good use, then, must be the basis of all good style. The next thing to ask ourselves is how to recognize good use. And here we are met by a fact that, more than any other I know of, confuses most people who begin seriously to consider the matter in question. For various reasons, the chief of which is that five centuries ago pretty much everything worth reading was comprised in what survived of the literatures of Greece and Rome, the education of civilized Europeans and Americans is still based on a prolonged and not always very fruitful study of classical Latin and Greek. Now, what makes Latin or Greek letters stand for Latin or Greek words, and what makes Latin or Greek words stand for the thoughts and emotions which are not only Latin and Greek, but broadly human too, is precisely what makes English letters and words stand for the thoughts and emotions that make up our conscious lives; namely, that many thousands of human beings tacitly agreed what this double system of symbols should symbolize, and so that good use arose. But between the classical languages, which we call dead, and the modern languages, whose life is more vigorous than the life of any human being, there is a broad distinction, not very often kept in mind. Good use, like all other vital things, not only comes into being and flourishes, but it passes out of being too; and Latin use and

Greek passed out of being with the nations whose political and intellectual lives they expressed. So completely are they things of the past, indeed, that so far as I can learn from friends who have given their lives to the classics, nobody to-day on earth has any real knowledge of how Latin or Greek was pronounced. At Harvard College, and elsewhere, to be sure, they have supplanted the unquestionably barbarous English pronunciation by one which they call probably ancient; but whether Pericles or Cicero could understand the most punctiliously learned nineteenth-century professor is a question not to be settled this side of Elysium. In short, though we know pretty accurately what words classical letters symbolize, and what thoughts and emotions are symbolized by classical words, one part of the classical languages — the sound, the thing that made them true languages or tongues — is as dead as Alexander or Cæsar. And along with the sound has perished the vital principle of the languages, — the constantly changing use which brought them from the rude jargons in which they began into the exquisitely finished forms in which their literatures preserve them. In other words, the classical languages, like other things that have passed out of this world, are complete. Nothing but the occasional discovery of a manuscript or an inscription can add a syllable to them; nothing but the demonstration of a corruption or a forgery can take a syllable away. Nothing, in all human probability, can supply the place of that troublesome *caret* which used to

bother us so much in the old Latin grammars. Here lies the distinction between the classical languages and the modern, the dead and the living. Latin and Greek are complete; dictionaries and grammars can codify them with final authority. English, on the other hand, like every living tongue, must remain incomplete so long as it retains life enough to be spoken and written by living men; and so dictionaries and grammars can at most be mile-stones in its progress through this world.

Now, of course the unlearned in matters of style look for authority to the learned. And the learned, brought up from childhood on the authority, in matters of classical style, of Latin and Greek dictionaries and grammars, are accustomed to display what little human frailty survives the process of culture by attaching to dictionaries and grammars themselves an importance second only to that which good men attach to Holy Writ. They do not stop to remember, or at all events to remind us, that what makes Latin and Greek books of reference so finally authoritative is not that they are books of reference, but that the languages therein codified have long since ceased to grow; and so that these tongues can be codified with something which approaches perfection.

To be certain of what good use is in a living language, then, we must have other things to rest our case on than the fact that some maker of dictionaries or grammars has registered — and given chapter

and verse for — the words or phrases we would defend. There are other tests of good use to which we must turn. The most notable, I think, are that it must be Reputable, National, and Present, — Reputable as distinguished from vulgar, slangy, eccentric; National as distinguished from local or technical; Present as distinguished from obsolete or transient. In view of the fact that every question of right or wrong in style must ultimately be referred to good use, these three phases of good use are worth separate attention.

Reputable use is the use of no single writer, however eminent; it is the common consent of the great body of writers whose works, taken together, make up what we mean when we seriously use the term English Literature, — a term which of course includes any literature written in the English language, Scotch, Irish, American, Australian. The fact that Shakspere uses a word, or Sir Walter Scott, or Burke, or Washington Irving, or whoever happens to be writing earnestly in Melbourne or Sidney, does not make it reputable. The fact that all five of these authorities use the word in the same sense would go very far to establish the usage. On the other hand, the fact that any number of newspaper reporters agree in usage does not make the usage reputable. The style of newspaper reporters is not without merit; it is very rarely unreadable; but for all its virtue it is rarely a well of English undefiled. And just here, I may say, lies perhaps the most crying fault of con-

temporary style in general. For better or worse, the fact remains that our grandfathers used to read the Bible morning and night, and that we read instead the morning and evening newspapers. Our spontaneous vocabularies differ from theirs accordingly, — not wholly for the better. And when, now and then, somebody raises a feeble voice in protest, the reporters, who as a class are very human beings, grow much excited, forgetting that no known system of logic can warrant the conclusion that because all good style is readable, all readable style is necessarily good.

But an example or two of style that is national and present, but not reputable, and so not good, will make the matter clearer than all the generalization in the world. In Mr. Mallock's "New Republic," you may remember, is a tale of how a fastidious gentleman refrained from offering himself to a pretty girl because she asked him if he was *partial* to boiled chicken. In any newspaper you may find a comfortable house described as an "elegant residence" or a "costly home;" and so on.

National use is the use of neither England, Ireland, Scotland, America, nor Australia; nor yet of any single body of men, however learned. It is the use which is sanctioned by the common consent of the whole English-speaking world. Whoever uses technical words, or foreign, or local, violates this rule of good use. The use of technical words, still more the use of foreign, is commonly a conscious affectation, which any

sane man may avoid. The use of local terms is often spontaneous; here lies the chief danger of falling into a style not national.

A few examples of style that is reputable and present, but not national, and so not good, will make the matter clear. "*Ecteronic appendages*," I find in the first book of physiology I open, "not found in man, make their appearance in other animals." "I noticed a dirty *gamin*," writes a student; and another, using a word now confined at Harvard College to street urchins, describes the same small boy as a *mucker*.

Present use is best described, I think, in the familiar lines of Pope: —

> "In words as fashions, the same rule will hold:
> Alike fantastic if too new or old.
> Be not the first by whom the new are tried,
> Nor yet the last to lay the old aside."

These lines mention a very suggestive analogy. Fashions constantly change, nobody knows exactly why. But everybody knows that a series of annual fashion-plates extending over a century would show a very marked series of changes in the outward aspect of the human form divine. Every theatre-goer knows too that these changes are so marked that a play written a generation ago — Bulwer's "Money," for example, or even Robertson's "School" — cannot without a grotesqueness that would nullify its dramatic effect be produced with such costumes as were

worn by the original actors. Though the more subtile fashion to which we have given the name "good use" changes more slowly, it changes just as surely; and to a certain degree it follows fashion itself. The most curious example of this I have lately come across is in a song familiar to most of us: —

> "Yankee Doodle came to town
> A-riding on a pony,
> He stuck a feather in his hat,
> And called him macaroni."

Now, why he should have described himself as a nutritious article of diet popular in Southern Europe I could never imagine until I happened to notice Sir Benjamin Backbite's impromptu verses in the "School for Scandal," — a play produced just before the American Revolution: —

> "Sure, never were seen two such beautiful ponies;
> Other horses are clowns, but these macaronies.
> To give them this title I 'm sure is not wrong,
> Their legs are so slim and their tails are so long."

Apparently the macaroni was a dandy in tights and very long coat-tails. The embattled farmers with feathers in their hats were derisively likened to him, just as a country fellow on a cart-horse is sometimes hailed to-day as a "dude on horseback." And a panorama of men's fashion-plates from Sheridan's time to ours would show a series of figures, each of which might have been described all along as an *exquisite* or a *man of fashion;* but for each of which, as

it appears specifically different from the rest, a new and transient name arises: macaroni, for example, buck, dandy, swell, dude.

Perhaps, however, the most suggestive example of good use — reputable, national, and present — is a fact within the personal experience of every one of us. When we write letters, we begin them with the adjective *dear*. Now, the occasions when we mean by this word to express even the smallest degree of personal affection are so rare that at such moments we often feel called upon to change the word to *dearest*, or *very dear*, or *darling*. There is another form of address in all respects but one decidedly more expressive of what we really mean, — *Friend*. Yet none of us begins a letter "Friend Tompkins." And the only reason why none of us commits this unpardonable sin is that custom, fashion, good use, forbids. So nowadays we are no longer "Obedient, Humble Servants," but "Truly" or "Sincerely" or "Faithfully Yours," — not because either phrase was ever literally true, but simply and solely because, nobody knows why, good use once sanctioned one form, and now sanctions the others.

I have dwelt thus long on good use because, as I have said more than once already, good use is inevitably the basis of all good style. Whoever strays from it is first "original," then eccentric, then obscure, then unintelligible. Whoever writes a totally foreign language is of course unintelligible, but unintelligible only because in every word he formulates,

and sometimes in every mark he puts down, he serenely violates every rule of the reputable, national, and present use that makes modern English the thing it is. But unless I have sadly missed my purpose, I have shown you reason to see that in the last sentence I used a word by no means felicitous. "Every *rule*," I wrote, "of good use;" but the very essence of good use is that it is not a system of rules, but a constantly shifting state of fact. Rules, dictionaries, grammars, can help us to discover it, just as fashion-plates and manuals of etiquette may help us to dress ourselves and to behave properly at table. But in the one case, as in the others, there is no more absolute rule than the one which prudent people habitually exemplify; namely, that a wise man should keep good company, and use good sense.

So far, in order to emphasize at once the laxity and the tyranny of good use, I have been asking you to consider style as a series of letters so joined together as to make words. And I hope that our consideration of the subject has been close enough to fix in our minds the fact that the chief reason why style impresses us as a thing possessed of very subtile qualities is that human consent has agreed to associate with those palpably material facts, arbitrary sounds and the arbitrary marks that stand for them, certain more or less definite phases of that eternally immaterial reality to which we give the name "thought." I shall ask you now, in imagination, to turn once more to a printed page, — or better still, to a printed

book, — and ask yourselves whether we have as yet seen all that is therein visible.

A number of black marks we found these words to be, grouped together and occasionally repeated. A little closer inspection will show us that, in any modern piece of printing or writing, these groups of black marks to which we give the name "words" are themselves grouped, by means of spaces and of other black marks, which we call punctuation, in masses which even to the most untrained eye are more or less independent. In other words, anybody, whether he understand English or not, can see that any piece of style consists not of an indefinite series of independent words, but of a series of words intelligently composed, — a word which means neither more nor less than *put together*. The Latin term, as a single word, is the more convenient. We need a name for the visible groups in which the words that make up style are arranged. The best and simplest word I know is *compositions*.

In a printed book or a properly written manuscript, we shall soon observe that more than one kind of composition is visible. The book or the manuscript itself is a complete composition; it is generally made up of a considerable number of visibly distinct parts to which we give the name "chapters;" these in turn are made up of a number of somewhat less distinct parts which we call "paragraphs;" these in turn of parts still less, but still visibly, distinct, which we call "sentences." Or, to

state the matter conversely, all style consists of words, composed in sentences, composed in paragraphs, composed in larger groups to which we may for our purposes give the name "whole compositions."

The question which now presents itself to whoever has grasped the fact that good use, and good use alone, is what gives significance to the words of which all style primarily consists, takes a very definite form. Are compositions, like words, governed by good use? Or may we, in composing words, act with more independence than in choosing them? In that case, are there any general principles of composition by which we may to advantage govern our conduct?

The simplest way of answering this question, I think, is to answer it backward: in the first place, to inquire what general principles of composition might rationally be laid down if there were no such troublesome thing as good use to interfere with us; and then to inquire how far the action of these principles is balked in practice by good use.

And here we come to what has appeared to me the fault of almost every textbook of Rhetoric I have examined. These books consist chiefly of directions as to how one who would write should set about composing. Many of these directions are extremely sensible, many very suggestive. But in every case these directions are appallingly numerous. It took me some years to discern that all which have so far come to my notice could be grouped under one of

three very simple heads, each of which might be phrased as a simple proposition. Various as they are, all these directions concern either what may be included in a given composition (a sentence, a paragraph, or a whole); or what I may call the outline, or perhaps better, the mass of the composition, — in other words, where the chief parts may most conveniently be placed; or finally, the internal arrangement of the composition in detail. In brief, I may phrase these three principles of composition as follows: (1) Every composition should group itself about one central idea; (2) The chief parts of every composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye; (3) Finally, the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. The first of these principles may conveniently be named the principle of Unity; the second, the principle of Mass; the third, the principle of Coherence. They are important enough to deserve examination in detail.

I have said that all compositions should have unity, — in other words, that every composition should group itself about one central idea. The very terms in which I have phrased this principle suggest at once the chief fact that I have tried to keep before you in the earlier part of this chapter, — that words are after all nothing but arbitrary symbols standing for ideas. So really, when we come to consider the substance of any composition, we may better concern ourselves rather with what the words stand for than with the visible symbols themselves. If we once know what

ideas we wish to group together, the task of finding words for them is immensely simplified; on the other hand, if in the act of composition — an act which is generally rather hasty — we have grouped together a number of words, the question of whether we shall leave them together, or strike out some, or add some, is generally to be settled by considering not what visible forms our composition has associated, but what ideas. Now, the principles on which we may properly group ideas together are as various as anything well can be. In the first place, as we have just seen, there are various kinds of compositions, — sentences, paragraphs, and those larger kinds which for convenience I have grouped under the single head of wholes. Obviously there is in good style some reason why the unity of the sentence should be more limited than that of the paragraph, and the unity of the paragraph than that of the whole. Yet, as our purposes in composing vary, we may perfectly well devote to a single subject — George Eliot, for example — a book, a chapter, a paragraph, or a sentence. Any decently written life of George Eliot — Mr. Cross's, let us say — has unity, in that it groups itself about one central idea; namely, the notable writer in question. Any history of English fiction in the nineteenth century — to be sure, I do not at this moment recall one worth mentioning — would probably contain a chapter about George Eliot which would possess unity for precisely the same reason. So, in a general account of contemporary English literature, we should be rather

surprised not to find at least a paragraph devoted to George Eliot, and this paragraph would have unity for precisely the same reason that caused us to recognize it in the imaginary chapter, or in Mr. Cross's book. And a very short article — a leader in a newspaper, for example — which should deal with modern novels in general would be more than apt to contain at least a sentence about George Eliot, of which the unity would be demonstrable in exactly the same way. In other words, the question of scale — in many aspects important — has very little to do with the question of unity. The question of unity is whether for our purposes the ideas we have grouped together may rationally be so grouped; if we can show that they may, we are safe. Analogies are often helpful: we may liken the grouping of ideas in compositions to the grouping of facts in statistics. A group of statistics, such as the director of the Harvard gymnasium calls anthropometic, may concern a single individual; again, a genealogy concerns, as the case may be, a family, or a group of families related by blood or marriage; a local history, such as we have hundreds of in New England, properly concerns a considerable number of families who have lived at different times under the same political conditions; a State or a national census concerns the entire population of State or nation, and groups it too in any number of different ways. But each of these things has a unity of its own; and to a certain degree each larger group contains each smaller one.

Here, I think, is the chief thing to keep in mind: just as the sentence is a group of words, the paragraph is a group of sentences, and the whole a group of paragraphs. We should take care that each group has, for our purpose, a unity of its own; and that the unity of each larger group is of a kind that may properly be resolved into the smaller unities of which it is composed.

In considering the question of unity, then, we consider rather what the words stand for than the visible words themselves. In considering the second principle of composition, — the principle of Mass, — I conceive the case to be different. Style, you will remember, I defined as the expression of thought and emotion in written words. Written words we saw to be visible material symbols of that immaterial reality, thought and emotion, which makes up our conscious lives. What distinguishes written words from spoken, literature from the colloquial language that precedes it, is that written words address themselves to the eye and spoken words to the ear. Though this fundamental physical fact has been neglected by the makers of textbooks, I know few more important. The principle of Mass, you will remember, — the principle which governs the outward form of every composition, — is that the chief parts of every composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye. Now, what catches the eye is obviously not the immaterial idea a word stands for, but the material symbol of the idea, — the actual black marks to which good use has in course

of time come to attach such subtile and varied significance. In these groups of visible marks that compose style certain parts are more conspicuous than others. Broadly speaking, the most readily visible parts of a given composition are the beginning and the end. Run your eye over a printed page; you will find it arrested by every period, more still by every one of those breaks which mark the division of paragraphs. Compare a book not broken into chapters — Defoe's "Plague" for example — with a book in which the chapters are carefully distinguished; and you will feel, on a conveniently large scale, the extreme mechanical inconvenience of the former arrangement. On the other hand, compare the ordinary version of the Bible — broken into verses whose separation is based chiefly on the fact that each by itself will make a tolerable text — with the Revised Version, in most respects so deplorably inferior as literature: in the former case, it is mechanically hard, unless somebody is reading aloud to you, to make out which break is important, which not; in the latter case, the task is mechanically easy. Or again, remark a fact that is becoming in my literary studies comically general: familiar quotations from celebrated books are almost always to be found at the beginning or the end. "Music hath charms" are the opening words of Congreve's "Mourning Bride." Don Quixote fights with the windmill very early in the first volume; he dies with the remark that there are no birds in last year's nests near the end of the last. Until I read

"Don Quixote" through, a few years ago, these two incidents were the chief ones concerning him which general reading and talking had fixed in my mind. Now, the fact that, for better or worse, human readers notice the beginning and the end of compositions a good deal more readily than the parts that come between is the fact on which the principle of Mass is based. A writer who is careful so to mass his compositions as to put in places that catch the eye words which stand for ideas that he wants us to keep in mind, will find his work surprisingly more effective than that of a perhaps cleverer man who puts down his words in the order in which they occur to him.

The principle of Unity, we have seen, concerns itself chiefly with the immaterial ideas for which the material written words stand; the principle of Mass chiefly with the written words themselves; the third principle of composition — the principle of Coherence — concerns itself, I think, about equally with both. I phrased it, you will remember, in the words that the relation of every part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. In a given composition, for example, no word should appear without apparent reason for being there, — in other words, no incongruous idea should destroy the impression of unity. Again, to put the matter differently, no written word should be so placed that we cannot see at a glance how its presence affects the words about it. Sometimes coherence is a question of the actual order of words; sometimes, as in

the clause I am at this moment writing, of constructions; sometimes, as in the clause I write now, it demands a pretty careful use of those convenient parts of speech to which we give the name "connectives." In that last clause, for example, the pronoun *it*, referring to the word *coherence*, which was the subject of the first clause in the sentence, made possible the change of construction from "it is a question of" this or that to "it demands" this or that. But perhaps the most important thing to remember about this last principle of composition is its name. Coherence is a much more felicitous name than Unity or Mass. To "cohere" means to "stick together." A style that sticks together is coherent; a style whose parts hang loose is not.

We find, then, an answer to the first question we proposed a little while ago: if there were no such troublesome thing as good use to interfere with the free exercise of our ingenuity, we might clearly put together our compositions in contented obedience to the principles of Unity, Mass, and Coherence. It remains for us to inquire how far the action of these principles is hampered in practice by good use.

Perhaps the simplest way of answering this inquiry is to study an example of style frequently cited in the textbooks. Among the various facts which have conspired to give unfavorable fame to the Emperor Nero is the general belief that he killed his mother. In English we state this belief in these words: Nero killed Agrippina. If asked to parse

this sentence, we say that *Nero* is in the nominative case because it is the subject of the verb *killed;* and that *Agrippina* is in the objective case — or the accusative — because it is the object of the verb. But if Agrippina had been the slayer and Nero the slain, Agrippina nominative and Nero objective, the word *Agrippina* would still remain *Agrippina;* the word *Nero* still *Nero.* In English the only way to change the meaning would be to change the order of words, and to say, "Agrippina killed Nero." In Latin, on the other hand, the accusative case is different in form from the nominative; the original sentence would be, "Nero interfecit Agrippinam." That convenient final *m* does Agrippina's business; the three words may be arranged in any order we please. But if we wished to say that Agrippina killed Nero, we should have to alter the form of both names, and say "Neronem interfecit Agrippina." In this single example we can see as plainly as we need, I think, the chief way in which good use interferes with the free operation of the principles of composition. The English language has fewer inflections than almost any other known to the civilized world; that is, each word has fewer distinct forms to indicate its relations to the words about it. All nouns have possessives and plurals; all verbs have slightly different forms for the present and the past tense; but this is about all. In English, then, the relation of word to word is expressed not by the forms of the words, but generally by their order; and any wide departure from the

normal order of a sentence — in brief, subject, verb, object — is apt to alter or to destroy the meaning. "Nero interfecit Agrippinam," "Agrippinam interfecit Nero," "Nero Agrippinam interfecit," all mean exactly the same thing; the difference in mass alters the emphasis, that is all. "Nero killed Agrippina," on the other hand, means one thing; "Agrippina killed Nero," means another; and what "Nero Agrippina killed" may mean, nobody without a knowledge of the facts can possibly decide.

What is true of this simplest of sentences is true in a general way of any sentence in the English language. Good use has settled that the meaning of one great class of compositions in English — namely, of sentences — shall be indicated in general, not by the forms of the words which compose them, but by the order. Except within firmly defined limits, we cannot alter the order of words in English without violating good use; and in no language can we violate good use without grave and often fatal injury to our meaning. "Nero Agrippina killed," to revert to our example, is as completely ambiguous as any three words can be. While, on the one hand, then, we who use uninflected English are free from the disturbing array of grammatical rules and exceptions which so bothers us in Latin or in German, we are far less free than Romans or Germans to apply the principles of composition to the composing of sentences. The principle of Unity, to be sure, we may generally observe pretty carefully; but the principle of Mass is

immensely interfered with by the fact that it is the order of words in a sentence that in general gives the sentence meaning; and so to a less degree is the principle of Coherence.

When we turn to the larger kinds of composition, however, we find the case different. As a matter of fact, the sentence is the only kind of composition that inevitably appears in spoken discourse. Until words are joined together, composed in sentences, there is, of course, no such thing as intelligible communication. The moment they are so joined, the organism of spoken language is complete. Paragraphs, on the other hand, do not appear in spoken discourse at all. And though, of course, in serious compositions the organic structure of the whole ought to be almost as palpable to hearers as to readers, the fact remains that in by far the greater part of oral discourse — the conversation, the chat, the bustle of daily life — there are no wholes at all. In other words, then, while oral usage — actual speech — is what the sentence is based on, the paragraph and the whole composition are based on written usage, which is commonly a great deal more thoughtful.

What is more, while the sentence is as old as language itself, the whole composition is hardly older than literature, and the modern paragraph is considerably younger than the art of printing. It follows, then, and a very slight study of the facts will prove the conclusion, that while in sentences good use very seriously interferes with the operation of the prin-

ciples of composition, it interferes very little with their operation in paragraphs and in compositions of a larger kind. In other words, we are free to arrange sentences in paragraphs, and paragraphs in chapters, and chapters in books, pretty much as we think fit.

We are now, I think, in a position to sum up in a very few words the theory of style which I shall try to present to you. Style, you will remember, I defined as the expression of thought and feeling in written words. Modern style — the style we read and write to-day — I believe to be the result of a constant though generally unconscious struggle between good use and the principles of composition. In words, of course good use is absolute; in sentences, though it relaxes its authority, it remains very powerful; in paragraphs its authority becomes very feeble; in whole compositions, it may roughly be said to coincide with the principles.

In the chapters that follow, I purpose first to examine as carefully as may be the outward and visible body of style. It is made up of what I may call four elements, — the prime element Words, composed in Sentences, composed in Paragraphs, composed in Whole Compositions. Each of these elements I shall examine in detail, inquiring first how far it is affected by the paramount authority of good use, and then how within the limits of good use it may be made, by means of the principles of composition or otherwise, to assume various forms and to perform

various offices. Then, when we have studied the visible body of style, its material elements, as carefully as we can, I shall turn to the three qualities, Clearness, Force, and Elegance, and try to determine what it is in the elements by which each of them may be secured or lost.

A dull business this seems to many, yet after ten years' study I do not find it dull at all. I find it, rather, constantly more stimulating; and this because I grow more and more aware how in its essence this matter of composition is as far from a dull and lifeless business as earthly matters can be; how he who scribbles a dozen words, just as truly as he who writes an epic, performs — all unknowing — one of those feats that tell us why men have believed that God made man in His image. For he who scrawls ribaldry, just as truly as he who writes for all time, does that most wonderful of things, — gives a material body to some reality which till that moment was immaterial, executes, all unconscious of the power for which divine is none too grand a word, a lasting act of creative imagination.

II.

WORDS.

WORDS, considered by themselves, are nothing more or less than names, — the names we give people just as much as the names we give ideas. *John* is clearly at once a word and a name; so is the compound word *John Jones;* so is the word *spade*, which proverbial wisdom declares to be so often used with reluctance; so perhaps less obviously is the compound, — not necessarily preferable, — *the iron utensil frequently employed for purposes of excavation.* The office of the words or groups of words which we shall consider in this chapter is precisely the office of proper names, — to identify separate ideas. John Jones, American citizen, tax-payer; kill, put to death, execute; admirable, not to be endured, — all these are names of ideas. So is every word I utter in this, or in any other sentence. The main thing to keep in mind is that here we are to consider words by themselves, and not in composition; as names of separate ideas, and not as groups which indicate the mutual relations of separate ideas.

It is hardly worth while to repeat that the only thing which makes a given word signify a given idea

is that good use — use which is reputable, national, and present, — has consented that it shall do so. It is more than worth while, however, it is absolutely necessary, to keep this fact in mind. For since, generally speaking, there is no other relation between the sound we utter and the idea we wish to convey than that a great many other people have previously used the same sound for the same purpose, it follows that if for any reason we depart from the general practice of the people we address, we run into danger, if not into the certainty of exerting ourselves to no purpose whatever. I remember having once waked up in a Spanish railway-carriage to find myself alone on a side track near the foot of the Sierra Morena, over which the rest of the train had proceeded an hour or two before. I am unfortunate enough to know nothing whatever of the Spanish language. The twelve hours of misadventure which followed my waking were immensely complicated by the fact that I had no idea of what notions the kindly disposed inhabitants of Estremadura attached to the vocal sounds they amiably uttered; nor had they any of the usage prevalent in the more civilized parts of North America. And a very curious fact was that the interpreter on whom we ultimately fell back was a native of the place who had the misfortune to be deaf and dumb. The language of sign has no nationality.

Of course a dangerous practice is not necessarily fatal. You may go into action without getting shot; you may ride a bucking horse without breaking your

neck; you may write or utter a word sanctioned by no respectable usage whatever without being incomprehensible, — *vamose*, for example, *absquatulate*, *enthuse*, *walkist*. But to go no farther than a play that all of us have read, what does Hamlet mean by two phrases to be found in every text? When Ophelia asks him what his play means, he answers, "This is *miching mallecho;* it means mischief;" and when, somewhat earlier, his friends are trying to prevent his following the ghost, he says, "By Heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that *lets* me." Now, I am informed that in certain parts of New England the word *meaching* is still in use, to express some sly line of conduct or other observable in dogs. I never heard it; I do not know exactly what line of conduct it describes. What *mallecho* may mean, except that it looks Spanish, and that the Latin root *mal* means *bad*, and has given rise to a great many names for bad things in modern languages, I have no idea at all. English it certainly is not, any more than *miching mallecho* is comprehensible without considerable commentary, much of which is concerned with the question of whether the whole trouble may not be a printer's error. To turn to the second phrase, we all use the word *let;* roughly speaking, it means to allow, to permit: you *let* a child sit up past bedtime. But what sense is there in Hamlet's threatening to make a ghost of whoever *lets* him follow the ghost — which is exactly what he is trying to do? As a matter of fact, the good use of Shakspere's time attached to the word *let* the

meaning that we express by the words *check* or *prevent*, — a meaning preserved nowadays only in the somewhat rare idiom "without *let* or hindrance." Obviously, neither of Hamlet's words is of any particular use to a man who wishes to convey an idea to another in the year of grace 1891.

I chose these simple and very palpable examples of words that answer no purpose nowadays because they show very clearly the two grounds, and the only two, on which we are safe in declaring a word unfit for use. To English-speaking people *miching* may once have meant something; at present, to most English-speaking people it certainly means nothing whatever; to most English-speaking people, I incline to think, *mallecho* has never meant anything at all. In other words, neither *miching* nor *mallecho* is at this moment in the English language. *Let*, on the other hand, is undoubtedly in the language; but at this moment it means not what Hamlet meant by it, but precisely the reverse. To use the technical terms of Rhetoric, *miching* and *mallecho*, words not in the language, are now Barbarisms; *let*, a word in the language, but a word to which good use gives a different meaning from that for which it is employed, is now an Impropriety. All offences against good use in our choice of words are either Barbarisms or Improprieties. It is worth while, then, to devote a few minutes to each class.

For just here come a great part of the questions about style which puzzle unpractised writers and add

discomfort to a chair of Rhetoric. Is this word or that admissible? they ask us, day after day. Is it a Barbarism, we ask ourselves, or an Impropriety? If neither, then it is admissible.

Comparatively speaking, Barbarisms are not very common. Obsolete words, such as Hamlet's *miching mallecho*, are obsolete just because, for one reason or another, people have stopped using them. For this very reason, people who write nowadays do not know them by sight and sound; and there is little danger of falling into any sin from temptation to which circumstances free you. Foreign words, on the other hand, are more insidious. To many minds *haut-ton* says something far more significant than *fashion*, — something which I found expressed in Portugal, some years ago, by a mysterious phrase which the Portuguese pronounced *ig-leaf*, a perfect rhyme with *fig-leaf;* they spelled it, I discovered later, *high-life*, and believed it very choice English. The truth is that novelty of expression frequently masks commonplace. A little learning is very dangerous to vocabulary; but a very little good sense will minimize the danger.

> "And when that he wel drunken had the win,
> Then would he speken no word but Latin;"

but when the ecclesiastic was sober, he could discourse in very rational English.

Brand-new words, like foreign ones, are insidious for much the same reason: they conceal for a moment the triteness of the idea they stand for. Slang

changes a good deal faster than the manners and customs of mankind. Stale stories existed long before chestnuts, and have already survived them a year or two. Now, there is, I conceive, just one excuse for a brand-new word; namely, a brand-new idea. When telephones were invented we needed a vocabulary to fit the facts, and straightway introduced one. When Ericsson gave us a new kind of war-ship, the accident of its name gave us the new term *monitor*, which has lasted. *Copperhead* was a good word five and twenty years ago; so was *Mugwump* when certain of our fellow-citizens refused to vote for Mr. Blaine; but as politics have changed, *Copperheads* and *Mugwumps* are becoming, save to historical scholars, terms as mysterious as to young people nowadays is the term *waterfall*, which was applied to those bunches of hair that dangled at the necks of pretty girls in President Lincoln's time. But *Whig* and *Tory* lived for a century and more; so perhaps will *Republican* and *Democrat*. And *curls* and *skirts* and *wigs* are perennial; but *periwigs* are no more. Perhaps no phase of barbarism is more palpable and more provoking than the pedantic trick of spelling old names in new ways: why we say Alsace and Bavaria and Mark Antony, why we do not say Homeros and Roma and Brute, I do not know; but I know that we do not. And I know that there are few more unidiomatic absurdities than those of the gentlemen who insist on spelling Alfred Aelfred, and Virgil with an *e*, and otherwise on impairing that irrational, spontaneous variety which

people who love English know to be one of its most subtile charms. The worst of the mischief is that they cannot do it without knowing it. Neither, as a general rule, can any prudent person, who knows a language well enough to talk it fluently, be guilty of a serious Barbarism.

A curious proof of this was an experience I had a little while ago. Touching this subject in some lectures at college, I took up a package of undergraduate themes, some sixty in number, and looked through them for examples of Barbarism. In half an hour or so I found only three; and none of them was flagrant. I then looked through the same package for examples of Impropriety; in less time I had found something near a hundred. "Harvard," for example, wrote one youth, who wished to be superlatively loyal, "is the *peer* of all American colleges," which means of course only that Harvard is as good a college as any other.

Improprieties, then, — the misuse of words which are actually in the language, — are by far the commonest and most insidious offences against good use in words. It is convenient to study anything in a somewhat exaggerated form. Crude Impropriety is a perennial form of humor; it is what makes us laugh at the speeches of Mrs. Quickly, of Dogberry, of Mrs. Malaprop; at the spelling of Hosea Biglow or of Josh Billings. And two speeches of Dogberry's will perhaps afford as good examples as we need. When one of his prisoners calls him an ass, he exclaims,

"Dost thou not *suspect* my place?" and a little later, in regret that the contempt of court is unrecorded, "O that he were here *to write me down an ass!*" By asking why Dogberry falls into these two errors, we may discover the chief reasons why anybody ever falls into Impropriety. The reasons for the two are distinct: when he says, "Dost thou not *suspect* my place?" — meaning *respect* — he deliberately uses a bigger word than he can understand; when he says, "O that I had *been writ down an ass!*" he has lost his head, and so in excitement utters a phrase which in cooler moments he would understand to mean something very different from what he intends. One or the other of these reasons I have found to underlie nearly all the Improprieties I have come across.

In point of fact, the charm of novelty and mystery which surrounds any unfamiliar phrase is profoundly fascinating. I have always sympathized with the man in one of George Eliot's novels who finds much comfort in repeating to himself the words, "Sihon, King of the Amorites, for His mercy endureth forever. And Og, King of Bashan, for His mercy endureth forever." So too with the converted African, in some less notable fiction, who found in an old Book of Common Prayer no words quite so pregnant with spiritual meaning as "Augusta, Princess-Dowager of Wales." Even reasonably educated people, I am afraid, are not proof against the charms of the unfamiliar. Not long ago I found in the work of an admirably but modernly trained American an elaborate figure about

the fate of Phaeton, whom a classical dictionary confirmed my fear that he had confused with Icarus. But a glance at a classical dictionary would have saved him; so would a single question as to whether he really knew whom he was talking about. In brief, this kind of Impropriety is very closely akin to the barbarous use of foreign or of new words, which we found to be easily avoidable. And most of the Improprieties I found in the package of themes I mentioned a moment ago fall under the other head.

For one reason or another, most of us generally speak or write hastily, without leisure to consider details of style. We use the first phrase that occurs to us. This is particularly true of journalists, far and away the most prolific and the most widely read of modern men of letters. An Impropriety of frequent occurrence is a typical example of the trouble that follows. In hasty manuscript the words *house* and *home* look almost exactly alike. What is more, they really mean things that have points in common; most *homes* are in *houses*, and many *houses* contain *homes*. I venture to guess that the first blunder was a printer's; it was not enough of a blunder to be seriously corrected. And nowadays, in newspapers, in college themes, and even in books, you will find the words *house* and *home* hereabout used synonymously, usually to signify a square wooden structure, in excellent order, with a little grass about it, and all the modern improvements. One who falls

into this error, as most of us manage to fall; one who constantly uses words with inaccuracy enough to confuse them, though not enough to amount to obscurity or even to palpable grotesqueness, — gets at last into very serious trouble. Instead of having at his service a definite vocabulary, he finds himself in possession only of a jumbled collection of ill-defined synonyms.

I have said enough, I think, to show clearly what Barbarisms and Improprieties are. Under one head or the other must fall all offences against good use in the choice of words. Our next business must be to consider various effects which may be secured by the choice of various kinds of words, all in themselves admissible; and finally to draw from these considerations certain conclusions, worth keeping well in mind, concerning the ultimate relation of words and ideas.

Before proceeding to discuss specific kinds of words, however, I may perhaps say a word about vocabularies in general. By a vocabulary I mean the total number of words at the disposal of a given individual. No experience in travel is more surprising than the speed with which a man of ordinary intelligence can pick up words enough to get along in a country which he enters ignorant of its language. The linguistic accomplishment of couriers and Swiss waiters ceases to be marvellous as soon as you try to imitate them. In point of fact, the number of words absolutely required for the necessary purposes of human inter-

course is astonishingly small. In the region of Puget Sound there has grown up a curious jargon called Chinook, by means of which the native Indians and the European or American traders conduct their negotiations. The jargon is said to be equally unlike the native dialects and any tongue known to the civilized world, — a pure hybrid; and I am informed that less than a thousand words abundantly suffice for all purposes of trade. For travel, for every-day life, a hundred or two prove more than enough. Italian opera, it is said, expresses all the notions that verbally underlie its extremely pretty music by seven or eight hundred. In short, the vocabulary which anybody absolutely needs is very small indeed. The vocabulary at the disposal of a master of such a language as English, on the other hand, is comparatively enormous. A modern dictionary contains something like a hundred thousand separate titles, — all sanctioned by more or less usage. Nobody would ever think of using all these words. The total number used by Shakspere, an extremely copious writer, is, I believe, not above fifteen thousand. But anybody who is anxious for the power of easily expressing many and various shades of thought and feeling will do well to keep at his disposal as large a vocabulary as he can manage. The way to increase a vocabulary is very like the way to increase your personal acquaintance. Put yourself in the way of meeting as many different phases of expression as you can, — read widely, talk with clever people, — and whenever

you come across a new word or expression train yourself, so far as possible, to understand it, just as you would train yourself to classify and remember people you meet, gentle and vulgar, good, bad, or indifferent. Each one has its place in that great composite fact, — human nature and human life.

Some such process as this is consciously or unconsciously followed by pretty much everybody who has had any experience in the art of verbal expression. The result of this accumulated experience has phrased itself in certain more or less accepted commonplaces, which may roughly be called directions to those in search of a vocabulary. Like most commonplaces, these directions contain a good deal of truth and are apt to result in a good deal of rather mischievous error. There is no better way, perhaps, to reach the conclusions about vocabulary to which I am trying to guide you than to examine a few of these commonplaces in a little detail.

Among these commonplaces I select four which one certainly hears as frequently as any. What is called "strong Saxon English" is constantly maintained to be better than words derived from the Latin; big words are decried, as by no means so good as little ones; general words, even though they cluster in glittering generality, are held much inferior to specific; and the sins of florid rhetoricians, even though skilled, have led many good and wise teachers to deplore the use of figurative language. I propose to examine each of these commonplaces in turn, and

to see what result our examination leads to. In so doing, I need hardly remind you, I put the question of good use aside. No words we shall consider now are either barbarous or improper; all are sanctioned by good use. The question is not grammatical, but rhetorical; not of right or wrong, but of better or worse.

The simplest way to proceed is by direct example. I shall ask your attention, then, to a few fragments of English literature in some of which a Saxon vocabulary is predominant, in others a Latin. Then we will ask ourselves which is the better.

The first is a passage from the "Pilgrim's Progress": —

"Then *Apollyon*, espying his opportunity, began to gather up close to *Christian*, and wrestling with him, gave him a dreadful fall; and with that, *Christian's* Sword flew out of his hand. Then said *Apollyon, I am sure of thee now;* and with that, he had almost prest him to death, so that *Christian* began to despair of life. But as God would have it, while *Apollyon* was fetching of his last blow, thereby to make a full end of this good Man, *Christian* nimbly reached out his hand for his Sword, saying, *Rejoyce not against me, O mine Enemy! when I fall, I shall arise;* and with that, gave him a deadly thrust, which made him give back, as one that had received his mortal wound: *Christian*, perceiving that, made at him again, saying, *Nay, in all these things we are more than Conquerours.* And with that, *Apollyon* spread forth his Dragons wings, and sped him away, that *Christian* for a season saw him no more."

In this passage the proportion of Latin words to Saxon is about one in thirteen.

In the next passage, from Dr. Johnson's "Rambler," the proportion of Latin words to Saxon is almost one in three: —

"Words become law by the occasions to which they are applied, or the general character of them who use them; and the disgust which they produce arises from the revival of those images with which they are commonly united. Thus if, in the most solemn discourse, a phrase happens to occur which has been successfully employed in some ludicrous narrative, the gravest auditor finds it difficult to refrain from laughter, when they who are not prepossessed by the same accidental association are utterly unable to guess the reason of his merriment. Words which convey ideas of dignity in one age are banished from elegant writing or conversation in another, because they are in time debased by vulgar mouths, and can be no longer heard without the involuntary recollection of unpleasing images."

Compare these two passages; then compare this other group, — the first stanza of Wordsworth's "Skylark," and that of Shelley's. Here is Wordsworth's:

"Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!
Dost thou despise the earth, where cares abound?
Or while the wings aspire, are heart and eye
Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground? —
Thy nest, which thou canst drop into at will,
Those quivering wings composed, that music still."

And here is Shelley's: —

"Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art."

In each of these groups you can hardly fail to notice a marked contrast in effect. You can hardly fail to notice too that the difference in effect is in each case produced chiefly by the notable difference in the kinds of words deliberately or instinctively chosen by the writers; in a word, its cause is etymologic. Yet in no one of these extracts is there a word not sanctioned by good use; and I venture to assert that in no one of them is there an effect of which the loss would not make the English language poorer.

In the passage from Bunyan, — describing a hand-to-hand fight, — the Saxon words have a simple vigor which no other vocabulary at our disposal could secure; in that from Johnson, — a formal, old-fashioned literary criticism, — the Latin words have a sonorous and authoritative weight which, for all their pomposity, gives the passage a character unattainable by any simpler kind of diction. In the Latin words of Wordsworth's opening line, the sentiment of the meditative poet is bound to earth, the attention held downward; in the Saxon words of Shelley's, the aspiring spirit of the poet leaps heavenward with a lightness that no other kind of words could give it.

The difference we find here, then, is not a difference between good and bad, or even between better

and worse; it is simply and solely a difference in effect. Sometimes we wish to do one thing, sometimes another; according as we wish to do one or another thing we choose our words from one or the other of the chief sources of our language. For this English language of ours is a curious hybrid. I never heard it better described in a phrase than by a Dutch divine a good many years ago. I happened to be dining, on the continent of Europe, with a company of Protestant clergymen of various nationalities. They had passed the day rather seriously, and were amusing themselves at table by pleasantly disputing as to what language we might expect to use in heaven, whither it was civilly assumed we all were bound. English, French, and German each had its native advocates. Suddenly this Dutchman, who had sat silent, broke in, with ponderous authority: "My friends," said he, "it must be English. English is the only *pot-pourri*."

Etymology, in short, is a most interesting study or pastime; and the history of this *pot-pourri* of an English of ours makes the fit words for simple ideas — ideas of fighting, for example, or of spontaneous aspiration — chiefly Saxon in their origin; but the same history makes the fit words for more contemplative ideas — ideas of literary criticism, for example, or of deliberate meditation — chiefly Latin. The question is not which kind of word is abstractly best, but generally which kind of idea we have in mind. And fascinating though etymology may be, alluring

as simple ideas, the charms of etymology and simplicity should never blind an earnest student to the fact that English usage is not Saxon and not Latin, but both, — each in its place.

Two examples of single phrases may perhaps lead us as directly as anything to the next classification of kinds of words I have proposed to you, — big and little. The first phrase is Coleridge's name for his most popular poem, — the "Ancient Mariner." Now, this means in Latinized diction precisely what "old sailor" means in Saxon; but the big Latin words express something which the little Saxon words quite lose. The second example is from a bit of my personal observation. In a country graveyard in Middlesex County, I once came across two stones side by side. On the older by a few years were cut for an epitaph the familiar lines from Hamlet: —

> "All that live must die,
> *Passing* through *Nature* to *eternity*."

On the newer was an epitaph expressing exactly the same idea in pure Saxon: —

> "The path of death it must be trod
> By those that wish to walk with God."

Simpler words, and littler those last; uncontaminated by the slightest suspicion of Latinism too; but not for that eternally better.

With big words and little, in fact, we shall find the case to be just what it was with Latin and Saxon, —

a question not of inflexible rule guiding us between good and bad, or even between better and worse, but of what effect we have in mind. Big words are apt to be Latin, and little to be Saxon: *acknowledge* and *damn* to the contrary notwithstanding. But dropping all thought of etymology, let us compare the two love-letters in the fifth chapter of "Middlemarch." Here are passages from each:—

"I have discerned in you," writes Casaubon, "an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness, which I had hitherto not conceived to be compatible either with the early bloom of youth or with those graces of sex that may be said at once to win and to confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities above indicated."

"I am very grateful to you for loving me," writes Dorothea, "and thinking me worthy to be your wife. I can look forward to no better happiness than that which would be one with yours."

Casaubon's conventional, formal nature expresses itself grandiloquently; Dorothea's simple, earnest nature expresses itself simply. Each expresses itself properly. The difference between big words and little, in short, is a question of effect.

To pass now to the third classification of words to which I called your attention, — specific and general, —let me ask you to glance at two bits of verse, taken almost at random from the literature I happened to be reading when I last discussed this subject in my college lectures.

The first is from a song by Thomas Nash: —

"Spring, the sweet spring, is the year's pleasant king;
Then blooms each thing, then maids dance in a ring,
Cold doth not sting, the pretty birds do sing,
Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-wee, to-witta-woo!

"The palm and may make country houses gay;
Lambs frisk and play, the shepherds pipe all day,
And we hear aye birds tune this merry lay,—
Cuckoo, jug-jug, pu-wee, to-witta-woo!"

The second is from a familiar song by Shakspere:

"When icicles hang by the wall,
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail,
And Tom bears logs into the hall,
And milk comes frozen home in pail;
When blood is nipt, and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl,
Tuwhoo!
Tuwhit! Tuwhoo! A merry note!
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot."

In both of these the usage is notably good; but compare for a moment the difference between the word *shepherds* in the first verses and the words *Dick the shepherd* in the second. The difference in effect is very notable; it lies almost wholly in the specific character of the proper name *Dick:* we do not know who Dick was, but the very mention of him makes the picture that arises in our minds a great deal more distinct than can possibly be summoned up by the word *shepherd* alone. Again, to turn to mere phrases, what do the words *a great church* mean,—

a powerful hierarchy like the Church of Rome, or a tall cathedral, like Salisbury? The general phrase, to a certain degree, suggests both of the ideas it includes: each specific phrase excludes the other. All three phrases are beyond reproach. Still again, to consider the form in which I believe the unintentional use of generalization to be most insidious, compare the phrase we have already considered, "Nero killed Agrippina," with the passive form of the same statement, "Agrippina was killed." The first phrase is specific. The function of the passive voice is to effect a separation between an action and the agent; the second phrase throws the possible suspicion of murder on all mankind, and yet leaves open the question whether Agrippina may not have been killed by accident. Now, obviously we may with perfect propriety wish to express either of these ideas, just as we may wish to express the ideas phrased in the words *great church*, or *powerful hierarchy*, or *tall cathedral*. As with Latin words and Saxon, with big words and little, the question of specific words or general reduces itself to a question of effect.

The last question to which I proposed to ask your attention we shall find reducing itself to the same form, now perhaps tediously familiar. Take, for example, the opening quatrain of the familiar sonnet of Shakspere: —

"That time of year thou mayest in me behold,
When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
Upon the boughs that shake against the cold, —
Bare, ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang."

Here is a somewhat curious complication of metaphor. In likening his temper to winter, Shakspere of course is absolutely metaphoric; but in carrying out the figure he is first literal in the second line and the third, and then in the fourth line he adds a second figure to the first. Dropping for the sake of convenience the main metaphor, — allowing the poet the licensé of general expression in figurative rather than in literal terms, — let us compare the literal phrase in the third line, "the boughs that shake against the cold," with the figurative phrase, "bare, ruined choirs," in the fourth line. Both are admirably specific, particularly the last. The word *bare* excludes at the beginning all possibility of that luxuriant verdure which comes to our minds with the memory of almost every English ruin; the word *ruined* does away with every suggestion of roof, of painted glass and dim, religious light; and when the word *choirs* comes, we are ready to complete in fancy the picture of Gothic tracery with clear eastern sky gleaming through the empty apertures. But what is more to our purpose now, I for one, since I knew these lines, have never looked through the boughs of a tree in late December without at least some faint fancy of what the English abbeys were in the times when the monks might still be alive to remember the comfortable glories which Henry VIII. took from them when he deprived England of the mystic pageantry of Rome. The figure says more, in short, than any literal phrase could say. Is what it says what we wish to

say? Is the effect it produces the effect we have in mind? If so, then we should use the figure. If not, then we should discard it, not because it is an evil thing, but because it does not serve our purpose.

The conclusion we have reached — that what kind of words we should choose, within the limits of good use, depends wholly on what effect we wish to convey — seems at first wholly to discredit the commonplace directions to those in search of a vocabulary which we have examined. Neither Latin words nor Saxon are absolutely better, — neither big nor little, general nor specific, literal nor figurative. Yet I know few more marked follies than that which leads people — and sometimes very clever ones — wholly to discredit commonplace. Spontaneous generalization is often misleading; but it generally has at bottom comfortably hard facts. And the facts at the bottom of the four commonplaces that we have been thinking about are not hard to find. In human intercourse we are more apt to have simple thoughts to express than abstruse. Now, we have seen that little Saxon words fit simple ideas better than big Latin words. Again, there is no more insidious habit of mind than the laziness which prevents us so often from taking the trouble to think out exactly what we mean. Now, broadly speaking, the more specific our words, the more exact must be the thought behind them. So too for general purposes we are far more apt to need to tell people what we really mean than to suggest to them what the thing we mean resembles. Now, this

suggestion of resemblance is precisely what we secure by using figurative words; when we wish to say exactly what we mean, our words, in the nature of things, ought to be as literal as we can make them. In point of fact, then, our commonplaces turn out to be in the main true, but to state truth in a somewhat disguised form. They purport to be statements about the relative value of different kinds of words; in truth, they are statements about the relative wisdom of different habits of thought.

It might now seem well to proceed at once to the consideration of the relation of words to ideas, with which, I have said, I purpose to conclude this chapter. But, as you will perhaps remember, I have said that we must consider as virtually independent words those compound names of ideas which consist of a considerable number of separate words. *Spade*, for example, is obviously a word; less obviously, but for our present purpose just as truly, so is the phrase, *iron utensil frequently employed for purposes of excavation*, — just as the present sovereign of Italy may be said to be named either *Humbert* or by the line or two of names given him in baptism and duly registered in the Almanac de Gotha. And there are certain commonplaces which I think we should not pass over, about the number of words by which we should name our ideas.

Be brief, I suppose, is the commonest, — more politely phrased in the proverb, "Brevity is the soul of wit;" and here, certainly, there is more positive truth

than in any of the commonplaces concerning single words to which I called your attention. No truth is more constantly impressed by experience on a teacher of composition. At various times I have taken up a great many college themes, and criticised them with this point in view. On an average, I venture to assert, one half of the words in any such composition can be stricken out without the loss of a shade of meaning. What is more, the process of excision is apt to result in a surprisingly idiomatic precision of style. A great many people whom few would suspect of writing well use very good words indeed, and conceal the fact only by persistent dilution of style with unnecessary words.

For various reasons, not the least of which is the obvious economy of time and attention, — at least for readers, — a compact style is undoubtedly worth taking trouble for; but compactness is not always a positive merit, any more than is the use of strong Saxon English. In the one case as in the other, the real question is what effect we wish to produce. The effect secured by compactness is extremely useful; but the effects secured by diffuseness are not for that reason, or for any other, to be disregarded.

An example of deliberate contrast between diffuseness and compactness may be worth our attention. It is from De Quincey.

"In saying this, we do but vary the form of what we once heard delivered on this subject by Mr. Wordsworth. His remark was by far the weightiest thing we ever heard on the subject of style; and it was this: That it is in

the highest degree unphilosophic to call language, or diction, 'the *dress* of thoughts;' and what was it, then, that he would substitute? Why, this: he would call it the 'incarnation of thoughts.'"

In this the diffuseness of the context emphasizes as nothing else could emphasize the admirable compactness of the phrases on which the attention centres. But there are a great many writers whose peculiar effects are produced by a frequently unrelieved diffuseness: De Quincey is one of them, — a writer whose style has always had for me a very subtile charm. In his work you rarely find a sentence that cannot be much compressed without the slightest violation of English usage: I am tempted to say that you rarely find an idea named by as few words as it might with full propriety be named by. And yet I have proved by experiment more than once that you cannot often strike out a single one of De Quincey's single words without the loss of a perceptible part of what makes De Quincey's style peculiarly De Quincey's. The same is true of very many of our earlier writers; Izaak Walton, for example. I mention him because Professor Bain, whose very suggestive books on Rhetoric suffer from the fact that he is apparently unable to understand how a rational general principle can be open to any exception, has tried to improve a sentence of Walton's in a way that seems to me quite in point.

"I have been told," writes Walton, "that, if a man that was born blind could obtain to have his sight but for

only one hour, during his whole life, and should, at the first opening of his eyes, fix his sight upon the sun when it was in its full glory, either at the rising or setting of it, he would be so transported and amazed, and so admire the glory of it, that he would not willingly turn his eyes from that first ravishing object, to behold all the other various beauties this world could present to him."

"Here," writes Professor Bain, "we have both the diffuse expression of appropriate ideas and the accumulation of particulars that are really unnecessary. Such a sentence as the following contains all the relevant matter, and gives the idea more directness and force: 'It is said that if a man born blind could obtain his sight but for one hour, the glory of the sunset or sunrise, should he happen to behold it, would entrance him beyond all the other beauties of the world.'"

Professor Bain, you see, prefers his own version. It is certain that Walton's expresses nothing which the most vivid imagination would attribute to Professor Bain; but does Professor Bain, after all, succeed in expressing anything which any imagination would attribute to Izaak Walton? Does not Walton, to be himself, need every word he used to begin with?

Be brief, we can see by this time is an excellent commonplace, provided that our purpose is one which can properly be expressed by brevity. It is an admirable rule of conduct; it suggests a habit of thought which under another guise — *Be specific* — we have already seen to be highly worth cultivating. At the same time, for very many reasons, a writer may very properly wish to express something which can be

expressed by nothing short of diffuseness. As a positive rule, we cannot phrase the warning more rigidly than by charging people to use no more words than they need. The real question before any writer is what effect he wishes to produce.

This question is by no means so simple as it appears. To answer it with certainty, a writer must have, I think, a far more definite understanding of the ultimate relation of words and ideas than most of us habitually enjoy. I shall turn, then, to a consideration of this question, which I think we should carefully consider before dismissing this part of our subject.

Not very long ago I reminded you that the total number of words observed in good use and registered in the larger English dictionaries of contemporary style may be roughly estimated at a hundred thousand. Of these, the most copious and varied writer rarely uses above ten or fifteen thousand; and for every-day purposes a thousand or so prove amply sufficient. We are safe, I think, in assuming that whoever has four or five thousand words at his ready disposal has a better vocabulary than most of us. With this number of outward and visible signs he must express, as best he can, the eternally immaterial reality of thought and feeling which makes up his conscious life.

A moment's thought will show us the amazing, the insurmountable discrepancy between our vehicle of expression and the fact we have to express. The thoughts and the feelings of no two human beings are

identical; and the shades of thought and feeling which every single human being must know are virtually infinite, far beyond any power of human computation. Nothing is commoner, then, than to find different people habitually using the same word to express perfectly familiar but radically dissimilar ideas. In one of Sardou's plays, I remember, an ardent free-thinker is astonished and delighted to find himself in complete accord with an American lady on the subject of the general villainy of the priesthood; and a little later appalled to discover that by *priests* the lady has understood ecclesiastics of the Roman Catholic communion, and that she is an ardent devotee of the more evangelical branch of the Church of England.

How true, how inevitable spontaneous disagreement as to what words mean must be, how wholly inadequate the vocabularies at our disposal to the infinite shades of thought and feeling we must use them to express, nothing can show more clearly than the disputes, in talk and even in volumes, which are constantly going on about us. More of these than any one would guess who has not carefully examined them turn upon what seems like perverse misunderstanding of words. What does a man mean, for example, who asserts that another is or is not a gentleman? To one the question turns on clothes; to another on social position gauged by the subtile standards of fashion; to another on birth; to another on manners; to another on those still more subtile things, the feelings which go to make up character; to another

still on a combination of some or all of these. Last winter a superannuated fisherman died in a little Yankee village. He was rough enough in aspect to delight a painter; if he could read and write it was all he could do. But there was about the man a certain dignity of self-respect which made him at ease with whoever spoke to him, which made whoever spoke to him at ease with him. I have heard few more fitting epitaphs than a phrase used by a college friend of mine who knew the old fellow as well as I: "What a gentleman he was!" But one who heard this alone would never have guessed that it applied to an uncouth old figure, not over clean, that until a few months ago was visibly trudging about the paths of our New England coast. Just such misunderstanding as any of us can see would arise here, underlies by far the greater part of what disputes come to my knowledge.

I have said enough, I take it, to emphasize the enormous, inevitable discrepancy between our ideas and the few outward and visible signs by which common consent — good use — agrees that style must express them. It follows from this, I think, that the agreement of good use, the consent which makes any word mean anything, must be far from exact; at best it is approximate. For every-day purposes it answers fairly well; for the finer purposes of the higher literature it often proves almost hopelessly inadequate.

In this matter I have found very suggestive the line of thought started in my head a few years ago by

some questions circulated by certain English psychologists. What ideas, they asked, do we attach to certain extremely familiar words and signs, — to the letters of the alphabet, for example, or such a word as *man?* The answers to their questions revealed certain facts that I should never have thought of. A considerable number of sane human beings, it appears, attach to each letter of the alphabet a distinct color, probably an unconscious reminiscence of the illuminated alphabets of infancy. For my own part, I found that the word *man* suggested pretty distinctly a figure with a clumsy hat and a chin-beard, poising himself rather unsteadily on his left leg. I subsequently discovered the original of the image in a copy of Mother Goose, familiar to me at the age of two or three. To take another word, which we considered a little while ago, what does *choir* mean? Usage, to be sure, gives it two distinct significations: in architecture it means the part of a church where the singers stand; hereabouts it generally means the singers themselves. In the phrase from Shakspere that we considered, — "Bare, ruined *choirs* where late the sweet birds sang," — the second meaning is excluded; but the very comment I made on the line — that the eastern sky gleamed through the empty tracery — showed that to me the word suggested a Gothic structure viewed from the interior. To another it might with equal propriety suggest the exterior of the same structure; to still another the whole structure, visible from no particular point of view. And turning to the other meaning of

the word, does *choir* when applied to singers suggest a company of surpliced boys such as make so impressive some of the services of the Episcopal Church, or one of those more social bodies from which, the newspapers tell us, sopranos occasionally elope with tenors?

We have come, in fact, to a point where we can begin to appreciate pretty distinctly the actual relation that exists between words and ideas. Our words are at most so few, our ideas at the very least so many, that almost every word we possess must be pressed into service for very various ideas; and what is more, that no idea can ever be called up in our minds by a word, without the suggestion of a considerable number of others along with it. Every word we use in defining our ideas for ourselves must not only name an idea, but along with it must suggest, consciously or unconsciously, a very curiously complex set of others. Every word we use in imparting our ideas to other people must likewise arouse in their minds a similar curious complexity of conscious or sub-conscious associations. Here is a fact that we can no more escape than we can escape the absolute authority of good use itself.

We are now, I think, in a position to appreciate more fully than before the precise problem before one who, within the limits of good use, would choose for his compositions the kinds and the number of words which shall best produce the effect he has in mind. It is not what it seemed at first, — simply to pitch

upon a word by which good use has agreed with reasonable approximation to name the idea he wishes to arouse. It is equally, if not more, to make sure that the word he chooses shall not only name the idea distinctly enough to identify it, but also name it by a name — if such a name is to be found — which shall arouse in the minds of whoever read or hear it a set of suggestions as nearly as possible akin to those which it arouses in his own. Otherwise it must, in all probability, fail to produce the effect he has in mind.

How hard this is we can see by thinking for a moment of the various associations which in various companies cluster about those most definitely specific of words, — proper names. Every school-boy, I will assume, has known who Brutus was, any time these fifteen hundred years. He was the Roman gentleman who had been a close personal friend of Julius Cæsar, but whose devotion to the old constitution of the Roman republic led him to join in the conspiracy which put Cæsar to death. Shakspere's tragedy makes Brutus, to English-speaking people, something of a hero, — a man not to be imitated, perhaps, but surely to be admired for whole-hearted devotion to the highest ideals he knows. In the "Divine Comedy" of Dante, on the other hand, Brutus appears in a very different light. If I am not in error, Dante believed passionately in the divine right of the Roman empire; to him Brutus was the first and chiefest of the sinners who had raised their hands against it. In

the very lowest depth of hell he found him suffering the penalty of the gravest but one of human crimes; the worst torture of all — only a shade worse than his — was reserved for Judas Iscariot. Now, if there be school-boys trained in the "Divine Comedy" as most of us have been trained in Shakspere, the name "Brutus" would suggest to them anything but our heroic ideal. Each set would know who Brutus was; but the one set would think of him as a hero, the other as one who deserved worse execration than ever Yankee vented on Benedict Arnold.

After all, the analogy of such proper names as I have just mentioned is perhaps the most instructive to which I can now call your attention. If we understand a proper name at all, we know to what human being it applies. In general, his outward and visible form, lovely or unlovely, rises before our eyes when we hear the arbitrary syllables by which men have agreed to name him. But what set of emotions rises in our minds along with this imaginary figure varies almost as much as we ourselves vary from one another. In private life it is often hard to guess what these emotions will be. With public figures the case is a little different: it is safe to assume, I think, that the name of Mr. Jefferson Davis, calling up a slim figure with a slight beard under the chin, would arouse one set of emotions in a citizen of Massachusetts, and quite another in a citizen of Mississippi. Sensible people, wishing to produce distinct rhetorical effects, should govern their use of the name *Jefferson Davis*

accordingly. And here we may see, as distinctly as anywhere, the two functions that every word, every name of an idea, must perform: in the first place, it names something in such a way as to identify it; in the second, it suggests along with it a very subtile and variable set of associated ideas and emotions.

These two functions, hardly ever quite distinct in style, must both be kept in mind by whoever would use words — and, as we shall see later, by whoever would compose words — with any approach to certainty. It is worth while, then, to name them now distinctly. The names I give them are, I believe, sanctioned by no small amount of usage; but even were there no usage behind them at all, I should feel at liberty, with such definition as I hope I have given them, to use them in this book. A word may be said, then, to *denote* the idea it identifies; *Jefferson Davis* denotes the slim gentleman with a slight chin-beard. A word may be said to *connote* the thoughts and emotions that it arouses in the hearer or reader, in whose mind these thoughts and emotions habitually cluster about the precise idea it denotes: in the North, for example, the name *Jefferson Davis* connotes the idea of treason; in the South, the idea of patriotism. What we have seen true of this proper name I shall ask you to believe true, in greater or less degree, of every word we use.

Now, the effect which we may wish at any moment to produce is a matter not of denotation alone, nor of connotation, but of both together. Nor is it a matter

of what a given word may denote or may connote to us alone; it is a matter of what that fine perception of fact which marks the distinction between what we call sanity and what we call folly, leads us to believe that the word will at once denote and connote in the minds of those whom we address. And this is the consideration that must govern us in our choice of words, Latin or Saxon, big or little, general or specific, figurative or literal; and in our choice of number of words, many or few. A very fine question this proves to be, — depressing, perhaps, at first sight, for it is clear that ideal perfection is as unattainable in the use of words as in other phases of our conduct of life. But what is unattainable is not for that unapproachable; and I believe that there are few things in this world more constantly, more increasingly stimulating than unceasing, earnest effort to approach more and more nearly an ideal which is all the more worth striving for when we are sure that it will never repay us with the fatal satiety of full possession.

III.

SENTENCES.

A SENTENCE I may define as a series of words so composed as to make complete sense. In its simplest form it consists of a subject — the thing concerning which a completely sensible assertion is made — and a predicate, the assertion made. There may or may not be objects and modifiers. *I study*, is a sentence; so is, *I study Rhetoric;* so is, *I study Rhetoric with pleasure in spite of its apparent dulness;* and so on. But a true sentence may always, I think, be analyzed into subject, or sometimes subjects, and predicate, or sometimes predicates, with occasional modifiers, — objects, adjectives, adverbs, what not. For various purposes, it may take various forms, — positive, negative, interrogative, exclamatory, — but so long as it remains a composition of words, and of nothing but words, which makes complete sense, it is a sentence.

I need hardly remind you that sentences are as old as language itself. Until a child is able to put words together we do not, unless blinded by affection, pretend that the child can really talk. The moment he can put words together, the moment he begins to express ideas, not independently, but with a growing sense of their mutual relations, he begins to make sentences. In the composition of sentences, then, we are controlled by a system of good use as old as the language we employ; and this system of good use which tells us how we may compose words in sentences is what has been codified so often under the depressing name of "grammar." In some languages, certainly as they were taught in my day, grammar is appalling. The Latin grammars that we used to learn by heart in the good old times were dreadful things,— not only because we were generally made to learn them by heart before we had any real knowledge of what the phrases they codified meant, but because the number and variety of the forms assumed by almost every word in the Latin language is in itself bewildering. In English, on the other hand, we are grammatically so fortunate that people fond of epigram have said with a shade of truth that English has no grammar at all. This means that English has fewer inflections than almost any other language. What is more, its other grammatical forms are surprisingly simple: gender, for example, instead of being arbitrary, corresponds with physical fact; double negatives are really equivalent to affirmatives. The forms assumed by English words, in short, are so few and so simple that anybody who knows the language at all knows them at sight, — what singulars are, for example, and plurals, and possessives, and past tenses. Now when a composition involves incongruity — a violation of common-sense —

almost anybody can see it. *We was there*, for example, does not make sense; the word *we* means that there were more than one of us, the word *was* confines the number present to one. So "that *girl* is putting on *its* gloves" does not make sense; all girls are feminine, at least in English grammar, and the function of the neuter in English is to strike out all notion of sex. What is true in these very simple cases seems to me true in all. In English, good use in composition is a question chiefly of good sense; I have yet to find a sentence that makes good sense — and anybody who knows what words mean can tell, with a little thought, whether a sentence makes good sense or not — that is not good English.

In considering, then, what forms of composition are sanctioned by English grammar, — by the good use that must govern us in composing words, — I have found the most convenient plan to be this: putting aside formal grammar, I ask myself of a given construction whether it makes good sense; if so, I find it good English. The only serious question that arises concerns constructions that in analysis do not make good sense. Most of them are what we call Solecisms, — a convenient single word for grammatical blunders; but some fall under another head. Like every other language, English possesses very irregular forms or phrases which good use has abundantly sanctioned. These, which give a very subtilely effective turn to style, we call Idioms. Before asserting that a construction which does not make good sense is a

blunder, we must make sure that it is not an Idiom. If a given construction does not make good sense, and is not an Idiom, it is a Solecism; and a Solecism is a violation of good use. That seems to me the whole story.

One or two very simple examples will illustrate this matter as well as more elaborate ones. Take a phrase that any of us who are much in the country often hear: "*Was you* there?" Now, *was* is singular, and *you* is plural; obviously there is an incongruity here not consistent with good sense. But English usage has agreed with that of most other languages in discarding the second person singular. The plural form *you* is the one which the accumulated courtesies of several centuries compel us to use in addressing even sweethearts and servants. Does English usage, then, sanction the incongruity *you was?* At present it certainly does not. Yet a slight examination of some of the best writers of the last century will show that certainly as late as the time of Fielding, there was a great deal of good authority for *you was*, when the second person singular was intended; that *you were* was reserved for a distinct plural. *You was*, then, may be said once to have been idiomatic; present use makes it a Solecism. Take another phrase, which few of us fail to utter every week: *it is me*. Now, clearly the word after the verb *is* should be grammatically in agreement with the subject of the verb. Clearly, too, the subject of the verb is nominative; and apparently the form *me*, one of the very few inflections

which remain in English, is not nominative, but objective. No question could occur with a noun: *it is John, it is the man*, for example, would be unchanged in form if English usage should choose to demand an objective instead of a nominative case after the verb. Clearly, too, *it is him* is wrong; and *it is her*. But how about *it is me* and *it is I*? Everybody knows that the latter form is logically the true one; most of us have been reproved over and over again for our depraved persistency in the use of the former. But, as a matter of fact, has not good use gone a long way to make *it is me* idiomatic, and *it is I* a bit pedantic? I do not feel at all sure that we can answer *No*.

On the other hand, the English usage which generally seems most arbitrary, seems to me really reducible to a matter of the simplest common-sense. I refer to the use of *shall* and *will*. *Shall* is the normal form of the future: its literal meaning is absolutely prophetic; I *shall* come, for example, settles the question of my coming. *Will*, on the other hand, implies distinct volition. I *will* come, means, clearly enough, that I should like to come very much. In the first person, in predicting our own conduct, we use the auxiliaries with their literal meaning. In the second person and the third, we find the case apparently changed: we say not you *shall* come, but you *will* come; not it *shall* rain, but it *will* rain. Why? Simply and solely, I believe, because as a matter of good sense, or at least of good manners, we cannot rationally or decently assume such control of persons or

things other than ourselves as to risk a distinct prophecy about them. To say *you shall come* would be to assume complete control of your conduct; to say *it shall rain*, to assume complete control of the weather. As a matter of courtesy, then, we use *will* when we utter predictions about persons other than ourselves, — implying their consent to the line of conduct we assert them about to follow; and pure idiom, personifying such impersonal things as the weather, makes *will* the word by which, in such questions as that about rain, we rid ourselves of the assumption of impossible authority or responsibility. In a word, I have found this rule invariable: *Shall* is the normal form of the future tense. Unless good sense or good manners forbid, it should be used; but when good sense or good manners forbid us to assume control of the subject of the verb, we should use *will*.

To put the whole matter in a slightly different way, a Solecism — a construction not sanctioned by English usage — is reducible to a mode of Impropriety: it really amounts to using an English word, or English words, in a sense not sanctioned by English usage. It differs from a simple Impropriety only in the fact that the misuse is not obvious until we consider the word misused, not alone, but in its relation to the context; and under the head of Solecism must fall all violations of good use in compositions.

This is certainly true at least of style in its broader sense, which includes spoken discourse as well as

written. In written discourse, however, there is one peculiar feature of rather late growth, which deserves independent consideration. This feature, wholly absent from spoken discourse, addressed solely to the eye, and very bewildering to most people, is punctuation. Certain marks of punctuation — interrogation-marks, exclamation-points, signs of quotation — are easy enough to manage. Periods rarely give much trouble to anybody who stops to think. But commas, and above all semi-colons and colons, are dreadfully puzzling; and I have never yet come across a book on the subject which did not leave me more puzzled than it found me. I have tried to discover some general principle beneath the practice — the manifold forms of good use — now in vogue. I do not feel completely satisfied with the form which the principle I find there takes in my mind; but at all events, it has proved suggestive. In spoken discourse, vocal emphasis and pauses indicate where we wish the hearers' attention to centre. In written discourse, addressed solely to the eye, such emphasis is impossible. Some substitute is necessary; otherwise no one word, no one part of a composition, appears any more significant than another. The crude substitutes — italics, capitals, and the like — prove in practice too crude. Good use, then, has fallen back on punctuation, whose function, very generally stated, is to do for the eye what emphasis does for the ear, — to group separately those words and thoughts which for the purpose in hand should be separately grouped; and

so far as the good use which governs the order of words will permit, to arrest the eye for an instant on those words on which it is desirable to arrest the attention.

Putting aside interrogations and exclamations, the period is the strongest mark of punctuation; it marks the limits of sentences. The next strongest mark is the colon; weaker, but still stronger than the comma, is the semicolon; weakest and most frequent of all is the comma. In a given place, as we shall see later, we may often with perfect propriety use any of these four marks; the question in such cases, the question in general, is what we wish to group together, what to emphasize, and how strong to make our emphasis.

Now, usage clearly does not permit us to put marks of punctuation wherever we please. In putting into practice this very general principle that punctuation does for the eye what vocal stress does for the ear, we must constantly keep in mind a rational sense of how far we may go. But within the limits of good use, I have found this principle, I have said, extremely suggestive. So much for good use in the composition of sentences. Our next business is to inquire whether within the limits of good use there are any specific kinds of sentences which deserve special attention, any types of sentence which on general principles we should prefer to others.

In discussing a similar question about words, you will remember, I began by mentioning certain com-

monplaces current about the matters in hand. At the beginning of my first chapter, I mentioned one commonplace about sentences which is constantly turning up. Are not short sentences, I am asked again and again, a great deal better than long ones? Perhaps the simplest way of considering what effects may be produced by various kinds of sentences is to examine this commonplace, to see how much truth there is in it, and why.

Before reaching any definite conclusion about long sentences and short, however, we may conveniently fix in our minds another, and a far more exact, classification of sentences, — that which divides them into periodic and loose. Bain's definition of a period — another name for a periodic sentence — will at once help us to understand this classification and illustrate it. "In a period," he says, "the sense is suspended until the end. Sentences where this is not the case are termed loose." Here are two sentences: are they periodic or loose? The first runs thus, "In a period the sense is suspended until the end." Now, clearly the words, "In a period the sense is suspended," make complete sense, and would be a perfectly grammatical sentence, even if the words "until the end" never appeared at all. According to itself, then, this sentence is not a period. What it is the next sentence tells us: "Sentences where this is not the case," it runs, "are termed loose." Bain's first sentence, then, is slightly loose, at the word *suspended;* his second, where the sense is incomplete until the very last

word, — in other words, where the sense is suspended until the end, — is, like the clause I am now writing, incontestably periodic.

This classification is obviously exact. Every sentence that was ever composed, every sentence that ever will be, must be either periodic or loose. And in almost any writer whose work you choose to examine you will find examples of both kinds. Nobody that I know of has written wholly in periods; hardly anybody has avoided periods altogether. But almost every writer will be found, on examination with this matter in view, generally to prefer one of these kinds of sentence to the other; and according as a writer tends to the use of periodic sentences or of loose, his style may, without too great a stretch of propriety, be roughly called a periodic or a loose style. On the whole, the most periodic of modern English writers seems to be De Quincey; the loosest, Carlyle. To get a notion of the striking difference of effect secured by their different habits of syntax, you may well compare passages from them taken almost at random.

Of course, there is between them a marked difference in temper; but difference in temper, we must always keep in mind, can reveal itself in literature only by means of the choice and the composition of the elements of style. And though De Quincey's choice of words differs notably from Carlyle's, it does not, in my opinion, differ by any means as notably as his general habit of thought, evinced by his gener

ally periodic composition. The sustained, somewhat pompous, but, to my thinking, dignified character of De Quincey's prose is largely an affair of periods; the slashing vigor of Carlyle's prose, the startling strength of many of his unexpected strokes, is largely an affair of deliberately loose sentences.

With an appreciation of the marked difference in effect produced by loose style and by periodic, we may now inquire whether there is any reason for preferring either in general. Theoretically, I believe there is a good case for the periodic. It is best stated, I think, by Mr. Herbert Spencer, in a paper called, "The Philosophy of Style," which is remarkable, like a good deal of his work, for being very ill written. In brief, I understand his position to be this: In a loose style, the mind of the reader tends constantly to pause, to grasp the complete idea, at each point where the sense is grammatically complete; and each added clause involves not only the addition of some new features to an idea that one is tempted to consider complete without them, but often also the unmaking of an idea into which the logically incomplete if grammatically complete statements of the earlier portions of the sentence have led us. In a periodic style, though the attention is sometimes strained, there is far less liability to error. The whole principle may be very simply illustrated by considering three words, first as the English arrange them, and then as the French. "A black horse," we say; the French say, "un cheval noir." Off-hand, anybody would

declare one order exactly as good as the other. But repeat to yourself the words, "a black horse," and see what image arises in your mind: once for all, it will be a black horse, mane, tail, and hide. Then say to yourself, "a horse," — the English equivalent of the French "un cheval:" unless your experience and habit of mind be different from that of everybody I have carefully examined on this point, the image that will form itself in your mind will have a bay hide. Hereabouts, at any rate, the typical horse is a bay. Now add to the words, "a horse," or "un cheval," the adjective "black," or "noir," and see what happens: you have to destroy your bay image before you finally possess yourself of the proper black one. The English form, "a black horse," is periodic, — it conveys the whole idea at once; the French form, "un cheval noir," is loose, — it conveys the idea in two distinct parts, the first complete in itself, and subtilely misleading. What is true of these three words I have found to be true of periodic and loose style in general. And broadly speaking, the looser style gets, the worse the trouble grows. Theoretically, the best style is periodic.

When we come to practice, however, we find our theory decidedly limited. As I said a little while ago, no writer can be found whose sentences fall invariably into one class or the other. This means, of course, that to write wholly in either periodic or loose sentences would be to violate the unanimous usage of English literature; and unanimous usage of this

kind is apt, like commonplace, to rest upon some permanent fact. In this case the permanent fact is not far to seek. In uninflected English, the relation of word to word is generally indicated by their order. Much to alter this order is to alter or destroy their meaning. The English language, then, is normally loose. A single example will illustrate what I mean: The style of Cæsar's Commentaries is approved by Latin scholars. Here is a literal translation of one of Cæsar's elaborately inflected periods, taken from the first page at which I opened the book: "At the same about time, Publius Crassus, when into Aquitania he was come (which region, as before said has been, both of territory in extent, and in number of inhabitants, for a third part of Gaul is counted) when he had understood, in this region by him war to be carried on, where a few before years Lucius Valerius, the legate, army defeated, killed had been, and whence Lucius Manlius, the proconsul, baggage lost, had retreated, not small by him care to be taken understood." Absolutely periodic this arrangement, logically admirable from beginning to the end, but no more like English than I to Hercules. To make English at all, we must ruthlessly loosen it, for example, thus: "About the same time Publius Crassus arrived in Aquitania, a region, which, as I have said before, is accounted in both territory and population a third part of Gaul. Here he was to carry on the war; here, he remembered, Lucius Valerius, the legate, had a few years before been routed and killed;

from hence Lucius Manlius, the proconsul, had retreated, with the loss of his baggage. Clearly, Crassus understood, he must keep his wits about him."

I have said enough, I hope, to show that the fundamental difference between periodic sentences and loose is about the same as the fundamental differences we discussed between different kinds of words, — Latin and Saxon, big and little, and so on: it is a difference of effect. And I hope I have said enough to show why, on the whole, I think the effect secured by an approach to the periodic form the better. But I have shown too how remote the usage of uninflected English compels such an approach to be. In short, I have explained as fully as I can here why it is my custom to advise pupils to make their style as periodic as they can without palpable artifice.

In a very few words, I can now answer the question with which we started this part of our inquiry: Are not short sentences preferable to long? What long sentences are, and short, I leave to your common-sense; what anybody can perceive needs no definition. I refer to your common-sense, too, the obvious fact that monotonous adherence to any one form of sentence — or to any given line of conduct at all — is apt to be exquisitely annoying. But from what I have said, it should be clear that the longer a sentence is, the harder it is to make the sentence periodic, the more breaks there are apt to be in the sense. Very broadly speaking, the effect produced

by a style in which short periodic sentences predominate is more satisfactory than that produced by a style full of long and loose ones, or of long ones whose periodicity is secured only by palpable artifice; and this position I believe in a general way to be maintained by the historic development of English style during the last three centuries.

Of course such a fact as this — that the historic development of style has followed a certain course — can be proved only by prolonged study, by great accumulation of evidence. Even if I had collected enough to make my conclusions incontestable, I could not lay much of it before you here; and, in fact, I do not pretend that my opinion is more than an opinion. At the same time, I believe that I may well offer you a few examples of the evidence which has led me to it; for while they indicate something concerning the general development of English style, they also illustrate, pretty distinctly, some of the principles to which I have still to call your attention. In choosing them, I have followed this plan: With all its almost infinite variations, each period of any national history has a character peculiarly its own. This character is very hard to define, but by no means hard to recognize. We all know, in a certain way, what connotation clusters about the words Elizabethan, Cavalier, Puritan, Restoration, Queen Anne, Eighteenth Century. Certain types of face, types of fashion still more marked, contribute to the subtilely different impressions that each succeeding epoch in

national life makes even on a superficial student. Now, one who begins to know even a little of literature begins to feel instinctively that at each period of national history there arises a style which, very subtilely, expresses that period and no other. With all his genius, that bids fair to make his writings permanently contemporary, Shakspere remains — and the better we know him the more we feel it — Elizabethan. Milton is not only Milton, but a man and a poet of the seventeenth century. In Gray we have something that belongs as much to the palmy days of the Georges as powdered wigs do and furbelows; in Wordsworth, something that is full of the spirit which marked the first part of our own century; in Browning, something peculiarly of our own time. Guided at first only by this instinctive sense of what makes a given piece of style — like a given costume — characteristic of a given epoch, I select a few characteristic examples of English style at different periods of national life, between the time of Queen Elizabeth and our own. Then, always remembering that the effects of style are produced only by means of the choice and composition of the elements, I proceed to analyze them — as far as may be — and to discover what gives each its peculiar character. For the moment, of course, I confine my analysis to the composition of sentences.

Unable to choose many examples, I take half at random passages from four writers, each of whom, despite his individuality, is typical of his own cen-

tury: Sir Walter Ralegh of the sixteenth, — the age of Elizabeth; Sir Thomas Browne of the seventeenth, — the age of the Stuarts; Henry Fielding of the eighteenth, — the age of the Georges; Lord Macaulay of the nineteenth, — the age of Victoria.

From Ralegh I take his famous apostrophe to Death, which closes the great "History of the World," — the book which busied his thirteen years of imprisonment in the Tower of London: —

"O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised: thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words, *Hic jacet.*"

Long we find it, and very loose, in spite of its surging cadences.

From Sir Thomas Browne I take the famous sentence from his "Urn-Burial" which was so dear to De Quincey: —

"Now, since these dead bones have already outlasted the living ones of Methuselah, and in a yard underground, and thin walls of clay, outworn all the strong and spacious buildings above it, and quietly rested under the drums and tramplings of three conquests, what prince can promise such diuturnity unto his relics, or might not gladly say, *Sic ego componi versus in ossa velim?*"

Still long, but no longer loose, this sentence. Elaborately, carefully, artificially periodic; modelled, indeed, on inflected Latin.

From Fielding I take, even more at random, a bit of "Tom Jones": —

"Now, there is no one circumstance in which the distempers of the mind bear a more exact analogy to those which are called bodily, than in the aptness which both have to a relapse. This is plain in the violent diseases of ambition and avarice. I have known ambition, when cured at court by frequent disappointments (which are the only physic for it), to break out again in a contest for foreman of the grand jury at an assizes, and have heard of a man who had so far conquered avarice as to give away many a sixpence, that comforted himself at last on his deathbed, by making a crafty and advantageous bargain concerning his ensuing funeral with an undertaker who had married his only child."

The first two sentences here are much shorter. Written English has come a great deal nearer spoken. Considering the idiomatic freedom of the style, it proves on examination surprisingly periodic; but Fielding's periodicity is nothing like so palpably artificial as Sir Thomas Browne's.

From Macaulay I take, much at random too, a few sentences from his essay on Warren Hastings: —

"With all his faults — and they were neither few nor small — only one cemetery was worthy to contain his remains. In that temple of silence and reconciliation where the enmities of twenty generations lie buried, in the Great

Abbey which has during many ages afforded a quiet resting-place to those whose minds and bodies have been shattered by the contentions of the Great Hall, the dust of the illustrious accused should have mingled with the dust of the illustrious accusers. This was not to be. Yet the place of interment was not ill chosen. Behind the chancel of the parish church of Daylesford, in earth which already held the bones of many chiefs of the house of Hastings, was laid the coffin of the greatest man who has ever borne that ancient and widely extended name."

Short sentences and long we find here, deliberately intermixed. Periodic, every one of them. Artificial, if you please: the nineteenth century is nothing if not self-conscious. But the free periodicity of Macaulay, frankly recognizing the limits of a language where the order of words chiefly determines the relation of thoughts, is a wonderfully different thing from the half-Latin periodicity of two centuries before.

Of course, these few examples indicate the development of style in a very rough way. They prove nothing, unless very careful and detailed study prove them typical. Personally, I incline to believe that it would. But putting that question aside, these examples certainly show how varied the effects are which can be produced within the limits of periodic sentences alone, and how far from modern a style must be whose periodicity is laboriously artificial. They show too, with much distinctness, another trait in the composition of sentences which is worth keeping in mind. In each

of the four extracts the sentences are balanced. The balance of Ralegh's clauses is very obvious and simple, — as obvious as that of the Psalms. In the passage from Sir Thomas Browne is a clause whose balance is to me the most exquisite I have found in the language: to see just what is meant by balance, then, we cannot do better than study it for a moment in detail: —

"*Quietly rested* under the *drums* and *tramplings* of *three conquests*."
1 2 3 3 2 1

Not only every significant word in this clause has one to balance it; but the main consonantal sounds of each balancing pair are identical, and yet so subtilely varied that though the exquisite art of the phrase is not exquisite enough to seem quite artless, few would perceive exactly in what the artifice consists. *Quietly* balances *conquests; rested* balances *three; drums* balances *tramplings*. An obviously balanced style — Dr. Johnson's is notoriously the most so in our classical literature — has the fatal fault of aggressive artificiality. A style which neglects balance is often, in effect, still worse. Take this sentence, for example, from some newspaper: "As distinctly as W. Renshaw is at the head of the men, so is Miss Maud Watson the premier lady player." What makes this so vile is not so much, I think, the barbarous impropriety of the last clause, as its utter and needless dissimilarity to the first. In brief, I am accustomed to urge pupils to make style as balanced as idiomatic freedom will allow.

I have now discussed, as far as time will permit, the first two phases of the sentence which I proposed at the beginning of this chapter: the danger of offending in composition against the paramount authority of good use, and some of the different effects which within the limits of good use may be produced by sentences of different kinds. Our business now is to turn to the principles of composition, and to inquire how far good use will allow us to apply them to the composition of sentences.

These principles of composition, you will remember, are three: The first, the principle of Unity, concerns the substance of a composition: every composition should group itself about one central idea. The second, the principle of Mass, concerns the external form of a composition: the chief parts of every composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye. The third, the principle of Coherence, concerns the internal arrangement of a composition: the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. The question before us now is how far we may apply these principles to the composition of sentences.

To turn, then, to the principle of Unity, — that every composition should group itself about one central idea. In the first chapter I pointed out sufficiently how very elastic this principle is: as our purpose varies, the same idea may legitimately be made the central idea of a sentence or a paragraph or a chapter or a book. The question of scale, in short, is a perfectly indepen-

dent one; but the question of unity is a perfectly distinct one. A style in which each composition has a demonstrable central idea is a style very different in effect from one in which each composition is heterogeneous, and for general purposes is by no means as serviceable. An example you can all turn to will show what I mean: the paper in the "Spectator" which tells of the death of Sir Roger de Coverley. It is too long for insertion here; but a short extract will perhaps serve our purpose: —

> "I have likewise a letter from the butler, who took so much care of me last summer when I was at the knight's house. As my friend the butler mentions, in the simplicity of his heart, several circumstances the others have passed over in silence, I shall give my reader a copy of his letter, without any alteration or diminution: —
>
> "'HONOURED SIR, — Knowing that you was my old master's good friend, I could not forbear sending you the melancholy news of his death, which has afflicted the whole county as well as his poor servants, who loved him, I may say, better than we did our lives. I am afraid he caught his death the last county-sessions, where he would go to see justice done to a poor widow woman and her fatherless children, that had been wronged by a neighbouring gentleman; for you know, Sir, my good master was always the poor man's friend.'"

The contrast between the polite style of the Spectator himself and the vulgar style of the butler, proves on analysis to be chiefly a matter of unity of sentence. And this example emphasizes one important fact: neglect of the principle of Unity in the composition

of sentences is very apt to produce a subtile effect of vulgarity. It connotes, in short, a confusion of mind which, in educated people, nothing short of extreme emotion will justify.

The question which naturally presents itself now is whether there is any test by which unity of sentence may be proved. At the risk of seeming too dogmatic, I have come to the practice of laying down a rule as definite as this: When a sentence may be resolved into a single subject with legitimate modifiers, and a single predicate with legitimate modifiers, it has unity. Sentences not thus reducible often lack it.

From this, two or three conclusions follow, sometimes laid down as distinct rules. Obviously, a short sentence is less apt to stray out of unity than a long; a periodic than a loose. Short and periodic, then, should, on the principle of Unity, commonly be preferred. Again, a shift of subject in a sentence, or of predicate, or an accumulation of either subjects or predicates, is apt to lead to violation of unity; and violation of unity is apt to mean a missing of the effect which, as educated people, most writers generally wish to produce.

A glance back at the four examples of different stages of English style which I cited a little while ago will show an interesting fact about this matter of unity. Three hundred years ago, and two hundred, for that matter, few writers seem to have paid much attention to unity of sentence; like modern Germans and Harvard undergraduates, Englishmen of

the most accomplished kind put into a sentence pretty much what they felt like putting there. A century ago, we find this changed. From a style that resembles the heterogeneity of modern German, English has passed to a style that, more remotely, suggests — at least in its observance of the principle of Unity — the precision which makes so fascinating the style of the last two centuries in France. In other words, if we consider modern style — as I am disposed to — as the result of a constant conflict between good use and the principles of composition, we may say that in English sentences the principle of Unity has carried the day. So far as good use can be said at all to sanction a matter so remote from mere grammar, good use may be said at present abundantly to sanction unity of sentence — not dogmatically, as it governs words and grammatical forms, but in the form of a constantly strengthening tendency.

So we come to the principle of Mass: that the chief parts of each composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye. In my first chapter I dwelt on this matter more than on that which we have just considered. I showed how, in writing, technical devices must do for the eye what in speech emphasis does for the ear; how the physical fact that written style is addressed chiefly to the eye has, in my opinion, more than a little to do with the principles which must govern our written composition. I showed, you will remember, how in any composition the points which most readily catch the eye are evidently the beginning

and the end. From which, of course it follows that, broadly speaking, every composition — sentence, paragraph, chapter, book — may conveniently begin and end with words which stand for ideas that we wish to impress on our readers. And very lately I have called your attention to another fact which we should remember here: broadly speaking, the office of punctuation is to emphasize, — to do for the eye what vocal pauses and stress do for the ear, — to show what parts of a composition belong together, and among those parts to indicate the most significant. It is clear that periods emphasize more strongly than semi-colons; and semi-colons than commas. From this, of course, it follows that in an ideally massed sentence the most significant words come close to the periods, the less significant close to the lesser marks of punctuation, the least significant in those unbroken stretches of discourse where there are nothing but words to arrest the eye. The test of a well-massed sentence, then, is very simple: Are the words that arrest the eye the words on which the writer would arrest our attention?

With these principles in mind, let us glance at the four examples of English style to which I have already called your attention.

The passage from Ralegh, whatever its faults, is ideally massed. The words that catch the eye are in every case the chief ones; and at the same time the careful balance and antithesis of each separate clause indicate with great precision the comparative value of the ideas expressed.

The passage from Sir Thomas Browne is by no means so well massed: as a consequence, we find that we cannot read it by any means as fast. Before we can tell which words are significant we must in imagination read the whole sentence aloud, and decide on what words to throw vocal stress. But in this decision we are greatly aided by the careful balance and antithesis that pervades the sentence.

In the passage from Fielding the artificiality of style is far less palpable than in the others; but the mass, though perhaps less satisfactory than Ralegh's, is distinctly better than Sir Thomas Browne's.

In the passage from Macaulay, the massing, though not so good as Ralegh's, is better than Browne's or Fielding's. And here, again, balance and antithesis come to the aid of punctuation.

In a general way, I think, these examples indicate two facts which I believe true. In the first place, it is very hard to mass a sentence well without making the artifice very palpable. To put a word in a conspicuous place, unless it chance to put itself there, is deliberately to alter the natural order of our words; and to alter the natural order of our words in an uninflected language is to strain, and often to violate, the authority of good use. From this would naturally follow the second fact I have in mind: that in the historical development of English style the conflict between good use and the principle of Mass has followed a course very different from that of the conflict of good use with the principle of Unity. In the case of the

principle of Unity there was in the nature of things no reason why the principle should not more and more prevail. In the case of the principle of Mass, which conflicts directly with the naturally inflexible order of words in an uninflected language, every effort to apply the principle involves an artificial distortion of style. The result is just what we should expect. The conflict of principle and use is still at its height, and here is where modern students of style must exercise the greatest care not to stray farther than need be from principle.

An example from my own experience may serve to make this matter clearer.

It occurred while I was last discussing this very matter at Harvard College. I had come to this point, when I proposed a question that I have not yet mentioned. Granting, as we have seen, that the most conspicuous points in a sentence — or in any composition — are the beginning and the end, is either of these more important than the other? It is a natural fact that to most people — other things being equal — what is freshest in mind is most conspicuous. Perhaps chiefly for this reason, I asserted the end of a composition to be on the whole a more emphatic place than the beginning. And here, I pointed out, is the secret of anti-climax: intentionally or unintentionally as the case may be — with fatal loss of effect or with great ironical power — it emphasizes what, in the nature of things, should not be emphatic. And to close the whole subject, I wrote this sentence: "Be

sure that your sentences end with words that deserve the distinction you give them." Revising the passage, I was impressed by the fact that this sentence was perhaps as complete a violation as I could devise of the very principle it laid down. "Give them" were the most emphatic words; the next most emphatic — the opening ones — were, "Be sure." Evidently that would not do. Applying the principle of Mass deliberately, I inquired what the chief words really were. Obviously, I saw, they were *end* and *distinction*. Striking out needless words, placing needful ones where, according to principle, they belonged, I found my sentence in a form in all respects superior to the first, — shorter, more compact, quite as freely idiomatic and perfectly massed. In that form it stands now, a counsel which I trust you will not find useless: "End with words that deserve distinction."

So we come to the principle of Coherence: that the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. Applying this to sentences, it obviously means that the relation of each word and each clause to the context should be unmistakable. In a very general form, this statement covers by far the greater part of the rules which fill conventional textbooks of rhetoric. In a very general form, but I think an adequately suggestive one, it answers by far the greater part of the questions concerning composition which novices in the art address to teachers. As I have said, such questions almost always concern matters of detail; and in its very essence, the princi-

ple of Coherence is that which applies chiefly to matters of detail. To distinguish it from the principle of Mass, indeed, *detail* might have been a better name for it.

For this very reason, the principle of Coherence is far more difficult to discuss in a few minutes than either of the others. Examples of the observance and the violation of it take so many and such varied forms that at first sight the whole matter seems almost hopeless. I believe, however, that coherence of sentence is dependent on one of three pretty simple general devices; that all the rules I have found to guide us toward it will fall under one of three broadly general ones. By stating these and briefly discussing each in turn, I can certainly treat the subject with more decision than otherwise.

The general principle, we may remember, is this: in a sentence the relation of each word and each clause to the context should be unmistakable. Now, the mutual relations of words and clauses, indicated primarily in our uninflected language by order of words, may be made evident in three ways: by the actual order of words in detail, by the grammatical forms into which we throw our clauses, and by the use of connectives. Three subordinate rules or principles have therefore phrased themselves in my mind: The first, which concerns coherence in the order of words, is this, — words closely related in thought should be placed together, words distinct in thought kept apart. The second, which concerns coherence

in constructions, is this, — phrases that are similar in significance should be similar in form. The third, which concerns coherence in the use of connectives, is this, — when the order of words and the form of constructions prove insufficient to define the relation of a word or a clause to the context, connectives should denote that relation with precision. These three subordinate rules of coherence I propose to discuss in turn. They may be discussed most conveniently by means of broadly typical examples.

The example which first occurs to me of coherence in the order of words is one from my own experience. Writing a lecture on a part of our subject, — paragraphs, — which will be before us later, I put down the following sentence: "A glance at any printed page will show that the points in paragraphs which most readily catch the eye are — even more notably than in sentences — the beginning and the end." On revision I found this sentence unsatisfactory. It had unity; it was tolerably massed; so far as the principles of composition went, then, the trouble must fall under the head of coherence. Under this head my first question was whether the trouble lay in the actual order of the words. So far as good use permits, I reminded myself, words connected in thought should be kept together, words distinct in thought kept apart. In this troublesome sentence what words belonged together in thought, which were not together in fact? At a glance I saw that "in paragraphs" kept apart two words — "points" and "which" —

that in thought belonged together; at another glance I saw that the clause, "even more notably than in sentences," not only separated words — "are" and "the beginning" — that in thought belonged together, but that in thought this clause belonged with the other words, — "in paragraphs," — which had likewise proved out of place. "In paragraphs even more notably than in sentences," then, formulated itself as a distinct clause which demanded insertion in a sentence that without it ran thus: "A glance at any printed page will show that the points which most readily catch the eye are the beginning and the end." Where did the qualifying clause, without which the meaning was obviously incomplete, belong? Obviously between the main verb — "show" — and its object; for in some degree it qualified both verb and object. So the sentence fell into this far more coherent form: "A glance at any printed page will show that in paragraphs, even more notably than in sentences, the points which most readily catch the eye are the beginning and the end."

In this single example, then, we may see how to apply a general principle of coherence commonly stated in a number of apparently independent rules: Qualifying words should be close to words they qualify and carefully separated from words they might qualify, but do not; Parenthesis is undesirable; and so on. Words closely related in thought should be kept together, words distinct in thought kept apart, — that sums up the whole story.

To turn to coherence in constructions, I think of no better example of it than the passage from Ralegh already before us. What preserves its looseness from incoherence is simply and solely the admirable uniformity of its constructions. First comes the apostrophe; then three perfectly independent clauses all constructed exactly alike, each admirably balanced and notably antithetical: this identity of construction instantly groups them — where they belong — together in the mind of any reader. Finally comes the long clause explanatory of the three preceding: slightly different in significance, it demands a slight alteration of construction, that it may stand sufficiently apart; but not varying from the others in mood or in general character, it preserves, like them, careful balance and antithesis. This example, of course, is old-fashioned; it applies the principle in a form rather exaggerated for modern style. But it shows more distinctly than less exaggerated examples the value, in coherence, of balance and antithesis, and of parallel constructions. A very modern example of incoherence — a sentence from a college theme — may serve to show, in very few words, how the principle that Ralegh so carefully observed is nowadays commonly violated. An undergraduate dabbler in fiction was engaged in telling a story where he assumed the character of a young and beautiful woman assaulted by a spider: "I started up," he wrote, "and a scream was heard." Now, in the context there was no considerable company within hearing, to be startled by the

scream; and except for the purpose of calling attention to the hearers of the scream there could have been no possible reason for changing the construction to the passive voice, and for shifting the subject. What he meant was not what he wrote: it was one of two other things, — "I started up and screamed," or "I started up with a scream." In short, he managed, in eight words, to commit the two most common and needless offences against coherence in constructions. He shifted his subject, and altered the voice of his verb from active to passive.

In considering how to improve this incoherent little sentence, we are brought face to face with the third subordinate principle of coherence. When the order of words and the form of constructions prove insufficient to define the relation of a word or a clause to the context, connectives should denote that relation with precision. At first, I dare say, you were surprised to have me say that he meant one of two different things: either, "I started up and screamed," or, "I started up with a scream." Off-hand there appears here little if any difference in meaning; but really there is a difference which I believe to be very profound. In the first sentence — "I started up and screamed" — the two actions, starting and screaming, are co-ordinate: the function of *and* is to assert that the facts or the words it connects are of precisely equal value. Take the name of a firm, for example, Brown and Jones: the *and* signifies that Brown's signature or Jones's is equally binding on both parties.

Now, did the writer of our incoherent sentence mean that the start and the scream were *co*-ordinate, — were independent actions, for the purpose in hand of exactly equal value? Or did he mean that, as a matter of fact, one of these actions was a part of the other, was *sub*ordinate? If so, he should have employed a subordinating connective, — such as *with*. "I started up *and* screamed," means that there were two independent actions, one as significant as the other; "I started up *with* a scream," means that the two actions really formed one, — the former addressing itself to the eye, and in case of physical contact to the sense of touch as well; the latter, a slightly secondary one, addressing itself solely to the ear. This nicety of distinction, in so simple a case apparently unimportant, is among the most subtile secrets of effective style; no confusion of thought is commoner than that which confuses subordinate matters and co-ordinate. Nor is there any more direct path to precision of thought than that which leaves subordinate matter on one side and co-ordinate on the other.

To appreciate the full value of skilfully used connectives, we cannot do better than glance back at the passage from Sir Thomas Browne already before us. Its notable coherence, which in total effect quite atones for the weakness of its massing, is due wholly to the connectives. The second word — *since* — subordinates the opening clauses; the five *ands* are strictly co-ordinate in meaning; the *such* binds the main clause firmly to the subordinate ones that precede; and the

or, slightly loosening the alternative clause with which the sentence ends, goes far to relieve the impression of tension sure to be produced by too sustained a period. Of these connectives the most subtile is *such*, whose connective meaning does not instantly appear. It is the most subtile because it is placed, not at the beginning of the clause which it binds to the preceding. but in the body of it. To use a figure of speech, it dove-tails style instead of merely gluing it; and this dove-tailing of style is a thing worth attending to. In producing a firmly coherent effect, connectives in the body of a clause or sentence are surprisingly more efficient than initial connectives. *Also* and *too*, for example, are decidedly firmer than *and;* so, in that preceding clause, the connective *for example* more firmly knits this sentence to the preceding than this clause, with an initial *so*, is knit to the clause before it. And so I have touched on the two chief guides to precision in the use of connectives: distinguish between subordinate and co-ordinate matter; and prefer connectives in the body of a clause to initial ones.

So much for the principle of Coherence in detail. The test of coherence appears in my very statement of the principle: Is there any chance of mistaking the relation of a word to its neighbors? So far as this chance exists, — and it cannot always be avoided, — a sentence is incoherent.

The historical growth of coherence in English style is too large a subject to discuss here. I shall venture,

then, in very few words, to state what I now think about it. In brief, I think — and perhaps a study of my four typical examples will bear me out — that coherence in the order of words has tended on the whole to strengthen; that coherence in construction is far more rare than it used to be; and that coherence in the use of connectives has on the whole tended to grow firmer and more subtile as thought has gained in freedom and precision. In the conflict between good use and the principle of Coherence, then, we find the principle farther advanced than the principle of Mass, but by no means as far as the principle of Unity. And the point where it is now weakest is constructions; few writers nowadays practically remember that phrases similar in thought may to advantage be similar in form.

Toward the end of the last chapter I called your attention to a matter to which we must now revert. Having considered the dangers of offence against good use in our choice of words, you will remember, and having pointed out what notable differences of effect we might secure within the limits of good use by judiciously varying our choice of words, I proceeded to inquire how a careful writer should proceed in his search for the kinds of words that should produce the effects he has in mind. In our discussion of sentences we have now reached this same point: we have discussed the dangers of offence against good use in composition; we have seen how within the limits of good use different kinds of sentences can

produce very varied effects; and we have seen how judicious application of the principles of composition to sentences of any kind — long or short, periodic or loose, balanced or unbalanced — may help us to vary and to define the effects we have in mind. It is our business now to inquire concerning sentences, just as we inquired concerning words, in what these effects consist.

There is no need of repeating in detail what I said then. I pointed out, you will remember, the inevitable discrepancy between the limited number of words in our possession and the virtually infinite number of thoughts in the mind of every living man; and I showed how in fact every word we use or hear not only names an idea, but suggests along with it a considerable number of others: the idea it names it denotes; the ideas it suggests it connotes.

What we then found true of words by themselves must obviously be true, in a vastly greater and more complicated degree, of words in composition. Composition combines every phase of the words it brings together; in the organism of the sentence denotation and connotation fuse. Take the simplest of examples, — two words: I speak. As I utter these words in combination, the pronoun calls up certain individualities of face and form and manner and dress, and what not. If any one else should utter the same words, the whole connotation would alter. The changed denotation of the pronoun, of course, would be the chief feature of the alteration; but this change

would be more than enough completely to alter the connotation of the verb. Or take a somewhat longer example, but just as simple, where there is no change in denotation at all. Some years ago a gentleman died hereabouts, whose literary style was much admired by the friend who wrote an obituary notice of him: "His English," ran the sentence, which I have remembered for years, "was purified by constant study of the best models: the English Bible, Shakspere, Addison, and Fisher Ames." I confess that this sentence, which has often made me laugh, is what has chiefly kept alive in my mind the memory of our deceased fellow-citizen. But if his admirer had turned the phrase the other way, without altering his denotation a bit, he would have secured a connotation if not more favorable to the immortality of his subject, at least more consonant with its dignity: "His English was purified by constant study of the best models: Fisher Ames, Addison, Shakspere, and the English Bible." Of compositions, then, we may say just what we said of words: in the first place, they so name ideas that we may identify them; in the second place, they inevitably suggest at the same time a very subtile and complicated set of associated ideas and emotions. In short, compositions, like words, inevitably possess both denotation and connotation; and whoever would intelligently compose sentences must know, in deciding what effect he would produce, both what he would denote and what he would connote.

IV.

PARAGRAPHS.

In discussing both words and sentences, I have reminded you more than once that both of these elements of style are inevitable in all discourse, written or spoken. To exist at all, a language must have not only words, but settled forms in which those words compose intelligible sentences. The good use which ultimately governs both words and sentences is a fact which has arisen from the generally spontaneous consent, first of talkers, and then of writers. In its broader form it is a fact to which in every word he speaks, in every thought he articulately formulates, every man of us must constantly conform. In writing words and sentences, then, we simply put on paper things that we are incessantly making. We record our habits of thought. Now, there is no fact in human experience much more settled than this: to do anything thoroughly well we must not stop in the act to consider how we are doing it. Action of any kind may be carefully planned; things once done may be rigorously scrutinized and criticised. But the time to plan is before work begins; the time to criticise is after work is done. To pause in the course of work, wondering whether we are on the right course, is almost certainly to blunder. This is nowhere truer than in composition. The task of the writer, as I can hardly repeat too often, is a very wonderful one. It is nothing less than an act of creative imagination, than the giving of a visible material body to an eternally immaterial reality, which until embodied must remain unknown to all but the one human being who knows it. In the act of creation there is but one possible course: it is to concentrate attention as closely as we possibly can on the reality which we would make real to others than ourselves. Only thus, I believe, can the words we create possess even a shadow of the vitality which makes the thought they symbolize a thing so inexpressibly real.

And yet, if the work of the writer ended here, there were no use in all this pother about the elements of style. It is true, I believe, that our best work of any kind is done in those moments of splendid adjustment when the forces without ourselves for a little while relax their crushing hostility; but such moments of inspiration are not common. The most we can generally do is to mimic them as best we may, seeking in ourselves the motive force that is denied us from without; and even though our mimicry sometimes come so near the truth that for the while we forget ourselves, we can never be sure that the work we have done is the work that we meant to do. We must plan it, then, as carefully as we can; and once done, we must scrutinize it with all our care.

In this planning and this scrutiny we need principles to guide us; these principles are what I am trying to set and to keep before you.

To put these high-sounding generalities in concrete terms, the experience of pretty much every writer is something like this: An idea presents itself to him in a general form; he is impressed with some fact in experience, perhaps, which nothing but the most exquisite verse can adequately formulate; or perhaps he receives an invitation to dinner which he wants to accept. His first task — and often his longest — is to plan his work: he decides how to begin, what course to follow, where to end. His next task is to fill out his plan; in other words, to compose, in accordance with the general outline in his mind, a series of words and sentences which shall so symbolize this outline that other minds than his can perceive it. His final task is to revise the work he has executed, and to see whether he has succeeded in producing the effects — denotative and connotative — which he had in view.

It is in this revision that the principles we have hitherto discussed become valuable. In actual writing, just as in actual thinking and talking, no sane man stops to consider words or syntax. But in revision of writing few men are fortunate enough to find themselves so completely made in the divine image as unhesitatingly to pronounce their work good. If it is not good, it fails of excellence because in one way or another the writer has neglected the principles of

his art. And nothing can so surely help him to remedy the trouble as a deliberate knowledge of just what those principles are.

Now, as I have said already, the principles which govern the composition of sentences are the same which govern the composition of paragraphs and chapters and books; but in composing the larger elements of style, we use these principles in a distinctly different way. Except in rare cases, we do not deliberately plan our sentences; we write them, and then revise them. Except in rare cases we do deliberately plan our paragraphs, our chapters, our books; and if we plan them properly, we do not need to revise them much, if at all. Words and sentences are subjects of revision; paragraphs and whole compositions are subjects of prevision.

That this distinction is not fanciful must be shown, I believe, by the experience of any teacher of composition. Dogmatize, lecture as he will about how things ought to be done, he finds his task, when he comes to criticise the work of his pupils, resolving itself into a form unpleasantly free from exhilaration. The greater part of his work consists in pointing out how in the choice of words and the composition of sentences his pupils have failed to produce the effects they had in mind. In other words, so far as teaching concerns words and sentences, it must confine itself chiefly to the correction of rooted and vicious habits, constantly strengthened by the inevitable carelessness of daily speech. But when we come to paragraphs

and whole compositions, the experience of the teacher undergoes a refreshing change. In every-day life pupils do not make paragraphs or wholes at all. There are no vicious habits, then, for teachers to unmake. A single lecture on principles will prove more fruitful than a course of instruction in the earlier stages of the art; and what is more, if the teacher keep in his own mind and his pupils' the truth that the principles which so plainly bring paragraphs and order out of chaos are the very same which, applied habitually and under different conditions, make the difference between good sentences and bad, a very long step will have been taken on the road somewhere.

Firmly remembering, then, that what we have considered hitherto is of use to us chiefly in revision, and that what we are to consider now is of use chiefly in prevision, let us turn our attention to paragraphs.

First of all, we may best ask ourselves what a paragraph is. We all know paragraphs by sight. They are those large masses of written or printed words that appear on almost any properly composed page, distinguishing themselves from the context by a marked indentation of the first line. But obviously this is not a definition. And no fact is more indicative of the general neglect of the subject of paragraphs than that no textbook of rhetoric I have come across contains any satisfactory definition of them. A paragraph, says one, is "a collection, or series, of sentences, with unity of purpose." A paragraph, says another,

is "a connected series of sentences constituting the development of a single topic." A paragraph, says a third, is "a whole composition in miniature." And so on. In these straits, trying to make a definition for myself, I have been able to frame no better one than this, whose comparative form makes it at least suggestive: A paragraph is to a sentence what a sentence is to a word.

While this, of course, is nothing but another way of saying what I have said already, — that the principles which apply to the composition of paragraphs are the same that apply to the composition of sentences, — it states the fact in a more compact form; and it fixes more firmly in one's mind the fact which most writers never keep in mind at all, — that paragraphs ought to be as definitely organized as sentences themselves.

This fact, I have just said, few writers keep in mind. Recalling for an instant what everybody knows, — that paragraphs, like punctuation, exist only in written discourse, and are not recognizable in spoken, — we can see that this statement amounts to saying that in the composition of paragraphs there is no such thing as good use. Some good writers are pretty careful about paragraphs; but quite as many seem to regard paragraphs as purely ornamental devices, serving in literature some such purpose as that filled by illuminated initials. A page or two of unbroken text is ugly; let us break it somewhere. Without exaggeration a very large number of the paragraphs I have exam-

ined appear to be made on no more vital principle than this. The first line of every paragraph, to be sure, is sharply indented; and in paragraphs, as in sentences, monotony of construction is palpably artificial, and palpable artificiality is never idiomatically free. Now, what is not apparently idiomatic may be said to offend against good use. Very generally, then, I may say that good use appears not to sanction rigid monotony of paragraph. Further than that, nothing.

To a serious student of the art of composition this state of things is very refreshing. It means that we have reached a point where we are emancipated from the troublesome control of external fashion, where we are free to guide ourselves by intelligence. We are past the gambit; the game is open. The only question is how we may most effectively exercise our good sense.

Our good sense, I say. For if my definition of a paragraph be true, if a paragraph really be to a sentence what a sentence is to a word, then pretty much every principle which, constantly hampered by good use, we tried to apply to sentences, we can now apply untrammelled; and almost the first thing we found true of sentences was that, happily for us, English grammar is little else than a clumsy codification of British good sense. A sentence which on analysis proves sensible is generally good English. By the same token, a paragraph sensibly composed is beyond cavil a good paragraph.

The next thing for us to inquire is whether there

are any distinct kinds of paragraphs, by means of which distinctly different effects may be produced. The only kinds of paragraphs which seem practically important are the long and the short. What a long paragraph is, or a short, it is not very easy to say; but perhaps it is easier than to answer a similar question about sentences. In an ordinary page of print — in a page of this book, for example, — there are between two and three hundred words. Taking this as a standard of measurement, I may roughly say that a paragraph of less than one hundred words — of a third of a page or less — is distinctly short; and that a paragraph of more than three hundred words — of more than a page — is distinctly long. And there is no doubt that long paragraphs produce an effect distinctly different from that produced by short. The effect secured by long paragraphs I may roughly call solid or heavy or serious; the effect secured by short paragraphs I may roughly call light. Each effect is perfectly legitimate; each has its function; in a given piece of writing one kind or the other may with perfect propriety predominate or prevail.

The general fact that long paragraphs are distinctly heavy in effect is tacitly recognized in a familiar commonplace. With all their manifold unwisdom, children and young people have good eyes: literally and metaphorically they have a way, mortifying to conscientious old folks, of seeing things pretty much as they are. Now, when we ask children, or people whose minds still retain the guileless veracity

of infancy, to read a book, their first question is apt to be whether there is much conversation in it. If so, they are willing to read without coaxing; if not, we often have to coax. In modern books speeches are apt to be short; in modern books each speech makes a distinct paragraph. Technically speaking, then, this marked preference for books with conversation in them amounts to an instinctive preference for short paragraphs; nor is this preference exclusively infantine. It is short speeches that give such swift vitality to some of the most perennially delightful scenes of Molière; it is the prevalence of conversation and short paragraphs that makes so perennially amusing the novels of the elder Dumas. Tired people of my acquaintance generally prefer Dumas to Walter Scott; when I am tired, I greatly prefer him myself, — and so far as I can analyze the preference, it is largely a matter of length of paragraph.

In this fact we have the simplest guide in our consideration of the principles of composition as they apply to paragraphs. We shall discuss them, of course, in their regular order, — first the principle of Unity, then the principle of Mass, and last the principle of Coherence. The general principle of Unity, which concerns the substance of a composition, you will remember to be this: Every composition should group itself about one central idea. In applying this principle to paragraphs, the textbooks grow pedantically lifeless. "Unity in a paragraph," says one

"implies a sustained purpose, and forbids digression and irrelevant matter." "Unity in a paragraph," says another, "requires that every statement in the paragraph be subservient to one principal affirmation." "Unity in a paragraph," says a third, "is subserved by choosing for each paragraph a determinate subject, to which all parts of the structure are related as constituting elements in its development." For my part, I find it far more easy to understand the matter when I simply say that the type of a paragraph that possesses unity is a single speech in a dialogue.

A few examples within anybody's experience will define this matter very simply. In the novels of the last century it was generally the fashion to write dialogue in great masses, — running into a single paragraph a number of distinct speeches. You can find such paragraphs anywhere in Fielding. In any modern novel, on the other hand, each speech is kept rigidly distinct; and yet there is one case where the most severe modern usage would place in a single paragraph a number of independent speeches: this is when you wish to produce the effect of confused cries. In the "Arabian Nights," you will remember, is a tale of how a prince of Persia sets out to climb an enchanted mountain in search of a speaking bird. If he turn around, he is sure to meet a fate akin to that of Lot's wife, and to become a black stone. The moment he begins to climb he is accosted by all manner of taunting voices apparently just behind him, which try to make him turn his

head, and so meet his fate. A confused vituperative clamor this, — each speech independent of every other, but all combining in a single exasperating effect. To separate these speeches into independent paragraphs would be wholly to destroy the effect. They should be written in a single paragraph.

So much for what unity of paragraph means. We may understand it still better by inquiring how to test it. While not scientifically exact, I have found the test I shall propose to you very instructive. A paragraph has unity when you can state its substance in a single sentence; otherwise it is very apt to lack it.

This subject is physically too large to be conveniently illustrated here. I must ask such of you as wish to prove it by observation, then, to make observations for yourselves. One or two examples from my own experience, however, may be suggestive aids. At Harvard College, some years ago, I had occasion to consider in detail Burke's speech on Conciliation with America. I have never read a more astonishingly lucid presentation of a very complicated subject. How is this lucidity secured? was one of my first questions. Pencil in hand, I analyzed the whole speech; and from beginning to end I found not a single paragraph whose substance could not be summed up in a single sentence. Again, there is in this country a newspaper whose style is always notable for certainty of effect: I mean "The Nation." I often dislike what it says, but I have rarely found

in it a leading article that at least rhetorically I have not admired. On analysis I have shown myself again and again that whoever write these leading articles in "The Nation" — I refer to the political articles, not to the scholarly letters, and so on, which are often disfigured with all the most lifeless pedantries of modern Germany — rarely write a paragraph whose substance cannot be summed up in a single sentence. Of this masterly making of paragraphs in "The Nation," I shall have more to say when I come to speak of their mass.

Perhaps it may be worth our while here to glance at this whole matter of unity from another point of view. The mere physical bulk of paragraphs makes this method far simpler here than in the case of sentences. What, we may now ask ourselves with some hope of a simple answer, are the chief dangers of offence against unity of composition? Obviously they are two: first, we may break up discourse into needlessly small fragments, thereby, in this case, confusing the function of the paragraph with that of the sentence; in the second place, we may crowd into a single unit of composition incongruous matters, thereby, in this case, confusing the function of the paragraph with that of the whole composition.

From this consideration follows directly a practical suggestion. Excessive length of paragraph, resulting in heterogeneity, and excessive brevity of paragraph, resulting in isolated fragments of style, are alike unfavorable to unity. Proverbial wisdom is wisest after

all: here we are face to face with a special case of what we all know, — *in medio tutissimus ibis.* I may add that a study of the historical development of English tends on the whole to show that unity of paragraph is constantly, though slowly, improving. As in the case of unity of sentence, then, principle and usage tend to agree.

To revert for a moment to the matter with which I began this chapter, you will remember that the way to use what we get into our heads about paragraphs is precisely opposite to the way to use what we know about sentences. In that case, we apply our knowledge in revision; in this case, we apply it in prevision, — in the deliberate planning of our work. It follows, then, that whoever wishes his work to produce the effect secured by intelligent unity of paragraph may wisely set about the task of writing as deliberately as this: on a sheet of paper he may prudently write down a scheme of the work he wishes to execute, phrased in as many independent sentences as he would ultimately have paragraphs in his composition; and in filling out this scheme he may wisely confine each of his paragraphs to one of the aspects of his subject which he has provisionally phrased in a single sentence. Unless inspiration override all canons of art, — it sometimes does with all of us, — I know of no rule of literary conduct more fruitful of good than this.

So we come to the principle which governs the external form of paragraphs, — the principle of Mass: that the chief parts of each composition should be so

placed as readily to catch the eye. More than the other principles of composition this applies to written discourse, for only written discourse appeals directly to the eye. To be sure, written discourse is closely related to spoken. The principle of Mass will be found by no means useless to a mere talker. But, at least for our purposes, it is primarily a matter not of spoken style, but of written. Now, paragraphs are essentially elements of written discourse. It follows directly that the principle of Mass — that the chief parts of a composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye — is above all applicable to the composition of paragraphs.

In paragraphs, too, the oral usage which we saw interfere with the principle in the composition of sentences has no existence at all. The principle, then, is not only theoretically applicable to paragraphs, but to a great degree actually so applicable in practice. How conspicuous the chief places in any paragraph are, a glance at any printed page will show. Trained or untrained, the human eye cannot help dwelling instinctively a little longer on the beginnings and the ends of paragraphs than on any other points in the discourse. Let any one of you take up a book or an article, hitherto strange, and try in a few minutes to get some notion of what it is about. Whoever has tried to do even very little reviewing for the newspapers; whoever has tried to collect authorities for a legal brief, — knows the experience disagreeably well. First, you instinctively look at the beginning of the

article or book, then at the end; then, turning over the pages, you skim them, — in other words, you glance at the beginning and at the end of each paragraph, to see whether it is a thing you wish to read more carefully. And if the paragraphs in question be well massed, you are made aware of it by the fact that the process of intelligent skimming is mechanically easy: that you can, apparently by instinct, arrest your attention on those parts which serve your purpose. If, on the other hand, as is more frequently the case, the paragraphs in question be ill massed, you find difficulty in discovering what you want. All this is quite independent of sentence-structure, and of unity, and of coherence. It is a simple question of visible, external outline; and it means, in other words, that the beginning and the end of a paragraph are beyond doubt the fittest places for its chief ideas, and so for its chief words.

A definite question now presents itself to us: Is there any test by which we may decide what the chief ideas and the chief words in any paragraph ought to be? We have already seen that a paragraph should possess unity; we have already seen that the test of unity in a paragraph is whether we can sum up its substance in a single sentence. Now, clearly the chief words in a typical sentence are the subject and the predicate. Clearly, then, in general, the chief ideas in a paragraph are those which are summarized in the subject and the predicate of the sentence which summarizes the whole. Our question, then, proves

one which, by implication, we have already answered. A paragraph whose unity can be demonstrated by summarizing its substance in a sentence whose subject shall be a summary of its opening sentence, and whose predicate shall be a summary of its closing sentence, is theoretically well massed.

A matter so technical as this demands illustration. In my lectures at Harvard College I have found myself generally able to illustrate it by simply turning to whatever has happened to be the last number of "The Nation." I do not mean that it is observed in every single leading article. "The Nation" is too well paragraphed to be so palpably monotonous. I do mean that I have rarely turned to "The Nation" for illustration of this principle without finding, in the first number I opened, some article which would illustrate it admirably. As I write these lines I happen to have no fresh copy of "The Nation" at hand: at random, then, I take one of the illustrations which I have used at college. In "The Nation" for Nov. 28, 1889, was a leading article entitled, "The Universities and the Professions." It contained four paragraphs: these I have summarized by the simple plan of reducing each to a single sentence whose subject is a summary of the opening sentence of the paragraph, and whose predicate is a summary of its closing.

Here is the summary: —

¶ 1: The decline in the proportion of students to population . . . is noticeable in the United States and in England.

¶ 2: Prominent reasons for this are that college delays the beginning of professional life, . . . and that college-bred men prove to dislike trade.

¶ 3: Colleges, after much deliberation, . . . have begun formally to consider the "reduction of the college course."

¶ 4: The increasing gravity of the situation . . . makes "Study or clear out" the proper motto for any college.

General Summary: The decline in the proportion of students to population . . . makes "Study or clear out" the proper motto for any college.

Each paragraph, you see, is theoretically perfect in mass. What is more, the excellence of the mass goes a step farther. If we try to summarize the whole article, we shall see in a moment that we can do so by the simple process of writing a sentence whose subject is a summary of the opening sentence of the first paragraph, and whose predicate is a summary of the closing sentence of the last paragraph. The mass of the whole composition, then, is theoretically just as good as the mass of each separate paragraph. The satisfaction which this particular article gave me may have been partly due to the fact that I happen to agree with every word of it; but I think, after all, that it came more from the fact that its mass is theoretically perfect.

Theoretically perfect, though, I should repeat with emphasis. For I am aware that in my discussion of this phase of our subject I have laid down the law with dangerous dogmatism. No principle of composition

is anywhere absolute. Good use, wherever such a thing exists, is supreme; and we have already seen that even in paragraphs good use has pretty nearly established one rule. This is phrased, like the better part of human wisdom, in a very old saw: *Ars celare artem*, — the finest art is imperceptible. Now, nothing is more aggressively perceptible than monotonous uniformity of manner. To follow any principle of composition so far as to neglect the necessity of subtile variety of style, is to be monotonously uniform, to violate good use, — in brief, to be (what no real artist ever was) unintelligent. Principle is not rule; it is a guide, not a master. To neglect it is to go astray; to follow it blindly is to know not where you are. Above all principle, above all else, the deepest secret of all fine art is fine good sense.

So far in my discussion of the mass of paragraphs I have called your attention to nothing wholly new to us. I have merely shown how to the planning — the prevision — of paragraphs a careful writer may apply just the same principles that he should apply to the revision of sentences. We have now reached a point in our discussion of the principle of Mass where I believe we may well glance at another phase of it. The bulk of sentences is too small to permit this phase to be considered in connection with them. The bulk of paragraphs is large enough to make it now worth attention. In whole compositions we shall find it more important still. Briefly phrased, it is simply this: Due propor-

tion should subsist between principal and subordinate matters.

Like everything else we are considering, this is at bottom a matter of simple good sense. Indeed, it is after all a matter on which we have touched before: it is a mode of the general principle that our number of words should be carefully governed by what effect we wish to produce. But in its application to paragraphs it really means something almost as definite as this: that, for the purpose of not misleading the reader's eye, we should generally give more space to important parts of our subject than to unimportant.

Take the last paragraph of the leading article from "The Nation" to which I have already called your attention. Its substance may be summarized in this sentence: "The increasing gravity of the situation . . . makes . . . 'Study or clear out' the proper motto for any college." Now, as a matter of fact a writer, in his development of the paragraph, might wish to emphasize either the subject or the predicate of this sentence; he might wish us to feel the gravity of the situation, or he might wish us rather to feel how the gravity might be lightened. According as one or the other of these views predominated in his mind, he might to advantage vary the number of his words. By giving more space to the gravity of the situation, he would probably leave the gravity of the situation more deeply imbedded in a reader's mind; by giving more space to the proper motto for any college, he would probably give similar weight to the proper motto for any college. In brief, according to the principle of Mass, a student of the mass of paragraphs must consider not only the actual placing of words, but their actual number.

In our discussion of sentences we decided that in a given composition the end is a more emphatic place than the beginning: here we found lay the secret of anti-climax, — essentially a false emphasis. In paragraphs I believe this truth more important still. A glance at any printed page will show that the beginning and the end of a paragraph are distinctly more conspicuous things than the beginning and the end of a sentence. We may repeat, then, more emphatically than ever, the rule with which we brought to a close our discussion of the mass of sentences: End with words that deserve distinction.

All that remains before we proceed to the principle of Coherence is to ask how far the historical development of the English language warrants the conclusions we have reached.

So far as I have analyzed English paragraphs, they follow no particular law. In old English and in new I have found well-massed paragraphs; I have also found many more paragraphs which may be roughly said to have no mass at all. But at the same time I have found that the effect of a piece of writing whose paragraphs are well massed is almost always a great deal more definite than the effect of any other kind; and over and over again I have found, just as I find in "The Nation," that the secret of a

satisfactory style may often be discovered in the skilful massing of its paragraphs. While there is no consent of good use to govern us, then, there is no consent of good use to thwart us; and I believe that to-day no writer can intelligently follow any one principle with more certainty than that which shall encourage him carefully to mass his paragraphs.

So we come to the principle of Coherence, which governs the internal structure of paragraphs: that the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. Applying this principle to paragraphs, — remembering that a paragraph is a composition of sentences, and is to a sentence what a sentence is to a word, — we can see at once exactly what it means. A paragraph is coherent when the relation of each sentence to the context is unmistakable.

In discussing the coherence of sentences, you will remember we found the subject so full of detail that we were compelled for convenience to divide it into three parts. All general rules which concern coherence, so frequent in the textbooks, we found might be grouped under one of three heads: order of words, constructions, or connectives. In discussing the coherence of paragraphs we may best follow exactly the same method: it will bring us, I dare say, to nothing new; but I think it will serve to fix the principle more firmly in our minds. Coherence in the order of the sentences which make a paragraph, then, coherence in the construction of these sentences, and

finally, the use of connectives in paragraphs, we shall consider in turn.

First, then, for coherence in the order of sentences. The general principle that underlies it is this: Matters closely connected in thought should be kept together, matters distinct in thought kept apart. In sentences, you will remember, this principle is much thwarted by good use. Uninflected English indicates the grammatical relation of word to word chiefly by their actual order; the limits within which we are at liberty to vary the order of our words in sentences, then, are very narrow. In paragraphs, on the other hand, there is no such trouble. So far as I know, there is absolutely no reason why we should not arrange our sentences in any order we please. We may apply this principle with unfettered freedom.

This perfect freedom and the axiomatic good sense of the principle would lead us to expect careful writers in general to observe it. Oddly enough, they do nothing of the kind; in careful writers, as in other human beings, actual manifestations of practical good sense are not so frequent as to grow tedious. The truth is that the human head is normally muddled; to bring order out of the chaos that dismays each one of us within himself is no small feat. It has taken me the better part of ten years to think out, from a snarl of books and of practical experiments, the very obvious principles that I am trying to lay before you now; and even now I am fully aware that they might well be thought

out and composed more definitely and firmly. So our difficulties are not solved when we quite understand that according to the principle of Coherence matters connected in thought should be kept together, and that in paragraphs there is no reason why we should not so keep them. After all, what matters really are most closely connected in thought? Every new case in any man's experience brings up this question afresh; every new case demands a new answer. Before we can tell anything about form we must understand much about substance; and this, with our poor muddled human heads, is no easy thing.

In truth, we are now face to face with a fact that makes this art of composition utterly discouraging to some temperaments, and profoundly fascinating to others. Every problem that presents itself to a literary artist is really a new one. In human life there cannot be any two instants whose conditions are precisely the same. The moment when it is perfectly easy to disentangle from the riotous thicket of thought and emotion we all know within ourselves the exact thoughts and emotions whose mutual relations as well as whose independent selves shall serve our purpose of imparting to readers what we have in mind, is a moment that to most of us never comes. We are face to face with a problem that is ever remaking itself. Nothing but constantly fresh intelligence can at any moment solve it. Lazy minds give up in despair: "I can't write anyhow," say students to me

year after year; they mean that they won't think. But an active mind is constantly more stimulated, by each difficulty it surmounts, courageously to attack the next. The contest is one where wit may always win much: if no absolute victory be possible, a hard fight is sure to bring some measure of success.

But I am straying again from the technical matter properly before us. The general principle underlying coherence in the order of sentences we have seen to be this: Matters closely connected in thought should be kept together, matters distinct in thought kept apart. We must turn now to the second phase of coherence, — coherence in constructions.

Here, too, there is a simple general statement of the principle we should keep in mind: Phrases that are similar in significance should be similar in form. Outward form is, after all, what we see in style, just as truly as it is what we see in human beings; and the same general law of thought which makes all who have eyes know that men are not in all respects as trees walking, impels us instinctively to class together phrases and sentences that look and sound alike. This fact is very little appreciated by writers in general: in general, as I have said, hardly anybody seems quite to have understood the merely physical conditions involved in the fact that written style is addressed primarily to the eye. But though the books of Rhetoric say nothing of this phase of the matter, recent books have a good deal to say about the general principle that phrases similar in thought

should be similar in form. The rule of parallel construction, some of them call it, — a rule which any one can see has a good deal to do with such devices as antithesis and balance.

Perhaps the easiest way of discussing it, and of beginning to appreciate its scope and its limits, is to consider one or two simple examples. For our purposes we may consider as a paragraph the most familiar piece of English in the language, — the Lord's Prayer. Every one of us knows and feels its marvellous effect, merely as a piece of style. Few of us, I take it, have ever thought of analyzing the means by which this effect is produced. It begins with an invocation: "Our Father who art in heaven." Then come three clauses of praise: "Hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Then come four distinct petitions: "Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us; lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil." Finally comes a final clause of praise: "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever." Examining these clauses, we find that the first words of the invocation call our attention directly to the infinite fatherhood of God. There are eight other clauses, — three of praise, four of petition, and a final one of praise. Each of these is a separate address direct to God. And of these eight, all but the first, which immediately follows the invocation, are composed on the same

plan: the first word addresses itself straight to God, — "*Thy* kingdom come; *Thy* will be done;" and so on. First God's self, then God's attributes and acts, in every one of them. Alter a single word here, shake the parallel construction in the slightest degree, and some of the marvellous effect is lost. And yet if we alter the first of the eight clauses that follow the invocation, if we make the construction of the prayer absolutely parallel, if instead of "Hallowed be Thy name," we say, "Thy name be hallowed," we find the marvellous effect impaired still more. In truth, I believe the reason lies here: the invocation calling up the infinitude of God must stand for an instant alone; to put just beside it the idea of one of the attributes of God would be never so subtilely to suggest a limitation of what in its very essence knows no limit. But the word *hallowed* applies to all the infinitudes. Again, by the inversion of this single clause, the first two of God's attributes to which our attention is called — "Thy name" and "Thy kingdom" — are brought together: it is only after this that the construction permits us to contemplate God's attributes and actions one by one. And here, I believe, lies much of the secret of the marvellous effect of the prayer. Of course, no one would for a moment think that such deliberate technical reasons governed the translators who gave the Lord's Prayer its English form; but I have chosen this greatest of examples just because it can tell you better than any lesser one how even the most divine effects of literature can be

and must be produced only by such technical means as everybody recognizes in the petty parts of human style.

The amazing value of parallel construction, of coherence in constructions, I cannot more specifically show you; nor yet the way in which the other principle of coherence — that matters which belong together in thought should be kept together — can never be neglected. Whoever is curious to study the effect of parallel construction in secular literature cannot spend a few minutes more profitably than in examining the celebrated description of Westminster Hall in Macaulay's essay on Warren Hastings. By simply repeating the word *here* at intervals, Macaulay gives that passage the notable coherence that the most hasty reader must feel. For our part, we may now best turn to an example where neglect of the principle in question produces a notably grotesque result.

In our consideration of the coherence of sentences, we saw how serious and common a fault lay in needless shift of subject or of voice. The sentence by which I illustrated this, you will remember, was a very simple one, where in eight words both subject and voice were shifted. "I started up, and a scream was heard," wrote a student whom we decided to have meant one of two other distinct things: either, "I started up and screamed," or, "I started up with a scream." Now, although it would be foolishly pedantic to lay down a rule so absolute as that in a paragraph every sentence should have the same subject,

and every principal verb be in the same voice, it is not at all foolish to say that, even in the separate sentences of a paragraph, a needless, unmeaning shift of subject, or voice, or both, is according to the principle of parallel construction very damaging to coherence. A single example will show exactly what I mean. Some months ago Mr. Henry Grady, an eminent citizen of Georgia, died. Here is what appeared next morning in one of the Boston newspapers: —

"Atlanta, Ga., Dec. 23, 1889. Henry W. Grady died this morning. He was born in Athens, Ga., in 1851. His father was a wealthy business man of Athens, and although a Union man, went with his State when she seceded. He was killed while fighting before Petersburg, where he commanded a North Carolina regiment. The funeral has not yet been definitely arranged, but he will be buried in Atlanta, probably on Thursday."

The battles before Petersburg, you remember, occurred in 1864. It is simply a stupid shift of subject, a stupid neglect of parallel construction, that calls up the distressing picture of gallant Colonel Grady lying unburied for a quarter of a century.

Before finally leaving this principle of parallel construction, of coherence in constructions, however, I must recall to you the fact that the only form in which good use interferes with our composition of paragraphs is this: Monotony of construction is palpably artificial; and palpable artifice is never good art. While a careful writer, then, should never ne-

glect the principle of parallel construction, he should be constantly on the alert never to follow it blindly. The secret of all fine art, we must never forget, is fine good sense.

So we come to the third phase of coherence in the composition of paragraphs, — coherence in the use of connectives. What we found true of the composition of sentences is true here too. When neither order nor constructions will serve to make unmistakable the relations between the parts of any composition, we should use connectives with scrupulous precision. I need hardly recall to you the minor conclusions that we reached here: how immensely important it is scrupulously to distinguish thoughts that are co-ordinate — for our purposes, of equal value — from thoughts some of which are subordinate to others. We analyzed those little sentences, "I started up with a scream," and, "I started up and screamed," and saw how, for all their similarity, they really meant different things. I need not repeat the other minor conclusion we reached: that connectives in the body of a clause knit style more firmly than initial connectives possibly can. Nor can I here, any more than I could there, pause to call your attention to the great richness of uninflected English in purely connective parts of speech. In Bain's Rhetoric, the curious may find them collected by the dozen. All I can do is briefly to examine just how these principles, already familiar, apply to the composition of paragraphs.

In the first place, I would recall your attention for

a moment to the newspaper account of poor Mr. Grady. We saw clearly how a needless shift of subject there made a serious matter ridiculous. I would call your attention now to the fact that what contributes to the general incoherence of the paragraph in question is a very careless use of a connective. This connective is the pronoun *he*, the subject of the fourth sentence. "Henry W. Grady" is the subject of the first sentence; "He" (H. W. G.) is the subject of the second sentence, and by directly referring to the subject of the first, indicates clearly enough that the relation of the second sentence to the first is simply cumulative. "His father" is the subject of the third sentence; and the possessive pronoun *his* serves here just the same connective purpose which in the last sentence was served by the nominative pronoun *he*. The subject of the fourth sentence is again the pronoun *he;* now, this might grammatically refer either to the father or to the son. It is subtilely ambiguous, — a connective which does not indicate the relation of its sentence to the context with scrupulous precision. This slight incoherence, really involving a shift of subject, is what leads to the grotesque incoherence that follows; and we have already looked at this passage long enough to see the meaning of a general statement about connectives: any word in a given clause or sentence which specifically refers to a preceding clause or sentence may be described as a connective.

A maker of paragraphs, a writer of any long con-

secutive composition, cannot keep this fact too constantly in mind. How important it may be was shown me by a rather interesting experience some years ago. I happened to be, in company with a very skilful reporter, an eye-witness of a prolonged and very exciting political convention. I had nothing to do but look on. My companion was less fortunate. Wholly unaided, and in the midst of such a tumult as I have hardly seen elsewhere, he had to write column after column describing just what happened. As fast as a sheet was filled he handed it to a telegraph messenger; and it was on its way over the wires before the next was fairly begun. In subsequently reading the reports thus composed, I was very much impressed by their firm coherence. On analyzing them, I discovered that in almost every sentence — and by no means at the beginning of it — there was some word which directly referred to something in the preceding sentence. In short, my reporting friend, consciously or not, had practically mastered the secret of dove-tailing style.

In paragraphs even more than in sentences, I find, firm coherence depends on connectives which are not at the beginning or the end of the parts of a composition which they connect, but are firmly imbedded in the midst of them; and yet there is no commonplace which has given me as a teacher more needless bother than one which imperfectly phrases this very idea. A sentence, some of the books say, should never begin with *and* or *but*. It is true that most sentences cannot properly begin with *and* or *but;* and

the reason for this is obvious: comparatively few sentences stand to the preceding in strictly co-ordinate or strictly disjunctive relations. Unless sentences so stand, an initial *and* or *but* is an impropriety. But to say that no sentence should begin with *and* or *but* is to say, what is clearly absurd, that the relation of a sentence to the preceding should never be either strictly co-ordinate or strictly disjunctive. Like most commonplaces, however, this of ours is not meaningless. As a matter of fact, people do not think with precision; and thought which lacks precision commonly presents itself in experience as either a simple addition to what precedes or an abrupt breaking off. In the former case, one instinctively writes *and;* in the latter, *but*. And there are few more useful practical suggestions in composition than this: Use no more *ands* or *buts* than you can help.

So much for the principle of Coherence as it applies to the composition of paragraphs. The test of coherence in paragraphs is as simple as in sentences: A paragraph where the mutual relations of sentences are not unmistakable is incoherent; a paragraph where these mutual relations are unmistakable is coherent. As in sentences, perfect coherence is perhaps unattainable; but certainly it may be indefinitely approached.

As for the historical development of Coherence in the English paragraph, I can only say very hastily that, on the whole, coherence in the order of sentences tends to grow stronger; that coherence in construc-

tions, like other devices which come dangerously near palpable artificiality, seems certainly not to have developed during the past century or so; and that the inevitable hastiness of much modern style makes intelligent coherence in the use of connectives far less common than it might well be. But save for the palpable artificiality which good use condemns in those who blindly follow the principle of parallel construction, there is nothing in modern usage which should stand in the way of any one who intelligently tries to make paragraphs coherent.

To make as simple as I could the principles which may govern the planning of paragraphs, — the same principles, I cannot too often repeat, which govern any literary composition, — I have laid them down very dogmatically; and the words in which I have stated them sound dangerously like absolute rules of style. There are two ways of doing this thing, they seem to say, — two ways of composing a paragraph: one right, the other wrong. Within certain very broad limits, this approaches truth. As a general rule, paragraphs that have coherent unity and firm mass perform their office better than paragraphs with other traits. But this is not because paragraphs with other traits are essentially vicious; it is simply because as a general rule writers wish to produce an effect of firm precision; and the principles I have so dogmatically stated are the principles by means of which an effect of firm precision may most probably be secured. If another effect than that

of firm precision be the effect which a writer wishes to produce, he may most probably produce it by deliberate disregard of nearly everything that in this discussion of paragraphs I have advised. An effect of confusion can be produced in no more simple way than by deliberately disregarding coherent unity of paragraph; an effect of indecision in no more simple way than by deliberate weakening of mass. And the maker of paragraphs, just as truly as the maker of sentences or the chooser of words, has before him at any given moment no more definite question than this: What is the effect I wish to produce, and how may I best produce it?

In answering this question, we find ourselves just where we found ourselves at the close of our consideration of words and of sentences. In deciding just what effect we wish to produce, the inevitable inadequacy of the means at our disposal to the matters we would express — the inevitable limit of vocabulary — compels us carefully to consider two phases of the inevitably complicated thing we wish to express. In the first place, we must ask ourselves what the actual facts are which we wish to denote; in the second, we must ask ourselves what are the associated thoughts and emotions which we wish to connote.

In the composition of sentences, we saw, denotation and connotation are things just as real, just as vital, as in the choice of words. In truth they are things inevitable to any expression of human thought. No word can be quite free from suggestions of things it

leaves unnamed; and if this be true, no combination of words can be quite free from suggestions of things and of combinations of things that do not meet the eye of a reader or the ear of a listener. You will remember the example I gave you of how the arrangement of mere proper names in climax or in anti-climax actually alters the whole character of a clause. "The English Bible, Shakspere, Addison, and Fisher Ames," says one thing, "Fisher Ames, Addison, Shakspere, and the English Bible," says another. True of mere words in composition, this is far truer of sentences in composition. A little while ago I happened to read an admirable translation of the prose of Heine. The effects Heine produced were remarkably reproduced by the translator. Even in English they were not short of amazing; and the secret of them seemed to lie chiefly in the point to which I am now calling your attention. The connotation of one sentence was again and again so startlingly different from the connotation of the last that it made one stop, half breathless. Here is a man, one said, who sees infinities all at once, — great and small, pure and vile, celestial and devilish and earthly. And yet almost all this was in what he left unsaid; and chiefly in what he left unsaid in the composition of utterly incoherent paragraphs, — paragraphs, too, and sentences, where nothing could have done his work but utter disregard of unity. And literature without Heine were a poorer thing than the literature we have to-day. Effects, after all, denotation and connotation in their infinitely

delicate combinations, are what the writer must always keep in mind.

And so, in leaving this subject of paragraphs, we must keep in mind other things than those I have laid down so dogmatically. Generally true in human practice, these by themselves are not enough to guide us. They are generally true here more than elsewhere, here more than elsewhere we may generally keep them in mind, because alone of the elements of style paragraphs belong to written composition, and not to spoken. But in written composition, just as in spoken, what the maker really has to do is not to conform to any rules more rigid than those of good use; it is to know what effects he wishes to produce, and then by every means in his power to strive to produce them. And in his effort to know what effects he would produce, the maker of paragraphs must be just as careful as the maker of sentences or the chooser of words: he must know not only what he would say, but what he would leave unsaid. And he must learn by toilsome practice the wonderful subtilty with which, by varying his kinds of paragraphs, and by applying to his paragraphs with elastic intelligence the broadly simple principles of composition, he may almost infinitely vary his effects, in denotation and in connotation alike.

V.

WHOLE COMPOSITIONS.

We come now to the last of the elements of style,— to compositions larger than paragraphs. Of course there may be more than one kind of these. A chapter, a volume, a book in several volumes, even a series of books in themselves independent, would all come under this head. So would any single chapter in this book I am now trying to compose intelligibly, and the whole book itself. But for our purposes all these larger forms of composition may be considered together; for both usage and principle affect them all in about the same way.

In spite of their familiarity, we shall do well briefly to glance at the conclusions we have already reached. Style, we remember, consists primarily of words, — arbitrary sounds to which the common consent we call "good use" has given definite significance. Before these words can convey any organic meaning they must be composed — put together — in sentences. In sentences, grammar and idiom — the forms in which good use controls composition — are extremely powerful; and as nothing can justify a violation of good use, our composition of sentences must be far from arbitrary. But for all this, the moment we begin to

compose, even in sentences, we have found that within the limits of good use we may wisely govern our work by certain very simple principles of composition. The principle of Unity counsels that each composition be grouped about one central idea; the principle of Mass counsels that the chief parts of every composition be so placed as readily to catch the eye; the principle of Coherence counsels that the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors be unmistakable. And arbitrary though these principles seem, there is good reason to think that the common-sense of English-speaking people has in a general way tended to a growing, though hardly a conscious, observance of them. At least, I think this may be said: a style whose sentences do not violate these principles will generally be felt a superior vehicle of modern thought and emotion to a style whose sentences neglect them. In paragraphs we found good use greatly relaxed. Without fear of violating either grammar or idiom, we found ourselves at liberty to compose our paragraphs with pretty strict attention to the principles; and some years of practical experience have convinced me that paragraphs are really parts of composition as definitely organic and quite as important as sentences themselves. What is more, having escaped the authority of good use, they are parts of composition which any one who knows the principles may easily make conform to them, often with surprising results.

With whole compositions, particularly of the larger

kinds, the case is somewhat different. In the nature of things they are apparent at a glance; they are the most conspicuous things in style. To all appearances, too, they are things of the most various kinds: chapters, books, volumes, looked at in one way; looked at in another, essays, sermons, novels, treatises, poems, what not that may be put in words. At different times many pretty distinct rules have been laid down about them in some of their phases. Perhaps the most distinct and troublesome concern introductions and conclusions, or things more awful still, which the books call exordiums and perorations. It took me a good while to find out that the principles which may best govern our planning of whole compositions are simply our old friends, — the principles of Unity, of Mass, and of Coherence; and that compositions carefully planned with these principles in view will in the end write themselves in a form incredibly better than compositions in which the principles have been neglected.

As in paragraphs, there is no good use to hamper us. So far as I know, there is no reason whatever why any writer should not cast his material as a whole in any form he may choose; but there is abundant reason in human experience why he should not cast his material in any form at all until he has carefully considered it and pretty carefully constructed the proper mould. And this is exactly what any one who has observed the normal condition of the human mind would expect.

Order, though credibly declared the first law of heaven, is by no means the rule on earth. Our experiences come to us pell-mell. Even those things in life which possess in themselves elements of the most orderly kind — our meals, our professional work, our devotions, our studies — are really, in experience, things as broken, as discontinuous, as confusingly intermingled with one another and a thousand things else as are the separate instalments of a serial story, — a kind of composition that most of us leave unread until it is published complete. As a result of this inevitable fact our ideas present themselves in a state of confusion. Dozens of trains of thought are running in our heads at all times, intermingling, distorting one another, entangling themselves a great deal more than any one who does not sometimes try to disentangle them would begin to suspect. And if we try to express ourselves without a pretty definite notion of what we are about, we are fairly sure before long to find ourselves nowhere.

The easiest way, then, to approach the part of the subject now before us is, I believe, to consider how, if we have to say something, we may most wisely proceed. A moment ago I used a figure which goes far toward the answer of this question. We wish to cast our thoughts and emotions in a form which shall make them intelligible to others than ourselves; and whoever would cast anything into any form must first proceed to make a mould.

In literal words this means that a prudent writer

once for all puts aside the notion that he is inspired; and with it the traditional attitude of the poet who nibbles away most of the feathers of his quill before he begins to wear the point. No matter how delicate our purpose, — even though we contemplate a masterpiece of literature, — the actual task before us is a sober matter of business; and like any matter of business, it is to be approached by a man of sense with the greatest coolness he can command.

In such a case as this a concrete illustration is of far more value than any amount of generalization; and an illustration, by no means a model in other respects, is at this very moment before us all. I shall ask no further indulgence for speaking now of the way in which I have tried to compose these chapters. My effort has been to make each in itself, and all of them taken together, a practical illustration of the principles that I have in mind. And it may be worth while to say that in my experience as a teacher, and in what little writing I have found time to do, the principles that apply to such expository compositions prove exactly the same that apply to writing of any kind. A narrative, a description, an argument, a play, I find, may any and all of them be planned in very much the same way.

In considering these chapters, then, — just as in planning a biography or a novel, — the first question that presented itself concerned the substance of the matter in hand. What was to be said; and more important still, what was to be left unsaid? In the

present state of human intelligence, I find one is far more apt to drag in needless, useless, even irrelevant matter, than to leave out matter really essential. In answering this question, I found, and I know of, no better guide than the old principle of Unity. Every composition should group itself about one central idea. In a sentence, as we saw, this idea is sometimes a single word, and almost always a perfectly simple assertion. In a paragraph it is apt to be a thing which phrases itself in a larger way: a paragraph, we remember, is to a sentence what a sentence is to a word; and just as the centre of unity in a sentence is generally a word, so the centre of unity in a paragraph is generally a sentence. In a whole composition — like this chapter, or the series of which it forms a part — the scale is larger still. The centre of unity may generally be a thing as large as a paragraph; but if we are to have a unity that is anything more than chance, a centre of unity, and a thoroughly apprehended one, we must have. In discussing paragraphs, you will remember, we found that the most convenient test of unity was whether we could summarize the paragraph in a single sentence. In a whole composition the most convenient test of unity is whether we can sum up its substance in a single paragraph. Once for all, then, in composing these chapters I bound myself by this simple condition: I resolved that no one of them should contain anything that could not ultimately be included in a general summary of no more than one paragraph; and

what is more, that all eight of the chapters that compose this book should themselves contain nothing that could not ultimately be summarized almost as compactly.

In carrying out these resolutions, the first thing to do was to make the summaries in question. Once made, these summaries proved guides toward further composition whose practical value it would be hard to overstate. At any moment there was close at hand a test by which I could judge whether, in the confusion of thoughts and suggestions that must come to anybody engaged in prolonged literary work, I was in danger of straying from the chief matter actually in hand.

Of course no one's foresight is perfect. No preconceived plan I have ever happened to examine has been so near perfection that after-thought may not possibly mend it. To bind one's self hand and foot by such summaries as I have mentioned would be to do a very silly thing. The intelligent way to use them is to use them as guides, rather than masters. At least, they will lead us somewhere, and will prevent us from going astray; but if in following them, we find ourselves by and by in a place where we can see a way distinctly better than that in which they lead us, it were folly not to discard them for better ones. Vagaries, however, are not as a rule perceptions of better ways; they are generally only spontaneous manifestations of the inexhaustible power of human beings to do things as things should not be done. And when I have once made a summary, I find the

wise course to be careful adherence to it until, as happens more rarely than I could wish, I clearly see my way to the making of a better.

In expository or argumentative writing, such a process as this is fairly easy. In writing of a more popular and apparently lighter kind, it is sometimes rather hard. In narrative, for example, briefly to summarize the whole story is by no means easy. In such serious and complex narrative as a history, such a process may become almost impracticable. In cases like this, however, there is another guide, not so satisfactory, but not to be disdained. A composition whose parts may all properly fall under a single definite title is pretty sure to possess unity; and here is one of the chief reasons why I am accustomed to urge my pupils to give their compositions titles which, as nearly as may be, shall coincide with their subjects.

The most notable example of unity thus demonstrable that I have lately come across is a book so long that until last summer I never had the courage to read it. I mean Carlyle's "Frederick the Great," — a work which comprises a considerable number of volumes and twenty-one distinct books, each of which is subdivided into a number of chapters, of which most are in turn subdivided into separately named sections. The edition I read in the spare hours of six or eight weeks was printed rather closely on a page containing, I should guess, from three to four hundred words. The number of these pages was in the region of three thousand; and the matters dis-

cussed therein embraced the whole recorded history of Brandenburg and of the House of Hohenzollern, and pretty much everything that happened in Europe during the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. Sovereigns from Henry the Fowler to Catherine the Second crowded on us pell-mell; soldiers, statesmen, buffoons, peasants; Voltaire, and Maria Theresa, and Augustus of Saxony, and all four Georges of England, and two or three Louises of France; tobacco parliaments, Silesian wars, Potsdam millers, scandals, heroisms, schoolmasters, apothecaries, what not that whirled about in this world of ours a century or two ago. Such a mass of living facts — for somehow Carlyle never lets a fact lack life — I had never seen flung together before; and yet the one chief impression I brought away from the book was that to a degree rare even in very small ones it possessed as a whole the great trait of unity. In one's memory, each fact by and by fell into its own place: the chief ones stood out; the lesser sank back into a confused but not inextricable mass of throbbing vitality. And from it all emerged more and more clearly the one central figure who gave his name to the whole, — Frederick of Prussia. It was as they bore on him from all quarters of time and space, and as he reacted on them far and wide, that all these events and all these people were brought back out of their dusty graves to live again. Whatever else Carlyle was, the unity of this enormous book proves him, when he chose to be, a Titanic artist.

All of this seems perhaps too obvious to be worth the time I have already given it; but there is a grave reason for dwelling on it, particularly to English-speaking people. Although, as I have said, there is in the matter of whole composition no consent of good use which should bind us to anything, there is, naturally enough, more general consciousness of what the great people have done on a large scale than of what they have done on a small. Now, in English literature there are few traits more generally notable than the utter disregard of form permitted themselves by men of genius. To go straight to the greatest of all, I know few writers, who, in whole works, more frequently and serenely disregard unity than Shakspere. Of course our modern impression of Shakspere's form is distorted. Few popular playwrights become established classics; it is both unfair and unintelligent to judge by the rules of the study compositions that were put together to amuse an audience of Elizabethan Londoners. And very few people who talk about Shakspere ever take the trouble to read the great body of dramatic literature, with conventions and methods of its own, of which his plays form in bulk a still inconsiderable part. But after making all allowances, I am disposed to assent to the criticism Ben Jonson is said to have uttered: that Shakspere wanted art. In other words, this means that like many a popular playwright since his day, Shakspere frequently did not trouble himself about how his plays were put together,

so long as they would act. This is particularly true of his chronicle-histories, which, like other plays of the same class, are nothing but a casting into dramatic form of material he found in narrative. Scenes, situations, even words and phrases, are simply put into such shape that they can be acted instead of read. Now, Shakspere was, above any other man who has written in our language, a man of genius. It seems to have been out of his power to write a page of words without making more than one phrase which should ultimately express some phase of human thought or passion; and even in the most formless of his histories we find so much of his power that few of us care to think of anything else. That same Ben Jonson who criticised him was a man of very different mould. A great scholar in his way, perhaps the sturdiest Englishman of his day, he had not, so far as I can see, a spark of genius. On the other hand, his industry was indefatigable, and his art more conscientious than that of any other writer of his time. There is not one of his greater plays which does not command the conviction that every line of it is written as well as he could write it. To make the comparison concrete, both Shakspere and Ben Jonson wrote, among other things, plays which presented stories from Roman history. To my thinking, the greatest of Shakspere's historical plays is "Antony and Cleopatra;" each time I read it I am impressed more and more with the superhuman power of the man who from the conventional narrative of Plutarch could wake into eternal vitality the Romans and the Greeks and the Egyptians, whose final struggle settled the fate of the world. Yet nothing that I have read in this play or of it can make it anything to me but a series of disjointed scenes, preserved from incoherent confusion only by the transcendent genius of the man who wrote them. The greater of Ben Jonson's historical plays is "Sejanus." Nowadays "Sejanus" is very hard reading. When you come to lines like

> "Sleep,
> Voluptuous Cæsar, and security
> Seize on thy stupid powers, and leave them dead
> To public cares,"

you breathe a sigh of relief in the midst of a flood of verse that is as far from vital as even the lesser lines of "Antony and Cleopatra" are far from lifeless. But as one begins to study "Sejanus," one begins to see that of the two it is the safer model. From beginning to end every stroke is part of a preconceived and complete whole. Thoughtful, laborious, uninspired, but never reckless, never for an instant forgetful of the conscience of an artist, Ben Jonson has, after all, with what power was in him, done a great work; and Shakspere's work could not help being great.

Now, most of us are not great enough to disdain rule and principle and conscience; nor are most of us intelligent enough to understand that Shakspere is great in spite of his faults, just as in their own lesser

ways are Dickens and Thackeray. Because genius has in their case atoned for lack of careful art, we are very prone to call art worthless and narrowing and what not; and as a result we take comfortably little pains, and let our faults shelter themselves under the shadow of the faults of masters. If we have genius, well and good; if not, as is the case with most of us, we simply come to grief.

Of course, I need hardly repeat, we may legitimately have in view other effects than unity. If our object be to ramble, then not to ramble were to blunder; but in general our object is to produce a definite effect and not a nebulous. And in broadly general considerations of such a matter as this, it is safest to assume this general object. In planning our compositions, then, there is nothing else quite so important as a constant, conscious determination that they shall contain what belongs there, and nothing else; that, if any work of ours can make them, they shall group themselves about one central idea, — that they shall have unity.

So much for the substance of our whole compositions. The next question that presents itself is how, in a very broad way, we should arrange it. In the smaller compositions we have considered, in sentences and paragraphs, this consideration was at first glance by no means obvious. In large compositions, I think it becomes very obvious indeed. We have in our possession certain definite materials. Our object is so to compose these materials that a reader shall be

able to possess himself of them too; and this, as a matter of course, we must first do in a general way. We have a story to tell, for example; in what order shall the incidents be narrated? If the story be a long one, there must probably be many shifts of scene. What scenes shall we choose to dwell on, what shall we describe directly, what indirectly? How shall each be treated? To propose a concrete example, suppose we are telling a story, historical or fictitious, in which one of the incidents is the first battle of Bull Run. Shall we describe it in detail, as Carlyle describes the battles of Frederick, and Tolstoi the battles of Napoleon's wars in Russia; or shall we keep it in the background, as Thackeray keeps Waterloo in "Vanity Fair"? At this moment I do not recall a notable literary account of the battle in question. The incidents of that field are a matter of recorded fact, within reach of any historian. Should the historian take us straight to the battlefield, and tell what went on there, hour after hour, and so follow as far as he can the exact course of events from the first engagement to the final defeat? Or should he take us to Washington, and tell how the troops marched out and how all manner of rumors began to come in, now of victory, now of rout, until finally stragglers in mad retreat brought the confused certainty of defeat to the frightened capital? Either method would be perfectly legitimate; so would a combination of both. The question really is what effect we have in mind.

Again, suppose, as is perhaps more often the case, that our object be to write an argument, to convince people that our way of looking at a given state of things is the sane one. Argument conveniently divides itself into two parts, — premises and conclusion, or, as the Rhetorics phrase it, proof and proposition. We have some definite thing to maintain, — our conclusion or proposition; and we show why we maintain it by definitely stated reasons, which we call premises or proof. In what order should we present this matter? Should we begin by stating our proposition, and then collect the proof in the strongest order in which we can marshal it; or should we begin by collecting our proof, and so lead up to a final statement of our proposition? Again, either method is legitimate, and so are combinations of both. In this case, indeed, the general question of composition becomes to a great degree a question of tact. Abruptly to state a proposition with which readers would be apt to disagree is unwise, for much the reason that makes unwise any act of deliberately unpopular behavior. Needlessly to keep back a proposition which commands general assent is often equally unwise, partly because it needlessly puts off one of the bonds of sympathy that may be formed between writer and reader. As in narrative, the question reduces itself to a deliberate consideration of what effect we have in mind.

In my teaching I have found one purely mechanical device of much value here. Whatever our object,

whatever kind of writing we undertake, and on whatever scale, our work must inevitably divide itself into certain separate parts. Our books must fall into chapters, our chapters or single essays into paragraphs. What shall those parts be? is the question; in what order shall they be arranged? The simplest way I have found of answering these questions is this: On separate bits of paper — cards, if they be at hand — I write down the separate headings that occur to me, in what seems to me the natural order. Then, when my little pack of cards is complete, — in other words, when I have a card for every heading which I think of, — I study them and sort them almost as deliberately as I should sort a hand at whist; and it has very rarely been my experience to find that a shift of arrangement will not decidedly improve the original order. Ideas that really stand in the relation of proof to proposition frequently present themselves as coordinate. The same idea will sometimes phrase itself in two or three distinct ways, whose superficial differences for the moment conceal their identity; and more frequently still, the comparative strength and importance, and the mutual relations, of really distinct ideas will in the first act of composition curiously conceal themselves from the writer. A few minutes' shuffling of these little cards has often revealed to me more than I should have learned by hours of unaided pondering. In brief, they enable one, by simple acts of rearrangement, to make any number of fresh plans. If the first plan be drawn out on a single page, every

new one must be written afresh. Mechanical as the device is, I find it most serviceable.

In the stage of composition at which we have now arrived, the general principle which should guide our conduct is nothing more nor less than our old friend, the principle of Mass. Generally speaking, the chief parts of any composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye. In compositions on a scale so large as that of wholes there are three distinct things that must inevitably catch the eye: two are what must catch the eye even in sentences, — the beginning and the end; the third is what we saw beginning to appear in paragraphs, — the comparative space devoted to the different parts of the matter in hand. These I shall consider in turn.

The beginning of any composition may wisely, I think, indicate what the composition is about. Compare, for example, the opening sentences of two standard histories of England, Hume's and Macaulay's.

"The curiosity, entertained by all civilized nations," begins Hume, "of inquiry into the exploits and adventures of their ancestors commonly excites a regret that the history of remote ages should always be so much involved in obscurity, uncertainty, and contradiction."

And so on for a page, in my edition, before he begins to tell what he purposes to do.

"I purpose," begins Macaulay, "to write the history of England from the accession of King James the Second down to a time which is within the memory of men still living.

And so on, for a page or two, distinctly laying down the plan of the great work he never finished. No one, I think, can question the superior efficacy of Macaulay's method. Again, compare with the opening of almost any respectable modern novel the opening pages of those generally much more notable pieces of fiction, the novels of Sir Walter Scott. There may be living occasional individuals who have resisted the impulse to skip the endless lucubrations of Dryasdust and what not; but I do not remember having met one. The fact is that there was once a formal old fashion, pretty generally observed, of beginning any piece of writing by a lot of more or less commonplace generalization; and that modern writers have begun to find out that such passages are a waste of good ink and paper, inasmuch as hardly anybody has ever been known to read them. As a matter of fact, too, most people have a very strong impulse to preface something in particular by at least a paragraph of nothing in particular, bearing to the real matter in hand a relation not more inherently intimate than that of the tuning of violins to a symphony. It is the mechanical misfortune of musicians that they cannot with certainty tune their instruments out of hearing. It is the mechanical luck of the writer that he need not show a bit more of his work than he chooses. As a teacher, my most frequent experience is the striking out of the first page or so of a student's compositions; as a writer, so far as my experience has gone, I have almost always forced

myself ruthlessly to destroy the original beginnings of whatever I have written; and this just because these spontaneous beginnings involve a needless disregard of the principle of Mass, so serious as greatly to impair the actual effect a writer has in view.

So much for the principle of Mass as it applies to the beginnings of whole compositions. Its application to their close is very similar. Whoever does not take deliberate care is very apt to go on writing and talking after he has really said his say. Physical fatigue sometimes comes to his rescue here; but not so often as you would expect. Yet a weak ending is in final effect a more fatal thing than a weak beginning. It is, in brief, anti-climax at its worst, — the most false of false emphasis. Whoever has listened to after-dinner speaking knows this from bitter experience. If there is anything more utterly depressing than a speech which begins flatly, it is one that begins well and ends with dreary commonplace. If the case is not quite so palpable in print, it is just as true. More than anywhere else, we should keep in mind concerning our whole compositions that if they are to have on the reader the effect we wish to produce, they must end with words that deserve distinction.

Here, too, as a teacher I have often found my practical work taking the form of amputation. It is far more common to find the best end of a composition imbedded in what at first glance looks like the body thereof than not to find it at all; and when you appreciate that a given piece of writing ends weakly, you will

do well, before trying to alter it, to make sure that there is not already in it some point where it may actually end strongly. But the rule tells the whole story. I have yet to find the composition that may not to advantage end with words that deserve distinction.

So we come to the third phase of the principle of Mass in whole compositions. In the textbooks I have found this somewhat dryly formulated thus: Due proportion should obtain between principal and subordinate matters. In simple English I conceive this to mean that, generally speaking, what is most important may conveniently be treated at most length. In biography, for example, — a kind of writing that students often have to try, — the first question is why the subject is worth writing about at all. During the past ten years it has been my misfortune to read, I should guess, from five hundred to a thousand undergraduate accounts of the life of Daniel Webster. Now, Webster, I conceive, is worth writing about for three different reasons: he was a great orator, and a very notable lawyer, and a great statesman. Any or all of these phases of his character might properly occupy the greater part of any account of his life. But what in my opinion should be passed over hastily is what in a great number of the undergraduate compositions is treated at the greatest length; namely, the not very exceptional circumstances of his childhood and youth. I remember one theme which covered perhaps a dozen pages of carefully written manuscript, of which all but two were devoted to an elaborate account — re-

ferred to no recognized authority — of how the infant Daniel, engaged in ploughing with his father, plied the old gentleman with many edifying questions concerning the rights and duties of American citizens, and received answers that might have been copied from "Sandford and Merton." I remember another theme, entitled "John the Baptist," which told of nothing but the extremely picturesque and very highly colored misconduct of Herod. And only a short time ago I had occasion to study a life of Sir Richard Steele, in which a great many pages were devoted to discussions — illustrated by legal documents quoted at length — as to who were, and who were not, related to his wives. Yet really what a reader wanted to know in each of these cases — really, I think, what the writer wished to tell — was why Webster, or John the Baptist, or Steele, was worth the attention we were called upon to give him.

Of course, even in writing of this kind, our purpose may be different from the general one. Last year I read a Life of Abraham Lincoln, by a Mr. Herndon who was an intimate friend of his in early life. Whether Herndon's book is authentic or not, I do not pretend to decide. It purports to give an astonishingly complete account of what Lincoln did and what manner of world he lived in up to the time when he emerged into the sight of the nation. It purports, indeed, to tell the whole story of his life; but after Lincoln was in national politics, Herndon saw and knew comparatively little of him, and other people

saw and knew a great deal. Of Herndon's three volumes, then, almost if not quite two are devoted to the earlier part of Lincoln's career. Into the third volume is compressed, in very general form, all that makes Lincoln's name a household word; but this massing of Herndon's book, far from being faulty, seems to me admirable. What Herndon had to tell, what nobody else knew, was precisely that personal detail of early life which the other books and other writers, for want of knowledge, passed over. A truer title would have been the "Early Life of Lincoln." A better book might have ended at the moment when Lincoln became a public character. But, given Herndon's purpose, Herndon's book is, in its main masses, very well composed, for the very reason that it gives most space, and so attracts most notice, to what most deserves distinction.

An interesting composition from this point of view is the chapter in "Vanity Fair" which tells of the battle of Waterloo. In point of fact, I rather think Thackeray had never seen a great battle, and was too prudent an artist to venture on the description of a very notable kind of thing which he knew only from hearsay. He lays his scene in Brussels, then, and tells with great vividness and detail the story of the panic there, — not essentially a different thing from any other scene of general excitement and confusion and terror; a great deal nearer the ordinary experience of human beings than any form of battle, murder, or sudden death. But he never lets you forget that what has

made this panic is Waterloo: every now and then you hear the growling of the cannon, and feel, hovering not far off, the dreadful shadow of Bonaparte. So — in my little Tauchnitz edition — he writes for twenty-two pages, dwelling at greatest length on that part of his subject which he was best able to treat, and leaving in the reader's mind — what every writer really wishes to leave there — a deep sense of reality and of power. But this has not told his whole story. In the last page and a half he tells very briefly what had been doing in the field all this time; and in his very last paragraph — and the very last words of it — he tells the fact which makes the passage an essential part of his story. Here is the paragraph, and it is so placed that in the total effect of the chapter it remains the chief point of the whole: —

"No more firing was heard at Brussels: the pursuit rolled miles away. The darkness came down on the field and city; and Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart."

For skilful massing that chapter has always impressed me as notable. It is the space given to Brussels that emphasizes the part of the story which Thackeray could tell best; it is the placing of that single sentence about George Osborne — not even a sentence, only a relative clause — which leaves it once for all inevitably in the reader's memory.

In whole compositions, then, the question of mass — of how we should begin, how end, how arrange the

proportions of our work — becomes more important and more delicate than before. On our management of it depends to an amazing degree what effects we produce with given material. It cannot be considered too carefully. And nothing has so assisted my consideration of it as that simple device with cards that show me, as I arrange them in different orders, what different effects are at any moment within my power.

So we come to the principle of Coherence: that the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. In sentences and in paragraphs, we shall remember, we found that this matter of coherence depended on one or more of three devices: the actual order in which we arranged the parts of our compositions; uniformity of constructions; and the use of connectives. In whole compositions these three devices remain important; but the first and the third are more so than the second. The simplest way of considering them, perhaps, is to revert to the little packs of cards that I have said are so useful in deciding questions of mass. In arranging these it is not enough that we should give most space to what we wish most to impress on the reader, or put at the beginning and the end the matters we wish chiefly to emphasize. It is almost equally important that we arrange the separate parts of our compositions — in this case, the separate paragraphs — in an order that shall as far as possible indicate their mutual relations.

In certain kinds of writing, this mere arrangement will assure all the coherence that is necessary. In a novel, for example, or a simple historical narrative, it is often enough to arrange the parts that make up the whole in such order that each naturally leads from the last to the next; but whenever one gets into a kind of composition where one cannot move straight ahead, — where one must gather together more than one thread of discourse, — other devices become necessary.

The device of parallel construction is at once less useful and more dangerous in whole compositions than in paragraphs. It is less useful because it is not nearly so perceptible; more dangerous because, if it is perceptible, it is apt to be more palpably artificial. And yet complete disregard of it may be decidedly confusing in effect. An article in a magazine that I lately glanced through will show what I mean. On the page where I happened to open the book I observed two paragraphs: "Thirdly," began one, "we believe this to be the case because," — and so on. "Fourthly," and so on, began the next. Something in the text caught my attention. I turned back a page or two, in hopes of finding what the first and second headings were. But though beyond doubt there were first and second headings somewhere, they were never so described, nor, if there were such things in the article in question, were any headings after the fourth. These two paragraphs on which my eye happened first to fall chanced to stand

in just the same relation to the main proposition, and so were cast in a form superficially similar, and so were coherent in construction. But there were other paragraphs that by the very terms that demonstrated the coherence of these — "thirdly" and "fourthly" — must inevitably stand in just their relation to the main proposition; and the very change of construction which made them hard to find when I looked back to them made them hard to recognize in exactly their true character when I read the article straight forward. In such a series as I suggest here, perhaps the value of coherence in the constructions of whole compositions is most apparent. To phrase each of these separate headings in a notably similar way might well have been to grow palpably monotonous. To introduce each of them by its regular title — "first," "secondly," and so on — would certainly have gone a long way to obviate any other device for the securing of coherence.

And yet in the most finished models of composition such coherence as I have just suggested is discarded as too palpable. One of the most finished bits of composition I know is the passage from Burke's speech on Conciliation with America, which discusses the temper and character of America. At this point, it is worth analyzing in some detail: "In this character of the Americans," it begins, "a love of freedom is the predominating feature, . . . and this from a great variety of powerful causes." "First," begins the next paragraph, "the people of the colonies are de

scendants of Englishmen. England, sir, is a nation which still, I hope, respects, and formerly adored her freedom," and so on for more than a page. "They were further confirmed in this pleasing error," begins the next paragraph, — which might have begun "secondly," — "by the form of their provincial legislative assemblies. Their governments are popular in a high degree." And this, too, he develops a little. "If anything were wanting to this necessary operation of the form of government," comes instead of "thirdly," "religion would have given it a complete effect. . . . The religion most prevalent in our northern colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion." And there is well on to a page of this. "Sir," begins the next paragraph, — which might have begun "fourthly," — "I can perceive that some gentlemen object to the latitude of this description, because in the southern colonies the Church of England forms a large body, and has a regular establishment. . . . There is, however, a circumstance attending these colonies which, in my opinion, fully counterbalances this difference. . . . It is that in Virginia and the Carolinas they have a vast multitude of slaves. . . . Freedom is to them not only an enjoyment, but a kind of rank and privilege." And so on for half a page more. "Permit me, sir," — instead of "fifthly," — begins the next paragraph, "to add another circumstance in our colonies, which contributes no mean part towards the growth

and effect of this intractable spirit. I mean their education. In no country, perhaps, in the world is the law so general a study." "They augur misgovernment at a distance," the paragraph closes, "and snuff the approach of tyranny in every tainted breeze." "The last cause of this disobedient spirit in the colonies," begins the sixth paragraph, "is hardly less powerful than the rest, as it is not merely moral, but laid deep in the natural constitution of things. Three thousand miles of ocean lie between you and them." And so on for a page more. His enumeration of the causes of American love of freedom is now complete.

Burke's business now is to proceed further in his speech, — to discuss what conduct should be pursued toward a people whose chief characteristic he has thus defined and explained. But this definition and explanation, which, even as I have mutilated it, is not precisely brief, has filled, in the edition from which I quote, almost six closely printed pages. And it is highly desirable that it should be finally presented in a form so compact that a reasonably attentive listener may rationally be hoped to keep it completely in mind. Before proceeding with his discourse, then, Burke gives a short paragraph to a deliberate summary of these last six. "Then, sir," he says, "from these six capital sources, — of descent; of form of government; of religion in the northern provinces; of manners in the southern; of education; of remoteness of situation from the first source of govern-

ment, — from all these causes a fine spirit of liberty has grown up."

Mutilated as my citations from this passage have inevitably been, they are enough, I hope, to show pretty clearly two of the devices by which Burke — one of the most coherent writers in English literature — gives coherence to his style. From point to point of the six heads by which he accounts for the fine spirit of American liberty that just four weeks later burst into open rebellion at Lexington and Concord, he marks his transitions with a care which makes impossible the slightest misapprehension of their nature. Though we may sometimes forget whence we have come or whither we are going, there is never a moment when we can doubt where we are. Every transition is as carefully defined as every point. In the second place, when he has reached a point where a summary is practicable, he summarizes what he has said in the order in which he has said it; and his summary, gathering up in a single sentence the matter that he has impressed on our minds by expanding it into six full paragraphs, leaves it with us in a form where we can finally grasp it as a whole, and in full possession of it proceed to a consideration of the further matter that he must lay before us.

In coherence of whole compositions these two devices — definitely marked transitions and carefully placed summaries — do precisely what in the coherence of shorter compositions is done by simple

connectives. They specify in a way which no man can mistake the exact relation of part to part.

In some degree — in this speech of Burke's to a great degree — this careful attention to coherence involves, and rightly, a disregard of the strict principle of Mass. At the beginning of almost every one of his paragraphs we have not a word or phrase which is in itself significant, but one which indicates unmistakably the relation of what is to come to what has gone before. Undue emphasis, this may seem, on what is essentially unimportant; and yet from another point of view it is perhaps defensible on the very ground of emphasis. To know the bearing of what we are about to consider on what we have already grasped is often quite as important as to understand precisely what the thing we are about to grasp may be. In those paragraphs of Burke's which begin with simple connectives, the chief sentences, when we get to them, are generally massed to perfection. Take, for example, that famous one about "the dissidence of dissent, the Protestantism of the Protestant religion." No one ever forgot what that meant. I know of no passage in English better worth studying as an example of the comparative value of the principles of Mass and of Coherence, and of the inevitable necessity of compromise between them; nor any either, which more instantly demonstrates the great value of a final summary.

To come down to every-day matters, the precise les-

son which one learns from such models as this is of great value when we come to write out the compositions whose unity and mass we have settled by some such device as the separate headings on separate cards. Once arranged in its general outline, a composition must of course be finished in detail. If we have made our plans with minute care, each of our headings may properly be expanded into a paragraph. How should that paragraph begin, how proceed, how end? Oftener than one would think off-hand it may to advantage begin with a specific connective phrase; very often it may so expand as to treat a far wider range of subject than at first one would expect. But as we saw when we were discussing paragraphs by themselves, it is of the first importance that each sentence bear to the last a relation as unmistakable as each paragraph itself should bear to its neighbors; and there are few cases where a paragraph may not wisely end with words which leave last in the reader's mind — and place where they will most readily catch the reader's eye — thoughts and emotions combined which shall somehow imply the motive of the whole paragraph. Coherence is often the chief thing at the beginning; at the end the chief thing is almost always emphasis or mass.

I have said enough, I hope, to show how in the planning of whole compositions, large and small, the now familiar principles of Unity, of Mass, and of Coherence are of the greatest value. In this phase of their application I think their true nature appears

most clearly. They are not rules like rules of grammar, the violation of which is positive error, and the observance of which must be rigid; they are general principles of conduct, the disregard of which may very probably lead us astray. To state them to ourselves too rigidly is to make masters of what should be our servants, and to produce work whose effect is fatally frigid. It is to fall into the error of such pseudo-classicism as for two centuries made intolerably dull the tragic drama of France, and for well on to a century the polite poetry of England. More than in shorter compositions we should apply them to whole compositions with elastic intelligence. We should clearly understand, for example, whether for our purposes we need an introduction or a conclusion, and accordingly write an introduction or a conclusion not because on general principles such things seem desirable, but because the effect we have in mind demands one. And if our space is completely at our disposal, we should arrange the dimensions and the proportions of our materials in the way which seems to us most suitable to the effect we have is mind. If rigid adherence to formal rules be fatally frigid, none the less fatal to any certainty of effect is that relaxation of grasp that must result from disregard of the principles of Unity, of Mass, and of Coherence, that underlie all formal rules.

Perhaps the simplest way to show the superiority of carefully planned work to carelessly, is to compare examples of each kind in the work of the same writer.

As examples undoubtedly familiar to us all, I turn to three familiar plays of Shakspere: the "Comedy of Errors," the "Two Gentlemen of Verona," and "A Midsummer Night's Dream." There is some evidence to suggest that the first two were written before the third; and it is fairly certain that all three belong to the earlier part of Shakspere's career as a dramatist. In the "Comedy of Errors," to be sure, the plot is put together with some care; but the total effect of the play is among the least satisfactory in the works of Shakspere. The confusion of persons on which the whole plot is based is a palpable absurdity, and there is nothing in the play to redeem it into plausibility. In the "Two Gentlemen of Verona," the plot is more complicated, and for my part I have never been able to detect much composition in any part. The story is told in a succession of independent scenes, some effective, some the reverse. Proteus, a young gentleman of Verona, leaves his mistress, Julia, and goes to Milan, where his friend Valentine is already at the feet of Silvia. He proceeds to fall in love with Silvia, to betray Valentine's confidence, and to get Valentine banished from Milan. Valentine, turning outlaw, subsequently captures Proteus and some of the other principal personages, including Julia, who has followed Proteus in disguise. With no particular reason Proteus suddenly discovers that he is in love with Julia after all; and the whole ends merrily, each gentleman allied to his chosen mistress. In which plot, very carelessly put together, it is evident that

the conduct of Proteus is at once detestable and inexplicable. Few plays could be more thoroughly unsatisfactory. Yet there is no doubt that the confusion of persons in the "Comedy of Errors," and the startlingly sudden vagaries of such a character as Proteus are dramatically effective. Well acted, they will amuse an audience. In the "Midsummer Night's Dream" we have a play which I find it hard to believe other than a deliberate working over of these two plots. The main incidents of each are preserved. And the absurdity of such confusion as we find in the "Comedy of Errors," and the hatefulness of such meaningless inconstancy as we find in the "Two Gentlemen of Verona," are made plausible by being transported into a world of pure fantasy, where they are caused directly by the intervention of a tricky fairy. Perhaps the cleverest variation of all is that by which such treason to a friend as makes Proteus odious is made, simply by attributing it to Helena, a woman, a very venial matter. Whether the sense of personal honor possessed by women in general is really weaker than that of men, this is not the moment to inquire. It is certain, however, that even to the present day, normal males forgive in a woman many lines of conduct which in any man they would most sternly condemn. The aberration of the heroine of one of Mr. George Meredith's novels, who in a moment of pique deliberately betrays the political secret of her lover to the public prints, is a case in point. You regret that she should be so weak, but, after all,

the weakness seems what you might have expected even from the cleverest woman. The virtue required to resist that kind of temptation is the virtue peculiar to men. There is no doubt in my mind that Helena's betrayal of Hermia, in the "Midsummer Night's Dream," which is distinguishable from Proteus's betrayal of Valentine only by the fact that the betrayer is not a man, impresses one rightly or wrongly, not as a piece of rascality, but as the natural, if deplorable, vagary of a pretty woman. With the exception of this incident, I think, the other incidents of the two earlier plays which are blended in the main comedy of the "Midsummer Night's Dream" are all made fantastically plausible by the simple device of placing them, not on earth, but in fairyland.

So far, perhaps, there has been little in this excursion to show why it belongs in a discussion of the way to put compositions together; but the mere composition of the "Midsummer Night's Dream" has always impressed me as masterly. The skilful care with which the scenes are put together — the care which makes the play to this day an acting comedy much more amusing than I ever supposed it could be until I saw it played — is too subtile to be analyzed here. Whoever will read the play with a little care may see it for himself. But a phase of the composition just as skilfully subtile, and far more apt to escape attention, may be analyzed here perfectly well. The fairy world in which the confusions of the "Comedy of Errors" and the inconstancies of the "Two Gentlemen of Verona" became plausible and delightful is a fantastic region completely remote from every-day life. With a cleverness that I can hardly believe other than deliberate, Shakspere gives us a whole introductory act of romantic comedy before we approach fairyland at all. The romantic Athens of Theseus of course is no such place as any actual human being ever saw; but it is a place near enough human experience to seem plausible, and at the same time remote and fantastic enough to lead the way insensibly toward the purely fantastic forest where the fairy comedy plays itself so charmingly. But when the fairy comedy is done, we are too far from daily life not to feel the unreality very sharply if we are sent about our daily business at once; so there is a whole last act of romantic comedy again, and of rollicking burlesque, which leaves the fairy fantasy at last in a sort of dreamy distance, — just where it belongs. A more exquisitely simple composition of apparently incongruous elements into one finely massed coherent whole I have never discovered. Read the "Midsummer Night's Dream" for yourselves; compare it with the earlier comedies, which I think may fairly be considered as preliminary studies. You can have no better single lesson in composition.

Of course, as I have said, these guesses about Shakspere's methods of composition are nothing more than guesses. The more one knows of the ordinary process of composition, however, the more plausible these guesses seem. Even the best literary

artists cannot see their way to the best form in which their work may be cast without a good deal of preliminary experiment. In the act of composition this preliminary placing and the preliminary failures it involves are perhaps the longest and most tedious part of the work. They are just as inevitable, I believe, in argumentative work, in scientific exposition, in history, in any kind of writing conceivable, as they are in plays or novels. They are fraught with discouragement that any one who hopes to be a literary artist must learn constantly to expect and constantly to face. The satisfaction with which at last one emerges from this period of experimental failure into the light of artistic certainty goes far to make up for all the hours of discouragement. That is the bright side of the picture.

To illustrate this a little further, I venture to recur to my own experience in putting together this book, — originally a course of lectures. Like many people who undertake the task of composition, I found myself at the outset bound by certain unavoidable conditions. It was necessary to divide the matter in hand into a given number of equal parts, — in this case into eight lectures, each of which should occupy one hour. Four of these settled themselves at once. There must clearly be an introductory lecture, to place the general scheme of the course definitely before whoever wished to follow it throughout; and clearly there must be a lecture about each of the qualities of style, — Clearness, the intellectual; Force, the emotional; and Elegance, the æsthetic. Clearly, too, as I have now said with perhaps tedious frequency, these qualities can be conveyed to the mind of a reader only by means of the visible elements of style, — words in composition. Evidently, then, the four remaining lectures must be devoted to these elements. The precise question, then, was how the elements might best be treated in four parts. Two distinct methods presented themselves: one was to speak first of good use, as it applies to words, sentences, paragraphs, and whole compositions; then similarly, of each of the three principles of composition, the principles of Unity, of Mass, and of Coherence, — in other words, to consider all four elements four separate times. The other method, which I ultimately preferred, was to consider each element by itself, and to show, as well as I could, how good use and the principles of composition apply to each. This I preferred chiefly because it seemed more distinctly to emphasize a fact that I hope I have by this time made familiar; namely, that the principles which govern composition in all its stages are essentially the same, but that they apply in different ways to sentences and to paragraphs and to wholes. Each separate stage of composition is worth special attention. No better way of emphasizing this occurred to me than giving a separate lecture to each. Now came a more troublesome matter still. The conditions under which these lectures were composed compelled each to be given in a stated time: each must fill one hour, and no more. To introduce in any sin-

gle lecture matter not closely related to the subject directly in hand would have been confusingly to violate unity, — to fail to keep the four elements of style properly distinct. In college, where much more time is at my disposal, I find that I give four lectures to words, seven to sentences, three to paragraphs, and only one to whole compositions. In this course, then, my problem became definite: it was to reduce my four lectures about words to one, and my seven about sentences, and my four about paragraphs; and then to make this lecture about whole compositions as nearly equivalent to the others as I could. The result of my efforts — a result which I lay before you at this moment in no sense as a model, but only as an example with which I can assume most of you to have some acquaintance — is instantly open to one serious objection. Beyond any question the lecture about sentences is much more crowded than any of the others; and this one about whole compositions much less so. The scheme has unity and coherence; but so far as proportion goes it is irregularly massed; I have not given most space to the part of it which on the whole probably deserves most attention, — to the element of sentences, where the conflict between good use and the principles of composition is at once most evident and most active. Had I chosen the other plan, — one lecture about good use, and one about each of the principles, — this difficulty might very probably have been avoided. But as I said a moment ago, this would have failed to emphasize what I

wished most to emphasize: the independence, and yet the similarity of each of the three stages of composition, — sentences, paragraphs, and wholes. I chose, then, deliberately to crowd my lecture about sentences, and perhaps in some degree unduly to expand this one about whole compositions. What success has attended my work, you can judge better than I. If it has served clearly to define what I conceive to be the chief facts about the elements of style, it has done all I could venture to hope.

In few words, I have tried to make clear that good use, and nothing else, is what ultimately makes words, alone or in composition, significant of ideas, — anything more than arbitrary marks or sounds. Only within its limits can we possibly apply any principles at all; but when we have once learned to recognize its limits, and begin to inquire how within these limits we may best exert ourselves, we find that in all three elements of composition there are three traits to which we may well attend: the substance of the composition, its outward form, and its inner structure. And we find that our consideration of each of these traits is much aided by a definite rule. If in considering the substance of a sentence, or of a paragraph, or of a whole, we remind ourselves of the principle of Unity, — that each composition should group itself about one central idea, — we shall find the question of what a given composition may best include a great deal easier to answer than without such help. And so when we remind ourselves that each composition — sentence,

paragraph, or whole — should be so massed that the parts we wish to make most notable may most readily catch the eye; and that in any composition — sentence, paragraph, or whole — the relation of part to part should be unmistakable. As we study these principles afresh with each element of style, we get to know the principles better and better, and to appreciate at once, I think, their value and their elasticity.

If we have followed all this with reasonable care, we need hardly stop here to remind ourselves again that for convenience' sake we have phrased these principles much more dogmatically than we are warranted in phrasing them. The single thing about which we may always risk positive assertion in matters concerning style is good use. Within the limits of that the only real question is what effects we have in mind. In by far the greater number of cases that present themselves, we wish to produce an effect of definite, firm mastery of the matter in hand. With such an object in view, there is no plan better than so far as good use will permit deliberately to obey the principles we have formulated; but if the effect we wish to produce be other than the ordinary one I have just mentioned, a deliberate disregard of the principles may often help us to produce it. Nothing, for example, can better produce an effect of confusion than deliberate violation of unity; nothing better an effect of weakness than deliberate anti-climax; and so on. In short, with every new literary plan, a new problem arises; and that problem a writer cannot with certainty settle for himself without a very clear understanding of just the effect he wishes to produce.

In our consideration of words, of sentences, and of paragraphs, we reached this same point; and here there is little need to dwell on it. We all remember that every word not only names an idea, but suggests along with the idea it names a greater or smaller number of others. We all remember that as words are composed, not only their denotations are put together, but their connotations too. And the same is true when sentences are composed in paragraphs, and paragraphs in whole compositions. In Thackeray's description of Brussels during Waterloo, for example, the battle is mostly connoted. The effect, in short, which any composition, large or small, produces, is just like the effect that any word produces, — a question of denotation and of connotation combined in ways that as the art of composition grows finer become almost infinitely subtile.

And now it may be worth while once more to sum up what I have said about the elements of style, — the visible features of which every composition must be made up: All style must consist of words, composed in sentences, composed in paragraphs, composed in whole compositions. Our choice of words is absolutely controlled by good use; but within its limits we are able, by varying the kinds and the number of our words, to produce a great variety of effects. Our composition of sentences must be largely controlled by good use, in the form of grammar and idiom; but within its limits

we are again able to produce a great variety of effects, by varying the kinds of our sentences and by applying to all kinds the principles of Unity, of Mass, and of Coherence. In our composition of paragraphs and of wholes, we are little trammelled by good use; so we may vary our effects by the application of these principles almost as we please. Modern style may be regarded, then, as the result of a constant and by no means finished contest between good use and the principles of composition. And, finally, realizing that any effect in style must be produced only by means of our composition of the elements, we should never forget that in our choice and our composition alike there are two things to keep in mind: their denotation, — what they name; and their connotation, — what they suggest.

VI.

CLEARNESS.

To this point we have been considering the outward and visible aspect of style. Henceforth we shall approach the subject in another way. Of a given piece of style we shall ask ourselves, not what it consists of, but what effect it produces. We shall concern ourselves chiefly, not with its elements, but with its qualities. Widely various as the impressions which style can make evidently are, they may, we have seen, be summed up under three and only three headings. In the first place, any piece of style appeals to the understanding; we understand it, or we do not understand it, or we are doubtful whether we understand it or not; in other words, it has an intellectual quality. In the second place, it either interests us, or bores us, or leaves us indifferent; it appeals to our emotions; it has an emotional quality. Finally, it either pleases us, or displeases us, or leaves us neither pleased nor offended; it appeals to our taste; it has a quality which I may call æsthetic. Under one of these headings, as I have said, fall in a general way all the qualities of style which I have discovered. We shall discuss these three headings in turn: the intellectual

quality under the head of Clearness, the emotional under the head of Force, the æsthetic under the head of Elegance.

Clearness — the quality before us now — I may best define as the distinguishing quality of a style that cannot be misunderstood. To be thoroughly clear, it is not enough that style express the writer's meaning; style must so express this meaning that no rational reader can have any doubt as to what the meaning is. To come as near clearness as I could, for example, I deliberately avoided pronouns in that last sentence, repeating *style* and *meaning* with a clumsiness defensible only on the score of lucidity.

The first difficulty that meets us in considering this quality is a matter of every-day experience. One need know little of life to be familiar with the fact that plenty of things are daily said and written which are perfectly clear to some people, and at the same time wholly incomprehensible to others. A good many of my friends at college are deep in one or another kind of scientific study. I am apt to lunch with one of them who frequently has in his hand an elementary treatise on Physics. Once or twice lately I have looked into this book. The Preface and a considerable part of the text are indubitably written in the English language; but a large part of most pages that I have happened to look at is covered with formulæ which group themselves in my mind under the general heading $a + b = \sqrt[n]{x}$. To a physicist, in all probability, that formula would mean

nothing whatever; but it would mean exactly as much as any of his profoundly significant formulæ mean to me. The only difference would be that while he and I know that my formula is probably nonsensical, we both know that in all probability his formulæ are not. To me, then, a reasonably educated man, an elementary treatise on Physics is wholly lacking in clearness; to a student of Physics, on the other hand, it is as clear as A B C. Again, among my pupils at Harvard there are a number who take a healthy interest in the game of foot-ball; and some of these write detailed reports of the games for the college papers. These reports I have sometimes had the curiosity to examine. Like the textbook of Physics, they are indubitably written in something that purports to be English. "Full-back," for example, is obviously a compound of familiar English words; so is "rush-line;" so is "a foul tackle;" and so on. But a column or two about full-backs and half-backs and rush-lines and such things convey to my ordinarily educated mind no definite meaning whatever; and this because, perhaps unwisely, I have never made myself familiar with the technical practices and terms of the game of foot-ball. To a great many undergraduates, on the other hand, I find these reports of sport perfectly clear. In matters of foot-ball their technical learning is as admirable as is my scientific friend's in the matter of Physics. In each case I am left in helpless bewilderment. But I discover that I can have my revenge by addressing physicists and

sportsmen in the technical terms of rhetoric, which to all appearances equally bewilder them. These very simple examples, such as each of you must constantly meet in daily life, — if only when you hear people gossiping about friends of theirs whom you do not happen to know, — are enough to show what we mean when we assert that clearness is not a positive quality, but a relative; that what may be perfectly clear to one man may be hopelessly obscure to another.

In a general discussion, however, we must not rest satisfied with a fact like this. The question before us is, very broadly, what kind of style is generally clear, and what not. As clearness is obviously a relative quality, this question means, in other words, what kind of human being shall we generally aim to address? And this question admits of a pretty definite answer. A generally clear style is a style adapted to the understanding of the average man. The more widely intelligible a given piece of writing is, the clearer.

I know few points in rhetoric which arouse in clever people more impatience than this. To clever people, no matter how philanthropic their general scheme of life, there are few more unlovely facts than the average man. He is commonplace; and what is commonplace is precisely what a clever person does not wish to be. The aristocratic instinct, which makes human beings in general exert so much of their energy to distinguish themselves from their fellows, makes clever people, who are fond of talking about "aristocracies

of intellect" and the like, recoil from the commonplace. Why, an average man can understand the daily newspapers, and Mr. Roe's novels, and all the other myriad books of the great gospel of Philistia. Heaven forfend that men of wit address themselves to such as he!

At all events, this mood is one which constantly confronts me as a teacher; and in some degree as a reader of modern literature too. It is nowhere more apparent than in the works of two writers whom I am sometimes disposed to rate as the two most notable literary figures of Victorian England, — Carlyle in prose, and Browning in verse. It is a mood which can be justified by nothing but the possession of genius, — of that wonderful power of insight into things unseen which enables rare men, at rare intervals, to leave behind them records which permanently enrich the wisdom of the race. Very notoriously the faults of genius are easy to follow: anybody can take to opium, and it was opium which produced that wonderful Confession of De Quincey's; anybody can wear a loose collar and declare himself a very bad man indeed, and were not loose collars and incessant manifestoes of personal villany salient characteristics of Byron? Anybody, in short, can imitate the superficial traits that distinguish men of genius from what is commonplace. And fewer people than one would believe off-hand can understand the wisdom and the truth of the old myth: it was not only the theft of fire from heaven that made Prometheus the great

type of genius; it was that he gave the stolen fire to all mankind.

The fact is that the average man may be viewed with equal truth in two different ways. In one aspect he is commonplace, and nothing more; and what is commonplace is not winsome. In another aspect he is more broadly and more profoundly than his fellowmen of genius a human being, — the permanent type of those simplest and broadest traits, of thought and of emotion alike, which make the brotherhood of the human race. And among the men of genius and the men of wit who emulate them, not many have or have had the perception to feel beneath his commonplace exterior this great, permanent fact of humanity.

Yet no trait seems to me more surely characteristic of such art as the centuries finally pronounce the greatest than a frank recognition of this humanity. In architecture, in sculpture, in painting, in music, as well as in the art of letters, which we are specially studying now, the supreme works have first of all a noble simplicity which makes them mean something to all men. Unlearned men, and limited, never see in the great works all that is there to see. The greatest works have a depth of significance that reveals new meanings to each generation that approaches them, each with its own new experience of human life; but above all this lasting significance the great works rise with a superficial simplicity that makes them seem to ordinary men things almost as intelligible as to the learned they seem more and more marvel-

lous. I have hardly met a traveller from Athens who has not felt the beauty of the Parthenon, nor one from France who has been insensible to the grandeur of a great Gothic cathedral. There is something in the Phidian sculpture that makes it a pleasant thing to the eyes of Bostonian laborers, of a Sunday afternoon. To almost any eye a great Madonna of Raphael is a picture still worth the trouble of looking at. Many an ear bewildered by the complexity of a modern symphony can take permanent delight in listening to one of the great movements of Beethoven. And in this art of letters, any one can feel the charm of Homer's swift narrative, and of Dante's marvellous descriptions; and as for Shakspere, his plays — the body of English literature which has proved perhaps best of all to reward patient study — still, after three centuries, hold the stage before popular audiences. To come down to lesser things, there is in English no other satire so terrible in its lasting misanthropic significance as "Gulliver's Travels," nor any nursery tale more certain to please children.

The perfect simplicity of Swift's mature style is what makes him to this day, in certain aspects, among the safest models we can follow; and a short passage from one of his mature works — "A Letter to a Young Clergyman" — shows how deliberate this simplicity was: —

"I believe," he writes, "the method observed by the famous Lord Falkland, in some of his writings, would not be an ill one for young divines." — This Lord Falkland,

you will remember, was perhaps the most spotless and accomplished of the loyal gentlemen who fell in the Civil Wars, fighting for King Charles. — "I was assured by an old person of quality, who knew him well, that when he doubted whether a word was perfectly intelligible or not, he used to consult one of his lady's chambermaids (not the waiting-woman, because it was possible she might be conversant in romances), and by her judgment was guided whether to receive or reject it. And if that great person thought such a caution necessary in treatises offered to the learned world, it will be sure at least as proper in sermons, where the meanest hearer is supposed to be concerned, and where very often a lady's chambermaid may be allowed to equal half the congregation, both as to quality and understanding. But I know not how it comes to pass that professors in most arts and sciences are generally the worst qualified to explain their meaning to those who are not of their tribe: a common farmer shall make you understand in three words that his foot is out of joint, or his collar-bone broken; wherein a surgeon, after a hundred turns of art, if you are not a scholar, shall leave you to seek."

In few words, the secret of what is permanent in literary art is "to think the thoughts of the wise, to speak the language of the simple."

It is, then, of the first importance that a writer who wishes to be clear — to use a style that cannot be misunderstood — reconcile himself to the thought of addressing the average man, and not a little company of the elect. But even when he has reached this resolution, his task is only begun. There are few

facts which do more to prevent the free intercourse of man with man than our habit of assuming that other people think as we do. Common tricks of speech are apt to have more significance than we generally attach to them; and there is one trick of speech, incessant in children and other uneducated folks, — and by no means confined to them, — which at this point has often seemed to me suggestive. Whoever thoughtlessly begins to tell a story is very apt to find himself interjecting at intervals the words, "You know." At bottom, I take it, this really means that one is instinctively disposed to fancy the company he addresses really in possession of his own experience. And I have always relished a family story which relates how a precise old gentleman, some years ago, interrupted his grandson, who began to utter frequent "You knows," with these words: "No, sir; we do not know. And we presume that is why you are affording us the information."

The first thing a writer wants to realize, in short, is the range and limit of his reader's information. In literature, as truly as in science, the only safe method is to proceed from what is known to what is unknown. Thus proceeding, we shall always be clear; failing thus to proceed, we shall generally fail to attain clearness.

But what may we assume to be known? That is the question. Needlessly to explain familiar matters were at the very least a waste of time, probably exasperating to whoever is called upon to waste it. To leave

unexplained matters that a reader does not understand is often to proceed thenceforth — so far as the reader is concerned — to no purpose whatever. The simplest way, I think, of considering what we may assume other men to know is to inquire in what ways we are apt to blunder in this matter of clearness.

There are two fairly distinct ways in which we constantly fail to make ourselves understood. The first is by so expressing ourselves that what we say may mean more than one thing: in which case our style is sometimes vague, sometimes ambiguous. The second is by so expressing ourselves that, at least without study on the part of the reader, what we say does not mean anything at all: in which case our style is obscure. These two ways of avoiding clearness are worth consideration in detail.

In daily life, in speech and in writing alike, we find it convenient to express ourselves with no great nicety of phrase. I have just been reading a composition by an undergraduate who endeavored to tell what he saw some months ago during a visit to Quebec. Among other things he visited a church, which he described as having "plain, rough walls," adding a little later that it was "ancient." As the church in question is in Quebec, it evidently cannot be much above two centuries old; so the suggestion which "ancient" would arouse abroad — that the structure was of Roman origin — is happily out of the question. But what are "plain, rough walls"? Are they of stone or brick or wood? And of what

general style of architecture is the building of which they form a part, — Romanesque, Gothic, or Renaissance? and so on. In point of fact, being unfamiliar with Quebec, I have not the slightest idea. I am almost as far from a definite notion of what the church in question looks like as if I had not been informed that its walls were plain and rough. The only service that these words have done me is to set me to making in fancy one of the many images that they would properly describe; and for aught I know, this image of a rubble structure with small square windows is no more like the church in question than Westminster Abbey is like St. Peter's at Rome.

In this case, the vagueness of phrase was due to carelessness. Doubtless my pupil had some general idea of the material, the shape, the color, of his "plain, rough" walls. But his phrases might have fitted so many other ideas than the ones they were meant to express, that for an ordinary reader they had no particular value. This example too — a bit from a description of something that the writer has not lately observed — suggests one fact about vagueness of phrase that is worth remarking. Vagueness is far more common in reminiscent descriptions than in descriptions of things that have been lately observed. All the carelessness of habitual speech and writing rarely suffices to make a note of something recent by any means as indistinct as a note of the same thing after an interval. While sometimes a mere matter of style, vagueness is oftener an actual

matter of thought. In a general way, a vague writer does not know what he wants to say, and so generally says something that may mean a great many different things.

I have taken the simplest and most concrete example of this offence against clearness that I could find. In this simplest form the trouble is most typically apparent; and it does not essentially differ from the same trouble in the greatest complexity. The platitudes of cheap sermons, of political eloquence, of unintelligent criticism, all reduce themselves to the same thing. "Love," writes a Harvard student, "is that abiding principle in the life of man which leads him to do right because it is the highest pleasure of his life to be in sympathy and touch with the source of all good." Conceivably the man who wrote that had some idea of what he meant: he explained afterward that by "love" he meant what the older translators of the Bible called "charity," — the thing which is declared greater than faith and hope. But I confess myself unable from his definition to frame any distinct idea of what the quality that has so baffled translators of Scripture may be.

Partly a matter of thought, then, and partly a matter of phrase, vagueness is fatal to real clearness, because a style vague in any part is a style which, though it be not meaningless, is always a style that may be misunderstood.

More subtile than vagueness, because far less a matter of thought, and so far less conscious, is ambiguity. In a book on rhetoric I lately read is a long quotation from some respectable man of letters concerning what the career of a man of letters ought to be; and at the end of the quotation, he who quotes writes thus: "The foregoing considerations will serve to show how truly *the author's* career is made up not only of endeavor and achievement, but also of travail and self-denial." Now, whom does he mean by "the author"? Discarding the unreasonable though not unwarrantable notion that he means himself, — for writers have a stupid trick of referring to themselves as "the author," — does he mean the man who wrote the extract he has quoted, or that abstract being, the author in general? Probably the latter; but not certainly. If he had said "an author," there would have been no doubt. As he has said "the author," which may properly mean either, his style is a style that can be misunderstood. He knew exactly what he meant: in this case there was no confusion of thought; but the poor reader must be left to take what comfort he can in the best guess he can make.

Mere matters of words, these; but ambiguity can also be a question of sentences. In "Macbeth" is a speech which has puzzled actors and critics alike. Lady Macbeth has proposed the murder of Duncan. "And if we fail?" says Macbeth. "We fail," is her answer. "But screw your courage to the sticking-point, and we 'll not fail." Now, how should her "We fail" be read? Is it an exclamation, — "*We* fail!" —

disdaining such a possibility? Or is it a grim acceptance of fate, — "We fail," if so must be? Again, in "Much Ado about Nothing," where Hero is slandered at the marriage-altar and swoons, Beatrice exclaims, "Why, how now, cousin! wherefore sink you down?" Miss Ellen Terry gave this line as an exclamation of terror. To my thinking, it were more in the character of Beatrice to give it as an exclamation of disdain, implying that for her part Beatrice would rise in wrath, and not sink at all. And to go no farther than every-day life, whoever has played the game of Twenty Questions knows from experience how ingeniously exasperating intentional ambiguity can be, especially if the maker thereof happen to be clever.

Vagueness and ambiguity have in common the trait that they sin against clearness, not by meaning nothing, but by conceivably meaning more than one thing; and vagueness, we have seen, is chiefly a matter of thought, and ambiguity chiefly a matter of phrase. Obscurity, the other offence against clearness, differs from them by apparently having no meaning at all. Apparently, I say, because I have found it convenient generally to class as obscure any passage which will not reveal its meaning without study. As a matter of fact, few written documents of any kind can reasonably claim a right to be studied. Most things that we read, we read only once. If one honest reading does not reveal their meaning, the meaning, so far as one honest reader goes, is as good as none; so really it may be a matter either of consummate confusion of thought, or merely of inapt diction.

Take, for example, two well-known writers, whose works in general are, according to my definition, obscure, — Browning and Emerson. In Emerson's essays there are any number of single sentences as simple as one can wish. I open a volume of his at random. On the first page to which I turn is this sentence, which nobody can misunderstand: "Deal so plainly with man and woman as to constrain the utmost sincerity and destroy all hope of trifling with you." But a few lines later comes this sentence, which I, for one, fail to understand at all: "The simplest person who in his integrity worships God becomes God: yet forever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable." Such contrasts as this abound in Emerson. At one moment he is simple enough for any child; at the next, lost in what seems, except to his worshippers, a hopeless mist of words. No one of his essays that I have ever read leaves in your mind an impression that you can definitely phrase. You are impressed with the subtile personal quality of the man; perhaps you are stirred, ashamed of the meaner parts of yourself, eager to do something with those parts of yourself that are not mean. But, asked precisely what Emerson has told you, in all human probability you will be compelled to confess that you do not know. As he says himself, I believe, his paragraphs seem made up of sentences which possess inexhaustible

powers of mutual repellence. Consistency, if I remember aright, he somewhere declares to be the chief vice of little minds. Of almost any one of Emerson's essays you can remember some notable phrases, a general atmosphere of that peculiar purity which we find only in New England, but no such thing as organic unity. In fact, I take it, Emerson himself could often have been found at fault, had he tried to explain exactly what he meant. Emerson's obscurity comes, I think, from want of coherently systematic thought. Browning's, on the other hand, as some recent critic has eagerly maintained, is only an "alleged obscurity." What he meant he always knew. The trouble is that, like Shakspere now and then, he generally meant so much and took so few words to say it in, that the ordinary reader, familiar with the simple diffuseness of contemporary style, does not pause over each word long enough to appreciate its full significance. What reading I have done in Browning inclines me to believe this opinion pretty well based. He had an inexhaustible fancy, too, for arranging his words in such order as no other human being would have thought of. Generally, I fancy, Browning could have told you what he meant by almost any passage, and what relation that passage bore to the composition of which it formed a part; but it is not often that you can open a volume of Browning and explain, without a great deal of study, what the meaning of any whole page is. Emerson's indubitable obscurity to ordinary readers I take to be

a matter of actual thought; Browning's seems rather to be a matter of what seems — even though it really were not — deliberate perversity of phrase.

I have dwelt perhaps too long on the ways in which writers avoid clearness. My purpose, you will remember, was to define as distinctly as I could the ways in which we may manage at any point in our writing to put ourselves out of touch with a reader. To be clear in narrative, or in exposition, or in argument, or in any kind of discourse whatever, we must evidently proceed from what is known to what is unknown; and if at any point in this process we permit our style to become vague or ambiguous or obscure, — in other words, so to express ourselves either that our meaning may rationally be mistaken or that we may rationally be supposed to have no meaning at all, — we may resign ourselves to the probability that from thenceforward our readers will have comparatively little idea what we are about. The precise question before us, then, is what the average man may be expected to find vague or ambiguous or obscure.

In the first place, as many of the examples I have cited show, he will certainly find vague or ambiguous or obscure — as the case may be — whatever is not clear in the writer's mind. A commonplace that we have all heard insists that whoever knows what he wishes to say can say it. If this were true, life would be less troublesome than we generally find it. Like other commonplaces, however, this has in it a large

element of truth. If an unexpressed thought has gone so far as to phrase itself in distinct words, the chief part of the business is done. All that is left is the mere utterance in speech or in writing, — a purely mechanical matter. But except in the case of certain public speakers, and other habitual makers of phrases, an unexpressed thought does not often cast itself in any distinct form of words; nor indeed does it generally present itself to the thinker in any distinct form at all. Take, for example, a state of things I constantly meet at college. In some of my courses there I require students to read very copiously; in a course concerning the Elizabethan drama, for instance, I ask them to read in a week three or four plays, of about the length of one of Shakspere's. Then I ask them, week by week, to tell me in writing what their reading has meant to them, — in short, to define their impressions as they read. Their weekly reports are apt to be very vague; for the reason, I believe, that as a rule students are not in the habit of forming definite opinions of what they read, that their impressions are really confused to a degree that is almost bewildering, and that they have not learned the beginning of the secret of reducing mental chaos to order. And before they can be clear in their expression they must have something other than chaos to express.

Week by week, when I am going to lecture on this literature which I have asked my pupils to read and to criticise, I have found myself in much their position.

I have read these plays myself; they have impressed me in a good many different ways which combine in one general impression, that at first seems to defy analysis. Yet before my lecture can amount to anything, I must analyze this impression. Personally I have found the best method to be tentative expression. Pencil in hand, I try to phrase those parts of my impression which seem most nearly to have reached the form of words. I make such little packs of cards as I spoke of when I was talking of whole compositions. And as I write these cards, with a separate heading on each one, and study their mutual relations, I find my ideas of the subject in hand slowly defining themselves. Almost always, however, they define themselves slowly. It is not often that I give a lecture twice without finding my ideas of what I wish to say growing more definite each time; and sometimes the process is very long. As I have remarked before, I think, I have been fully ten years in making up my mind what I think of the matters I am now discussing.

My method of clearing my ideas is by no means the only one. I have known people who could do it best by talking; by putting somebody else in a comfortable chair and making him listen to their efforts to discover what they really think. I have known others who could really do best by sitting still and pondering in apparent idleness; others who could do best by walking alone in the open air; others, by stating to themselves the problems they wish to solve, and

then going about all manner of other business, trusting, from experience, to something they call unconscious cerebration. Each man, I take it, must find his own method; at different times each man may find different methods the best. But by some method or other each man must arrive at something as near as may be to precision of thought before he can hope with any certainty for clearness of style.

The truth is we are once more face to face with the real nature of this art we are studying. Whatever our subject-matter, our task is to translate the evanescent, immaterial reality of thought and emotion into written words. No matter how humble our task may seem, — even if we are merely writing the most trivial of letters, — we are really performing, well or ill, an act of creative imagination. We put before ourselves, in imagination, a certain set of words. Pen in hand, we put these words on paper; and there on paper is something that in just that form was never on paper before. Now, what makes this creation of ours something more than a collection of meaningless marks, such as a little child might scrawl, is that common consent, good use, has agreed that these marks shall stand for certain sounds, and that these sounds shall stand as symbols for certain parts of the immaterial reality of thought that makes up our conscious lives. Our first concern is to know as definitely as we can precisely what that reality is.

As in other human matters, we shall find our power limited. Conscious human life is a tremendously

subtile, complex thing. To phrase — with what accuracy language allows — all the thoughts and emotions, great and small, high and low, simple and intermingled, that compose the conscious life of a single day, were to fill volumes. We must leave out most of what we know, we must select from this great confused mass of real knowledge those bits which belong together, and which, symbolized together, shall awaken in a reader's mind something of what they have been in ours. At best our symbol of them must be incomplete. At best they themselves must be only a fragment of what life really means to us; and this fragment is not easy to disentangle from the great complexity of which it forms a part. Until it is disentangled, though; until in our own minds what we wish to express begins to stand out by itself, apart from the complexities around it, — we cannot hope to put before our readers any symbol that shall unmistakably stand for it. And until we can do this, we have not even approached the point where we can rationally expect our style to be clear.

But even when our thinking is done, when we know as well as we can know what the reality is that our written words should stand for, our task is at most only half done. We can never show readers the reality; all we can lay before their eyes are those visible, material symbols, — the written words. And though if the reality be vague or obscure or anywise confused, the written words will almost surely reveal the trouble, it is by no means true that if the reality

be a very definite thing to us, our words will so show it to others.

We are inquiring, you will remember, what the average man — the human being to whom our style is addressed — may be expected to find vague or ambiguous or obscure. Thought, in the first place, that is really so, we discover; at moments when we should like the average man to fancy us more intelligent than we are, he shows a terrible sanity. And in the second place, any kind of style that is open to misconception. After all, though he is aware of vagueness or obscurity or clearness, as an impression in his own mind, the impression can be produced only by what he has actually seen, — by our choice and composition of visible, written words. It is the elements of style that have produced the faulty quality; to mend the quality, we must mend the elements.

My experience in naming this book — originally a course of lectures — is a case in point. I knew pretty clearly what I was going to say. I did not know satisfactorily what name would best inform whoever thought of coming to the lectures whether the subject was one he cared about. "Rhetoric" was one name that occurred to me. I discarded it because to a great many people *rhetoric* means the art of persuasion, and to a great many more the art of polite embellishment of language, and so on. "Style" was another name I thought of. I discarded it for somewhat the same reason; as I have said before, the word frequently means a certain graceful and formal turn of language.

"The Philosophy of Style" I discarded as too pretentious: *philosophy* is a word that means any number of things, grave and reverend; but what I was about was a much more practical matter than generally comes under this head. Finally I decided that the "Art of Composition" would cover the ground. Within a few weeks, it was pointed out to me that the name in question was open to misconception. Somebody, it appears, who had seen the title, had inquired how much of my course was to be devoted to composition in sculpture; other people might be trusted to expect something about architecture, painting, music. In short, the "Art of Composition" would not do. I suggested "Literary Composition." A friend instantly pointed out that anybody might properly expect under this title a discussion of how various kinds of literature ought to be put together: a lecture on how to compose plays, for example, novels, biographies, sermons, sonnets, what not. I was compelled to admit that he was right. I fell back at last on the not very enticing title, "English Composition," which is used at Harvard College to describe the subject with which the lectures dealt. Whatever else it was, it seemed to me, and still seems, unmistakably specific.

In each case here I had kept well within the limits of good use. To stray beyond them is, of course, almost always to run the risk of obscurity; for as good use is the only thing that makes words mean anything, to violate good use is very possibly to use

words which to the ordinary man will mean nothing at all. But in spite of this prudence, and in spite of the fact that I knew almost exactly what was to be in this course of lectures, it was no easy matter to find a name that should properly describe them. The trouble with each of the earlier names — "Rhetoric," "Style," the "Art of Composition," and so on — was that while they undoubtedly covered the matter in hand, they covered so much else too that without explanatory comment they might well lead anybody to expect more than I had to offer. In other words, these names were too general. They lacked clearness because they were by no means as specific as the thought they had to convey.

And yet it is by no means true that the more minutely specific style is, the clearer. You have all seen, I suppose, a deed of real estate, or perhaps, in the country, or in the newspapers, the advertisement of some executor's sale. The house and land to be disposed of is very likely one with which you are perfectly familiar. In the legal paper it is described with a specific minuteness that is intended to exclude all possibility of doubt as to what a purchaser may acquire. "The house and land occupied by the late A. B.," for example, "situated on such a street, bounded on the north by the land of such an one, on the northeast by the pasture of somebody else;" and so on for a paragraph. Nothing could be more specific in one sense; nothing could specify more particulars in the same space; nor could anything convey

much less notion to a reader not on the spot. I remember, not long ago, in a country store seeing a man puzzling over a description of this kind, who finally asked if it did not mean the big white house opposite the Orthodox Church. For legal purposes that last phrase would not do at all; for literary purposes it is what no legal paper ever was, — clear to the average man. In fact, the legal description is very properly more specific than any one's ordinary thought of the place in question would be. Its purpose is not to suggest what the place looks like; but if possible, to settle once for all any dispute concerning dimensions, boundaries, fixtures, what not. The human description, on the other hand, aims to express what the place in question would seem to any ordinary observer; and any ordinary observer, passing down the main street, would see just a big white house opposite a church.

This trouble of undue specification is not confined to legal documents. Almost any novel you choose to open will give you an example of it such as I constantly meet in my teaching. At some period in his career almost every undergraduate is seized with the idea that he can write fiction, and proceeds to submit to me a story. In eight or nine cases out of ten, the plot of this story concerns the flirtation of a youth of twenty with a girl of eighteen or so at a summer hotel. Generally they get engaged. Sometimes they quarrel and separate. But in every case there is a hero whose personal appearance we are

generally allowed to infer, and a heroine whose personal appearance is described at considerable length. We are told that she is not very tall, for example, but has a perfect figure; that she has great masses of golden hair, or dark, as the case may be; delicately arched eyebrows; a nose perhaps the least bit *retroussé;* a sensitive mouth; a very fine complexion, and so on, often for a page or more. This kind of thing is carefully specific: it often stands for a very definite image in the mind of the writer; but it never conveys to my mind — or to any other man's whom I have plied with questions — any unmistakable idea of what the young woman in question looks like. And the reason is very simple: as a matter of fact, when we look at a pretty girl, we are aware of little else than that she is so pretty that it is a pleasure to look. We take in at a glance the combined effect of her detailed charms; and every time we glance, we take in, not her height alone, or her figure, or her hair, or her eyebrows, or her complexion, but a fresh impression of what all these combined look like. To analyze her appearance in detail is really to do just what lawyers do when they describe a piece of property; to be a great deal more specific than for ordinary human purposes the thought is which we are trying to express. In short, we are in some degree obscure because we use too many words.

In the Waverley Novels there are a good many descriptions of persons that are ineffective for this

very reason. The description of Gurth, the swineherd, in the first chapter of "Ivanhoe," is a case in point. Admirably specific in detail, it fails to call up in one's mind a distinct image of the swineherd, just because it is far more specific than any actual observation by an ordinary human being possibly could be. But take this description of Oldbuck, from the first chapter of the "Antiquary": —

"Our youth . . . amused himself . . . by speculating upon the occupation and character of the personage who was now come to the coach office," it begins. And that introductory sentence contains a good part of the secret that makes what follows effective. It does what is so often neglected in descriptions: it defines the point of view and the spectator. We know through whose eyes we are supposed to look, and in what mood: a youth, for the moment idle, wonders who an approaching stranger may be; and this is what he sees: —

"He was a good-looking man of the age of sixty, perhaps older, but his hale complexion and firm step announced that years had not impaired his strength or health. His countenance was of the true Scottish cast, strongly marked, and rather harsh in features, with a shrewd and penetrating eye, and a countenance in which habitual gravity was enlivened by a cast of ironical humour. His dress was uniform, and of a color becoming his age and gravity; a wig, well dressed and powdered, surmounted by a slouched hat, had something of a professional air."

Just such details, you observe, as an ordinary eye, curiously observing a stranger, might rest on. Now comes the first conclusions that an ordinary observer might probably draw: —

"He might be a clergyman, yet his appearance was more that of a man of the world than usually belongs to the Kirk of Scotland; and his first ejaculation put the matter beyond doubt. He arrived with a hurried pace, and casting an alarmed glance toward the dial-plate of the church, then looking at the place where the coach should have been, exclaimed, 'Deil's in it! I am too late after all!'"

Try for yourselves to describe a figure contemporary with the Antiquary that you all know, — the figure of George Washington. Then you will see for yourselves how admirably clear that description of Scott's is. His words are just specific enough to convey the impression that a casual observer would receive; and by assuming for the moment the point of view of this definite casual observer, he has justified the use of just about as many words as he employs.

But as frequently happens with Scott, who wrote very fast, there is in that description one slip which though not serious here, well might be. "His countenance," says Scott, "was of the true Scottish cast," and so on; and a minute later, — in the same sentence, — was of "a countenance in which habitual gravity was enlivened by a cast of ironical humour." In the first place, *countenance* perfectly properly

means *face;* in the second, *countenance*, with almost equal propriety, means *expression.* In a single sentence, Scott has used the same word in two distinct senses.

Unimportant in this case, such a carelessness might in another kind of writing lead to hopeless obscurity. At this moment, for example, a friend of mine is engaged in a study of the romantic spirit in English literature. Now, *romantic* is a word that is very carelessly used. Sometimes it means something very like mediæval, or perhaps rather, pseudo-mediæval, applying to the sort of temper that likes, in a comfortable armchair, to contemplate what was picturesque in the Middle Ages. Sometimes it means sentimental, applying to the temper that finds most delight in sad music by moonlight. Sometimes it applies to that very marked movement in French literature, a generation or two ago, which found its most notable exponent in Victor Hugo. My friend knows perfectly well what he is in search of; but before he can with certainty write an account of his researches, he must in the first place frame a definition of *romantic*, and then throughout his book or essay use the term *romantic* in no sense except that in which he has defined it.

An admirable example of what I mean presented itself in a book I was lately reading. The title of the book is, "The Public and Men of Letters in England." Almost the first words of the Preface are these: "By man of letters I mean a writer who lives

by his pen. . . . By public I mean . . . people . . . who read and buy books." And having thus defined his chief terms, the author uses them in no other sense throughout his volume.

We have seen enough, I take it, to understand now the fundamental meaning of the many different directions concerning clearness in the use of words which fill the textbooks. Let your words be as specific as the thoughts they express; for example, when you mean, "We lunched," do not say, "A lunch was eaten." Use no more words than you can justify. When a word has more than one possible meaning, so place it that all but the meaning you intend shall be excluded; when threatened with lack of clearness, do not hesitate to define. I might go on almost as long as I chose. In brief, these seem to mean that we may assume the average man to know what good use is; but that inasmuch as good use has defined a vastly smaller number of words than we have ideas to express, we must be eternally watchful in the first place to make each word do all the work that good use warrants it in doing, and in the second place, to supplement good use in every needful case with careful definition of the precise phase of good use which in a given case we have in mind. Otherwise the average man, whom we are always addressing, may well miss our meaning.

We may turn now to the larger elements of style,— to words in composition, sentences, paragraphs, and wholes. At one time it was my fortune to read a

good deal of law; and even after I had learned what the technical terms meant, I found the greatest trouble in understanding the books. I open one of them now at random, and find the following passage in an opinion delivered by an English court in the year 1842. "The plea," it begins, "is a plea of set-off." So far as it goes, that sentence is clear; what we wish to know now is what a plea of set-off is. This the next sentence proceeds, very properly, to define, but to define only as follows:—

"Such a plea operates as a bar to the plaintiff's right of action, not by excusing or justifying the breach of promise complained of in the declaration, but, whilst it admits such breach to have been committed, by setting up, as a matter of compensation, the cross-demand of the defendant . . . ; and it is unnecessary to observe, that an ordinary plea of set-off cannot be met by the general traverse, but only by a special traverse, or denial of the existence of the cross-demand; and, upon another and distinct ground, the replication upon this record is inapplicable to the present case; for in those instances in which the plea goes only to matter of excuse or justification, and when, consequently, the general traverse is allowed, there is engrafted an exception, that, where the plea justifies under any authority, or command, or license from the plaintiff, the general replication is not good without a special traverse of such command, license, or authority —"

I have quoted less than half of the sentence in which the learned judge defines a plea of set-off. It is enough

for our purposes: to quote further were needlessly malicious to the judge and to you alike. Already we are far beyond the point where any ordinary human being retains the slightest idea of what all this means.

Bewilderingly long, that learned sentence, and in spite of the laborious periodicity of its clauses, bewilderingly loose,—each clause being apparently complete in itself. But its chief fault is a simple question of principle: it strays far beyond the limits of unity. It groups itself, to be sure, about the one central idea of a plea of set-off; but it treats this idea on a scale which no average human being could possibly think too small for a paragraph. Omitting only pure redundance, otherwise altering the sentence only by substituting periods for semicolons, let me show it to you again: —

"Such a plea operates as a bar to the plaintiff's right of action, not by excusing or justifying the breach of promise complained of, but by setting up, as a matter of compensation, the cross-demand of the defendant. It is unnecessary to observe that an ordinary plea of set-off can be met only by a special traverse, or denial of the existence of the cross-demand. Upon another distinct ground, the replication upon this record is inapplicable to the present case. In instances where the plea goes only to matter of excuse or justification, and consequently the general traverse is allowed, there is one exception." And so on.

In that second form I have not altered the words, some of which are distinctly technical. I am much

deceived, however, if that second form is not distinctly clearer than the first. To most human beings, the first, on a single reading or hearing, would be merely a collection of impressive words; the second, I believe, would suggest something resembling a meaning. Now, the only difference between the two is that in the first form the sentence strays far beyond unity; and that in the second form unity of sentence is carefully preserved.

To alter the technical terms would very likely have been to impair the legal precision of the opinion; but no such result can follow from merely limiting the sentences to single statements. And I am much in error if just such simple treatment as this would not go far to clear the bewildering obscurity of so much technical writing in law and in all the other arts and sciences. If people engaged in serious writing would only keep in mind the principle of Unity — that every composition should group itself about one central idea — serious writing would lose some of its most potent terrors.

Unity, however, is not the only principle that technical writers serenely violate. Not long ago, a friend sent me a sentence from a respectable legal periodical. He described it as "a beautiful specimen of legal English;" and here it is: —

"The comparatively recent introduction of sleeping-cars upon the great highways of travel, as a means of public conveyance, while it marks a new era in the history of common carriers of passengers, and signalizes the

advancement of the age in the attainment of the luxuries of refinement and wealth, yet on account of the unique and peculiar features of the system as it exists, both with reference to the railroads that employ them, and to the travelling public that enjoy their superior comforts and facilities, there have arisen interesting questions of law, touching the responsibility of such companies, for the loss or theft of the goods, luggage, and valuables of passengers, upon which there exist, among the bench and bar, an undesirable, and, it would seem, needless amount of uncertainty, not to say, diversity of legal sentiment."

It would be hard to find, in equal space, a less simple example of obscurity. The thought, in the first place, is so far from disentangled from its surroundings that in the midst of what purports to be a discussion of the legal rights of travellers in sleeping-cars, we have already been twice reminded that sleeping-cars are luxurious and comfortable, — at least in the opinion of the writer. In the second place, his words are at once vague and too many, — "unique and peculiar features," for example; whatever is *unique*, in this sense, must be *peculiar*. Yet neither of these tautologous words in the slightest degree specifies what the writer probably had in mind namely, that the sleeping-car is not owned by the corporation over whose lines it travels, and that passengers in sleeping-cars are therefore in a different relation to the corporation which has sold them tickets from that of passengers in cars which belong to the company. So "goods, luggage, and valuables" is simply a prolix phrase for

"property." In the third place, the confusion of thought which dragged in those needless remarks about refinement and luxury evidently deprives the sentence of unity; and though, when these are once left out, something resembling unity remains, it seems probable that two or three more limited sentences would have clearer unity. In the fourth place, incoherence of construction has gone so far that the sentences cannot possibly be parsed. "The comparatively recent introduction of sleeping-cars," it begins; and for about half its length this term is treated as a grammatical subject. But by and by the writer, like the rest of us, has quite forgotten how he began, and serenely begins again, "yet on account of" — something that fills two lines — "there have arisen interesting questions of law," and so on. The only principle that he has not utterly violated is that of Mass; his last few words are really words that deserve distinction.

Nothing but complete recasting can cure all these troubles; but complete recasting will not only cure them, but also reveal that what the writer had to say was nothing more nor less than this perfectly intelligible thing: —

"Sleeping-cars, comparative novelties on railways, have given rise to interesting questions of law. Not the property of the railways that employ them, they are yet the only vehicles in which many passengers on these railways travel. If property of these passengers be lost or stolen, who is responsible? On this point there is undesirable and perhaps needless diversity of legal sentiment."

In the original form there was one sentence — or at least one collection of words which the writer apparently supposed to be a sentence — containing one hundred and thirty-eight words; yet there was no distinct intimation of what the "unique and peculiar" features of sleeping-cars were. In the second form there are four grammatical sentences, but only sixty-two words. Yet in less than half the space, we have managed to state the writer's meaning with something like clearness, and this chiefly by applying to the matter in hand the principles of Unity and of Coherence.

I have purposely taken these examples from writing of a practical rather than of a literary kind, because I believe the matters we are discussing, though fundamentally important in literature itself, to be of far higher practical importance than practical men are commonly willing to believe. If the learned judge who laid down the law about pleas of set-off had given a little attention to the principle of Unity, he would have bettered his opinion without hurting his law; at all events, he would have said exactly what he did say, but in such a manner that an ordinary human being could understand that he was uttering something other than a string of technical words. If the gentleman who wrote about sleeping-cars had given the principles of composition a tenth part of the consideration he gave the legal questions in hand, he might, by the simple exercise of good sense, have produced an essay that an ordinary human being could

read. And such an essay, and such an opinion, would seem to me incalculably more efficacious than the bewildering slovenly masses of words in which these jurists, like many other serious people in all sorts of discourse, were content to bury their meaning.

In plenty of writing that purports to be literature, however, you will find examples almost as appalling, yet just as easily cured. To come back to our average man, we may conclude from what we have seen that in sentences as well as in words he may be assumed to know what good use is, and within the limits of good use, to appreciate, even though he do not perceive, the results that follow judicious applications of the principles of composition. The detailed suggestions about sentences that you will find in the books reduce themselves to this. We are told that short sentences are generally better than long; that it is well to make style as periodic as is consistent with idiomatic freedom, and so on. In brief, the clearest style is commonly a style in whose sentences the principles of composition are observed. In a style where they are disregarded, the average man, whom we are always addressing, may well miss our meaning.

The larger elements of style — paragraphs and whole compositions — are too bulky for special consideration here; but in our consideration of the separate elements we saw enough, I hope, to satisfy ourselves that the principles which apply to them are the same that apply to those simpler compositions, sentences.

We saw, for example, how instinctively people prefer a style in which the paragraphs are reasonably short, — conversation where each speech is given a paragraph by itself, to conversation such as you find in old-fashioned books, where a dozen speeches are run into a single paragraph. In brief, this is because the one is a great deal easier to understand than the other, — a great deal clearer. And I shall ask you to believe that a style whose paragraphs commonly conform to the principles of composition — a style like Burke's, for example, or "The Nation's" — is almost inestimably superior as a vehicle of thought to a style in whose paragraphs the principles are disregarded. Beyond doubt, whoever has had much experience will agree that the same is true of whole compositions. A composition whose unity has been assured by a preliminary plan, whose proportions have been settled by a discriminating application to this plan of the principle of Mass, whose coherence is preserved by making unmistakable the relation of each paragraph to its predecessor, is a composition that will prove incredibly clearer than one whose form is left to chance, impulse, or inspiration.

The truth is that this art of composition, like any other, is one that must be practised with deliberate coolness. Accidental effects any one may sometimes secure; but the certainty of touch which marks the difference between the artist and the dabbler is a trait that can come only after patient study and mastery of one's self and one's vehicle of expression. The

first thing, I believe, for any writer to do is as calmly as he can to face the complicated mass of thought and emotion that he wishes to express, and to ask himself what effect he wishes to produce. In some cases this may be an effect of vagueness, of indecision, of confusion, of mystery; if so, his business is to consider how he may best use the elements of style to arouse in a reader such sentiments as these. But it is not often that one seriously wishes to do this. Oftener, by far, one wishes so to express one's self that there is the least possible chance of misunderstanding. Indeed, by a very slight play on words, we can say that one always wishes so to express one's self; for if what one have seriously in mind be vague, or confused, or mysterious, then the clearest possible expression of it should express vagueness, confusion, mystery. Whatever one's motive, indeed, one should first look it in the face, and learn, so far as may be, to know it.

Then comes the actual task of composition. We turn to the elements of style, — these words, these arbitrary sounds, to which good use has given so vast and subtile a significance, — and ask ourselves how with these we may put before others than ourselves these things that we ourselves know. Our first object is so to express them that they cannot be misunderstood, — to give our style the quality of clearness. We find before us, then, a very definite question: Is there in the elements of style any trait that is favorable to this quality?

There is no need of repeating in detail what we have already considered more than once. You will remember that in our study of the elements — of words, of sentences, and of paragraphs and wholes, too — we saw that the vast complexity of thought and emotion which clamors for expression by these few thousands of words that are at our disposal makes every word we use do a double work; and if every word by itself do this double work, far more must words do it in composition. In the first place, every word we use names an idea; in the second place, along with the idea it names, it suggests, with more or less distinctness, a certain number of others. What it names we say it denotes; what it suggests it connotes.

In the nature of things, these traits are not separable. The connotation of every word must cling to it as closely as in our daily life color enlivens and varies every form our eyes rest on. Take three words, *woman*, *wife*, *mother*, which may well apply to the same human being. Nothing could make them mean quite the same thing; nothing could deprive each of the connotation peculiarly its own. So denotation and connotation, though separate traits of the elements of style, are not separable. And we may not say that when we attend to the one we may quite disregard the other; but we may say, with a certainty that will grow with experience, that we may attend chiefly to the one.

We denote, as somebody has expressed it, what

we say; we connote what we leave unsaid. The two traits must combine in the effect that we ultimately produce; but when we write with clearness in view, when we wish so to express ourselves that first of all we shall not be misunderstood, it is one of these traits and not the other on which we should concentrate our attention. Of our words we should ask ourselves first of all what they name; of our sentences, what they mean; and so of our paragraphs and our whole compositions. I have said enough, I hope, to make this final sentence clear: the secret of clearness lies in denotation.

VII.

FORCE.

THE emotional quality of style, to which we come now, is far more subtile. In the first place, its aspects are so various that in many of the textbooks it is described not as a single quality, but as a great number of separate ones, varying literally from the ridiculous to the sublime. In order fully to understand what we are considering, then, we shall do well, before we attempt a definition, to recall various examples of the quality; to know, in a general way, what the general impression is that we wish to define.

In reading anything, or indeed in listening to any prolonged speech, we are all aware of something more than the literal facts or ideas which the words express. These general impressions, indeed, are the chief things of which in ordinary reading we are conscious. In reading "Pickwick," for example, or one of Mark Twain's better books, we can give no very distinct account of exactly what the book told us; but we are very sure that it made us laugh, and we very properly call the book humorous. The death of Colonel Newcome brings tears to the eyes of a great many people by no means lachrymose in habit; and within a very

few years I have seen people still similarly affected by that death of Clarissa Harlowe that set all England to crying in George the Second's time. Take, almost at random, a couplet or two from Pope; these are about the poor: —

> "'God cannot love' (says Blunt, with tearless eyes)
> 'The wretch he starves' — and piously denies;
> But the good Bishop, with a meeker air,
> Admits, and leaves them, Providence's care."

You feel the satirical power here; it is the same quality that in a far deeper form makes "Gulliver" so terribly fascinating. Take any of the papers in the "Spectator" that deal with Sir Roger de Coverley; you will find in it a delicately well-bred humor — a sympathetic sense of what life is in some of its smaller aspects — that will pretty surely delight you. In the novels of Walter Scott, in many of the tales of Mr. Stevenson, there is a very distinct trait that without analyzing we call romantic, and that many of us are still able to enjoy. In modern novels there is often a profound sense of fact which seems for the moment to give these fictions a serious and lasting significance. In writers that many of us do not pretend to understand — in Carlyle, in Browning, in Shelley — many of us feel an individuality perhaps more stimulating than if we were able to make out precisely its components. In the literature that every one admits to be great — in the tragedies of Shakspere, in the nobler passages of Milton, to go no further — we find a spirit that can be described by

no lesser word than sublime. One might go on interminably, recalling the enormously varied impressions that the literature we care about makes on us. If we are sensitive enough, every writer who is worth the name will make an impression peculiarly his own. If we are sensible enough, we shall enjoy, or at least try to enjoy, each of these impressions in its own way. But our business with them now is not to separate or to enjoy them; it is to realize how many and how various they are, and then to inquire what trait they have in common. For the quality of style before us — the emotional quality to which I give the name "force" — includes them all.

In truth, I believe these various qualities, different as they seem, possess in common a trait more significantly characteristic than their differences. One and all, they hold the attention of a reader. Force, then, the emotional quality of style, I may define as the distinguishing quality of a style that holds the attention.

Of course, like clearness, force is in some degree a relative quality. What will interest one man will quite fail to interest another. Mr. Darwin, you remember, could find nothing in Shakspere; and it is not improbable that many people of a literary turn would fail to find anything in the works of Mr. Darwin. And we have all heard intelligent people eagerly disputing as to whether a given book is interesting or not. I remember such a dispute last summer about a novel called "Sir Charles Danvers," which impressed

me as tiresome; but to call it tiresome when the rest of the company had actually enjoyed it was simply to utter an absurdity. The fact that they enjoyed it showed that to many sane human beings it was not tiresome at all. Nothing, in fact, can be trusted to hold everybody's attention; nothing even with certainty to bore everybody. But though in this matter it is perhaps harder than in the matter of clearness to appeal to the average man, I believe that we may safely say that what will hold the attention of the average man — of the ordinary human being — is in most respects a better piece of work than what will appeal only to a single class. To fastidious people there will always be a charm about what other people do not know enough to appreciate: herein, I believe, lies half the secret of academic pedantry. To people not of a fastidious turn there will always be a less holy, if not less inhumane, charm in horrors, and broad jokes, really shocking to others. But now and then you will find something that appeals to coarse people and fastidious alike. Perhaps as notable an example, in a small way, of what I mean as has appeared of late years are the earlier operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. There was something in them that filled our theatres for months with popular audiences; and something, too, which very honestly delighted a class of people who find what generally pleases popular audiences utterly abominable. There have been verses and music enough meantime highly edifying to the elect; and there have been things they called

comic operas by the dozen, highly profitable to theatres of the lower sort. But in their own little way, "Pinafore" and the "Pirates of Penzance" and "Patience" were a great deal more forcible, in the sense in which I use the term, than the works called better, and the works admitted to be worse, each of which appealed to the emotions of only one of the classes who joined in enjoying these. Always remembering, then, that the average man is not a vulgar fellow, but a man who combines the traits common to gentle and to vulgar alike, we may safely say that the most forcible writing is that which holds the attention of the average man.

If we were not given so constantly to forgetting things that we know perfectly well, it would seem almost needless to repeat what I repeat now. We are aware of the force of a given piece of style only as an impression, — though an impression, to be sure, of which we are very keenly aware. At a given moment our wits may be so lazy that we cannot say certainly whether we understand what is said to us or not; but there are few moments in life when we do not know whether or not we are bored. Any piece of style submitted to us will interest us — will hold our attention — or not; and this matter of emotional impression, this question of whether we are interested or bored, is at once so much more palpable and so much more subtile a thing than the matter of intellectual impression — the question of whether or not we understand a thing — that we are apt to forget how it comes to us. Yet, as

we have reminded ourselves now with perhaps tedious frequency, a given piece of style presents to our eyes only certain arbitrary marks, which common consent makes symbolic of certain arbitrary sounds, which common consent in turn makes symbolic of certain more or less definite phases of thought and emotion. In other words, as we have said more than once, the only means by which the qualities of style can be conveyed from writer to reader are the elements. Force, then, just as surely as clearness, must be sought, and sought only, in the elements. The question before us becomes very definite: What trait in the elements of style — in words, alone or in composition — is favorable to force?

One trait, in general, I believe, may safely be urged as frequently favorable to it; and that is the trait we particularly considered in the last lecture, — denotation, the trait that is chiefly favorable to clearness. The textbook of Rhetoric which I have found most suggestive — Professor Adams Hill's — defines force as the distinguishing quality of a style that is efficient for the purpose in hand. Less satisfactory to me, because less specific, than the definition I have offered you, this of Professor Hill's is extremely suggestive at the point we have now reached. We have seen already that the cases where a writer wishes not to be clear are far less common than the cases where he wishes to be thoroughly understood. If clearness be his purpose, then any style which is not clear must for his purpose be inefficient, and so, by Professor

Hill's definition, lacking in force. Almost any one of the examples I offered you in the last chapter — the vague or ambiguous words, the long involved sentences of the lawyers who so serenely disregard unity and coherence alike — is as remote from force as from clearness. And though we cannot say that what is vague or ambiguous or obscure will for that reason fail to hold the attention, we may safely say in general that what is clear is very much more apt to hold it.

But very obviously clearness and force are by no means identical; and while clearness should generally underlie force, clearness of itself will not secure it. We must look, then, in the elements further than denotation for the trait that shall be favorable to the quality now before us.

To recognize this trait distinctly, it will be well, I think, to revert to a few familiar examples. In the midst of the American Revolution an event occurred familiar to you all. General Arnold betrayed the American cause. A British officer, travelling in disguise with messages of this treason, was arrested by some local patriots, and fell into the hands of Washington. This unhappy officer, Major André, was tried by court-martial and met a tragic fate. Now, how, in a single sentence, should we describe what happened to him? We all know what it was. But here are four separate phrases, each of which accurately tells what happened, yet each of which tells it in a distinctly different way: "Major André died": that is

perfectly true; and if we were breaking such news to a relative, that would probably be the wisest form to begin with. "Major André was killed": that is equally true; so are "Major André was executed," and "Major André was hanged." Now, there is little doubt, I think, that each one of these phrases would be more apt to hold attention than the preceding. "He was killed" is a more forcible assertion than "he died;" "he was executed" than "he was killed;" and most forcible of all is, "he was hanged." If we now consider these four phrases together, we shall find that each includes the last. Whoever is killed must die; whoever is executed by any means must be killed; whoever is hanged must probably be executed. In other words, each term, more definite than the last, suggested or connoted all the preceding ones. Again, to take not single words or phrases, but words in composition, compare these three simple statements: "I found him very agreeable one afternoon;" "I found him very agreeable one wet afternoon;" "I found him very agreeable one wet afternoon in a country house." Now, all that the word *wet* says is that the afternoon was watery; but it clearly implies that it was an afternoon when you would not care to be out of doors. All that the words *in a country house* state is the simple fact of locality; but they imply that you were in a place where not to be out of doors was probably a serious trial to the temper. So the last statement as a whole, "I found him very agreeable one wet afternoon in a country house," suggests,

though it does not state, that the person spoken of was one whose charms could overcome a pretty bad temper. At the same time, it is a phrase which I fancy anybody would admit to hold the attention more strongly than either of its predecessors; and its superiority in force lies not so much in the bare facts which it adds to the first statement as in the thoughts and emotions it suggests. Still again, take this sentence from one of M. de Maupassant's stories: "It was the 15th of August, — the feast of the Holy Virgin, and of the Emperor Napoleon." He states only two facts about the 15th of August, and these in the simplest of words. Neither by itself would hold one's attention enough to remain long in memory. But put them together; think what the Holy Virgin means to Catholic Europe, and what the Emperor Napoleon means to those who are not subdued by the magic genius of Bonaparte, — and you have a sentence that when mid-August comes about will hover in your head. Yet the force of this — so greatly superior to the force of either statement by itself — lies not in what is actually said, but wholly in what is implied, suggested, connoted, in this sudden, unexpected antithesis. I shall ask you to believe these simple examples typical. If they are, they will long ago have shown you what I believe to be true: that the trait in the elements of style which is favorable to force is connotation.

In less technical language this means that a forcible writer knows not only what he wishes to say, but

also what he wishes to imply; he understands, it is to be hoped, what he wishes a reader to know, but he understands more profoundly still, and indeed, for his immediate purpose of force he should understand chiefly, into what mood he wishes the reader to be thrown. A curious example of what I mean took place at Cambridge a few years ago. The Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College, which consists of the fifteen or twenty best scholars in each college class, and a few other people whom these choose on the ground of scholarship or intellectual note, is probably in temper as conservative a body as is to be found in New England. It is their custom every year to have a public oration, to which they march in solemn procession, headed by the oldest living members. Toward the end of Mr. Wendell Phillips's life, he was invited to deliver one of these orations, a little to the disquiet of prudent Phi Beta Kappa men, who were aware that his temper was not precisely of a conservative order. A good many went to hear him with much curiosity as to what he might say, and apprehension that they might have to disapprove it by silence at moments which to less balanced minds might seem to call for applause. In the earlier parts of his oration they found themselves agreeably surprised: he said nothing to which they were unprepared to assent, and what he said, he said beautifully. They listened with relief and satisfaction; when the moment for applause came, they cordially applauded. So the oration went on with increasing interest on the

part of the audience. Finally, when some fresh moment for applause came, they applauded as a matter of course; and it was not until they had done so that they stopped to think that what the cleverest of our oratorical tricksters had betrayed them into applauding was no less revolutionary an incident than the then recent assassination of the Emperor Alexander of Russia. Now, this result was attained simply by a skilful use of words: in this case very probably by a deliberately malicious use of words that should make a theatre full of people do a thing which not one of them really wished to do. It was not what he said that they applauded; it was what he implied, — not dynamite and dagger, but that not very clearly defined notion of liberty and freedom and the rights of man, which still appeals to the American heart.

I am far from proposing a malicious trick like this for a model. But it is certainly a notable example of the kind of thing that an honest man who would speak or write forcibly might legitimately want to do; namely, of the power of so holding attention that whoever listens or reads is carried along in spite of himself. Of course the secret of such consummate power is not to be learned, — at least by many. It can, however, be analyzed; and the analysis will teach us more than one thing that may help us at least to enforce our own style. Our present business, then, is to see, if we can, by what means we may master some of the secret of force; or in other words, how we should proceed to give our words and our

sentences and our larger compositions the connotation that we wish to convey to readers.

Perhaps the most suggestive way of answering this question is to examine in some detail a phase of style to which so far we have given little attention. In the old-fashioned books of Rhetoric this took up rather more space than anything else. It was classified and subclassified and named in detail by long words mostly derived from the Greek, to an extent that may well have affected the reason of anybody who tried to understand the appalling texts. But the object of all this lifeless business was precisely the object before us this evening; namely, to discover how to write forcibly. The phase of style to which I refer is that generally described as figures of speech.

In the old books such things as Interrogation, Exclamation, Antithesis, Climax, and other mere arrangements of words were classed as figures of speech; but the more recent books spare us this confusion, and confine themselves to the kind of figures which I shall discuss here. These are what may be generally classed as Tropes, — a convenient name for words, singly or in composition, diverted from their original meaning to suggest or signify something analogous. In Professor Hill's book, which, as I have said, has always seemed to me the most refreshingly sane, figures of speech are treated as a specific means of securing force; and even he names more than I am able to keep distinctly in mind. There is one called Synecdoche, for example, and another called

Metonymy, which I always confused until I discovered that there was no earthly use in keeping them separate. Like the figures that everybody knows by name, — Personification, Metaphor, Simile, — these have the common trait that is sufficient for us, and I believe for any practical purpose: they are Tropes, — they express a meaning by a name other than its rigorously proper one.

Before proceeding directly to the study of these, it may be well to specify by example precisely how they name ideas. Suppose, for example, that you wish to describe the first hours of the day in a single word. The literal name for it is *morning;* but *morning* is a word which by itself suggests — connotes — nothing very definite. It covers every hour from midnight to noon, and to most of us means simply that time of day when we may have breakfasted, but certainly have not lunched. If we wish to name our idea in a way that shall suggest the associations which in our memories cluster about those rare hours when we have known for ourselves the phenomena that gave mythology the figure of Aurora, we have in English another literal word, far more forcible, far more definite in its connotation. Instead of the literal word *morning*, whose connotation is very weak, we may use the literal word *daybreak*, whose connotation is tolerably strong. What it names is merely the glow in the eastern sky that tells of the coming day; but it suggests all manner of things, — the cool, clear air, the general sense of awakening that makes us, when we

really see daybreak, wonder why we do not see it oftener. Now, among these circumstances associated with daybreak, none has impressed traditional human beings more than the general awakening of birds — and notably of poultry. There is in English, then, a very common metaphor for early morning, — *cock-crow*. What this names is simply one of the circumstances associated with daybreak or early morning, — one of the facts more or less definitely connoted in the earlier terms. It suggests, instead of naming, the literal meaning. *Morning* is literal, and not forcible. *Daybreak*, still literal, is certainly more forcible, on account of the greater definiteness of its connotation; one of the things it connotes is the awakening of birds. *Cock-crow* is a figure of speech; it carries the process of forcible selection one step farther; it names the connotation, it leaves the denotation to be inferred.

If tropes, then, figures of speech, are essentially mere exaggerations of the normal process of forcible selection, we may conveniently study in them the nature of the process.

The first trait in them to which I would call your attention is that, far from being artificial creatures of a finished civilization, they lie at the root of all language in its primitive forms. You all remember that passage in Carlyle where he speaks of the very word — *attention* — that I have already mentioned so often in this discussion of force. To us it is a dull and lifeless term enough; but to a Roman, when he stopped

to consider, it would still have had its literal meaning. *Tendo* means to stretch; *ad* means *to* or *toward; attention* really means *a stretching out toward.* In some remote past it was a metaphor used by some old speaker of Latin who perceived that the process of mind by which we attend to anything is very like the physical process by which we stretch out our hand to grasp a tangible object. Again, when something has puzzled us, and at length we begin, by a process of attention, to grasp its meaning, there is a big Latin word by which we may express what occurs. We may say, with perfect propriety, that we *apprehend* it. With much less formal propriety, small boys have a way of saying, under these circumstances, that they *catch on.* A very slight knowledge of Latin will serve to remind anybody that these two phrases mean precisely the same thing. *Apprehend* is nothing more nor less than the Latin for *catch on.* The original maker of the word went through precisely the mental process that has produced the phrase which nowadays we condemn as slang. He saw the likeness between the mental process of what we now call *apprehension* and the physical process of grasping. He called the one by the name that really denoted the other. By and by the literal meaning, in other languages than Latin, at all events, fell away; the figurative meaning became literal. We can see by these few examples what a friend of mine meant when, a few years ago, he declared all our modern language to be nothing but a nosegay of faded metaphors.

Travellers among savage tribes almost always remark the very figurative habit of speech common to primitive peoples. When Sir Walter Ralegh went to Guiana, for example, he had a long talk with an old chief about the history of the country. It was now in possession of a people foreign to the chief in question; and this is how the old Indian described the invasion. "When his father was very old," writes Ralegh, "and himself a young man, there came down into the large valley of Guiana a nation *from so far off as the sun slept* (for such were his own words)." Again, uneducated people among ourselves have a way of using figures with a freedom and an aptitude that is sometimes surprising. I remember a Yankee villager, some years ago, who saw a small boy knocked down by the recoil of a new shot-gun. "'T ain't surprising," he said; "till a gun gets used to you, she 's apt to be *skittish.*" Quite how much of this spontaneous personification was a matter only of speech I never knew; the man's mind was so simple in its habit that perhaps he really thought of the gun as a sentient creature, just as primitive jurists thought of the weapons they punished for committing murder. But his figure was a good one. Still again, those strange little ignorant savages that are growing up about us — our own children — have a way of using figures of speech that many poets might envy. I remember not long ago hearing a small voice outside a dining-room door, where a company was in the midst of dinner. Somebody went out to see what the matter was; and there

was a little man of six in his night-gown. "I waked up," he explained; "and by and by I felt *as if everything was coming*, and I'd better get away." I have rarely heard a more apt description of the effect produced by the mysteriously inaudible voices of the night.

You can see at once why children and untutored folks and savages — people in the condition of those who first made language at all — use figures of speech so freely and effectively. The things they really know are few; but what they know, they know pretty well. It is not often that they are called upon to recognize or to name any fact that is beyond the range of their daily experience. When they are so called upon, a double state of things arises: in the first place, the novelty of the idea they must name excites their interest, arrests their attention far more than would be the case with people who have new shades of thought a hundred times a day; in the second place, as the number of words at their disposal is relatively small, they are driven to describing this new idea in terms of comparison with something already familiar to them. And as the things already familiar to them are generally things that remain permanently familiar to everybody, their figures are figures that appeal to almost any human understanding they address.

With more highly civilized people the case is different. Among the imaginative productions lately submitted to me by pupils is a description of a night journey by rail. The traveller tells how he looked

out of the window, and saw the lights from the train flying across a snowy country, *like a pack of wolves or a swarm of ghosts.* Now, I never saw a swarm of ghosts, or even a pack of wolves; and unless I had frequently seen such scampering night-lights as he likened to these unusual phenomena, I should have had so slight a notion of what he meant that I should not have been much impressed by his description. Again, to cite a poem of local interest to any Bostonian, when the Rev. John Cotton, first minister of Boston, died, some verses were written to his memory by the Rev. Benjamin Woodbridge, whose name stands first in the catalogue of graduates of Harvard College. And here is how he described Mr. Cotton:

> "A living, breathing Bible; tables where
> Both *covenants*, at large, engraven were;
> *Gospel* and *law*, in 's heart had each its column;
> His head an index to the sacred volume;
> His very name a *titlepage;* and next,
> His life a *commentary* on the text.
> O, what a monument of glorious worth,
> When in a *new edition* he comes forth,
> Without *erratas*, may we think he 'll be
> In *leaves* and *covers* of eternity!"

That is no bad specimen of the laborious rhetoric cultivated by the scholars who founded the college so dear to many of us; but nothing, continued for any length of time, could be much less effective, much less definitive of any connotation that would be aroused in an ordinary mind by contemplating the per-

son and the virtues of the Rev. John Cotton. Again, in "The Nation" I once found a most surprising review of Mr. Henry Adams's last volumes of American history. In this review there is as much laboriously ineffective metaphor as you oft n find crowded into an equal space. Take this sentence, for example, about President Madison: "In accepting the words as an immediate and prospective revocation of the decrees, and in promptly acting upon that understanding, he *pierced himself through with many sorrows*, and was betrayed into a diplomatic position which he felt to be most uncomfortable, and which was made doubly uncomfortable by the *slings and arrows* of the Federalists." After a few paragraphs of this sort of thing, you are not only left in the dark as to meaning, but — if you have energy enough left — you are more than bored, you are exasperated, at what seems like deliberate perversity of diction.

These few examples are typical of such use of figures among educated people as has led so many good teachers to advise pupils to use no figures at all.

But in real literature there are plenty of figures that are very different from these, — figures that you appreciate at once, figures that you remember, figures better yet than those of all the untutored makers of language. Take Dr. Holmes's saying about Boston which has passed into a proverb: —

"Boston State House is the hub of the solar system. You could n't pry that out of a Boston man if you had the tire of all creation straightened out for a crowbar."

Take what Sir William Temple, the most deliberate and formal of gentlemen, wrote about life: —

"When all is done, human life is, at the greatest and the best, but like a froward child, that must be played with and humoured a little to keep it quiet till it falls asleep, and then the care is over."

Take that famous lament of Cardinal Wolsey, in "Henry VIII.," which generations of school declamation have not spoiled: —

"This is the state of man: to-day he puts forth
The tender leaves of hope; to-morrow blossoms,
And bears his blushing honors thick upon him;
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost;
And — when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
His greatness is a ripening — nips his root,
And then he falls, as I do."

Better still, take the writer whose figures have always seemed to me supreme: I mean Dante. They are so wonderful that you cannot translate away their power. In this lame English prose of mine, I believe much of their force still remains. I take, almost at random, two passages from the "Inferno" that I have never forgotten since the first day I read them. The first tells how Dante and Virgil, having emerged from a wood, find themselves on a great dike that skirts the edge of a sandy plain. "Already," he goes on, "we were so far from the wood that I could not have seen where it was, even though I had turned about, when we met a troop of spirits, that came close to the

dike. And each of them peered at us, *as of an evening one peers at another beneath the new moon*, and they knit their brows at us, *as an old tailor does at the eye of a needle*." I have yet to find a passage in literature that in so few words gives a more marvellously suggestive notion of what that dim and ghostly twilight is like, when one cannot tell quite what one sees, when every mystery is doubly mysterious, and the crescent moon hangs low in the west. The second passage from Dante is that more famous one which occurs early in the story of Francesca: it is the figure that Mr. James Lowell, with pardonable enthusiasm, somewhere calls perhaps the most perfect in all literature. Dante and Virgil are standing on the edge of a cliff; and through the dark air before them the blasts of hell are sweeping the spirits of those who are damned for their lusts. And Dante would speak with two whom he sees clinging together, — "the two that seem so light in the wind." So he calls to them. And "even as doves, called by longing, with open, unmoving wings fly to the sweet nest, borne through the air by will, so these issued from the swarm." I might go on endlessly, from Dante, from Shakspere, and from thousands of the lesser masters, showing figures such as every lover of letters must be glad to have. If teachers could teach the secret of such as these, their task were another thing than the dreary one they find it.

The examples we have before us already, however, are enough for our purpose. If, as I believe, they are

truly typical, they will warrant us in drawing certain conclusions as to what makes figures effective, and what fails to. And if the essence of tropes be, as I have suggested, the same thing, a little exaggerated, that underlies all force, — namely, a deep sense of connotation, — these conclusions will help us toward some knowledge of how, with force in view, we may choose and compose the elements of style.

The effective figures, we find, are used by two perfectly distinct classes of men: first, untutored savages, peasants, children, — people whose knowledge of life and command of language is as elementary as possible; secondly, people who may be broadly classed as masters of the art of literature, — people whose knowledge of life and command of language becomes, as we consider the best of them, as comprehensive and exhaustive as human power will permit. The ineffective figures, we find, are used by the far more numerous class of writers and speakers which comes between these two, — those who have awakened from elementary unconsciousness of the limits of their perception and expression, and who have not yet attained the serene certainty of mastery. In this class most of us inevitably find ourselves. We are born into conditions that preclude the possibility of pristine unconsciousness; and unless we are lucky enough to be born men of genius, we can attain anything resembling mastery only by years of patient work. The question before us, then, is how we should proceed in our effort to attain it.

To answer this, we may best examine a little more critically the examples already before us, to discover if we can what traits the effective figures possess, and what the ineffective. We have already seen some of the traits of the elementary figures, — those used by savages and peasants and children. Whoever has lived long enough to be conscious of Nature is familiar with sunset, and the long stretch of sleepy night that follows: to any human being the phrase "they came from as far off as the sun slept," must instantly convey, in perfectly familiar terms, a familiar notion of extreme remoteness. Whoever has seen a restless horse knows what a Yankee means by *skittish*, and instantly feels the likeness between this trait in animals and the behavior of a gun in the hands of an inexperienced sportsman. Whoever has the most elementary experience of human emotion knows the disturbing sense of the mysteries about us which sometimes comes to us as we lie awake, and which can be likened to the approach of nothing more definite than that vaguest of things, *everything*. So when the old king of Guiana said that his enemies came from "as far off as the sun slept;" and when the Yankee countryman said that a new gun is "apt to be skittish;" and when the frightened child said he had hurried out of bed because he "felt as if everything was coming," — each of these elementary beings used a figure so familiar in substance that anybody can instantly understand it. In each of these cases, too, the analogy between the figure and the thing it

really signifies is so close that the moment it is pointed out, any human being can appreciate it. The connotation named is a connotation that might readily have occurred to any human mind. It is, in short, a thing that is wholly within the grasp of that imaginary personage whom we have seen we should always presume ourselves to address, — the average man.

Turning to the other group of effective figures, — the figures used by the masters, — we find the state of things surprisingly similar. When Dr. Holmes likens Boston State House as it appears in the eyes of good Bostonians, to a *hub*, he likens it to something that everybody he addresses knows; and the analogy is one which everybody he addresses instantly perceives. When Sir William Temple likens life to a fretful child, he likens it to something that everybody knows; and the analogy is one that everybody can understand. When Shakspere — or whoever wrote Wolsey's lament — likens the rise and fall of human greatness to the growth and the fate of a tree nipped by frost, he does the same. So does Dante, when he tells us how the spirits peered through the murky air as men peer at one another beneath the new moon; and how they knit their brows, as an old tailor knits his brows at a needle's eye. So, too, when he likens the way in which Francesca and her lover emerged from the swarm of spirits to what every one of us has seen again and again, — the motionless flight of the dove with outstretched wings, gliding through the air as if moved by no grosser power than unfettered will.

In each of these cases the substance of the figure is so familiar that any human being knows it; and the underlying analogy — the connotation that the figure names — is so close that the moment it is named any human being can understand it. In short, like the work of untutored people, the work of the masters is work that is addressed to the comprehension of the average man. In other words, it is broadly, sympathetically human.

I know of few single facts which so clearly exemplify what I had in mind when I said so decidedly that all writing should on general principles be addressed to the average man, — not to this class or that. Here we are face to face with the fact that in one great phase of writing — in the use of Tropes — those figures which are obviously the best, and are admitted to be the best, are precisely those that people in general can best understand.

Turning now to the ineffective figures, we shall see without much trouble that what makes them ineffective is either that they are in themselves unfamiliar, or that the analogy between them and what they are meant to stand for is by no means simple. When a student likens the lights of a passing train to a pack of wolves, he likens them to something that very few people have been unfortunate enough to observe. A reader may fancy what a pack of wolves would be like, but he does not know. When the student likens these same lights to a swarm of ghosts, he likens them to something which no human being ever saw, and which, as we have perhaps remarked, Dante himself made vividly real only by comparing it to things within everybody's experience. The student, in short, has named connotations that could not arise in ordinary minds. In point of fact, the simple adjectives, "swift, mysterious," would have expressed his meaning a great deal more forcibly. Again, when the Rev. Benjamin Woodbridge compares the Rev. John Cotton to a "living, breathing Bible," he compares him to a thing that we all know something about; but when we agree that the Bible is a holy book, and that Mr. Cotton was a holy man, the likeness seems exhausted. When we are told that his name is like a titlepage, his head like an index, his life like a commentary, and his appearance in heaven like the issue of a new edition without "erratas," we may be impressed by the ingenuity of the conceit, but we certainly are neither enlightened concerning Mr. Cotton, nor much stimulated to find out anything more about him. The analogy is not close enough to make the figure mean much: if it holds our attention at all, it holds it for a reason far from what was in the writer's mind, — simply because it is so ingeniously absurd. The connotation, in short, is not such as would present itself to any ordinary mind. Again, when the writer in "The Nation" speaks of Mr. Madison as "piercing himself with many sorrows," and thereby "placing himself in a diplomatic position," where he was uncomfortably exposed to the "slings and arrows" of political opponents, he does two or three unfortunate things. In the first place,

he likens Mr. Madison's discomforts to "slings and arrows," weapons wholly unknown to modern military experience; but we can let that pass as an allusion to Shakspere. Hamlet, you remember, talks of "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." In the second place, he speaks of Mr. Madison as piercing himself with sorrows; now, how on earth any human being could ever pierce himself with a sorrow I find myself quite unable to imagine. In the third place, he suggests that by means of this piercing Mr. Madison was betrayed into a position peculiarly exposed to the slings and arrows we have accepted on Shakspere's authority; now, if you can imagine how any process of self-piercing can result in betrayal into an exposed position, you can do more than most men. In short, these figures are not only bad in themselves, — unfamiliar in substance and remote in analogy, — but they are distinctly inconsistent with each other. In professedly serious writing you will not often meet with a more inextricably mixed metaphor; nor will you often find one which more distinctly shows the real trouble with mixed metaphors: in connection with a given idea, they name and make equally conspicuous connotations that are mutually incompatible. If in considering the original idea you let your mind follow out one of these lines of connotation, you constantly get farther away from the other. Either by itself would perhaps serve its purpose; to present both together is to ask you to do two perfectly different things at the same time.

In these ineffective figures, then, we find the substance remote from human experience, or the analogy something quite foreign to any connotation which the real idea would suggest in any ordinary human mind, or both. In some cases — like those of the student and of Mr. Benjamin Woodbridge — the figures may be laboriously elaborate; in some, like that of the writer in "The Nation," they may be stupidly careless. But both alike are ineffective because they are not addressed to the average man. They are not broadly human; they are not a bit sympathetic.

In that word *sympathetic* lies, I believe, the secret that whoever would learn to use figures well is seeking; and I need not repeat that what one seeks who would learn to use figures well is precisely what any one must seek who would learn to choose and compose the elements of style with force. We have studied figures so minutely only because they are exaggerated types of force, — actual connotations instead of merely connotative terms; and now we are come to a point where we can see that the process a writer must turn to who wishes to improve this phase of his style is not so much a technical process as a process of self-culture. There is an old commonplace, "Style is the man." What anybody expresses must ultimately be what he himself knows and feels. Here we can see that failure in expression commonly means failure to know and to feel as much as we ought to, — in a single word, imperfect sympathy both with what we would express, and with those whom we address.

human life, as day by day it has presented itself to real human beings; and as the months go on, more and more of these boys begin to find out for themselves how far from monotonous a thing even the routine of a college life may be if you will only use your eyes to see, and your ears to hear. Many of them, too, begin by and by to feel what any sympathetic writer must finally feel: that this real human life of theirs, this human life that is peculiarly theirs, is the source from which they must draw whatever they really have to say. It is not often that they learn more than this, — how to use this daily experience, this real knowledge, in writing of a more formal kind. But one counsel that I have given them sometimes proves fruitful. When they use figures, I advise them, let them be sure, whatever they write about, that these figures be drawn from their actual experience. Thus by degrees they may come to learn both how they may train themselves to find in life more than those blindly unsympathetic beings who pass through this world hardly aware that it is a living one; and how when they have found these things, they may begin to use them. Then I try constantly to remind them that whenever, for any reason, they undertake to express themselves about anything, they must try to understand it in just the way in which their daily notes have shown them they can learn to understand the commonplaces of daily life. Each thing, each thought, has some sentiment, some emotion, some subtile significance, bound up with it;

and this, as well as the thought or the fact itself, one must learn better and better to know.

But, as we have already reminded ourselves, it is not enough that we understand what we wish to express. In the second place, if we wish our expression to have certainty, we must understand too what sort of human beings we express it to. A single example will perhaps suffice to show the danger in this respect to which we are all liable. In one of Mr. Henry James's stories a rather cultivated American, who has thoroughly read what is called standard English literature, meets an old English lady, who, to his delight, proves to have known Byron. He proceeds to ask if perhaps she knew Charles Lamb too. "One did n't meet him," she answers. And there, in a single phrase, you have three views of Charles Lamb. To the American he is a great man of letters; to the Englishwoman he is a city clerk, quite out of society; to Mr. Henry James — and to the public Mr. James addresses — he is both. To us, in our comfortable modern culture, both the American, who thought Lamb a very great man, and the Englishwoman, who thought Lamb a nobody, are rather comically limited. But to the Englishwoman the American probably presents himself as crudely ignorant of the simplest facts in worldly life; and to the American, the Englishwoman, who is simply what her surroundings would have made any normal human being, probably presents herself as a very deliberate snob. In other words, neither of them is in a position

is produced by a fine, firm sense of what the elements of his style may be made to do, in denotation and in connotation alike.

For, as we have seen, the secret of clearness lies in denotation, the secret of force in connotation; the secret of clearness in what is said, the secret of force in what is left unsaid. And I believe that one experience very familiar to any teacher, will go far to prove this. I have somewhere seen a story of the younger Dumas, that when his first successful play was produced, some old Parisian man of letters complimented him on the firmness of his style. To which Dumas is said to have replied, *Il y a un fier dessous* ("There is no end of it out of sight"). He meant, I take it, that he had produced the notable firmness of his dialogue — a trait remarkable in most of his dramatic work — by the very simple process of courageously striking out needless words and phrases, — making each word do full work. By this very process, you see, he would make what words are left stronger and stronger in their connotation. In a similar way, every teacher must have discovered, in his own work as well as in that of pupils, what surprising gains in force may be made by what at first sight seems to a writer a deliberate process of weakening. The truth is that in written style as well as in declamation there is at any given moment a fairly distinct limit to the power of any given man. You can shout just so loud and no louder; you can be just so passionate, just so funny, just so pathetic, and not a bit

more. Now, if you often do your utmost, anybody will recognize it. That terrible sanity of the average man is always watching you. But if you keep your ultimate power in reserve, nobody will be able to say just how much farther you might easily have gone, had you chosen. There are moments, of course, that call for your utmost power; but these are rare. And your utmost strength should be reserved for them. The analogy of rant on the stage or in the pulpit is a very close one. You all know how fatal the effect of that is; and the final weakness you all feel there is a question of connotation. Slowly but surely, amid all this racket, comes to you a growing conviction that this man cannot do a bit more. There is no mere technical device for strengthening style, then, more apt to be of value than the deliberate weakening of passages you have written in your very strongest way. Such deliberate weakening of all but the very rare passages which really demand your utmost power results at once in a connotation directly opposite to that of vocal or written rant. It is evident, in such cases, that there is power in reserve. The more you listen, the more you read, the more you feel it. And how great it may be there is nothing to show. The tact with which style may be kept strong enough to connote no weakness, and weak enough to connote indefinite strength, is perhaps the finest trick of the writer's trade. Whoever has begun to master it will have learned for himself that the secret of force lies in connotation.

VIII.

ELEGANCE.

THE last quality of style is far more subtile than either of the others. Any style that we can understand, we have found, is clear; and the secret of clearness lies in the denotation of our words and compositions. Any style that will hold the attention, we have found, is forcible; and not so obviously, but I hope almost as surely, we have determined that the secret of force lies in the connotation of our words and compositions. But we come at last to a more elusive matter than force. What is it in style that may be trusted to please us; and what trait in the elements of style may be expected to secure it?

In my first chapter, I suggested to you both the name by which I shall describe the quality in question and the definition I shall give it. Elegance is the distinguishing quality of a style that pleases the taste. By framing and repeating this definition, however, I do not mean that it satisfies me. On the contrary, both name and definition are among the least satisfactory things I have ventured to offer you. Yet, paradoxical as it may seem, this very fact has inclined me not to

attempt to change them; for no single example could much better illustrate what I believe to be the real nature of the quality.

What we have in view, you see, is the æsthetic quality of style, — that subtile something in a work of literary art which makes us feel delight in the workmanship. Beauty, some call it; charm, others; others still, grace, ease, finish, mastery. Yet none of these terms, any more than the one I have chosen, speaks for itself. Most palpable, of course, in kinds of writing whose first object is to give pleasure, — in poetry, or in that finer kind of prose that we recognize as belonging to literature, — the quality I mean need not be wholly absent from even the most technical style or the most commonplace matter. We all feel it in the great poets; we all feel it in such prose as Addison's; in less certain form we all feel it in such modern prose as Mr. Matthew Arnold's, or Mr. Walter Pater's, just as we feel its absence in every-day journalism or in the astonishing vagaries of Carlyle or of Mr. Addington Symonds. But I think we do not all feel it in other places where nevertheless it exists; in technical treatises, for example, in every-day letters, in every case where human beings attempt the task of embodying in written words the elusive, immaterial reality of thought and emotion.

Our first task, then, is to realize what we mean; to fix in our minds the quality to which we are now trying to give a name. By so doing, we shall see why any name yet found for it must be unsatisfactory; and

by so seeing we shall learn, I think, more about it than we can learn in any other simple way.

Perhaps the easiest way of approaching our task is for a moment to consider the name for it now before us. A moment ago I said that any one can feel the elegance of Addison's style. Nobody ever had much less fundamental liking for the somewhat priggish Whig who gave English literature the "Spectator" than that stoutest of Georgian Tories, Samuel Johnson. Yet Johnson's Life of Addison closes with these words: "Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, and elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison." The opinion thus expressed has become a tradition. To this day, *Addisonian* is a word not infrequently used to mean that a style has the finest grace. To a certain extent this is true: if a writer have in view such purposes as Addison's, little higher praise can be given him than that he approaches the standard of excellence that Addison fixed for the wits of Queen Anne's London. In another way, this Addisonian tradition has given rise to what I believe to be grave error. If to be Addisonian is to be excellent, people are apt to fancy, not to be Addisonian is to be something not excellent at all. The logic, when you stop to think, is obviously imperfect; but as a rule, you do not stop to think. Now, the most salient trait of Addison's style is its politeness, its well-bred restraint, its complete freedom from any manner of excess. An admirable trait everybody must admit this, for a great

many purposes; but, to go no farther, to be at once Addisonian and passionate is simply impossible. And whoever should say that passionate writing cannot have the trait before us now — the quality that pleases the taste — as well as the intellectual quality clearness, and the emotional quality force, would obviously say something that would make his notion of the quality very different from the notion I am trying to lay before you.

To get a more comprehensive idea of just what this is, it will be worth while to turn to four passages from English poetry, in which four poets, each notable at a different period of our literature, have touched this matter. Among the beautiful passages which make Marlowe's "Tamburlaine," to whoever knows it well, something far more significant than the surging sea of bombast for which it stands in tradition, are these lines on beauty, —

> "If all the pens that ever poets held
> Had fed the feeling of their masters' thoughts,
> And every sweetness that inspired their hearts,
> Their minds, and muses on admired themes;
> If all the heavenly quintessence they still
> From the immortal flowers of poesy,
> Wherein, as in a mirror, we perceive
> The highest reaches of a human wit,—
> If these had made one poem's period,
> And all combined in beauty's worthiness,
> Yet should there hover in their restless heads,
> One thought, one grace, one wonder, at the least,
> Which into words no virtue can digest."

And this unspoken word is the final secret of beauty. Fifty years later, in that England of Cavaliers and Puritans that was in feeling centuries away from the passionate Renaissance of Elizabeth, John Ford, in his tragedy of the "Broken Heart," wrote this song: —

"Can you paint a thought; or number
Every fancy in a slumber?
Can you count soft minutes roving
From a dial's point by moving?
. . . . . .

"No, oh no! yet you may
Sooner do both that and this,
This and that, and never miss,
Than by any praise display
Beauty's beauty; such a glory
As beyond all fate, all story,
All arms, all arts,
All loves, all hearts,
Greater than those or they,
Do, shall, and must obey."

In a poem as far from these in character as the limits of literature allow — in Pope's "Essay on Criticism" — are these lines, which say the same thing: —

"Some beauties yet no precepts can declare,
For there 's a happiness as well as care.
Music resembles Poetry; in each
Are nameless graces which no methods teach.
. . . . . .

"True wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd;
Something whose truth convinc d at sight we find,
That gives us back the shadow of the mind."

And only a few years ago the most notable of our living American poets, Mr. James Lowell, gave us these lines: —

"I have a fancy: how shall I bring it
Home to all mortals wherever they be?
Say it or sing it? Shoe it or wing it,
So it may outrun or outfly me,
Merest cocoon-web whence it broke free?

"Only one secret can save from disaster,
Only one magic is that of the master.
Set it to music; give it a tune, —
Tune the brook sings you, tune the breeze brings you,
Tune the wild columbines nod to in June!

"This is the secret: so simple, you see!
Easy as loving, easy as kissing,
Easy as — well, let me ponder — as missing,
Known, since the world was, by scarce two or three."

Each of these poets in his own way has said the same thing; and when we ask ourselves what this thing is, we find it something that in our own prosy way we have already tried to keep in mind. The work of any artist — and as surely as M. Jourdain spoke prose, every writer must be essentially an artist — is a far more subtile and wonderful thing than we are apt to realize. It is nothing less than an act of creative imagination, than giving to the eternally immaterial reality of thought a visible, material body of written words. As Wordsworth put it in the passage I cited from De Quincey, style is the "incarnation of thought;" and this thought which we would incar-

nate is an infinitely subtile, infinitely varied thing. And the means of incarnation that we mortals have is a very limited thing, — only a few thousand arbitrary sounds, to which good use, and nothing else, has given approximate meanings. At best the incarnation can be only a feeble shadow of the reality, — a symbol to which nothing but deep imaginative sympathy can give anything like the significance which the artist longed to pack within it. By irrevocable fate expression must be eternally, almost tragically, inadequate.

There is no single example of this more notable than the phase of fine art which I am disposed to think most characteristic of this last half of the nineteenth century: I mean the music-drama of Wagner. Any one can appreciate how great a poet Wagner was. In "Siegfried," for example, when the dragon lies sleeping on his hoard, Wotan comes to warn him of the approach of the hero who is to slay him; and from the depths of his cave comes the growling answer, —

> "Ich lieg' und besitze.
> Lass mich schlafen," —

"I lie here, possessing. Let me sleep." In seven words Wagner has phrased the spirit that made the French Revolution what it was; that among ourselves to-day seems to many so terribly threatening to the prosperity of our own country. But Wagner is not only a poet; most of you, I think, who have let

yourselves listen, must have felt the indefinable power of the endlessly interwoven melody by which he seeks to express in music, too, the thought and emotion for which poetry alone is an inadequate vehicle. Perhaps you must go to Baireuth to know the rest. But certainly at Baireuth, where every engine of modern art was at his disposal, Wagner has brought all the other fine arts to his aid: architecture in the simple lines of the darkened theatre itself, where the music of the instruments fills the air one knows not whence; painting, in scenery, in costumes, in groupings of heroic figures, where for once the pageantry of the stage is treated as seriously as any great painting; even sculpture, as when, through the whole celebration of the mystic sacrament, Parsifal stands motionless as any figure cut from marble. No one art of expression was enough for Wagner; and it was at last his fortune to control them all. Yet when all was done by this man, who seems to me the greatest of modern artists; when at the point where each art by itself had done its utmost, a fresh art came to do more still, — the final reality (the real thought and emotion which all this marvellous thing would express) is as far away as ever. Even that wonderful "Parsifal," with all its fusion of the arts, is another thing, and an infinitely lesser thing, than the great simple truth which lies behind it: that the true secret of wisdom is infinite sympathy with humanity, good and evil.

In this vast, inevitable inadequacy of our means of

expression lies the secret of the profound discouragement that must often attend even the greatest of serious artists when he is all in earnest. Shakspere himself phrases what I mean: —

> "Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
> Featured like him, like him of wealth possest,
> *Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope,*
> With what I most enjoy contented least."

Whoever would work earnestly must learn, I believe, to know this mood; to face, with courageous resignation, the inevitable truth that underlies it, content with the thought, in which lies no exhaustible stimulus, that, do what he may, his ideal must always be beyond him, and so that there can never be any moment of accomplishment when he may not eagerly hope and strive to do better and better still.

We are far enough now, it seems, from Addisonian elegance; yet we are coming near to the place where we can see why, perhaps unwisely, I have chosen the term *elegance* to express that final quality in literary work which makes us recognize its art as fine. This quality, we clearly see, is a very wonderful thing, — a thing whose essence has eluded the greatest masters as well as the dabblers; a thing which no words we have can adequately phrase. And yet when we stop to think once more, and ask ourselves by what means, in works of literature, we become aware of this impalpable quality, we find ourselves just where we have so often found ourselves before. In the greatest poem, as truly as in the most impudent advertisement that we laugh at in horse-cars, all that meets the eye are the written words. It is something in them, and only something in them, that makes all the difference.

Is this thing a thing we can in any wise define? That is the question now. Have words, alone or in composition, any trait that is favorable to this exquisitely subtile quality to which I have given this trivial name of *elegance?*

We have seen already that every word we use must in greater or less degree possess two distinct traits, — denotation and connotation. It denotes the idea which good use agrees that it shall stand for; it connotes the very various and subtile thoughts and emotions which cluster about that idea in the human mind, whose store of thought is so vastly greater than its store of words with which to symbolize thought. And the traits that words possess, compositions must possess too; sentences, paragraphs, chapters, books, put together the words which compose them, and all the traits of these words. In all the elements of style, denotation and connotation may alike be recognized. The secret of clearness, we saw, lies in denotation; the secret of force in connotation. But we have already seen that when all is done, the expression of thought and feeling in written words can never be complete. Do what we may, with denotation in mind and connotation too, our style can at best be only something

> "That gives us back the shadow of the mind."

No expression can be so perfect that a better cannot be imagined. In this truth, I believe, lies the final secret of the quality I call elegance. The more exquisitely style is adapted to the thought it symbolizes, the better we can make our words and compositions denote and connote in other human minds the meaning they denote and connote in ours, the greater charm style will have, merely as a work of art. In a single phrase, the secret of elegance lies in adaptation.

I said at the very beginning of this chapter, that I was dissatisfied with the name — *elegance* — which I have given this æsthetic quality of style; and yet that I was induced to keep it for the very reason that it dissatisfies me. Now, I think, you can see why. We begin to understand, I hope, what the quality is; and if you will stop to think, you will find, I believe, that our language contains no word which will begin at once to denote and to connote all that we wish to express when we name the quality. In such straits, I often think, we may best choose a word whose literal meaning, when we scan it closely, will remind us of what we really mean; and the literal meaning of *elegance* comes nearer what we mean now than that of any other word I have found. With all its connotation of fashion and fastidiousness and over-nicety, *elegance* means, when we stop to remember our Latin, the quality that distinguishes anything that is carefully selected. The words it comes from — *ex* and *lego* — mean literally to pick out, to choose from

among some great mass of things the one thing that shall best serve our purpose; and this is precisely what the earnest writer would do who seeks constantly to adapt his style more and more exquisitely to his thought and emotion. In the very difficulty that meets us here, in the choice of a name, we can see, in concrete form, the nature of the quality we are considering, and the very remote approximation of style to thought with which the limits of human language so often compel us to rest satisfied.

To turn now to a few examples of the quality as it reveals itself in literature, we may best consider it in its finest form. In poetry everybody perceives it most clearly. Of course, the dialect of poetry differs from that of prose. To write prosy poetry, or to write prose full of words that belong to the vocabulary of poetry, is instantly to forget that the secret of elegance lies in the adaptation of style to thought. But the adaptation which gives its charm to the finest poetry is, after all, adaptation of means to end; and just such adaptation of style to meaning is what gives its charm to that fine prose whose purpose differs from that of poetry, and whose outward form must differ accordingly. Take a single word to begin with. For generations, English prose has discarded the pronoun *thou* and all its derivatives. No lover uses it to his sweetheart; nor could the phrase "thine eyes" stand for a moment in serious modern prose. But the moment we turn to song we find the phrase still acceptable: "Drink to me only with thine eyes," might have been

written yesterday. Not very long ago, I saw a little poem, written at Harvard College, and in many respects charming. The first line of it, though, ran thus: —

"Thy eyes are mirrors of strange things."

Now, just as in Ben Jonson's line the style seems perfectly adapted to the thought, so in this line there is something lacking. A moment's study will show that it is only the letter *n*. "Thine eyes" has a sound which we recognize as charming; "thy eyes" has a clumsy repetition of sound which subtilely recalls the "ki-yi" of a small boy. Remote as this connotation is, it is enough to make the second line a far less exquisitely adapted one than the first. In poetry — and in prose too — the mere question of sound, the mere choice of a single letter, may make a passage or mar it. Transfer that *n*, for example: suppose for a moment that Ben Jonson had written, "Drink to me only with *thy eyes*," and that the modern poet had written, "*Thine eyes* are mirrors of strange things;" and Ben Jonson's line is no longer certainly the better. Again, take a single phrase, no longer from serious literature, but from the work of a friend with whom I once discussed it. He was writing, in tolerably impassioned prose, a description of a landscape remarkable for a certain softness of beauty. "No rock peeped forth," he wrote, "save from a bed of verdure soft as a woman's breast." Putting quite aside the question of felicity of figure, he found himself dissatisfied with that sentence, because there was in it a connotation of voluptuousness foreign to his purpose. After a while he changed one word, and then found he had said what he meant to the best of his power. Instead of *woman* he wrote *mother*: "No rock peeped forth save from a bed of verdure soft as a mother's breast." The only change is in the choice of a more specific word; but the whole connotation is altered, and the style is as finely adapted to the thought as that man could make it.

Again, compare two passages of verse to which I have called your attention before: the opening lines of Wordsworth's "Skylark," and those of Shelley's. You will find them side by side in the "Golden Treasury." Here are Wordsworth's lines: —

"Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!
Dost thou despise the earth, where cares abound?
Or while the wings aspire, are heart and eye
Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground? —
Thy nest, which thou canst drop into at will,
Those quivering wings composed, that music still."

And here are Shelley's lines: —

"Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert,
That from heaven, or near it,
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art."

In the long words and the slow measure of Wordsworth's first line —

"Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!" —

there is something that keeps the mind where the contemplative poet would have it, — down on earth. In the short, ecstatic words of Shelley's first line —

"Hail to thee, blithe spirit!" —

there is something that lifts the mind straight away from all things earthly. Change a word in either of these, change even a syllable or a letter, and something is lost.

Again, take, almost at random, one of Shakspere's descriptions: the beginning of the speech that tells how Ophelia died: —

"There is a *willow* grows *aslant* a *brook*
That shows his *hoar* leaves in the *glassy* stream."

Try for yourselves, in seventeen words and twenty syllables, to pack even half so much of a picture as is there; and you will see for yourselves how marvellous those lines are in their exquisitely simple adaptation to the purpose of the poet. Then read the passage through; and when you have finished, see for yourselves how this simple picture that begins it sets the whole in a background of just such gentle, homely nature as should best make us feel the loveliness of the dying girl, and the mournfulness of her end. Or turn to Dante, and see how in the fifth canto of the "Inferno," where he tells the story of Francesca, that wonderful simile of the doves, full of suggestions of light and love and purity, softens and makes mournful the dreadful story of sin and expiation that in lesser hands than his might have been merely horrible. See too, if you will, the pathos of a single word in the beginning of Francesca's speech: —

"Siede la terra dove nata fui
Sulla marina, dove 'l Po discende
Per aver *pace* coi seguaci sui."

"The land where I was born lies by the shore,
There where the Po comes down into the sea,
To have at last *peace*, with his following streams."

No word but *peace* could so give the suggestion of all that might have been, had these sinners kept from the sin which has doomed them to the eternal torment of hell. I should not stray from English, I suppose; English affords us examples enough to last forever. But Dante happened to be the first poet who spoke to me; and when I think of all that is best in literature, I cannot help thinking of him.

We have seen enough of what this exquisite adaptation of means to end is like. It is time to turn to another example, where a real question arises. Is the passage that I shall now recall to you exquisitely adapted to its purpose, or does it fail to produce the effect the poet had in mind? I refer to the last line but one of Mr. James Lowell's "Secret," which I cited a little while ago: —

"This is the secret: so simple, you see!
Easy as loving, easy as kissing,
Easy as — well, let me ponder — as missing;
Known, since the world was, by scarce two or three."

Charming lines we must all find the first and the second and the last; but how about the last but one?

In the midst of the simple melody about it, that conscious little phrase, "well, let me ponder," startles us; it is a disagreeable discord. At first we are annoyed; why on earth did he spoil a pretty poem by such an ugly blemish? But look at the line again, ask yourself what it means; and you will find that its very purpose is to show how very easily we may fail to do what we have in mind; it is: —

"Easy as — well, let me ponder — as missing."

Could four words more subtilely suggest just the kind of failure that the line describes? And if this is what the poet had in mind, could four words, after all, be much more exquisitely adapted to his purpose? It is like that line of Pope's, who complains how, in bad verse, the measure drags: —

"And ten low words oft creep in one dull line."

But the art is more subtile than Pope's; you only feel its effect; until you stop to analyze it, you do not see how the effect is produced.

Few examples, I think, could bring us more directly to a fact that critics of style are very apt to forget; and yet which every one must fully realize before his criticism of style, as style, can be certain. Style, I may remind you again, is the expression of thought and feeling in written words. To a critic of style, a given piece of style, then, presents a double problem, but a double problem of which the separate parts are not clearly distinguished. First, he sees the written

words which stand for the thought and feeling that were in the writer's mind; secondly, he sees through those written words to the thought and the feeling which they incarnate. Now, what he knows, until he begins to analyze, is merely a general impression: he understands or fails to understand; he is interested or bored; he is pleased or repelled. And a careless critic confuses the two elements which may well be present in these primary impressions; but, as I conceive style, we must separate them rigorously. An artist, I believe, has the right to express whatever he will; what he chooses to express may be a very hateful thing or a very trivial, but if his expression be exquisitely adapted to his purpose, we cannot deny that technically his art is fine, and that if he displeases us ever so much in his purpose, he has by the fineness of his art executed a work in which, as technical critics, we may honestly delight. In brief, I believe that until we fully understand a writer's purpose, until we really know both what he would denote and what he would connote, we cannot safely object to any word or any composition on the ground of what I have called elegance.

Take, for example, two phrases, — "Them that was n't," and, "By thunder!" The former is as ungrammatical as three words can well be; the latter is, to say the least, very slangy. But see how those phrases come into these verses by Mr. Henley: to get the full effect, I must quote the whole little poem.

"'Talk of pluck!' pursued the sailor,
Set at euchre on his elbow,
'I was on the wharf at Charleston,
Just ashore from off the runner.

"'It was gray and dirty weather,
And I heard a drum go rolling,
Rub-a-dubbing in the distance,
Awful, dour-like, and defiant.

"'In and out among the cotton,
Mud, and chains, and stores, and anchors,
Tramped a squad of battered scarecrows, —
Poor old Dixie's bottom dollar.

"'Some had shoes, but all had rifles;
Them that was n't bald, was beardless;
And the drum was rolling *Dixie*,
And they stepped to it like men, sir!

"'Rags and tatters, belts and bayonets,
On they swung, the drum a-rolling,
Mum and sour. It looked like fighting,
And they meant it too, *by thunder!*'"

I doubt if you can find a more skilful use of words. The old blockade-runner, sick in hospital, gives this little glimpse of what he saw in the Confederacy: it gives some of us a glimpse of the Confederacy that we are not very used to. Change a single one of those irregular terms of his. Instead of, "Them that was n't bald was beardless," write, "Those who were not bald were beardless;" instead of, "And they meant it too, by thunder!" write, "And they were in deadly earnest," — and see how the picture begins to

fade. The very vulgarity of the phrases is perhaps what most of all so finely adapts the expression to the thought.

Again, take this passage from De Quincey's "Confessions;" it tells of his mood when he ran away from school, and wondered whither he should go. Notice how the colloquial vulgarity of one or two phrases expresses, in a way that nothing else could express, the overwrought emotion he has in mind.

"Amongst these attractions that drew me so strongly to the Lakes, there had also by that time arisen in this lovely region the deep, deep magnet (as to me *only* in all this world it then was) of William Wordsworth. Inevitably this close connection of the poetry which most of all had moved me with the particular region and scenery that most of all had fastened upon my affections, and led captive my imagination, was calculated, under ordinary circumstances, to impress upon my fluctuating deliberations a summary and decisive bias. But the very depth of the impressions which had been made upon me, either as regarded the poetry or the scenery, was too solemn and (unaffectedly I may say it) too spiritual to clothe itself in any hasty or chance movement as at all adequately expressing its strength, or reflecting its hallowed character. If you, reader, were a devout Mahometan, throwing gazes of mystical awe daily towards Mecca, or were a Christian devotee looking with the same rapt adoration to St. Peter's at Rôme or to El Kodah, the Holy City of Jerusalem (so called even amongst the Arabs, who hate both Christian and Jew), how painfully would it jar upon your sensibilities, if some friend,

sweeping past you upon a high-road, with a train (according to the circumstances) of dromedaries or of wheeled carriages, should suddenly pull up, and say, 'Come, old fellow, jump up alongside of me. I'm off for the Red Sea, and here's a spare dromedary,' or 'off for Rome, and here's a well-cushioned barouche.' Seasonable and convenient it might happen that the invitation were; but still it would shock you that a journey which, with or without your consent, could not *but* assume the character eventually of a saintly pilgrimage, should arise and take its initial movement upon a casual summons, or upon a vulgar opening of momentary convenience."

Still again, take what seemed when we were discussing the elements of style almost inevitably bad, — such excessive diffuseness as actually for the moment befogs meaning; and turn to "Henry the Fourth" or "Romeo and Juliet;" and see if anything else could so finely express what Shakspere had in mind when he conceived the characters of Mistress Quickly or of Juliet's nurse as the garrulous prolixity he puts into their mouths.

We must sympathetically understand a writer's purpose, you see, before we can sanely criticise his methods. In misunderstanding of this truth lies what I cannot but think the confusion of much everyday criticism. In literature, as in every other art, men have often wished to express things that might much better have been left unexpressed. The purpose of not a few admirable artists is so detestable that on grounds of morality and decency we may

utterly condemn their work; but this fact does not, in my opinion, at all affect the value of their work as a work of art. I have in mind such things as the stories of M. Guy de Maupassant. The French are finer artists than we; but according to our standards, at all events, they are apt to apply their art to very abominable subjects. More than half the time M. de Maupassant's stories deal with matters that no decent man out of France would for a moment think worthy of his pains. The impression left on you by reading these stories is unpleasantly debasing, — at least, if you happen to have been born a respectable Yankee; but you will have to read far and wide before you can find stories in which every word and every turn of sentence is adapted to its purpose with more subtile skill. And some of the stories that are in themselves most hateful can give, and rightly, to the technical critic the keenest delight. As style, his style often seems perfect.

In English, on the other hand, this state of things is more frequently reversed. Far more commonly we find the motive of an English novel to our taste; naturally enough, for the genius of any literature is at bottom the broad human nature which marks the people who use the language in which that literature is phrased. But over and over again, in stories irreproachable or even edifying in motive, we find false touches that make them as subtilely disagreeable as if they dealt with most repellent things. I remember, a few years ago, picking up a novel in which a

charming young woman was engaged in sewing, while a middle-aged gentleman sat by smoking. Both were agreeable characters. But in the course of the evening the young woman bit off her thread, and got a piece of it stuck between her teeth; and the smoker, who had been gnawing the end of his cigar, put the unpleasantly fringed stump of it in a neighboring saucer. It is probable that we have all seen charming women similarly inconvenienced by refractory threads, and very agreeable men whose methods of thoughtless smoking were similarly remote from winsome; but such sights have not enhanced in our minds the impression of charm commonly produced by the individuals in question. Indeed, if we wish to keep the charm in mind, we have a polite, if not deliberate habit of forgetting the unpleasant little traits which, if we choose to look for them, would mar the charm of anybody; and if we are writing stories in which we wish the reader's sympathy to go with our characters, we should be careful not to make the characters do anything disgusting. Not, I may repeat, because even very disgusting matters may not be deliberately introduced in any work of art; but because our purpose for the moment is not to excite disgust. Heroines, then, should not get thread stuck between their teeth, — simply because such a proceeding is essentially unpleasant; for the same reason, we should wink at the fact that agreeable elderly gentlemen sometimes masticate the ends of their cigars. A style which introduces such traits

in such characters is exactly what M. de Maupassant's style commonly is not, — admirably unadapted to the purpose in hand.

Actions that are out of character, indeed, are conveniently broad types of what I mean by inelegance. In everybody's life there are endless details which, for artistic purposes, are out of character. No man is great to his body-servant, you remember; nor anybody so contemptible as not to have many engaging qualities. A mediæval soldier, like Othello, would in all probability occasionally amuse himself by singing comically ribald songs; and Scotch gentlemen of the period of Macbeth would, very likely, in moments of relaxation, take part in national dances. But for Shakspere's purpose these wholly natural traits would have been out of character; they would have attracted attention to phases of life which for the moment we are not properly called on to observe. On the whole, then, we may be content that Othello does not lead a drinking chorus, and that Macbeth does not gladden the gallery with a Highland fling; not because the real Othello or Macbeth would not have done such things serenely, but because if they did such things on the boards, they were by no means such satisfactory protagonists in tragedy. In short, if Shakspere had made them act out of character, he would have missed the quality we have agreed to call elegance.

There is one trick of style to which I have referred before, which is commonly resorted to from a mistaken

notion of literary taste, and which is responsible for much of the minor inelegance that disfigures our literature. I mean euphemism, — the naming of a disagreeable idea by a word not in itself disagreeable. There are times in life, of course, when we have to mention disagreeable ideas; at such times we may well ask ourselves whether we may not best mask them a little. But generally, I think, the better plan is to ask ourselves whether we may not best of all leave them unmentioned. There are few safer habits than calling things by their real names; in that case we do not mention hateful things needlessly. On the other hand, if we habitually palliate hateful ideas, we begin before long to lose our sense of their hatefulness. As a result, one hears a great deal more than one need of such phenomena as accompany the experience of a landsman in a rough sea, or as make starched linen unbeautiful in July. And to take an example, where the real idea is not disgusting, but solemn, think for yourselves how habitual euphemism degrades the great fact of death. We all know what "to die" means; it means something we all have to face, and that we all face with some degree of dread. Tender-hearted people resort to metaphor: "to pass away," they say, or, "to fall asleep." Untender people take up the euphemistic metaphor: "to pass on," they say, or, "to kick the bucket." And a little while ago I saw in a newspaper that some unhappy creature who had taken his life had "executed a determination to become a gloomy corpse." Grosser indecency, I think, not even the vilest of our vilest news-mongers could invent. And all this comes from deliberate neglect of the real secret of elegance, — of constant, earnest effort to adapt our means to our end, our style to the thought and emotion it must express.

We have seen enough, I think, to understand now that nothing but constant, earnest effort can result in that habitual adaptation of means to end which must mark the style of a master. We have seen enough besides to understand that there is no little truth in the vulgar conception of elegance in style, which holds as a standard such a writer as Addison. It is true that we have in English very few writers whose style is more exquisitely than his adapted to the purpose for which it is used. It is also true that Addison very rarely has in view any purpose not in itself agreeable. There is in the man, with all his obvious limits, a certain sustained urbanity of temper that has made him for nearly two centuries the acknowledged model of literary breeding. But if literature could express nothing but polite breeding, it were an unspeakably less potent thing than many of us rejoice to find it; and the real secret of Addison's literary excellence is not his urbanity of temper, but the fact that, given his temper, his style expresses it almost to perfection.

There is in Addison's style, however, one subtile trait which it shares with any style, no matter how different in aspect and effect, which possesses the quality we have agreed to name elegance. This is

the ease of habitual mastery. You all remember the old saw which I have quoted to you already: *Ars celare artem* ("The finest art seems artless") To a great degree, I think, any style which we may ultimately regard as a model, adapted to its purpose as exquisitely as human power can adapt it, possesses this trait of ease. In much style that is clear as crystal the trait is absent. In reading George Eliot's novels, for example, one is constantly sensible of the effort that very notable writer is making. In much style so forcible that you care little whether it be clear or not, the trait is equally wanting. In Carlyle, for example, or in Browning, you may look far before you find it. And sometimes, as in most of the prose of Landor, you may find it fatally divorced from force, if not from clearness. But the ideal style is a style that is clear, — that cannot be misunderstood; that is forcible, — that holds the attention; and that is elegant, — that is so exquisitely adapted to its purpose that you are conscious of its elegance only by subtilely feeling the wonderful ease of habitual mastery.

Such habitual mastery of style is what we must strive for if we would give our work this final quality of elegance. The question before us, then, is how we may strive for it. In a very little while, I think, we may get some manner of answer. Style, we must always remember, is the expression of thought and feeling in written words. To express thought and feeling with the ease of mastery, we must in the first place train our hands. The master's hand is the

hand that is always at command. In some degree, then, that daily work which we saw so great a factor in the securing of force will serve our purpose here too. Whoever will let no day pass without its record, nor any record be other than the best he can make, will do much; but he will not do all. He must train, too, with equal constancy his power of perception.

One phase of perception, concerning which I have as yet said nothing, becomes of real importance here. I mean perception of what is fine in literary art. It is not hard for one who has very little such perception to write clearly, nor very hard for him to write with a great degree of force. But it is not often, I think, that one can learn to give one's style the final quality which comes from the most exquisite possible adaptation of style to thought, unless one has trained his power of appreciating and enjoying that quality in the works of the masters. Trained it, I say deliberately. With some of us it is inborn; with some it is so dormant that nothing but strenuous work can arouse it. But even those who possess it most will not waste the hours they give to earnestly developing it. One is sometimes inclined to think that native love for art is a fatal gift, preventing him who has it from ever being sure of what is really good; and those who do not possess this native love for art may surely, by earnest work, arouse in themselves perceptions of which without the work they would hardly deem themselves capable.

There have been endless discussions of what poe

try is; and no definition of it that was ever framed has proved adequate. Each new critic makes his new one; and no better one than the last. But this at least we may say: that poetry is the finest form of literary art. And the secret of its fineness lies in an adaptation of word — and even of the most subtile sound — to meaning that comes as near perfection as human power can bring it. Like all fine art, poetry can give to human beings a kind of pleasure more exquisite, more lasting, purer than can come from anything but fine art. And this pleasure any sane man can by and by begin to feel. I say this with conviction because as a teacher I have so often seen boys, to whom poetry seemed merely a clumsy statement of ideas in lines that broke off before they reached the edge of the page, teach themselves, by deliberately resolving to find the charm that other people had found there, slowly to know that keenest of delights which comes when at last they can begin to feel that what they read is, above and beyond its meaning and its interest, a thing of lasting beauty. And I am sure that no other earnest work will bring half so sure and lasting a benefit to whoever would finally master the art of letters as will come to him from a mastery of what poetry means.

I do not mean, of course, that every man should fancy himself a poet, or that any but poets should seriously try to express their thought or emotion in the terms of poetry. Yet it is a notable fact that there are few masters of prose, at least in our own

literature, who have not at some time tried their hand at verse. What they learn by the effort is oftenest, perhaps, that poetry is not for them; that what they say must be said in what seems to so many the less sublime vehicle of prose. But in the very process of learning this, they have learned, too, if not the secret, at least the charm, that makes the finest of literary art the marvellous thing it is. Beyond the perception of life that we saw the forcible writer must seek, beyond the perception of human nature which should make him know the human beings he addresses, beyond the perception of what words suggest or connote, as well as of what they mean, the writer who would attain the certainty of mastery must train himself in that finest of perception that delights in the great works of the masters.

Something of this every one who thinks of these matters we have been discussing perceives for himself. It is some gleam of this perception, perhaps, which makes almost every one who longs to write well try his hand — by no means well as a rule — at poetry. It is some gleam of this perception that makes so many, equally earnest and more sanely aware of their limitations, saturate themselves in conventional culture and then try piteously to express themselves in a way that shall speak to fellow human beings. The masters can write poems; the masters can enjoy the masterpieces: this they see, and striving to write and to enjoy, they fancy they are rising toward the point of mastery. The truth, though, as

we have seen long ago, is that whoever would write with thorough mastery must write in a style that has not only the æsthetic quality we have just been considering, but that has too the emotional quality and the intellectual as well. And these qualities, I believe, must be striven for in the order in which we have considered them. First of all, be clear: address the average human being, remembering not what is commonplace in him, but what is human. Then be forcible: do not content yourself with merely addressing him, but do your utmost to hold his attention. Finally, when these things are done, let your style have all the grace, the finish, the charm, that your finest care can give it, — remembering that no style is finally good until along with clearness and force it possesses too the quality we have named elegance. In other words, when you choose and compose the elements of your style, let your first thought concern their denotation; your second, their connotation; and only when these are secure, let yourself begin that ceaseless effort whose end shall be a finer and finer adaptation of style to meaning.

Finer and finer, I have said purposely. Often as I have repeated it, I cannot repeat too often that we are dealing now with something that can never be perfectly accomplished. There have been great writers, blind teachers tell us; look at them, reverence them, imitate them. When you equal them or approach them, your own work will be great. This mood — the mood of so many of our teachers and guides — seems

to me a phase of that deep tendency in human nature to glorify the past, to worship at the shrines of heroic ancestors, to look far back in primeval times for traces of the golden age. Great things have been done, and good, in life and in art; and these great things are the most precious treasures that have come to us from the humanity that is gone before. But what makes the great works of expression that have come down to us so precious is not that they are themselves supreme, but that they are the best images which human beings, akin to us in all but the genius which makes them sometimes seem more akin to divinity, have yet been able to make of the supreme truths of thought and emotion which each knows for himself in that great, endless world of immaterial reality. We every-day men cannot see far. Our thoughts and passions are petty things at best; and when we are brought face to face with the thoughts and the passions of the masters, which seem by the side of ours so vast and glorious, we are apt to forget that the noblest expression of the noblest art is as petty a thing beside the great, infinite expanse of truth that the masters strive to express, as is our work beside the little truth which is all that reveals itself to our eyes.

Far enough all this may seem from the technical matters with which we have concerned ourselves; and yet without something of this in mind I could never have faced the dreary work of professional teaching that has almost insensibly become the work of my

life. Year after year I must plod through ream upon ream of manuscript that college students write in an effort to learn how to make themselves writers. Bewildering, depressing, maddening, debasing, I should have found this work years ago, but for the growing conviction, which strengthens as the years go by, that the meanest of these works, if we will only let ourselves see it truly, is a very marvellous thing. Careless, thoughtless, reckless as these boys so often are, the most careless, the most thoughtless, the most reckless of all, has put before me an act of that creative imagination for which, as I have said to you before, one can find no lesser word than divine. All unknowing, and with the endless limitations of weakness and perversity, he has looked for himself into that great world of immaterial reality which, just as he knows it, no other human being can ever know; and with these strange, lifeless conventions we call words he has made some image of what he has known in that world which is all his own; and that image begins by and by to arouse within me some conception of what life has meant to him.

Petty enough this thing that life has meant to these thoughtless boys must often seem; yet it is an unspeakably greater thing than the lifeless words in which they have striven to set it forth. And as year after year I have striven to understand what these lame and blundering words and sentences mean, to penetrate the symbol, to grasp the thought, to tell the makers of these feeble elements of style

how they may better the work that seems so worthless, I have found myself year after year more and more aware that what they have done in their little way is what the masters have done in the way that we like to call great. More and more I have come to know that the realities which lie behind the symbols that make the greatest works great are things as far beyond the mere symbols themselves as the thoughtless thoughts of these college boys are beyond the symbols their pens so carelessly scrawl. And year by year there has come to me, amid this work that seems so dreary, the growing knowledge that beyond the ken of the students, and beyond the ken of the greatest of our masters too, lie unending, infinite realms of truth. And these no human power can ever exhaust; here to the end of time human beings may constantly seek farther and farther, with endless hopes of more to come; and here these endless stretches of truth not yet known, and truth perhaps never to be known to human beings, make the work of the greatest of the masters seem almost as small a thing as the work of the pettiest of the pupils. For what either has revealed is but some unspeakably little fragment of infinite eternities.

Technical, dull, lifeless, as all these things I have been prosing about must seem to whoever has not studied them deeply; dull and lifeless, I fear, as I have made them seem to many of you, — they are things that lead us by and by into a conviction of the truths of idealism that to some minds could

never come so strongly by any other means. And idealism, I believe, is a truth that cannot be shaken. What we read is but a symbol of the living thought behind it; what we see and know in life are but symbols of some greater, deeper, infinitely more real truth beyond them all, that only in these material forms can be revealed to such beings as we, who are living here on earth. Whatever leads us to such thoughts as this is a thing that leads us to thoughts that make us wiser, better men.

It is this that makes me more and more feel that the work so many of us are trying to do at Harvard College, the work of which I have tried to give you some account, the work of any earnest teacher of this subject — composition — that seems to most men so dull, is a work that may rightly claim a place in any system of education, no matter how high it hold its head. If teacher or pupil keep himself down to the symbol alone, he sinks hopelessly into the depths of pedantry. But if teacher or pupil keep himself alive to the truth that what he is striving to accomplish is no less a thing than an act of creative imagination; if he learn to know that in his own little way he is trying to do just such a thing as the greatest of the masters have done before him; if through the symbol his eye learn to seek and to know the infinite reality of truth that lies beyond, — he will find that even though technical mastery never come, he will learn more and more the infinite, mysterious significance of that human life that each of us is living

for himself. The old systems strove to bring us to such wisdom by reverent study — and sometimes by cruelly irreverent mangling — of the greatest works of the masters. There are minds, and not a few, that can come thither only by such means; but there are other minds, and not a few, I think, who can come thither better by such humbler means as ours: by striving each for himself to do his best. By and by he must come to know how little a thing that is by the side of what he longed to do; and by and by he will find that thus he has come to learn how vast a thing beside the little that the masters have accomplished is the thing for which they have striven. So, by one road as by the other, men may come at last face to face with what most of all wise men love to face, — with the infinite realities that lie, and that must forever lie, beyond human ken.

IX.

SUMMARY.

It has been my purpose to lay before you, as simply and as broadly as I could, the theory of style to which ten years of study have led me. To most people, as I said in the beginning, this matter that we have been discussing seems a question of endless detail, and of detail which may be declared in every case right or wrong. To me, as I have tried to show you, it seems rather a matter governed by a very few simple general principles. The art of composition, like any other art, can be mastered only by incessant, earnest practice and effort; but the principles that should govern the conduct of whoever would learn to practise it, and the ends he should keep in view, seem to me the principles and the ends — and no others — that I have attempted to lay before you. My task is almost done. There remains for me only to sum up, as briefly as I can, the substance of the eight chapters in which I have striven to tell what I know of the elements and the qualities of Style.

Style, the expression of thought and feeling in written words, must affect readers in three distinct ways, — intellectually, emotionally, and æsthetically. To

the qualities in style which produce these effects we give the names Clearness, Force, and Elegance. But any piece of style presents to the eye only those arbitrary marks that common consent, good use, has made significant of those arbitrary sounds — words — that good use has made significant of certain more or less definite phases of thought and emotion. The qualities of style, then, can be conveyed from writer to reader only by means of the way in which these black marks are chosen and arranged, — in brief, only by our choice and composition of words. In a given piece of writing, then, we may discover why a given quality is present or absent by analyzing the elements presented to the eye. In this analysis it is convenient to examine the elements in four stages: first, Words by themselves; then those compositions of words that we call Sentences; then those compositions of sentences that we call Paragraphs; and finally, those larger compositions to which we may give the name of Wholes. Of words we must always remember that they are arbitrary sounds to which meaning is given only by good use. Our choice of words, then, must be absolutely governed by good use; but within its limits we are able to produce widely various effects by varying our kinds of words and our number of words. Of sentences we must always remember that they are largely governed by good use, — to which in this case we give the name "grammar." Within its limits, however, we are free to vary the kinds of our sentences, and to apply to our sentences

the three principles of composition. The first, the principle of Unity, concerns the substance of a composition: each composition should group itself about one central idea. The second, the principle of Mass, concerns the external form of a composition: the chief parts of each composition should be so placed as readily to catch the eye. The third, the principle of Coherence, concerns the internal arrangement of a composition: the relation of each part of a composition to its neighbors should be unmistakable. Constantly hampered in sentences by the paramount authority of good use, the operation of these principles in paragraphs and in whole compositions may proceed almost untrammelled. And the visible body of modern English style may conveniently be regarded as the result of a constant and by no means finished conflict between good use and these three simple principles of composition, which seem slowly to be gaining authority. And now, having seen that the secret of the qualities of style must be sought in the elements, we may finally ask ourselves if in the elements we may detect any traits that are favorable to one quality or another. To me it seems that we may detect a trait favorable to each. Never forgetting the vast extent of our thoughts and emotions, and the very narrow limits of even the widest vocabulary, we remember that each of our words must not only name an idea, but along with the idea it names must subtilely but surely suggest others. I have borrowed from logic two names — there used technically — to

express these two powers of words. To their power of naming ideas, I have ventured to give the name "denotation;" to their power of suggesting ideas, I have ventured to give the name "connotation." And I have tried to show you that such choice and composition of the elements of style as shall best *denote* our meaning is what Clearness demands; that such choice and composition of the elements as shall best *connote* our emotion is what Force demands; and that such choice and composition of the elements as shall most exquisitely *adapt* itself to the eternally elusive immaterial reality of thought and emotion is what Elegance demands. In a single sentence, to sum up all I have tried to tell you, all that ten years of toilsome work have taught me: the secret of Clearness lies in denotation; the secret of Force lies in connotation; the secret of Elegance lies in adaptation.

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