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THE CRAFT OF WORDS.

Lee Vernon

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The art of Writing, like every other art, may be divided into two parts: one which cannot be taught, and one which can.

You cannot teach the Writer to feel life in a manner such as to make it worthwhile that his feelings be communicated to others. But you can teach the Writer to communicate such feelings as he has, whether worthy or not of communication, by the skilful manipulation of the Reader's mind. For the craft of Writing is based upon the psychological fact that, to an extent unknown in other arts, the literary work of art is dependent on two persons, the one who speaks and the one who listens, the one who explains and the one who understands, the Writer and the Reader; a fact which resolves itself into the still more fundamental fact, that the words which are the Writer's materials for expression are but the symbol of the ideas already existing in the mind of the Reader; and that, in reality, the Reader's mind is the Writer's palette. The Writer's materials are words, and those groupings, larger and smaller, of words which we call sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and other groupings for which we have no name, but which contain such groupings as, say, parenthetical passages, explanations, retrospects, and so forth; and it is by arranging these that he copies, so to speak, his own feelings and ideas. But these words, are in reality merely signals which call up the various items -visual, audible, tactile, emotional, and of a hundred different other sorts -which have been deposited by chance in the mind of the Reader. The words are what the Writer manipulates in the first instance, as the pianist manipulates in the first instance the keys of his instrument. But behind the keyboard of the piano is an arrangement of hammers and strings; and behind the words are the contents of the Reader's consciousness; and what makes the melody, the harmony, is the vibration of the strings, the awakening of the impressions in the consciousness.

The Writer is really playing upon the contents of the Reader's mind, as the pianist, although his fingers touch only the keyboard, is really playing on the strings. And the response to the manipulation is due, in both cases, to the quality of what is at first not visible: the Reader's consciousness, the living, vibrating string.

The efficacy of any word or class of words depends upon the particular nature and experience of the individual reader or class of reader. It is evident, for instance, that a man born blind will not respond to words intended to awaken visual images; and that a man in possession of his sight, but employing it only so far as indispensable for his convenience, will feel the efficacy of visual nouns and adjectives only in a negative way. Moreover, the experiences of each individual Reader will have given some kinds of stored-up impressions a greater tendency to reappear in his mind than others; we all know how different people will single out different passages of the same book as having impressed them. A soldier, for instance, will be more impressed by those words and sentences in a story by Mr. Kipling which evoke, or can evoke, images and feelings connected with barrack life; while a painter, no doubt, will scarcely notice those words and sentences, but will feel very keenly the passages, the adjectives and metaphors evoking aspects of sky and water and moving outlines of figures.

Words will be efficacious in many ways, and through two reasons; their familiarity on the one hand, and their unfamiliarity on the other. A word which is very frequently employed and in a very great variety of circumstances, will tend to become very wide in meaning and very massive, as psychologists express it, in the kind of feeling it awakens; each successive use of the word, implying, as it does, a state of mind, a way of thinking or feeling, leaves clinging to that word something of that state of mind, of that way of thinking and feeling.

And in this way the word becomes exceedingly composite, something like a composite photograph; through the accumulation of different meanings which have been connected it will widen out its general meaning, and widen also, to the extent sometimes of obliterating all special quality, the feeling attached to it. Think of such a word as Sea. It awakens in our mind an incredible number of possible visual, audible, sensible, and emotional impressions: wide, deep, wet, green, blue, briny, stormy, serene, a thing to swim or drown in, connecting or severing countries; moreover, a word which may awaken in our mind, because it has been accompanied with so many different ones, feelings of gladness or terror or sorrow. Thus, the word Sea is one of those which suggest most, but also most confusedly; and it is a word, also, which we probably none of us hear without a degree of emotion, infinitely more emotion than, say, a word like Bay or Gulf-but an emotion so compounded of different emotions as to be quite unclassifiable, and perceptible only as a very vague, faint general excitement. These images and states of mind, which a word brings up because they have accompanied it, are what I should wish every Writer to analyse as a deliberate exercise, unless he is already

extremely aware of their peculiarities; and those are what I mean by the commutations of words.

I have now come to the point where I want to direct your attention to the most important question in all literary craft, the question, if I may call it so for greater briefness, of the Adjective. I believe that you will find in dictionaries and grammars that the Adjective is the word which serves to qualify a noun. I am taking it in a much wider sense, and as including, besides the kind of word grammatically licensed to qualify nouns, and the other kind of word, namely, the adverb, grammatically licensed to qualify verbs, every kind of word of whatsoever category which serves to qualify another word; and also, every form of speech, comparison, metaphor, or even descriptive or narrative fragment, which does duty to qualify other parts of speech or fragments of statements. For all writing consists in two processes, very distinctly separate: a process of awakening ideas which are already existing, ready for combination in the mind of the Reader; and a process of qualifying those ideas by the suggestion of other ideas, in order that the principal ideas or sets of ideas be not only matched as closely as possible with the ideas or sets of ideas occupying the mind of the Writer, but that these principal ideas or sets of ideas should lead more irresistibly or easily to the other ideas or sets of ideas which are to follow. For we must remember always that the business of writing is not with effects co-existent like the obvious effects of painting, but rather successive, existing essentially in time, like the obvious effects of music. I have been pointing out to you that a word taken separately, for instance any noun, awakens an image in the mind which is apt to be complex and vague, and self-contradictory, because every time that the word has been used it has been used in slightly varying circumstances, a deposit of each of which has been left, more or less faintly, in the mind. Nearly every word has meant, turn about, so many different main calls on our attention; the word Sea, for instance, has meant, turn about or simultaneously, an impression of sight, colour, sound, smell, breath, and so forth, and what is more, a different kind of impression of each of these kinds, so that in order to awaken the particular impression we want, we have to cut off the possibility of some or all the others being revived. We have to shut the doors to impressions we do not want and to concentrate, in a way to canalise, in a particular direction those which we do want.

That which thus acts as a door to exclude irrelevancies, as an embankment to concentrate impressions, and again, as a signpost (forgive this confusion of metaphors) to indicate the direction of future impression, nay, as a window through which to catch glimpses of the impressions we are heading for, -this qualifier, adjective, adverb, or adjectively- or adverbially-employed metaphor, simile, or bare fact, is the chief instrument by which the Writer can rearrange the thoughts and feelings of the Reader in such a way as to mirror his own. Hence one might take it as one of the first precepts of writing that no adjective, by which I mean no qualifier, is ever without a result. You may, perhaps, merely waste principal items, facts, nouns, and verbs which are not acting as qualifiers; but you cannot merely

waste an adjective or qualifier: an adjective, if it does not help you, goes against you.

Adjectives are usually imagined to add something to nouns, and this slovenly notion is perhaps responsible for some amount of bad writing. A noun is almost always the representation of reiterated experiences of a similar kind, and it is always the representative of a simultaneous combination of many kinds of impression: it represents different modes of perception or emotion, even if it does not represent different occasions on which these different modes of perception or emotion have been united. This being the case, it is most improbable that the Writer will ever want to revive at once all the impressions grouped simultaneously under the heading of this noun, and I think I may boldly say that it is impossible he can ever want to revive at once all the impressions which, on successive occasions, have become stored up as a part and parcel of this noun. Consequently, one principal use of the adjective will be to direct the Reader's attention to the particular portions of the noun which are to be revived; the adjective will limit the noun; as, for instance, when we speak of the stormy sea, or the blue sea, we are not adding to the impressions conveyed by the word sea, but, on the contrary, diminishing them .

It is probably the increasing richness of connotation of nouns, a richness due to the constant addition made by every human being's experience, which accounts for the increasing use of adjectives. The very early ancients, the northern writers of the Middle Ages, did not require to use adjectives as much as we do, because their nouns were poor in significance, had, so to speak, few aspects, and they were, therefore, not obliged to limit the significance, to select the aspect; similarly, as regards all visual impressions, with the writers of the eighteenth century: they did not care for the visible aspects of things, and words, therefore, suggested to them but very few visible aspects among which to select—a hill was a hill, not a rounded hill or a peaky hill, so it was quite enough to say hill, or at most to say that it was a horrid hill; since to those comfortable, sedentary people there existed only two kinds of hill—the hill easy to climb and with a bench on the top, and the hill without a bench, and, owing to its difficulty of climbing, practically without a top.

The strings of the piano, whose vibrations the pianist selects and groups into patterns, have been arranged to suit the necessities of piano playing. They represent the convenience of generations of pianists. Moreover, the strings of the piano stay quiet when they are not struck by the hammer which the pianist's finger brings down on them by touching the keys; and a note does not suddenly ring out, and then another note, quite unexpectedly, because some other note has been struck with which they had some affinity unknown to the player. But the instrument played upon by the Writer, namely, the mind of his Reader, has not been arranged for the purpose of thus being played upon, and its strings do not wait to vibrate in obedience to the Writer's touch, but are for ever sounding and jangling on their own account. The impressions, the ideas, and emotions stored up in the

mind of the Reader, and which it is the business of the Writer to awaken in such combinations and successions as answer to his own thoughts and moods-these, which you must allow me to call, in psychologist' s jargon, "Units of Consciousness," have been deposited where they are by the random hand of circumstance, by the accident of temperament and vicissitudes, and in heaps or layers which represent merely the caprice or necessity of individual experience. They are a chaos; but-what is worse for the Writer who wishes to rearrange them to suit his thought or mood-they are chaos of living, moving things. For the contents of our mind, the deposit of our life, obey a law on which depends all the success and all the failure of writing: the law of the Association of Ideas; that is to say, the necessity, whose reason is one of the great problems of mental science, of starting into activity, in the order in which they were originally stored up, the various items united in our real experience tending to awaken one another in our memory. But, besides this storage of the Reader's thoughts and feelings (or their rudiments) in layers answering to the accident of life, there is another typical kind of such storage which will give the Writer, in his attempts to rearrange the Reader's mind, an equal amount of trouble, I mean the storage by the process of rough and ready practical classification, which comes as the result of life also. Let me explain myself : a certain shape of house, a certain tone of voice, a certain philosophical view, a certain sensation of warmth, a smell of wet earth or warm fir trees have been stored up together accidentally; but the operation of constantly comparing and sorting one's own impressions-which the very fact of living, of ordering our conduct, is constantly forcing on us, and which goes on for ever in the individual and the race-may have rearranged these impressions in its abstract pigeon holes; that particular shape of house will have been thrust unconsciously into the same heap with other shapes of houses; the tone of voice, the contralto notes, say, will have been bundled together with other tones of voice, other contraltos, and probably with tenors and basses and trebles; the philosophical opinion will have been thrown on to the other philosophical opinions, and the sensations of warmth, the smell of wet earth or warm fir trees, will be somewhere in the same box as other sensations of temperature and other smells. Hence, there is as much possibility of any of these items of consciousness, if touched by the Writer, if made to vibrate under the pressure of the signalling word, there is as much probability of any of these items of consciousness evoking its neighbours in the dull, abstract order of work-a-day classification, as in the vivid emotional order of actual individual experience.

And out of this accidental chaos, out of this rough and ready classification, out of twenty different possibilities of storage and neighbourhood, the Writer must summon up such items of the Reader's consciousness as he wants for his particular purposes; the Writer must select, for the formation of his particular pattern of thought or fact or mood, such as he requires among these living molecules of memory, such and such only as he wants - not one other, on pain of spoiling his pattern- and for this he has to make use of that very fact of association of ideas which

seems so much against him, finding the secret of wakening ideas by other ideas-the secret of putting ideas to sleep also.

It is by this selection and arrangement of the essential virtues (if I may use the expression) of words that we communicate not merely the facts of life, but, so to say, the quality of those facts; that we make the Reader feel that these are facts, not merely of life in general, but of the life of one particular kind of temperament and not of another.

There are words which, owing to their extreme precision-a precision demanding time for thorough realisation, or to their excessive philosophical generality, causing the mind to lose time in long divagations-there are words which make the Reader think and feel, in a way live, slowly; and there are other words which make the Reader think, feel, and live quickly, and quickly and smoothly, or quickly and jerkily, as the case may be. Above all, there are arrangements of words- combinations of action and reaction of word upon word, which, by opening up vistas or closing them, make the Reader's mind dawdle, hurry, or labour busily along. Now, by a law of our mental constitution, whatever kind of movement a picture, a piece of music, or a page of writing sets up in us, that particular kind of movement do we attribute to the objects represented or suggested by the picture, the music, or the writing; it is no idle affectation, no mere conventional desire to make things match, which makes us hate the lengthy telling of a brief moment, the jerky description of a solemn fact. We dislike it because two contrary kinds of action are being set up in our mind; because the fact related is forcing us to one sort of pace, to what is even more important, one sort of rhythm, and the words relating that fact are forcing us to another pace, to another rhythm. Some of the most extraordinary effects in literature are due to the accidental, unconscious meeting of a subject and a selection of words which reinforce one another too much. Neither the fact nor the wording is in itself overwhelming, but the joint action of the two overwhelms one. Thus Flaubert, by his enormous abundance of precise visual adjectives, by his obvious elaboration and finish, turns passing effects into unchanging pictures. There is probably twice as much adventure, hairbreadth escape, intrigue, and so forth, in "Salambo" as in the "Master of Ballantrae"; yet while the personages in Stevenson's story affect us as in perpetual agitation, the people in Flaubert's great novel seem never to be doing anything; to be posing in tableaux vivants, or, at the utmost, moving rhythmically for the display of costumes and attributes, like figures in a grand ballet.

On the other hand, George Eliot, with her passion for abstract scientific terms and scientifically logical exposition, often sacrifices entirely that evanescent, nay sometimes futile, quality without a degree of which life would wear us out in six months. And for this reason she conveys a wrong impression of characters whom, considered analytically, she understood thoroughly. Thus, Hetty Sorrel, whom we ought to think of as a poor little piece of cheap millinery, remains for our feelings, for our nerves, a solid piece of carpentering (please note by the way how the everlasting

reference to carpentering weighs down, ruler-marks, and compass-measures the whole novel)-a Hetty dove-tailed and glued, nailed and screwed, and warranted never to give way! This scientific dreariness of vocabulary and manner of exposition explains very largely why George Eliot's professed charmeurs and charmeuses Tito, Rosamond Viney, Stephen Guest, are so utterly the reverse of charming. They are correctly thought out, as mere analyses, and never do anything psychologically false or irrelevant; but they are wrongly expressed, although, as I am more and more convinced, and as I hope some day to prove to you, such wrong expression is due, in the last resort, to imperfect or wrong emotional conception, as distinguished from intellectual, analytical comprehension. George Eliot has another mannerism which alternates with this to create an impression different from the one she is aiming at; for she has also a little dry, neat, ironical, essay style (imitated from Fielding and the Essayists) which creates an impression of the excessive trumperiness of human struggles and woes (which, Heaven knows, she never felt to be trumpery); while at the same time she is making the limited feelings of obscure individuals into matters of state of the Cosmos by the use of terminology usually devoted to the eternal phenomena of the universe.

These peculiarities in the selection of words and their arrangement, like the even more important peculiarities in modes of exposition of the whole subject, are, I think, largely matters of inborn tendency; they express the Writer's way of seeing, feeling, living much more than we think. So that the art of the Writer consists less in adapting his style to the subject, than his subject to his style. George Eliot- although not one of her books is, from the artistic standpoint, a great book-had still, no doubt, a side on which she was a great writer. The happy passages in her books, for instance the analytic auto- biographical chapters (not unlike Rousseau's) in the " Mill on the Floss," seem to indicate what her real field of artistic supremacy might have been; as it is, the bulk of her work leaves a sense of wearisome conflict-conflict between what she has determined to say and the manner in which she is able to say it, and this because she disregarded her inherent peculiarities of style when choosing a subject. Stevenson and Pater, on the contrary, seem to me to show, in two totally different kinds of work, the most perfect fusion of style and subject. In Mr. Pater's "School of Giorgione," for instance, and in the Bass Rock episodes of "Catriona," it is quite impossible to say where style begins and subject ends. One forgets utterly the existence of either, one is merely impressed, moved, as by the perfectly welded influences of outer nature, as by the fusion of a hundred things which constitute a fine day or a stormy night.

Instead of summing up these remarks on the selection of words, on the action and reaction which their connotations provoke, I will merely say that one does not want to open up side vistas in a narrative which is intended to speed through time; and that one does not want narrowing down adjectives or definite and highly active verbs, in the description of a mood: it must float, wave, and give the notion of impalpable transitoriness.

You will have noticed that, in what I have just been saying, I have gradually, almost unconsciously, slid into speaking of something much more considerable than the choice of words. I have even used the expression "exposition of the subject." These two merge; while still speaking of construction in the narrower sense, I am obliged to forestall the treatment of construction in the wider. For it is all construction, whether we be manipulating what I called single units of consciousness, and the Words which bid them start forward; or whether we deal with the whole trains of thought, the whole states of feeling into which these units of consciousness have been united, and which larger fragments of intellectual building material are themselves ordered about in groups of sentences, paragraphs, or chapters. Whatever we are doing, so long as we are writing, we are manipulating the consciousness of the Reader. But why, one asks oneself, why should this rearrangement of the ideas and feelings of the Reader be such a difficult matter, since all we are aiming at is, after all, to awaken in the Reader the trains of thought and the moods which already exist in the Writer? Why all this manipulation and manoeuvring? Why not photograph, so to speak, the contents of the mind of the Writer on to the mind of the Reader? Simply because the mind of the reader is not a blank, inert plate, but a living crowd of thoughts and feelings, which are existing on their own account and in a manner wholly different from that other living crowd of thoughts and feelings, the mind of the Writer. We are obliged to transmit our thoughts and feelings to others in an order different from the one in which they have come to ourselves for one very important reason—that they are our thoughts. Being our thoughts means that they are connected with our life, habits, circumstances, born of them; it means that they are so familiar that we recognise them whether they come out head foremost or tail foremost, and into however many and various fragments they may be broken. To the Reader, on the contrary, they are unfamiliar, since they are not his; and the habits and circumstances of the Reader, so far from helping him to grasp them, distract him by sending up other thoughts and feelings, which are his own.

Add to this that the mere fact of original feeling and thinking, the fact of creation in ourselves, puts weigh on in a manner which no amount of merely receptive attention can replace. All writing, therefore, is a struggle between the thinking and feeling of the Writer and of the Reader.

These are a few of the facts of literary construction, of the craft of manipulating the stored up contents of other folks' minds, in the arrangement of words and sentences, of paragraphs and passages. But all the rest is construction also, however far we go, although the construction of a whole book stands to the construction of a single sentence as the greatest complexities of counterpoint and orchestration stand to the relations of the vibrations constituting a single just note. It is always, in small matters and in large, the old question of what movements we can produce in the Reader's mind ; and what other movements we must prevent or neutralise in order that those we desire should have free play.

Vernon Lee.

[VERNON LEE was the pseudonym for Violet Paget.]

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