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On Authorship and Style

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Translated by Rudolf Dircks

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On Authorship and Style.

There are, first of all, two kinds of authors: those who write for the subject's sake, and those who write for writing's sake. The first kind have had thoughts or experiences which seem to them worth communicating, while the second kind need money and consequently write for money. They think in order to write, and they may be recognised by their spinning out their thoughts to the greatest possible length, and also by the way they work out their thoughts, which are half-true, perverse, forced, and vacillating; then also by their love of evasion, so that they may seem what they are not; and this is why their writing is lacking in definiteness and clearness.

Consequently, it is soon recognised that they write for the sake of filling up the paper, and this is the case sometimes with the best authors; for example, in parts of Lessing's *Dramaturgie*, and even in many of Jean Paul's romances. As soon as this is perceived the book should be thrown away, for time is precious. As a matter of fact, the author is cheating the reader as soon as he writes for the sake of filling up paper; because his pretext for writing is that he has something to impart. Writing for money and preservation of copyright are, at bottom, the ruin of literature. It is only the man who writes absolutely for the sake of the subject that writes anything worth writing. What an inestimable advantage it would be, if, in every branch of literature, there existed only a few but excellent books! This can never come to pass so long as money is to be made by writing. It seems as if money lay under a curse, for every author deteriorates directly he writes in any way for the sake of money. The best works of great men all come from the time when they had to write either for nothing or for very little pay. This is confirmed by the Spanish proverb: *honra y provecho no caben en un saco* (Honour and money are not to be found in the same purse). The deplorable condition of the literature of to-day, both in Germany and other countries, is due to the fact that books are written for the sake of earning money. Every one who is in want of money sits down and writes a book, and the public is stupid enough to buy it. The secondary effect of this is the ruin of language.

A great number of bad authors eke out their existence entirely by the foolishness of the public, which only will read what has just been printed. I refer to journalists, who have been appropriately so-called. In other words, it would be "day labourer."

Again, it may be said that there are three kinds of authors. In the first place, there are those who write without thinking. They write from memory, from reminiscences, or even direct from other people's books. This class is the most numerous. In the second, those who think whilst they are writing. They think in order to write; and they are numerous. In the third place, there are those who have thought before they begin to write. They write solely because they have thought; and they are rare.

Authors of the second class, who postpone their thinking until they begin to write, are like a sportsman who goes out at random — he is not likely to bring home very much. While the writing of an author of the third, the rare class, is like a chase where the game has been

captured beforehand and cooped up in some enclosure from which it is afterwards set free, so many at a time, into another enclosure, where it is not possible for it to escape, and the sportsman has now nothing to do but to aim and fire — that is to say, put his thoughts on paper. This is the kind of sport which yields something.

But although the number of those authors who really and seriously think before they write is small, only extremely few of them think about the subject itself; the rest think only about the books written on this subject, and what has been said by others upon it, I mean. In order to think, they must have the more direct and powerful incentive of other people's thoughts. These become their next theme, and therefore they always remain under their influence and are never, strictly speaking, original. On the contrary, the former are roused to thought through the subject itself, hence their thinking is directed immediately to it. It is only among them that we find the authors whose names become immortal. Let it be understood that I am speaking here of writers of the higher branches of literature, and not of writers on the method of distilling brandy.

It is only the writer who takes the material on which he writes direct out of his own head that is worth reading. Book manufacturers, compilers, and the ordinary history writers, and others like them, take their material straight out of books; it passes into their fingers without its having paid transit duty or undergone inspection when it was in their heads, to say nothing of elaboration. (How learned many a man would be if he knew everything that was in his own books!) Hence their talk is often of such a vague nature that one racks one's brains in vain to understand of what they are really thinking. They are not thinking at all. The book from which they copy is sometimes composed in the same way: so that writing of this kind is like a plaster cast of a cast of a cast, and so on, until finally all that is left is a scarcely recognisable outline of the face of Antinous. Therefore, compilations should be read as seldom as possible: it is difficult to avoid them entirely, since compendia, which contain in a small space knowledge that has been collected in the course of several centuries, are included in compilations.

No greater mistake can be made than to imagine that what has been written latest is always the more correct; that what is written later on is an improvement on what was written previously; and that every change means progress. Men who think and have correct judgment, and people who treat their subject earnestly, are all exceptions only. Vermin is the rule everywhere in the world: it is always at hand and busily engaged in trying to improve in its own way upon the mature deliberations of the thinkers. So that if a man wishes to improve himself in any subject he must guard against immediately seizing the newest books written upon it, in the assumption that science is always advancing and that the older books have been made use of in the compiling of the new. They have, it is true, been used; but how? The writer often does not thoroughly understand the old books; he will, at the same time, not use their exact words, so that the result is he spoils and bungles what has been said in a much better and clearer way by the old writers; since they wrote from their own lively knowledge of the subject. He often leaves out the best things they have written, their most striking elucidations of the matter, their happiest remarks, because he does not recognise their value or feel how pregnant they are. It is only what is stupid and shallow that appeals to him. An old and excellent book is frequently shelved for new and bad ones; which, written for the sake of money, wear a pretentious air and are much eulogised by the authors' friends. In science, a man who wishes to distinguish

himself brings something new to market; this frequently consists in his denouncing some principle that has been previously held as correct, so that he may establish a wrong one of his own. Sometimes his attempt is successful for a short time, when a return is made to the old and correct doctrine. These innovators are serious about nothing else in the world than their own priceless person, and it is this that they wish to make its mark. They bring this quickly about by beginning a paradox; the sterility of their own heads suggests their taking the path of negation; and truths that have long been recognised are now denied — for instance, the vital power, the sympathetic nervous system, generatio equivoca, Bichat's distinction between the working of the passions and the working of intelligence, or they return to crass atomism, etc., etc. Hence the course of science is often retrogressive.

To this class of writers belong also those translators who, besides translating their author, at the same time correct and alter him, a thing that always seems to me impertinent. Write books yourself which are worth translating and leave the books of other people as they are. One should read, if it is possible, the real authors, the founders and discoverers of things, or at any rate the recognised great masters in every branch of learning, and buy second-hand books rather than read their contents in new ones.

It is true that *inventis aliquid addere facile est*, therefore a man, after having studied the principles of his subject, will have to make himself acquainted with the more recent information written upon it. In general, the following rule holds good here as elsewhere, namely: what is new is seldom good; because a good thing is only new for a short time.

What the address is to a letter the title should be to a book — that is, its immediate aim should be to bring the book to that part of the public that will be interested in its contents. Therefore, the title should be effective, and since it is essentially short, it should be concise, laconic, pregnant, and if possible express the contents in a word. Therefore a title that is prolix, or means nothing at all, or that is indirect or ambiguous, is bad; so is one that is false and misleading: this last may prepare for the book the same fate as that which awaits a wrongly addressed letter. The worst titles are those that are stolen, such titles that is to say that other books already bear; for in the first place they are a plagiarism, and in the second a most convincing proof of an absolute want of originality. A man who has not enough originality to think out a new title for his book will be much less capable of giving it new contents. Akin to these are those titles which have been imitated, in other words, half stolen; for instance, a long time after I had written "On Will in Nature," Oersted wrote "On Mind in Nature."

A book can never be anything more than the impression of its author's thoughts. The value of these thoughts lies either in the matter about which he has thought, or in the form in which he develops his matter — that is to say, what he has thought about it.

The matter of books is very various, as also are the merits conferred on books on account of their matter. All matter that is the outcome of experience, in other words everything that is founded on fact, whether it be historical or physical, taken by itself and in its widest sense, is included in the term matter. It is the motif that gives its peculiar character to the book, so that a book can be important whoever the author may have been; while with form the peculiar character of a book rests with the author of it. The subjects may be of such a nature as to be accessible and well known to everybody; but the form in which they are expounded, what has been thought about them, gives the book its value, and this depends

upon the author. Therefore if a book, from this point of view, is excellent and without a rival, so also is its author. From this it follows that the merit of a writer worth reading is all the greater the less he is dependent on matter — and the better known and worn out this matter, the greater will be his merit. The three great Grecian tragedians, for instance, all worked at the same subject.

So that when a book becomes famous one should carefully distinguish whether it is so on account of its matter or its form.

Quite ordinary and shallow men are able to produce books of very great importance because of their matter, which was accessible to them alone. Take, for instance, books which give descriptions of foreign countries, rare natural phenomena, experiments that have been made, historical events of which they were witnesses, or have spent both time and trouble in inquiring into and specially studying the authorities for them.

On the other hand, it is on form that we are dependent, where the matter is accessible to every one or very well known; and it is what has been thought about the matter that will give any value to the achievement; it will only be an eminent man who will be able to write anything that is worth reading. For the others will only think what is possible for every other man to think. They give the impress of their own mind; but every one already possesses the original of this impression.

However, the public is very much more interested in matter than in form, and it is for this very reason that it is behindhand in any high degree of culture. It is most laughable the way the public reveals its liking for matter in poetic works; it carefully investigates the real events or personal circumstances of the poet's life which served to give the motif of his works; nay, finally, it finds these more interesting than the works themselves; it reads more about Goethe than what has been written by Goethe, and industriously studies the legend of Faust in preference to Goethe's Faust itself. And when Bürger said that "people would make learned expositions as to who Leonora really was," we see this literally fulfilled in Goethe's case, for we now have many learned expositions on Faust and the Faust legend. They are and will remain of a purely material character. This preference for matter to form is the same as a man ignoring the shape and painting of a fine Etruscan vase in order to make a chemical examination of the clay and colours of which it is made. The attempt to be effective by means of the matter used, thereby ministering to this evil propensity of the public, is absolutely to be censured in branches of writing where the merit must lie expressly in the form; as, for instance, in poetical writing. However, there are numerous bad dramatic authors striving to fill the theatre by means of the matter they are treating. For instance, they place on the stage any kind of celebrated man, however stripped of dramatic incidents his life may have been, nay, sometimes without waiting until the persons who appear with him are dead.

The distinction between matter and form, of which I am here speaking, is true also in regard to conversation. It is chiefly intelligence, judgment, wit, and vivacity that enable a man to converse; they give form to the conversation. However, the matter of the conversation must soon come into notice — in other words, that about which one can talk to the man, namely, his knowledge. If this is very small, it will only be his possessing the above-named formal qualities in a quite exceptionally high degree that will make his conversation of any value, for his matter will be restricted to things concerning humanity

and nature, which are known generally. It is just the reverse if a man is wanting in these formal qualities, but has, on the other hand, knowledge of such a kind that it lends value to his conversation; this value, however, will then entirely rest on the matter of his conversation, for, according to the Spanish proverb, *mas sabe el necio en su casa, que el sabio en la agena.*

A thought only really lives until it has reached the boundary line of words; it then becomes petrified and dies immediately; yet it is as everlasting as the fossilised animals and plants of former ages. Its existence, which is really momentary, may be compared to a crystal the instant it becomes crystallised.

As soon as a thought has found words it no longer exists in us or is serious in its deepest sense.

When it begins to exist for others it ceases to live in us; just as a child frees itself from its mother when it comes into existence. The poet has also said:

“Ihr müsst mich nicht durch Widerspruch verwirren!

Sobald man spricht, beginnt man schon zu irren.”

The pen is to thought what the stick is to walking, but one walks most easily without a stick, and thinks most perfectly when no pen is at hand. It is only when a man begins to get old that he likes to make use of a stick and his pen.

A hypothesis that has once gained a position in the mind, or been born in it, leads a life resembling that of an organism, in so far as it receives from the outer world matter only that is advantageous and homogeneous to it; on the other hand, matter that is harmful and heterogeneous to it is either rejected, or if it must be received, cast off again entirely.

Abstract and indefinite terms should be employed in satire only as they are in algebra, in place of concrete and specified quantities. Moreover, it should be used as sparingly as the dissecting knife on the body of a living man. At the risk of forfeiting his life it is an unsafe experiment.

For a work to become immortal it must possess so many excellences that it will not be easy to find a man who understands and values them all; so that there will be in all ages men who recognise and appreciate some of these excellences; by this means the credit of the work will be retained throughout the long course of centuries and ever-changing interests, for, as it is appreciated first in this sense, then in that, the interest is never exhausted.

An author like this, in other words, an author who has a claim to live on in posterity, can only be a man who seeks in vain his like among his contemporaries over the wide world, his marked distinction making him a striking contrast to every one else. Even if he existed through several generations, like the wandering Jew, he would still occupy the same position; in short, he would be, as Ariosto has put it, *lo fece natura, e poi ruppe lo stampo.* If this were not so, one would not be able to understand why his thoughts should not perish like those of other men.

In almost every age, whether it be in literature or art, we find that if a thoroughly wrong idea, or a fashion, or a manner is in vogue, it is admired. Those of ordinary intelligence

trouble themselves inordinately to acquire it and put it in practice. An intelligent man sees through it and despises it, consequently he remains out of the fashion. Some years later the public sees through it and takes the sham for what it is worth; it now laughs at it, and the much-admired colour of all these works of fashion falls off like the plaster from a badly-built wall: and they are in the same dilapidated condition. We should be glad and not sorry when a fundamentally wrong notion of which we have been secretly conscious for a long time finally gains a footing and is proclaimed both loudly and openly. The falseness of it will soon be felt and eventually proclaimed equally loudly and openly. It is as if an abscess had burst.

The man who publishes and edits an article written by an anonymous critic should be held as immediately responsible for it as if he had written it himself; just as one holds a manager responsible for bad work done by his workmen. In this way the fellow would be treated as he deserves to be — namely, without any ceremony.

An anonymous writer is a literary fraud against whom one should immediately cry out, “Wretch, if you do not wish to admit what it is you say against other people, hold your slanderous tongue.”

An anonymous criticism carries no more weight than an anonymous letter, and should therefore be looked upon with equal mistrust. Or do we wish to accept the assumed name of a man, who in reality represents a société anonyme, as a guarantee for the veracity of his friends?

The little honesty that exists among authors is discernible in the unconscionable way they misquote from the writings of others. I find whole passages in my works wrongly quoted, and it is only in my appendix, which is absolutely lucid, that an exception is made. The misquotation is frequently due to carelessness, the pen of such people has been used to write down such trivial and banal phrases that it goes on writing them out of force of habit. Sometimes the misquotation is due to impertinence on the part of some one who wants to improve upon my work; but a bad motive only too often prompts the misquotation — it is then horrid baseness and roguery, and, like a man who commits forgery, he loses the character for being an honest man for ever.

Style is the physiognomy of the mind. It is a more reliable key to character than the physiognomy of the body. To imitate another person’s style is like wearing a mask. However fine the mask, it soon becomes insipid and intolerable because it is without life; so that even the ugliest living face is better. Therefore authors who write in Latin and imitate the style of the old writers essentially wear a mask; one certainly hears what they say, but one cannot watch their physiognomy — that is to say their style. One observes, however, the style in the Latin writings of men who think for themselves, those who have not deigned to imitate, as, for instance, Scotus Erigena, Petrarch, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, etc.

Affectation in style is like making grimaces. The language in which a man writes is the physiognomy of his nation; it establishes a great many differences, beginning from the language of the Greeks down to that of the Caribbean islanders.

We should seek for the faults in the style of another author’s works, so that we may avoid committing the same in our own.

In order to get a provisional estimate of the value of an author's productions it is not exactly necessary to know the matter on which he has thought or what it is he has thought about it — this would compel one to read the whole of his works — but it will be sufficient to know how he has thought. His style is an exact expression of how he has thought, of the essential state and general quality of his thoughts. It shows the formal nature — which must always remain the same — of all the thoughts of a man, whatever the subject on which he has thought or what it is he has said about it. It is the dough out of which all his ideas are kneaded, however various they may be. When Eulenspiegel was asked by a man how long he would have to walk before reaching the next place, and gave the apparently absurd answer Walk, his intention was to judge from the man's walking how far he would go in a given time. And so it is when I have read a few pages of an author, I know about how far he can help me.

In the secret consciousness that this is the condition of things, every mediocre writer tries to mask his own natural style. This instantly necessitates his giving up all idea of being naïve, a privilege which belongs to superior minds sensible of their superiority, and therefore sure of themselves. For instance, it is absolutely impossible for men of ordinary intelligence to make up their minds to write as they think; they resent the idea of their work looking too simple. It would always be of some value, however. If they would only go honestly to work and in a simple way express the few and ordinary ideas they have really thought, they would be readable and even instructive in their own sphere. But instead of that they try to appear to have thought much more deeply than is the case. The result is, they put what they have to say into forced and involved language, create new words and prolix periods which go round the thought and cover it up. They hesitate between the two attempts of communicating the thought and of concealing it. They want to make it look grand so that it has the appearance of being learned and profound, thereby giving one the idea that there is much more in it than one perceives at the moment. Accordingly, they sometimes put down their thoughts in bits, in short, equivocal, and paradoxical sentences which appear to mean much more than they say (a splendid example of this kind of writing is furnished by Schelling's treatises on Natural Philosophy); sometimes they express their thoughts in a crowd of words and the most intolerable diffuseness, as if it were necessary to make a sensation in order to make the profound meaning of their phrases intelligible — while it is quite a simple idea if not a trivial one (examples without number are supplied in Fichte's popular works and in the philosophical pamphlets of a hundred other miserable blockheads that are not worth mentioning), or else they endeavour to use a certain style in writing which it has pleased them to adopt — for example, a style that is so thoroughly Kat' e'xochae'u profound and scientific, where one is tortured to death by the narcotic effect of long-spun periods that are void of all thought (examples of this are specially supplied by those most impertinent of all mortals, the Hegelians in their Hegel newspaper commonly known as *Jahrbücher der wissenschaftlichen Literatur*); or again, they aim at an intellectual style where it seems then as if they wish to go crazy, and so on. All such efforts whereby they try to postpone the nascetur ridiculus mus make it frequently difficult to understand what they really mean. Moreover, they write down words, nay, whole periods, which mean nothing in themselves, in the hope, however, that some one else will understand something from them. Nothing else is at the bottom of all such endeavours but the inexhaustible attempt which is always venturing on new paths, to sell words for thoughts, and by means of new

expressions, or expressions used in a new sense, turns of phrases and combinations of all kinds, to produce the appearance of intellect in order to compensate for the want of it which is so painfully felt. It is amusing to see how, with this aim in view, first this mannerism and then that is tried; these they intend to represent the mask of intellect: this mask may possibly deceive the inexperienced for a while, until it is recognised as being nothing but a dead mask, when it is laughed at and exchanged for another.

We find a writer of this kind sometimes writing in a dithyrambic style, as if he were intoxicated; at other times, nay, on the very next page, he will be high-sounding, severe, and deeply learned, prolix to the last degree of dulness, and cutting everything very small, like the late Christian Wolf, only in a modern garment. The mask of unintelligibility holds out the longest; this is only in Germany, however, where it was introduced by Fichte, perfected by Schelling, and attained its highest climax finally in Hegel, always with the happiest results. And yet nothing is easier than to write so that no one can understand; on the other hand, nothing is more difficult than to express learned ideas so that every one must understand them. All the arts I have cited above are superfluous if the writer really possesses any intellect, for it allows a man to show himself as he is and verifies for all time what Horace said: *Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons*.

But this class of authors is like certain workers in metal, who try a hundred different compositions to take the place of gold, which is the only metal that can never have a substitute. On the contrary, there is nothing an author should guard against more than the apparent endeavour to show more intellect than he has; because this rouses the suspicion in the reader that he has very little, since a man always affects something, be its nature what it may, that he does not really possess. And this is why it is praise to an author to call him naïve, for it signifies that he may show himself as he is. In general, naïveté attracts, while anything that is unnatural everywhere repels. We also find that every true thinker endeavours to express his thoughts as purely, clearly, definitely, and concisely as ever possible. This is why simplicity has always been looked upon as a token, not only of truth, but also of genius. Style receives its beauty from the thought expressed, while with those writers who only pretend to think it is their thoughts that are said to be fine because of their style. Style is merely the silhouette of thought; and to write in a vague or bad style means a stupid or confused mind.

Hence, the first rule — nay, this in itself is almost sufficient for a good style — is this, that the author should have something to say. Ah! this implies a great deal. The neglect of this rule is a fundamental characteristic of the philosophical, and generally speaking of all the reflective authors in Germany, especially since the time of Fichte. It is obvious that all these writers wish to appear to have something to say, while they have nothing to say. This mannerism was introduced by the pseudo-philosophers of the Universities and may be discerned everywhere, even among the first literary notabilities of the age. It is the mother of that forced and vague style which seems to have two, nay, many meanings, as well as of that prolix and ponderous style, *le stile empesé*; and of that no less useless bombastic style, and finally of that mode of concealing the most awful poverty of thought under a babble of inexhaustible chatter that resembles a clacking mill and is just as stupefying: one may read for hours together without getting hold of a single clearly defined and definite idea. The *Halleschen*, afterwards called the *Deutschen Jahrbücher*, furnishes almost throughout excellent examples of this style of writing. The Germans, by the way, from

force of habit read page after page of all kinds of such verbiage without getting any definite idea of what the author really means: they think it all very proper and do not discover that he is writing merely for the sake of writing. On the other hand, a good author who is rich in ideas soon gains the reader's credit of having really and truly something to say; and this gives the intelligent reader patience to follow him attentively. An author of this kind will always express himself in the simplest and most direct manner, for the very reason that he really has something to say; because he wishes to awaken in the reader the same idea he has in his own mind and no other. Accordingly he will be able to say with Boileau —

“Ma pensée au grand jour partout s'offre et s'expose,

Et mon vers, bien ou mal, dit toujours quelque chose;”

while of those previously described writers it may be said, in the words of the same poet, et qui parlant beaucoup ne disent jamais rien. It is also a characteristic of such writers to avoid, if it is possible, expressing themselves definitely, so that they may be always able in case of need to get out of a difficulty; this is why they always choose the more abstract expressions: while people of intellect choose the more concrete; because the latter bring the matter closer to view, which is the source of all evidence. This preference for abstract expressions may be confirmed by numerous examples: a specially ridiculous example is the following. Throughout German literature of the last ten years we find “to condition” almost everywhere used in place of “to cause” or “to effect.” Since it is more abstract and indefinite it says less than it implies, and consequently leaves a little back door open to please those whose secret consciousness of their own incapacity inspires them with a continual fear of all definite expressions. While with other people it is merely the effect of that national tendency to immediately imitate everything that is stupid in literature and wicked in life; this is shown in either case by the quick way in which it spreads. The Englishman depends on his own judgment both in what he writes and what he does, but this applies less to the German than to any other nation. In consequence of the state of things referred to, the words “to cause” and “to effect” have almost entirely disappeared from the literature of the last ten years, and people everywhere talk of “to condition.” The fact is worth mentioning because it is characteristically ridiculous. Everyday authors are only half conscious when they write, a fact which accounts for their want of intellect and the tediousness of their writings; they do not really themselves understand the meaning of their own words, because they take ready-made words and learn them. Hence they combine whole phrases more than words — phrases banales. This accounts for that obviously characteristic want of clearly defined thought; in fact, they lack the die that stamps their thoughts, they have no clear thought of their own; in place of it we find an indefinite, obscure interweaving of words, current phrases, worn-out terms of speech, and fashionable expressions. The result is that their foggy kind of writing is like print that has been done with old type. On the other hand, intelligent people really speak to us in their writings, and this is why they are able to both move and entertain us. It is only intelligent writers who place individual words together with a full consciousness of their use and select them with deliberation. Hence their style of writing bears the same relation to that of those authors described above, as a picture that is really painted does to one that has been executed with stencil. In the first instance every word, just as every stroke of the brush, has some special significance, while in the other everything is done mechanically.

The same distinction may be observed in music. For it is the omnipresence of intellect that always and everywhere characterises the works of the genius; and analogous to this is Lichtenberg's observation, namely, that Garrick's soul was omnipresent in all the muscles of his body. With regard to the tediousness of the writings referred to above, it is to be observed in general that there are two kinds of tediousness — an objective and a subjective. The objective form of tediousness springs from the deficiency of which we have been speaking — that is to say, where the author has no perfectly clear thought or knowledge to communicate. For if a writer possesses any clear thought or knowledge it will be his aim to communicate it, and he will work with this end in view; consequently the ideas he furnishes are everywhere clearly defined, so that he is neither diffuse, unmeaning, nor confused, and consequently not tedious. Even if his fundamental idea is wrong, yet in such a case it will be clearly thought out and well pondered; in other words, it is at least formally correct, and the writing is always of some value. While, for the same reason, a work that is objectively tedious is at all times without value. Again, subjective tediousness is merely relative: this is because the reader is not interested in the subject of the work, and that what he takes an interest in is of a very limited nature. The most excellent work may therefore be tedious subjectively to this or that person, just as, vice versâ, the worst work may be subjectively diverting to this or that person: because he is interested in either the subject or the writer of the book.

It would be of general service to German authors if they discerned that while a man should, if possible, think like a great mind, he should speak the same language as every other person. Men should use common words to say uncommon things, but they do the reverse. We find them trying to envelop trivial ideas in grand words and to dress their very ordinary thoughts in the most extraordinary expressions and the most outlandish, artificial, and rarest phrases. Their sentences perpetually stalk about on stilts. With regard to their delight in bombast, and to their writing generally in a grand, puffed-up, unreal, hyperbolic, and acrobatic style, their prototype is Pistol, who was once impatiently requested by Falstaff, his friend, to “say what you have to say, like a man of this world!”(1)

There is no expression in the German language exactly corresponding to *stile empesé*; but the thing itself is all the more prevalent. When combined with unnaturalness it is in works what affected gravity, grandness, and unnaturalness are in social intercourse; and it is just as intolerable. Poverty of intellect is fond of wearing this dress; just as stupid people in everyday life are fond of assuming gravity and formality.

A man who writes in this *preziös* style is like a person who dresses himself up to avoid being mistaken for or confounded with the mob; a danger which a gentleman, even in his worst clothes, does not run. Hence just as a plebeian is recognised by a certain display in his dress and his *tiré à quatre épingles*, so is an ordinary writer recognised by his style.

If a man has something to say that is worth saying, he need not envelop it in affected expressions, involved phrases, and enigmatical innuendoes; but he may rest assured that by expressing himself in a simple, clear, and naïve manner he will not fail to produce the right effect. A man who makes use of such artifices as have been alluded to betrays his poverty of ideas, mind, and knowledge.

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to attempt to write exactly as one speaks. Every style of

writing should bear a certain trace of relationship with the monumental style, which is, indeed, the ancestor of all styles; so that to write as one speaks is just as faulty as to do the reverse, that is to say, to try and speak as one writes. This makes the author pedantic, and at the same time difficult to understand.

Obscurity and vagueness of expression are at all times and everywhere a very bad sign. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred they arise from vagueness of thought, which, in its turn, is almost always fundamentally discordant, inconsistent, and therefore wrong. When a right thought springs up in the mind it strives after clearness of expression, and it soon attains it, for clear thought easily finds its appropriate expression. A man who is capable of thinking can express himself at all times in clear, comprehensible, and unambiguous words. Those writers who construct difficult, obscure, involved, and ambiguous phrases most certainly do not rightly know what it is they wish to say: they have only a dull consciousness of it, which is still struggling to put itself into thought; they also often wish to conceal from themselves and other people that in reality they have nothing to say. Like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, they wish to appear to know what they do not know, to think what they do not think, and to say what they do not say.

Will a man, then, who has something real to impart endeavour to say it in a clear or an indistinct way? Quintilian has already said, *plerumque accidit ut faciliora sint ad intelligendum et lucidiora multo, quae a doctissimo quoque dicuntur... . Erit ergo etiam obscurior, quo quisque deterior.*

A man's way of expressing himself should not be enigmatical, but he should know whether he has something to say or whether he has not. It is an uncertainty of expression which makes German writers so dull. The only exceptional cases are those where a man wishes to express something that is in some respect of an illicit nature. As anything that is far-fetched generally produces the reverse of what the writer has aimed at, so do words serve to make thought comprehensible; but only up to a certain point. If words are piled up beyond this point they make the thought that is being communicated more and more obscure. To hit that point is the problem of style and a matter of discernment; for every superfluous word prevents its purpose being carried out. Voltaire means this when he says: *l'adjectif est l'ennemi du substantif.* (But, truly, many authors try to hide their poverty of thought under a superfluity of words.)

Accordingly, all prolixity and all binding together of unmeaning observations that are not worth reading should be avoided. A writer must be sparing with the reader's time, concentration, and patience; in this way he makes him believe that what he has before him is worth his careful reading, and will repay the trouble he has spent upon it. It is always better to leave out something that is good than to write down something that is not worth saying. Hesiod's [Greek: *pleon haemisu pantos*](2) finds its right application. In fact, not to say everything! *Le secret pour être ennuyeux, c'est de tout dire.* Therefore, if possible, the quintessence only! the chief matter only! nothing that the reader would think for himself. The use of many words in order to express little thought is everywhere the infallible sign of mediocrity; while to clothe much thought in a few words is the infallible sign of distinguished minds.

Truth that is naked is the most beautiful, and the simpler its expression the deeper is the impression it makes; this is partly because it gets unobstructed hold of the hearer's mind

without his being distracted by secondary thoughts, and partly because he feels that here he is not being corrupted or deceived by the arts of rhetoric, but that the whole effect is got from the thing itself. For instance, what declamation on the emptiness of human existence could be more impressive than Job's: *Homo, natus de muliere, brevi vivit tempore, repletus multis miseriis, qui, tanquam flos, egreditur et conteritur, et fugit velut umbra.* It is for this very reason that the naïve poetry of Goethe is so incomparably greater than the rhetorical of Schiller. This is also why many folk-songs have so great an effect upon us. An author should guard against using all unnecessary rhetorical adornment, all useless amplification, and in general, just as in architecture he should guard against an excess of decoration, all superfluity of expression — in other words, he must aim at chastity of style. Everything that is redundant has a harmful effect. The law of simplicity and naïveté applies to all fine art, for it is compatible with what is most sublime.

True brevity of expression consists in a man only saying what is worth saying, while avoiding all diffuse explanations of things which every one can think out for himself; that is, it consists in his correctly distinguishing between what is necessary and what is superfluous. On the other hand, one should never sacrifice clearness, to say nothing of grammar, for the sake of being brief. To impoverish the expression of a thought, or to obscure or spoil the meaning of a period for the sake of using fewer words shows a lamentable want of judgment. And this is precisely what that false brevity nowadays in vogue is trying to do, for writers not only leave out words that are to the purpose, but even grammatical and logical essentials.(3)

Subjectivity, which is an error of style in German literature, is, through the deteriorated condition of literature and neglect of old languages, becoming more common. By subjectivity I mean when a writer thinks it sufficient for himself to know what he means and wants to say, and it is left to the reader to discover what is meant. Without troubling himself about his reader, he writes as if he were holding a monologue; whereas it should be a dialogue, and, moreover, a dialogue in which he must express himself all the more clearly as the questions of the reader cannot be heard. And it is for this very reason that style should not be subjective but objective, and for it to be objective the words must be written in such a way as to directly compel the reader to think precisely the same as the author thought. This will only be the case when the author has borne in mind that thoughts, inasmuch as they follow the law of gravity, pass more easily from head to paper than from paper to head. Therefore the journey from paper to head must be helped by every means at his command. When he does this his words have a purely objective effect, like that of a completed oil painting; while the subjective style is not much more certain in its effect than spots on the wall, and it is only the man whose fantasy is accidentally aroused by them that sees figures; other people only see blurs. The difference referred to applies to every style of writing as a whole, and it is also often met with in particular instances; for example, I read in a book that has just been published: I have not written to increase the number of existing books. This means exactly the opposite of what the writer had in view, and is nonsense into the bargain.

A man who writes carelessly at once proves that he himself puts no great value on his own thoughts. For it is only by being convinced of the truth and importance of our thoughts that there arises in us the inspiration necessary for the inexhaustible patience to discover the clearest, finest, and most powerful expression for them; just as one puts holy relics or

priceless works of art in silver or golden receptacles. It was for this reason that the old writers — whose thoughts, expressed in their own words, have lasted for thousands of years and hence bear the honoured title of classics — wrote with universal care. Plato, indeed, is said to have written the introduction to his Republic seven times with different modifications. On the other hand, the Germans are conspicuous above all other nations for neglect of style in writing, as they are for neglect of dress, both kinds of slovenliness which have their source in the German national character. Just as neglect of dress betrays contempt for the society in which a man moves, so does a hasty, careless, and bad style show shocking disrespect for the reader, who then rightly punishes it by not reading the book.

Notes

(1) Schopenhauer here gives an example of this bombastic style which would be of little interest to English readers. — TRANSLATOR.

(2) Opera et dies, v. 40.

(3) Schopenhauer here at length points out various common errors in the writing and speaking of German which would lose significance in a translation. — TR.