

The Non-Sequaciousness of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Source: *The Irish Monthly*, Vol. 28, No. 325 (Jul., 1900), pp. 415-421

Published by: Irish Jesuit Province

THE NON-SEQUACIOUSNESS OF RALPH WALDO
EMERSON.

MR. BIRRELL, to whom the world of English letters is indebted for so many epigrammatic gems of graceful criticism, uses, in the second series of *Obiter Dicta*, a term which, though generally taboo to the dictionary makers, yet is burdened with more solidity of significance than many pages of Johnson or Webster. This term, which has Dryden for its sponsor, yet of whose entrance into the modern kingdom of letters Mr. Birrell is the court usher, occurs in the essay on Emerson. With much of what his admirers claim for the Concord literateur, Mr. Birrell is in agreement: "His sentences fall over you in glittering cascades, beautiful and bright, and, for the moment, refreshing." But this bewildering richness of thought and expression which sounds upon the ear as the tinkling of a silver bell, leaves us to wonder, "Dii immortales! ubinam gentium sumus?" And all, because, to use Mr. Birrell's term, Emerson's style is "non-sequacious." "Those voices of yours," wrote Carlyle, "which I have likened to unembodied souls, and censure sometimes for having no body—how can they have a body? They are light rays darting upwards in the East." Of course, over against this judgment of a friend, we can place such critics as Matthew Arnold and Lowell; and I have heard one who occupies to-day a high place upon Mount Parnassus declare that Emerson was the greatest of Americans. Amid such deep and resonant tones of expert criticism, I have no intention of interposing my feeble note—longe absit—my ambition is a different and lesser one. Lord Jeffrey has taught, in one of his essays, that it is one thing in an author, to fascinate his immediate circle of readers, and another thing, to remain as a permanent model of literary skill; and has not "glorious John" himself left it on record that whilst to him Shakespeare was the poet who of all poets, ancient and modern, had the largest and most comprehensive soul, Ben Johnson was the more fitting model of elaborate writing? "The one was the Homer, the other the Virgil, of our literature." This comparison between the effect of an author upon his contemporary readers, and that upon posterity, reminds one of the comparison

so often instituted between oratory and books, or still closer of that between the speeches spoken and written of the same great orator. Thus, Mr. Morley tells us, that while it is true to say of Edmund Burke that as an orator he was transcendent, "yet, in that immediate influence upon his hearers which is commonly supposed to be the mark of oratorical success, all the evidence is, that Burke generally failed." "In vain," wrote Moore of Burke's greatest speech—that upon Conciliation—"did Burke's genius put forth its superb plumage, glittering all over with the hundred eyes of fancy." "Yet Burke," says Mr. Morley, "will always be read with delight and edification, because he takes us into the region of lasting wisdom."

Now, this capacity for edification—for building up the mind of the reader in knowledge—arose, in Burke, from what Johnson once called "his power of out-arguing"—that logical instinct by which, like his great modern disciple, Mr. Gladstone, he follows his subject into all its issues; that instinct which Goldsmith ridiculed in "Retaliation."

"Who, too deep for his hearers, went on refining."

This power of edification—this faculty of building up the mind in virile qualities, it is which subordinates brilliancy of idea, forcibleness of language, and wealth of fancy, to the main thesis, making of them the ornaments which deck the onward road, but never permitting them to divert attention from the road itself. This faculty it is which Disraeli the elder supposes in every great writer, "for no great work," he says, "was ever produced without a grand (that is a comprehensive) plan," and this faculty it is whose absence in Emerson's writings Mr. Birrell characterizes as non-sequaciousness. He has said, in another of his essays, that logic is the prime necessity of the hour; "A wise author never allows his reader's mind to be at large. How carefully does a really great writer like Dr. Newman or M. Renan explain to you what he is going to do, and how he is going to do it. But Emerson makes no terms with his readers; he gives them neither thread nor clue. "He is," continues *Obiter Dicta*, "all sparks and shocks—the unparalleled non-sequaciousness of Emerson is as certain as the correggiosity of Correggio."

From this it follows that Emerson is, of all modern wilters, the least fitted to be relied on as a literary model. The sparks he

emits and the shocks he causes are dazzling and exciting; and his ideas are brilliant as the cascade's spray; but it will be admitted that the effect of such a writer, taken as a model for literary novices, must be in the last degree disastrous. The youthful mind is vastly inclined to vagueness, and, like Milton's spirits, "finds no end, in wandering mazes lost." Whatever, then, tends to encourage this tendency, must be fatal to that ratiocination, which, says Cardinal Newman, "is the great principle of order in thinking, reducing chaos to harmony."

Carlyle in his comparison between Schlegel and Thomas Hope (*Characteristics*), stands astonished at the want of an "articulate language" in Hope. Notwithstanding that his work indicates a writer of unusual thinking power, and is full of long, continued thought, it is "perhaps the absurdest book written in our time by a thinking man—a shameful abortion;" and this because his thoughts, lofty in themselves, are "tumbled out heterogeneously amorphous." "Action," Carlyle elsewhere tells us, "is, as it were, dissolved in speech is thought whereof speech is the shadow. The kind of speech in a man betokens the kind of action you will get from him. Our speech in these modern days has become amazing." Johnson complained, "Nobody speaks in earnest, sir; there is no serious conversation." This same principle Carlyle emphasises, when he describes thought as effort—that effort which, in its sublimest phase, becomes intensity. This effort clearly implies ratiocination and conversely ratiocination implies thought; and in this sense we are to understand Newman's maxim: that ratiocination is the principle of order in thinking. Without this effort—this exercise of the reasoning faculty—the mind becomes merely passive, and in the sequel, unhealthy and morbid.

Hence the aim of prudent and able professors of literature has ever been to promote intellectual activity, and as a means to this end, to divert their pupils from the study of writers, who, however picturesque, are vague and illogical; and to direct them to the study of models which combine simplicity of expression with accuracy of reasoning—the two qualities which are usually the most lacking to the budding literateur. In this connection, the author most generally recommended is Macaulay, and the next in order is Addison, who, though deemed by Macaulay the "great master of English eloquence," yet possessed in a less degree than

his famous critic, the directness of the logician. Many strictures are indeed passed by Mr. Morley and others upon Macaulay's style. He is meretricious, garish, flashy, vulgar, and shallow; and Hazlitt, Lamb and De Quincy were his equals in precision and his superiors in other qualities. Moreover, we ourselves may say of him what he said of Johnson: "How it happened that a man who reasoned on his premises so ably, should assume his premises so foolishly, is one of the great mysteries of human nature." But when all this has been said, it remains true, that, as Mr. Morley agrees, "Macaulay's style reproduces the good qualities of his understanding, its strength, manliness, and directness. Nobody can have any excuse for not knowing exactly what is it that Macaulay means." His prose like Boileau's verse "Bien ou mal, dit toujours quelque chose." "He never wrote an obscure sentence in his life" is Mr. Morley's summary of his style; and of how many writers can this be said?

Now, we are all familiar with this great writer's saying, that of the essay on Milton, which created his reputation, there was scarcely a paragraph which his matured judgment approved, and Carlyle quotes an ancient critic whose advice to his ambitious pupil was, "Whenever you have written any sentence that looks particularly excellent, blot it out." A quaint analogy to this advice is supplied by Isaac Disraeli, who tells us that the word "Zamar," by a beautiful metaphor from pruning trees, signifies in Hebrew, to compose verses, and thus, he adds, in literary compositions our green essays ought to be picked away, for the mind, like a young tree, "is weakened by bringing to maturity its first fruits." Hence the best models for the young in literature are those which will most effectually teach them the art of pruning, whether as to grandiose language or tangential ideas. The cultivation of such models while supplying a vocabulary, at the same time, teaches concentration of thought and consecutiveness. "What is the hardest task in the world?" asked Emerson. "It is to think." This is the same dogma we have heard from Carlyle, that thought is effort. The difference between Shakespeare and the ordinary man was, again says Emerson, "in his superior skill in using and classifying his facts." The want of this faculty of order, he illustrates by the pains we take when young, to fill our note-books, in the hope that in the course of a few years we shall have condensed into our encyclopedia the net

value of all the world's theories. Alas! we find, "that year after year our tables get no completeness, and at last we discover that our curve is a parabola whose arcs will never meet." Devotion to literary exemplars which habituate us to active and orderly thought, to close reasoning, is a most effective means towards acquiring these habits. The study of models which place sentiment above reasoning, and ornate phrases above clear and definite ideas, must tend to develop excessively the emotional side of our nature.

But, perhaps by an undue emphasis of that polarity in human nature which Emerson himself is so fond of dwelling upon, since "character may be ranked as having its place in the North," the yearning for culture, so general among youth, turns instinctively to the South, where form and show are more important than real solidity of character. For, in truth, it is not easy to account, upon any other grounds, for the Emersonian tendency of our young people. The gushing maiden, whose literary equipment consists mainly of gold-rimmed spectacles and a Back-bay accent, sighs languidly of "circles" and the "over-soul;" and the dreamy youth, who at eighteen years of age has but "graduated" from a common school, like a new Longinus, writes essays on the "Higher Law of the Beautiful."

Not the least evil result of this Emersonian cult is this, that a love for beautiful phrases, exalted ideas and musical periods, destroys the native fecundity of the mind. Few they are, indeed, whose natural talents, even aided by "culture," can originate ideas, or formulate phrases, of such a high standard; the result unfortunately is, in many cases, that, failing to find such among their domestic treasure, they appropriate those they find in the treasure houses of others. Not that quotation *per se* is a fault. Disraeli has told us that in its sphere it is good. "Montaigne's multitudinous quotations never injured that original turn which the old Gascon has given to his thoughts. Such judicious quoting is labour less quick than that with special pleadings and poignant periods, to fill sheets with generalizing principles. Those bird's-eye views of philosophy, for the nonce seem as if things were seen clearly. But the art of quotation requires more delicacy in the practice than those conceive who can see nothing more in a quotation than an extract. It is one thing, therefore, to use a felicitous quotation from an acknowledged authority, in order to

confirm an opinion or to add a proof to our demonstration; it is quite another thing to steal another man's thoughts, and to treat them, according to Sheridan's illustration, as gypsies treat stolen babies—disfigure them to make them pass for one's own.

It is not an unheard of thing, that university graduates have won oratorical prizes by orations to which their only contribution was a passable memory or a declamatory energy which was accepted for elocutionary skill. Nay, even in more exalted spheres, have we not heard of men, who, to again quote Sheridan, trusted to their memory for their tropes and to their imagination for their facts? We have lately seen the assertion of a Chicago clergyman, that the non-attendance of so many at church in this city is attributable to the baldness and poverty of the sermons. May it not be that these short-comings are due to the fact, that there is on the sermons no stamp of individuality? "To believe your own thought," writes Emerson, in one of his most direct essays, "to believe that what is true for you in your own private heart is true for all men, *that* is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense, for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost." In the same strain Matthew Arnold sings:—

Bounded by themselves and unregardful,
 In what state God's other works may be,
 In their own tasks all their powers pouring.
 These attain the mighty life you see.

O, air-born voice! long since, severely clear,
 A cry like thine in mine own heart I hear:
 Resolve to be thyself; and know that he
 Who finds himself, loses his misery.

But such a work of spontaneity can never emanate from him who, instead of cultivating his own garden, becomes merely a culler of others' flowers. Such a one perhaps appropriates wholesale another's work; perhaps, from half-a-dozen authors culls various rhetorical passages, which, having been written by men of differing genius and varied views, harmonize as accurately as would the sections of a treatise borrowed partly from Mill on Government, and partly from the "Mill on the Floss." It is told of Bishop Doyle (J. K. L.) that once on hearing a student deliver, and deliver badly, a sermon of Bossuet, he gave it as his criticism that the preacher had been guilty of robbery and murder. I

fear, were the good Bishop among us to-day, there would be many verdicts demanding intellectual electrocution. The tendency to value exalted ideas and graceful expression more than the development of the reasoning faculty, must result in the sacrifice of self-reliance to servile imitation, and thus must, in the end, lead to literary theft. This effect of the tendency soon develops into a passion. Frequently a fictitious reputation is thus acquired, rendering necessary a continuous pilfering. The subject of the passion, clinging to this reputation with tenacity, gradually allows himself to be deluded into the belief that it has been fairly won. Some time or other an experienced student notices the gaps in the reasoning or the appropriation of language or ideas—even Chatterton and Macpherson were found out—the bubble bursts; and the ass is shown in the lion's skin. Such a course of action Emerson describes as suicide. "A man must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion. Though the whole wide world is good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till."

Hence the study of the simple in language and the accurate in reasoning will, by developing a man's own capacity (I speak of ordinary men, not of embryo Pascals or Byrons) benefit him more than an attempted formation of a style modelled upon writers who, however exalted, give him for pabulum but cascade spray and sparks and shocks.

Pride is the source of all moral defects, as we know. It seems to be equally true, that the root of intellectual defects is, at least in great part, the vice which Mr. Birrell finds in Emerson—non-sequaciousness.

PATRICK DILLON.