

WORDS AND MEANING

‘PROPER words in proper places make the true definition of a style’. As usual Swift cuts through the jungle of theory and finds the fact. It would be interesting to know whether the ‘Young Clergyman’ to whom he wrote benefited by the definition. Certainly clerical English is one of the most chronic of occupational diseases; the fear that, in Sydney Smith’s phrase, the intellect may be ‘improperly exposed’ leads to the swaddling bands of rhetoric and the safe generalisation. Philosophers often fare little better; and the scholarship of yesterday lies mouldering in a hundred libraries, too often unread because it is unreadable.

‘Style’ is confined by the critics to the work of the conscious artist, for whom words are tools to be chosen, sharpened, used. The scholar, understandably contemptuous of the self-important claims of the professional writer, addresses himself to those who want to learn. And learning is never easy. Yet the business of communication has its grace; and a Locke, a Hume, a Macaulay, a Newman survive in a double immortality. Or, more strictly, in them the idea and its expression are matched.

*Stilus brevis, grata facundia, celsa, clara, firma sententia.*¹ One does not look for literary judgments in a breviary responsory. But this liturgical praise of St Thomas as a master of languages sums up, with something of St Thomas’s own gracious economy of speech, that union of thought and its expression which it should be any writer’s aim to reach. The identification of style with the decorative tricks of a Pater or a George Moore has confused an issue which is simple. Prose is designed to convey a meaning, and a good prose is one that is clear, economical and unselfconscious. See to the meaning, one might say, and beauty will see to herself.

In *The Reader over your Shoulder*,² Robert Graves and Alan Hodge set out to help writers of English prose. It is an arbitrary task, but one that is well worth attempting at a time when ‘the British people, though at times it recognises and applauds the first-rate in art, literature, statesmanship, technical achievement, social conduct and so on, is always over-indulgent of the second-, third- or fourth-rate and often taken in by the simply bad’. And the writing of good English is not just a ‘literary’ matter; it is, precisely, moral. Arnold Bennett went so far as to say that faults of style are largely faults

¹ ‘A closely-packed style; a pleasing eloquence, lofty, plain; a steadfast meaning’ (*Resp.* iv.)

² *The Reader over your Shoulder* by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge; revised edition (Cape, 10s. 6d.)

of character, and instanced the harshness and eccentricity of Carlyle's prose as a refection of behaviour that was 'frequently ridiculous, if not abominable'. Sir Ernest Barker, reviewing the first edition (1946) of *The Reader over your Shoulder* in the *Manchester Guardian*, fixed on this moral aspect of writing as fundamental, arguing that 'the muddle of our English style is the result of a moral muddle'.

Le style est l'homme même, and no doubt it is idle to expect an improvement in prose until there is an improvement, or at least a clarification, in the ideas of those who write it. In the meantime, Messrs Graves and Hodge modestly suggest some principles of clear statement and examine some samples of modern English in the light of these principles.

'Where is good English to be found? Not among those who might be expected to write well professionally. Schoolmasters seldom write well: it is difficult for any teacher to avoid either pomposity or, in the effort not to be pompous, a jocular conversational looseness. The clergy suffer from much the same occupational disability: they can seldom decide whether to use 'the language of the market-place' or Biblical rhetoric. Men of letters usually feel impelled to cultivate an individual style—less because they feel sure of themselves as individuals than because they wish to carve a niche for themselves in literature; and nowadays an individual style usually means merely a peculiar range of inaccuracies, ambiguities, logical weaknesses and stylistic extravagances. . . . As a rule, the best English is written by people without literary pretensions, who have responsible executive jobs in which the use of official language is not compulsory; and, as a rule, the better at their jobs they are, the better they write'.

The last sentence is true. Good writing is the reward of good thinking. Carelessness and ambiguity of style are an inevitable product of intellectual confusion. For St Thomas, or indeed for anyone else who has achieved it, clarity of style is not an extra ornament, a literary device to gild the austerities of his thought. He writes clearly because his thought is clear. His writing affirms the validity of his own metaphysic: the integrity of being proclaims goodness, beauty, truth. And underlying it is the discipline of logic—the worst master, but the most faithful servant of a good writer. The oratorical disputation of the medieval schools could lead to logic-chopping, yet even at that level it had its uses. Arpeggios are boring to listen to, and even more boring to play, but without the technical skill they induce one can scarcely hope to begin on Liszt.

In *The Reader over your Shoulder* the most eminent authors are examined and often fail to pass the rigorous Graves-Hodge tests. Perhaps the detailed catechism of single paragraphs allows too little

for the rhythm of a book as a whole, and the fair copies, however accurate, lack the vitality of a spontaneous prose. But one cannot be too grateful for the disinfectant touch of the authors, and the new edition of their book should be useful in schools, where, too often, a preoccupation with overt felicities of style conceals the basic function of writing.

An interesting illustration of the force of the Graves-Hodge argument, that the principles of good writing depend on the validity of the arguments and ideas it serves, can be found in a recent 'Miscellany of English Writing'³ edited by Malcolm Elwin. Its aim is 'to emphasise the free and natural approach to life and letters, as opposed to the conventions of urban artificiality so unhappily dominant before the late war'. One is tempted to apply the critical apparatus of *The Reader over your Shoulder* to Mr Elwin's collection. It is certainly true that the writer who is dealing with his own experience, who has mastered it and come to a clear judgment about it, writes with a serenity and ease that is wanting in more pretentious essays. No doubt Mr Henry Williamson, writing about his Norfolk farm, has a more straightforward job than that of Mr Middleton Murry, discussing 'Faith and the Free Society'. But is the concrete subject of the one, and the speculative concern of the other, a sufficient explanation for the difference between:

'When he had gone, I recall that I wept, thinking of men drowning in water and burning in the air, or lying in the searing desert sands and the icy steppes of Russia; and such was my illusion, I believed that the ruined condition of the roads and that of the Western world were one and the same thing; and I could not do anything about it any more'

and

'The free society can only be understood as the political society which, being based upon conscience, shapes its political institutions in accord with conscience, in order that it may progressively discover what the concrete content of conscience actually is'.

The comparison is, of course, unfair. But it does suggest the difficulty of giving to an abstract argument the lucid expression which, in a good writer, can recreate the impact of experience. It is not the philosopher's business to accommodate his thought to the level of a chance reader who has neither the equipment nor the inclination to think with him. Yet, when one considers the unintelligible jargon of psychologists and technologists of every sort, one is left with the suspicion that the modern façade may conceal confusion as well as erudition. Plato, Augustine, St Thomas, Pascal, Newman: in none

³ *The Pleasure Ground*, edited by Malcolm Elwin (Macdonald, 8s. 6d.)

of these is there any doubt as to what meaning the words they used was meant to convey. And yet a lifetime might be too short to exhaust the implications of the *Timæus*. There is no contradiction here. The noblest piece of writing is little better than a stammer when set against the background of Truth itself. But it is a human stammer, faithful and aware of the ultimate intelligibility it must lack. Perhaps in writing, as in much else besides, humility is a deeper virtue than we suspect.

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O B I T E R

THE EDITORIAL with which Mr Bernard Wall introduces the first number of *The Changing World* (Harvill Press, 3s. 6d.) speaks for every independent periodical in its plea for the vehicle of opinion which stands outside the 'managerial' demands of what is commercially profitable or politically expedient. The function of such periodicals has never been so vital as now, when the threats to freedom are organised and, moreover, are growing all the time. Totalitarianism is never more dangerous than when it uses the language of democracy. Lady Rhondda, in a notable series of articles in *Time and Tide*, recently drew a gloomy picture of the effect of our current totalitarianism without tears, with its bureaucratic contempt for minority opinion, its multiplication of laws and its simultaneous corruption of the principle of law itself.

Gabriel Marcel, writing on 'Technics and Sin', analyses the 'Blackmail on a planetary scale' which is threatening the world:

'Modern war presents these two striking aspects; on the one hand it involves the annihilation of whole populations without distinctions of age or sex, and, on the other, it is conducted on an ever-increasing degree by a small number of individuals, supplied with powerful weapons, who direct operations from the depths of their laboratories. As a result . . . the future of war and the future of technics appear to be indissolubly linked; and it may well be said that, at any rate in our own historical cycle, everything which promotes technics tends to make war radically destructive and inexorably inclines it towards that ultimate end which is nothing less than the suicide of the human race'.

What is the answer?

'It is in recollection alone that the powers of love and of humility can come to birth, powers which alone can ultimately form the counterweight to the sightless pride of the technician imprisoned in his technics'.