

# Literary Style

By CLARENCE S. DARROW



**M**OST young people, and not a few past middle life, are ever anxious about the style of their speech or composition. Fondly they pore over the writings of some favorite author and wish they might express themselves as gracefully as the language of the printed page. If it could only be remembered that ideas came before words, it might aid in the vexed question of literary art. No doubt an effete and over-cultured civilization has done much to substitute style for substance, and

to confound words with ideas. In this, our schools and colleges have lent their best and most elaborate service. In fact, until very recent times the chief function of colleges and schools has been to give young men a training that would furnish them the frills and flourishes for making sounding sentences or accurately rounded periods. Whether the thought to be conveyed was of much importance, or whether the maze of language was a mere stringing of words without ideas has ever been of secondary importance, if indeed of any concern whatever.

The college-bred writer or speaker can always save himself the pains of elaborately explaining that he has taken a degree. His dialect shows his literary genesis as unmistakably as the broken sentences of an emigrant reveal the fact that he has just landed from an ocean steamer. The University graduate has suffered the fate of the feet of the Chinese girl. He has been so thoroughly molded that he can no more get beyond the little groove in which the four narrow walls so long confined him than he could make a journey to the moon. True, if he was not too infinitely stupid in the beginning and has lived out the four years of his course, he can write a page, or a thousand pages, that only an expert could distinguish from Macaulay. In fact, it is Macaulay with here and there a touch of Cicero and Virgil, of Horace and Tacitus, to show that the English classics alone have not been "mastered"—or rather "masticated"—by the student. But the written page is after all only the great extended fan of the peacock's tail, and when the rainbow-plumage is plucked the flesh and bone are scarce large enough to hold the flaming feathers with which he has decked a lean and sickly thing.

Here the colleges and schools have served the purpose of the milliner and dressmaker with the vain lady. They have so decked and bespangled that nothing but the tawdry raiment can be seen.

This is one of the chief reasons why mankind has ever been compelled to get its words from the colleges, and its ideas from the great world outside.

To return once more to the real use of words. Long before human language was evolved, the rude savage had his knowledge and his thoughts of things. This knowledge came from the great nature all unexplored and unexplained, of whose life he was so small a part. Slowly through the ages he found words to tell of his desires and needs, to tell of his emotions and his thoughts, to convey his own impressions to others of his kind. He did not evolve language to learn of things. Words had no other use except to convey ideas. Of course with the development of his rude taste he learned to decorate his language as he learned to talk, and finally clothe his body, and these decorations, crude and fantastic, were the origin of the elaborate style of the cultivated men of letters of today. Civilization has gone forward from the primitive man. It has moved onward in a zig-zag line, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. The crude tattooing and uncouth clothing of the early savage would not pass muster in the millinery stores of the twentieth century, neither would the adornment of primitive speech appeal to the cultured stylist of today. The milliner would see more beauty in the naked form, and the college professor would find a better style in the plainest words that told the simplest wants, but still, neither are content with the origin or the decoration of the savage man.

The professional "wordist," like the professional modiste, needs must adorn, and successive generations devoted to the style of decoration have constantly tended to make fashions more elaborate and complex. This is true in all schools of art. It is ever true, with increasing force, until some great master is strong enough to break through all forms and decorations and come back to the simple and unadorned.

Learned language-jugglers have so long elaborated and mystified by the arrangement of words that endless pains are taken to learn vocabularies unrelated to any facts of life. It is not enough to know one's mother tongue, but all the other tongues must be known as well; and not content with this, the languages of ancient times must be studied and explored for long lists of words which past generations outgrew and left behind as completely as the rudimentary organs of the body that once performed a service, but are not now adapted to the changed life and form of man.

The world is very old in its use of words. From the time of the first rude chattering of the chimpanzee down to the present day, all speaking things have been adding to its store, until, in almost any language men can speak, there are words to express all the thoughts that can be conceived by human mind. It may easily be admitted that words have many and various shades of meaning, and that perhaps a scholar might be so astute as to learn that no two words convey precisely the same thought. But the

world will not be saved or humanity pushed far forward by splitting hairs. And if it were admitted, as it might well be, that the longest lifetime would in no way suffice to learn the shades of meaning of all the words of any one language, the case of the "wordist" is in no wise strengthened, but made rather the more absurd. No doubt a long life may be given to studying words, as many long lives have been so given, thanks to our schools, and at the end the devoted student finds himself with a store of words, but no ideas to be conveyed. His whole vocabulary is but useless rubbish which the schools have dumped upon his hands.

The young man who would be an orator, or a writer, must first of all have something worth while to say. No array of simple words, however sounding, or from whatever source derived, can take the place of thoughts that are worth the while to tell. Without ideas, as well be born dumb; aye, better, too, for then the world will be saved the din of your senseless chatter raised with all the rest. The world stands in no need of words, but it sorely needs real thoughts. In fact, never in its history has there been a time that the world had not need of thoughts, and never a time when it would not turn from all the stylists and professors on earth and stand with open ears and mouths for the utterance of some soul who bears a message to an ever-famished world. The man who really has a truth to tell, a truth that is vital to the world, need never fear that he will want for words. Even though he were born dumb, still he would fashion a new language made of signs and symbols, and the world would somehow hear the message that were his to give.

The student who repines about his style, or who goes to colleges and schools to learn the use of endless words before he has ideas to be conveyed, is like the man who would build a smelter for purifying gold before he had found any mineral in the earth. Language is learned as we learn to walk; though the child has never seen a book he gets his words almost as he learns to breathe; in fact, he never knows that he learns at all. But to the child the whole broad universe is an open book—a book more rare than any penned by hand—and whichever way he turns there is a new lesson to be learned and a new truth perhaps for the first time to be told to a waiting world. And the philosopher and the wise man is a simple child, however long he lives, for he is a humble seeker for truth, an eager learner from whatever source, and he has neither time nor inclination to seem anything but the simple, wondering child he is.

From all of this it does not follow that there is no such thing as literary art, or that all methods of expression are equally good or bad. Endless are the ways of conveying the simplest thoughts by means of words, and no two ways are of exactly equal value, and no school can teach by rule or precept or example which way is best. But, bearing in mind the central thought, that the use, and the

only use, of language is to convey ideas, it must follow that the plainest, simplest, shortest story is always best. And right here it is that the colleges have done the greatest harm. It is only the most consummate art that can take the place of the real and true. It is only those who are the most truly cultured and refined that can come the nearest to the plain and simple life. Most of the teaching must be lived through and overcome before art can be called back to the honest nature that all the frills and foibles of civilization have adorned and decked until it is a tawdry, vulgar thing. The unconscious child, the simple man burdened with a great mission, or a great truth, forgets himself and is forgotten by all who listen to the message that he brings. It is the message, not the man, and no art or training but the precious possession of something vital to the world can give this power, which it were almost mockery to characterize as style.

The eager searcher after truth devotes all his powers to find this truth in the simplest, shortest way, and when the truth is found and fully understood his own zeal for the great prize he has to give will be all sufficient to make him find the shortest way, the easiest way, and above all to use no ornament or art that can in any manner befog or hide the precious truth that it is his great privilege to give the world.

The man with arts and words and no message to convey needs must build a cardboard house, must arrange with care and precision the worthless lumber that he bought at school so that the hollow, bare inside may be concealed. All his art and care is but a vain striving for effect, an attempt to build from empty air some pleasing mirage that shall take the place of real, substantial things.

As the man possessed of vital truth will not waste a moment of his precious time on vacant forms, so, too, when he tells this truth to the listening world, he will waste no time in the effort for effect. He will introduce his subject first, and in the shortest time will affirm something about the subject introduced. He will use few adjectives or modifying clauses or involved sentences, but go direct to the heart of things and leave the truth clear and naked and living to impress itself upon the mind.

The devotee of truth must have learned some language at his mother's knee: this, to him, is as natural as the home where he was reared and the companions of his youth. In this language will he fashion into words the thoughts and knowledge of his brain. He need never fear that whatever was his mother-tongue it will not prove rich enough to convey all the lessons that he can ever teach the world. Even were it to be admitted that by exploring foreign tongues he might here and there find some more subtle word, still, his message must be conveyed to the people of his time and land, and he must speak to them in the tongue they know.

There are no fixed rules of rhetoric or oratory or prosody or

even grammar. Words and their combinations are ever changing and being modified to meet new conditions and altered tastes. No one has the right to make a grammar, much less a rhetoric; what is correct or incorrect in dress is a matter of taste and nothing else. Of course in literature, as in every other field of life, a few have set themselves up as the most competent to judge, the authorities as to the correctness of the grammar or the taste of expression, and of course these few are the ones whose time and money have given them leisure to arrange words, as the expert trickster may arrange cards, and the magazines and the more pretentious papers are ready to conform to the fashion that they set. But all of this by no means gives them the right to fix the fashion of language, or to say what form is the clearest and most expressive for the original, but well-nigh forgotten, use of language, the conveyance of ideas.

But in whatever age of the world, the mere stylist has spoken to only a very few, and his voice has never reached beyond his time and place. Somehow, in spite of all the false forms and conventions of the world, the real message has never passed unheard, and now, as ever, the great need is not the ability to find words to express ideas, but the sense to feel and understand the great common mother who in all lands and ages has reserved her message for those rare souls who could forget all other sounds as they held their ear reverently to her throbbing heart. No soul who feels the consciousness that it has ever caught any portion of this divine sympathy will ever fear his power to repeat the message to the world.

Job and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Jesus never studied Latin or Greek. In fact, they knew but little of what was taught by the schools of the day in which they lived, but all of these had drawn so close to nature's heart that down to the end of time the world will know and understand the truths they taught, and will translate the simple language that they spoke into all the babbling tongues that men have used to interpret nature's life.

The man who listens honestly and reverently will hear rightly and transcribe simply and honestly; and unless he so listens, "though he speak as with the tongue of angels yet will his words be but tinkling brass and sounding cymbals."