



SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STYLE AND ABILITY

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: In the sea of literature every part communicates with every other part; there are no land-locked lakes. It was with an eye to this system that I originally recommended you to start with Lamb. Lamb, if you are his intimate, has already brought you into relations with a number of other prominent writers with whom you can in turn be intimate, and who will be particularly useful to you. Among these are Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt. You cannot know Lamb without knowing these men, and some of them are of the highest importance.

INTRODUCTION

From the circle of Lamb's own work you may go off at a tangent at various points, according to your inclination. If, for instance, you are drawn towards poetry, you cannot, in all English literature, make a better start than with Wordsworth. And Wordsworth will send you backwards to a comprehension of the poets against whose influence Wordsworth fought.

When you have understood Wordsworth's and Coleridge's "Lyrical Ballads", and Wordsworth's defense of them, you will be in a position to judge poetry in general. If, again, your mind hankers after an earlier and more romantic literature, Lamb's "Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Contemporary with Shakespeare" has already, in an enchanting fashion, piloted you into a vast gulf of "the sea which is Shakespeare."

Again, in Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt you will discover essayists inferior only to Lamb himself, and critics perhaps not inferior. Hazlitt is unsurpassed as a critic. His judgments are convincing and his enthusiasm of the most catching nature. Having arrived at Hazlitt or Leigh Hunt, you can branch off once more at any one of ten thousand points into still wider circles. And thus you may continue up and down the centuries as far as you like, yea, even to Chaucer.

Here we would like to discuss about the similarities and differences between style and ability. In discussing the value of particular books, we have heard people say— people who were timid about expressing their views of literature in the presence of literary men:

- "It may be bad from a literary point of view, but there are very good things in it." Or:
- "I dare say the style is very bad, but really the book is very interesting and suggestive." Or:
- "I'm not an expert, and so I never bother my head about good style.

All I ask for is good matter. And when I have got it, critics may say what they like about the book." And many other similar remarks, all showing that in the minds of the speakers there existed a notion that style is something supplementary to, and distinguishable from, matter; a sort of notion that a writer who wanted to be classical had first to find and arrange his matter, and then dress it up elegantly in a costume of style, in order to please beings called literary critics.

This is a misapprehension. Style cannot be distinguished from matter. When a writer conceives an idea he conceives it in a form of words. That form of words constitutes his style, and it is absolutely governed by the idea. The idea can only exist in words, and it can only exist in one form of words. You cannot say exactly the same thing in two different ways. Slightly alter the expression, and you slightly alter the idea. Surely it is obvious that the expression cannot be altered without altering the thing expressed! A writer, having conceived and expressed an idea, may, and probably will, "polish it up." But what does he polish up? To say that he polishes up his style is merely to say that he is polishing up his idea, that he has discovered faults or imperfections in his idea, and is perfecting it .

An idea exists in proportion as it is expressed; it exists when it is expressed, and not before. It expresses itself. A clear idea is expressed clearly, and a vague idea vaguely. You need but take your own case and your own speech. For just as science is the development of common-sense, so is literature the development of common daily speech. The difference between science and common-sense is simply one of degree; similarly with speech and literature. Well, when you "know what you think," you succeed in saying what you think, in making yourself understood. When you "don't know what to think," your expressive tongue halts. And note how in daily life the characteristics of your style follow your mood; how tender it is when you are tender, how violent when you are violent.

You have said to yourself in moments of emotion: "If only I could write—," etc. You were wrong. You ought to have said: "If only I could "think"— on this high plane." When you have thought clearly you have never had any difficulty in saying what you thought, though you may occasionally have had some difficulty in keeping it to yourself. And when you cannot express yourself, depend upon it that you have nothing precise to express, and that what incommodes you is not the vain desire to express, but the vain desire to think more clearly. All this just to illustrate how style and matter are co-existent, and inseparable, and alike.

You cannot have good matter with bad style. Examine the point more closely. A man wishes to convey a fine idea to you. He employs a form of words. That form of words is his style. Having read, you say: "Yes, this idea is fine." The writer has therefore achieved his end. But in what imaginable circumstances can you say: "Yes, this idea is fine, but the style is not fine"? The sole medium of communication between you and the author has been the form of words. The fine idea has reached you. How? In the words, by the words. Hence the fineness must be in the words. You may say, superiorly: "He has expressed himself clumsily, but I can see what he means." By what light? By something in the words, in the style. That something is fine. Moreover, if the style is clumsy, are you sure that you can see what he means? You cannot be quite sure. And at any rate, you cannot see distinctly. The "matter" is what actually reaches you, and it must necessarily be affected by the style.

Still further to comprehend what style is, let me ask you to think of a writer's style exactly as you would think of the gestures and manners of an acquaintance. You know the man whose demeanour is "always calm," but whose passions are strong. How do you know that his passions are strong? Because he "gives them away" by some small, but important, part of his demeanour, such as the twitching of a lip or the whitening of the knuckles caused by clenching the hand. In other words, his demeanour, fundamentally, is not calm. You know the man who is always "smoothly polite and agreeable," but who affects you unpleasantly. Why does he affect you unpleasantly? Because he is tedious, and therefore disagreeable, and because his politeness is not real politeness.

You know the man who is awkward, shy, clumsy, but who, nevertheless, impresses you with a sense of dignity and force. Why? Because mingled with that awkwardness and so forth *is* dignity. You know the blunt, rough fellow whom you instinctively guess to be affectionate— because there is "something in his tone" or "something in his eyes." In every instance the demeanour, while perhaps seeming to be contrary to the character, is really in accord with it. The demeanour never contradicts the character. It is one part of the character that contradicts another part of the character. For, after all, the blunt man is blunt, and the awkward man is awkward, and these characteristics are defects. The demeanour merely expresses them. The two men would be better if, while conserving their good qualities, they had the superficial attributes of smoothness and agreeableness possessed by the gentleman who is unpleasant to you. And as regards this latter, it is not his superficial attributes which are unpleasant to you; but his other qualities. In the end the character is shown in the demeanour; and the demeanour is a consequence of the character and resembles the character.

So with style and matter. You may argue that the blunt, rough man's demeanour is unfair to his tenderness. I do not think so. For his churlishness is really very trying and painful, even to the man's wife, though a moment's tenderness will make her and you forget it. The man really is churlish, and much more often than he is tender. His demeanour is merely just to his character. So, when a writer annoys you for ten pages and then enchants you for ten lines, you must not explode against his style. You must not say that his style won't let his matter "come out." You must remember the churlish, tender man. The more you reflect, the more clearly you will see that faults and excellences of style are faults and excellences of matter itself.

One of the most striking illustrations of this neglected truth is Thomas Carlyle. How often has it been said that Carlyle's matter is marred by the harshness and the eccentricities of his style? But Carlyle's matter is harsh and eccentric to precisely the same degree as his style is harsh and eccentric. Carlyle was harsh and eccentric. His behaviour was frequently ridiculous, if it were not abominable. His judgments were often extremely bizarre. When you read one of Carlyle's fierce diatribes, you say to yourself: "This is splendid. The man's enthusiasm for justice and truth is glorious." But you also say: "He is a little unjust and a little untruthful. He goes too far. He lashes too hard." These things are not the style; they are the matter. And when, as in his greatest moments, he is emotional and restrained at once, you say: "This is the real Carlyle." Kindly notice how perfect the style has become! No harshnesses or eccentricities now! And if that particular matter is the "real" Carlyle, then that particular style is Carlyle's "real" style. But when you say "real" you would more properly say "best." "This is the best Carlyle." If Carlyle had always been at his best he would have counted among the supreme geniuses of the world. But he was a mixture. His style is the expression of the mixture. The faults are only in the style because they are in the matter.

One will find that, in classical literature, the style always follows the mood of the matter. Thus, Charles Lamb's essay on "Dream Children" begins quite simply, in a calm, narrative manner, enlivened by a

certain quippishness concerning the children. The style is grave when great-grandmother Field is the subject, and when the author passes to a rather elaborate impression of the picturesque old mansion it becomes as it were consciously beautiful. This beauty is intensified in the description of the still more beautiful garden. But the real dividing point of the essay occurs when Lamb approaches his elder brother. He unmistakably marks the point with the phrase: "Then, in somewhat a more heightened tone, I told how," etc.

Henceforward the style increases in fervor and in solemnity until the culmination of the essay is reached: "And while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech...." Throughout, the style is governed by the matter. "Well," you say, "of course it is. It couldn't be otherwise. If it were otherwise it would be ridiculous. A man who made love as though he were preaching a sermon, or a man who preached a sermon as though he were teasing schoolboys, or a man who described a death as though he were describing a practical joke, must necessarily be either an ass or a lunatic." Just so. You have put it in a nutshell. You have disposed of the problem of style so far as it can be disposed of.

But what do those people mean who say: "I read such and such an author for the beauty of his style alone"? When you read a book there are only three things of which you may be conscious:

- (1) The significance of the words, which is inseparably bound up with the thought.
- (2) The look of the printed words on the page—I do not suppose that anybody reads any author for the visual beauty of the words on the page.
- (3) The sound of the words, either actually uttered or imagined by the brain to be uttered.

Now it is indubitable that words differ in beauty of sound. To my mind one of the most beautiful words in the English language is "pavement." Enunciate it, study its sound, and see what you think. It is also indubitable that certain combinations of words have a more beautiful sound than certain other combinations. But does it live in the memory as one of the rare great Tennysonian lines? It does not. It has charm, but the charm is merely curious or pretty. A whole poem composed of lines with no better recommendation than that line has would remain merely curious or pretty.

It would not permanently interest. It would be as insipid as a pretty woman who had nothing behind her prettiness. It would not live. One may remark in this connection how the merely verbal felicities of Tennyson have lost our esteem. Who will now proclaim the **Idylls of the King** as a masterpiece? Of the thousands of lines written by him which please the ear, only those survive of which the matter is charged with emotion. No! As regards the man who professes to read an author "for his style alone," I am inclined to think either that he will soon get sick of that author, or that he is deceiving himself and means the author's general temperament—not the author's verbal style, but a peculiar quality which runs through all the matter written by the author. Just as one may like a man for something which is always coming out of him, which one cannot define, and which is of the very essence of the man.

In judging the style of an author, you must employ the same canons as you use in judging men. If you do this you will not be tempted to attach importance to trifles that are negligible. There can be no lasting friendship without respect. If an author's style is such that you cannot **respect** it, then you may be sure that, despite any present pleasure which you may obtain from that author, there is something wrong with his matter, and that the pleasure will soon cloy. You must examine your sentiments towards an author.

If when you have read an author you are pleased, without being conscious of aught but his mellifluousness, just conceive what your feelings would be after spending a month's holiday with a

merely mellifluous man. If an author's style has pleased you, but done nothing except make you giggle, then reflect upon the ultimate tediousness of the man who can do nothing but jest. On the other hand, if you are impressed by what an author has said to you, but are aware of verbal clumsiness in his work, you need worry about his "bad style" exactly as much and exactly as little as you would worry about the manners of a kindhearted, keen-brained friend who was dangerous to carpets with a tea-cup in his hand. The friend's antics in a drawing-room are somewhat regrettable, but you would not say of him that his manners were bad.

Again, if an author's style dazzles you instantly and blinds you to everything except its brilliant self, ask your soul, before you begin to admire his matter, what would be your final opinion of a man who at the first meeting fired his personality into you like a broadside. Reflect that, as a rule, the people whom you have come to esteem communicated themselves to you gradually, that they did not begin the entertainment with fireworks. In short, look at literature as you would look at life, and you cannot fail to perceive that, essentially, the style is the man. Decidedly you will never assert that you care nothing for style, that your enjoyment of an author's matter is unaffected by his style. And you will never assert, either, that style alone suffices for you.

If you are undecided upon a question of style, whether leaning to the favourable or to the unfavourable, the most prudent course is to forget that literary style exists. For, indeed, as style is understood by most people who have not analysed their impressions under the influence of literature, there *is* no such thing as literary style. You cannot divide literature into two elements and say: This is matter and that style. Further, the significance and the worth of literature are to be comprehended and assessed in the same way as the significance and the worth of any other phenomenon: by the exercise of common-sense.

Common-sense will tell you that nobody, not even a genius, can be simultaneously vulgar and distinguished, or beautiful and ugly, or precise and vague, or tender and harsh. And common-sense will therefore tell you that to try to set up vital contradictions between matter and style is absurd. When there is a superficial contradiction, one of the two mutually-contradicting qualities is of far less importance than the other. If you refer literature to the standards of life, common-sense will at once decide which quality should count heaviest in your esteem. You will be in no danger of weighing a mere maladroitness of manner against a fine trait of character, or of letting a graceful deportment blind you to a fundamental vacuity. When in doubt, ignore style, and think of the matter as you would think of an individual.

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