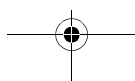
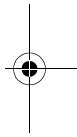
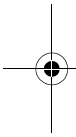
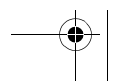
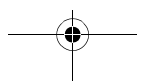
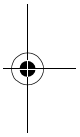
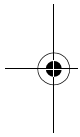
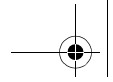
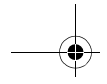


Articles from
Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine
1840–1







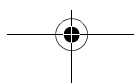
STYLE [No. I]

First published in *Blackwood's*, XLVIII, July 1840, pp. 1–17. Reprinted in *F, Historical and Critical Essays* (ii) (1853). A revised version appeared in *SGG*, XI, *Critical Suggestions on Style and Rhetoric* (1859). There is no known manuscript.

This and the three following essays form essentially a single continuous work containing many of De Quincey's characteristic ideas on style, rhetoric and communication. They cover parts of the same ground as an earlier *Blackwood's* piece, the 1828 essay 'Elements of Rhetoric' (see Vol. 6, pp. 155–89) but unlike the earlier article the present series is not a review and has no one identifiable literary source. It appears to be an unusually full expression of De Quincey's own views on prose composition. The composition of the articles themselves, however, gave De Quincey inordinate trouble. Partly this stemmed from his tendency to approach his favourite subjects more like a film director than a writer, generating an enormous footage of material, including many alternative versions of the same passages, and then relying on 'cutting' and editing to produce the final work. Partly also it was the result of the fact that for him the history of style involved the entire history of civilisation. Inevitably the articles spread enormously and were returned to publishable length only by severe cutting.

On 22 April 1840 De Quincey promised Blackwood an article 'on English Style as Applicable to the present circumstances of literature' (NLS MS 4051, f. 117), and spoke of it with enthusiasm as 'a *con amore* subject'. On 5 June he was apologising for delays, which he attributed to 'the vast materials I had gathered for many months towards this paper' (f. 124). On 9 June most of the first paper was sent and the next day he was able to send the conclusion, marking in red 'the two paras in which I allude (as it were to a possibility) that the paper might be followed by a 2nd; in order that, if you adopt...this only, you might have those allusions struck out' (f. 127). The paragraphs referred to are the two last of the article.

A second article was 'half finished' by 10 July (f. 133), and on 13 August he claimed to have spent the past week 'copying and revising' the second paper (f. 144); the following day, however, he found himself, for unexplained reasons, 'obliged to divide [it] into 2 papers – Greek Style: – Latin and Modern' (f. 145). The second article appeared in the September 1840 *Blackwood's*. De Quincey had some doubts about its quality, claiming that it had been written during 'dreadful molestations of creditors...forcing me to sit up night after night, driving me in short to utter distraction of thought, [which] allowed me no

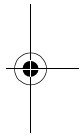
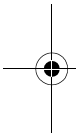




WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

possibility of revival'. On seeing a printed copy of the magazine, however, he decided that it 'does very well; except that there is rather a harsh transition from the subject of Herodotus to the parag. beginning "*Prose is a thing so well known to all of us*"' (ff. 147–8). For the transition in question, see p. 37 below.

A third paper under the same title, presumably representing the other part of the material De Quincey had felt 'obliged to divide', appeared in the October number of *Blackwood's*, and a fourth in the issue for February 1841. Both the opening sentence of this fourth and final paper, and De Quincey's letters to Blackwood, indicate that he was now losing confidence in the coherence of the series. The material, he said, had been 'sent by portions at considerable intervals' and a very large amount of text had been 'rejected or cancelled'. He feared that the result would be disproportion and 'some discontinuity' (ff. 164–5). On 27 November he was promising the conclusion to the fourth part the following day, having, he said, 'cut it as short as was consistent with at all fulfilling the promise of the outline' (f. 169). Through December 1840, however, he continued cutting (f. 176), a process still in progress on 7 January 1841, when he told Blackwood that he had 'entered far too extensively upon the history of Greek civilization: and in particular I had discussed the modern civilization arising out of the three learned professions, and also the services of Xtianity in relation to that great change in the composition of society. Now all this seemed on review too large a circuit, and too much of a digression. So I cancelled it all; recomposed one half; and in fact recast the whole' (ff. 138–9). Part of the text was sent to Blackwood on 14 January 1841 (f. 146), and the whole of this, the fourth part, appeared in the February 1841 issue of *Blackwood's*.



AMONGST the never-ending arguments for thankfulness in the privilege of a British birth – arguments more solemn even than numerous, and telling more when weighed than when counted, *pondere quàm numero*, – three aspects there are of our national character which trouble the uniformity of our feelings. A good son even in such a case, is not at liberty to describe himself as 'ashamed.' Some gentler word must be found to express the character of his distress. And, whatever grounds of blame may appear against his venerated mother, it is one of his filial duties to suppose – either that the blame applies but partially, or, if it should seem painfully universal, that it is one of those excesses to which energetic natures are liable through the very strength of their constitutional characteristics. Such things do happen. It is certain, for instance, that to the deep sincerity of British nature, and to that shyness or principle of reserve which is inseparable from self-respect, must be traced philosophically the churlishness and unsocial bearing for which, at one time, we were so angrily arraigned by the smooth south of Europe. That facile obsequiousness, which attracts the inconsiderate in Belgians, Frenchmen, and Italians, is too generally a mixed product from impudence and insincerity. Want of principle and want of moral sensibility compose the original *fundus*¹ of southern manners:

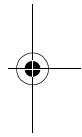
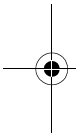




STYLE [NO. 1]

and the natural product, in a specious hollowness of demeanour, has been afterwards propagated by imitation through innumerable people, who may have partaken less deeply, or not at all, in the original moral qualities that have moulded such a manner.

Great faults, therefore, may grow out of great virtues in excess. And this consideration should make us cautious even towards an enemy; much more when approaching so holy a question as the merits of our maternal land. Else, and supposing that a strange nation had been concerned in our judgment, we should declare ourselves mortified and humiliated by three expressions of the British character, too public to have escaped the notice of Europe. First, we writhe with shame when we hear of semi-delirious lords and ladies, sometimes theatrically costumed in caftans and turbans, proclaiming to the whole world – as the law of their households – that all nations and languages are free to enter their gates, with one sole exception directed against their British compatriots;² that is to say, abjuring by sound of trumpet that land through which only they themselves have risen into consideration; spurning those for countrymen – ‘without whom,’ (as M. Gourville had the boldness to tell Charles II.,)³ ‘without whom, by G— Sir, you yourself are nothing.’ We all know who *they* are that have done this thing:⁴ we *may* know, if we enquire, how many conceited coxcombs are at this moment acting upon that precedent; in which, we scruple not to avow, is contained a fund of satire, more crying than any which Juvenal found in the worst days of Rome. And we may ask calmly – would not death, judicial death, have visited such an act amongst the ancient republics? – Next, but with that indulgence which belongs to an infirmity rather than an error of the will, we feel ashamed for the obstinate obtuseness of our country in regard to one and the most effective of the Fine Arts. It will be understood that we speak of music. In painting and in sculpture it is now past disputing, that if we are destined to inferiority at all, it is an inferiority only to the Italians and the ancient Greeks; an inferiority which, if it were even sure to be permanent, we share with all the other malicious nations around us. On that head we are safe. And in the most majestic of the Fine Arts, in poetry, we have a clear and vast pre-eminence as regards all nations; no nation but ourselves having equally succeeded in both forms of the higher poetry, epic and tragic. Whilst of meditative or philosophic poetry (Young’s, Cowper’s, Wordsworth’s),⁵ – to say nothing of lyric – we may affirm what Quintilian says justly of Roman satire – ‘*tota quidem nostra est.*’⁶ If, therefore, in every mode of composition through which the impassioned mind speaks, a nation has excelled its rivals, we cannot be allowed to suppose any general defect of sensibility as a cause of obtuseness with regard to music. So little, however, is the grandeur of this divine art suspected amongst us generally, that a man will write an essay deliberately for the purpose of putting on record his own preference of a song, to the most elaborate music of Mozart:⁷ he will glory in his shame; and, though speaking in the character of one confessing to a weakness, will evidently view himself in



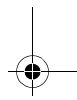
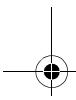
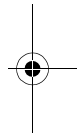
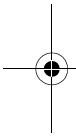


WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

the light of a candid man, laying bare a state of feeling which is natural and sound, opposed to a class of false pretenders who, whilst servile to rules of artists, in reality contradict their own musical instincts, and feel little or nothing of what they profess. Strange that even the analogy of other arts should not open his eyes to the delusion he is encouraging! A song – an air – a tune, that is a short succession of notes revolving rapidly upon itself, how could that by possibility offer a field of compass sufficient for the development of great musical effects? The preparation pregnant with the future, the remote correspondence, the questions, as it were, which to a deep musical sense are asked in one passage, and answered in another; the iteration and ingemination of a given effect, moving through subtle variations that sometimes disguise the theme, sometimes fitfully reveal it, sometimes throw it out tumultuously to the daylight, – these and ten thousand forms of self-conflicting musical passion – what room could they find, what opening, for utterance in so limited a field as an air or song? A hunting-box, a park-lodge, may have a forest grace and the beauty of appropriateness; but what if a man should match such a bauble against the Pantheon, or against the minsters of York and Strasburg? A repartee may by accident be practically effective: it has been known to crush a party-scheme, and an oration of Cicero's, or of Burke's,⁸ could have done no more: but what judgment would match the two against each other as developments of power? Let him who finds the *maximum* of his musical gratification in a song, be assured, by that one fact, that his sensibility is rude and undeveloped. Yet exactly upon this level is the ordinary state of musical feeling throughout Great Britain; and the howling wilderness of the psalmody in most parish churches of the land, countersigns the statement. There is, however, accumulated in London, more musical science than in any capital of the world. This, gradually diffused, will improve the feeling of the country. And, if it should fail to do so, in the worst case we have the satisfaction of knowing, through Jean Jacques Rousseau,⁹ and by later evidences, that sink as we may below Italy and Germany in the sensibility to this divine art, we cannot go lower than France. Here, however, and in this cherished obtuseness as to a pleasure so important for human life, and at the head of the physico-intellectual pleasures, we find a second reason for quarrelling with the civilisation of our country. At the summit of civilisation in other points, she is here yet uncultivated and savage.

A third point is larger. Here (properly speaking) our quarrel is co-extensive with that general principle in England which tends in all things to set the matter above the manner, the substance above the external show; a principle noble in itself, but inevitably wrong wherever the manner blends inseparably with the substance.

This general tendency operates in many ways: but our own immediate purpose is concerned with it only so far as it operates upon style. In no country upon earth, were it possible to carry such a maxim into practical effect, is it a more determinate tendency of the national mind to value the *matter* of a book

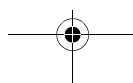




STYLE [NO. I]

not only as paramount to the *manner*, but even as distinct from it, and as capable of a separate insulation. What first gave a shock to such a tendency must have been the unwilling and mysterious sense – that in some cases, the matter and the manner were so inextricably interwoven, as not to admit of this coarse bisection. The one was embedded, entangled, and interfused through the other in a way which bade defiance to such gross mechanical separations. But the tendency to view the two elements as in a separable relation still predominates; and, as a consequence, the tendency to undervalue the accomplishment of style. Do we mean that the English, as a literary nation, are practically less sensible of the effects of a beautiful style? Not at all. Nobody can be insensible to these effects. And, upon a known fact of history, viz., the *exclusive* cultivation of popular oratory in England throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, we might presume a peculiar and exalted sense of style amongst ourselves. Until the French Revolution, no nation of Christendom except England had any practical experience of popular rhetoric; any deliberative eloquence, for instance; any forensic eloquence that was made public; any democratic eloquence of the hustings; or any form whatever of public rhetoric beyond that of the pulpit. Through two centuries at least, no nation could have been so constantly reminded of the powers for good and evil which belong to style. Often it must have happened, to the mortification or joy of multitudes, that one man out of windy nothings has constructed an overwhelming appeal to the passions of his hearers, whilst another has thrown away the weightiest cause by his manner of treating it. Neither let it be said, that this might not arise from differences of style, but because the triumphant demagogue made use of fictions, and, therefore, that his triumph was still obtained by means of his matter, however hollow that matter might have proved upon investigation. That case, also, is a possible case; but often enough two orators have relied upon the same identical matter – the facts, for instance, of the slave-trade – and one has turned this to such good account by his arrangements, by his modes of vivifying dry statements, by his arts of illustration, by his science of connecting things with human feeling, that he has his left his hearers in convulsions of passion; whilst the other shall have used every tittle of the same matter without eliciting one scintillation of sympathy, without leaving behind one distinct impression in the memory, or planting one murmur in the heart.

In proportion, therefore, as the English people have been placed for two centuries and a quarter (*i.e.* since the latter decennium of James the First's reign) under a constant experience of popular eloquence thrown into all channels of social life, they must have had peculiar occasion to feel the effects of style. But to feel is not to feel consciously. Many a man is charmed by one cause who ascribes the effect to another. Many a man is fascinated by the artifices of composition, who fancies that it is the subject which has operated so potently. And even for the subtlest of philosophers who keeps in mind the interpenetration of the style and the matter, it would be as difficult to



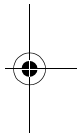
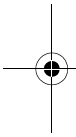


WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

distribute the true proportion of their joint action, as, with regard to the earliest rays of the dawn, it would be to say how much of the beauty lay in the heavenly light which chased away the darkness – how much in the rosy colour which that light entangled.

Easily, therefore, it may have happened, that, under the constant action and practical effects of style, a nation may have failed to notice the cause *as* the cause. And, besides the disturbing forces which mislead the judgment of the auditor in such a case, there are other disturbing forces which modify the practice of the speaker. That is good rhetoric for the hustings which is bad for a book. Even for the highest forms of popular eloquence, the laws of style vary much from the general standard. In the senate, and for the same reason in a newspaper, it is a virtue to reiterate your meaning: tautology becomes a merit: variation of the words, with a substantial identity of the sense and dilution of the truth, is oftentimes a necessity. A man who should content himself with a single condensed enunciation of a perplexed doctrine, would be a madman and a *felo-de-se*, as respected his reliance upon that doctrine. Like boys who are throwing the sun's rays into the eyes of a mob by means of a mirror, you must shift your lights and vibrate your reflexions at every possible angle, if you would agitate the popular mind extensively. Every mode of intellectual communication has its separate strength and separate weakness; its peculiar embarrassments, compensated by peculiar resources. It is the advantage of a book, that you can return to the past page if any thing in the present depends upon it. But, return being impossible in the case of a spoken harangue, where each sentence perishes as it is born, both the speaker and the hearer become aware of a mutual interest in a much looser style, and a perpetual dispensation from the severities of abstract discussion. It is for the benefit of both, that the weightier propositions should be detained before the eye a good deal longer than the chastity of taste or the austerity of logic would tolerate in a book. Time must be given for the intellect to eddy about a truth, and to appropriate its bearings. There is a sort of previous lubrication, such as the boa-constrictor applies to any subject of digestion, which is requisite to familiarize the mind with a startling or a complex novelty. And this is obtained for the intellect by varying the modes of presenting it, – now putting it directly before the eye, now obliquely, now in an abstract shape, now in the concrete; all which being the proper technical discipline for dealing with such cases, ought no longer to be viewed as a licentious mode of style, but as the just style in respect of those licentious circumstances. And the true art for such popular display is – to contrive the best forms for appearing to say something new, when in reality you are but echoing yourself; to break up massy chords into running variations; and to mask, by slight differences in the manner, a virtual identity in the substance.

We have been illustrating a twofold neutralizing effect applied to the advantages, otherwise enjoyed by the English people, for appreciating the forms of style. What was it that made the populace of Athens and of Rome so





STYLE [NO. I]

sensible to the force of rhetoric and to the magic of language? It was the habit of hearing these two great engines daily worked for purposes interesting to themselves as citizens, and sufficiently intelligible to command their willing attention. The English amongst modern nations have had the same advantages, allowance being made for the much less intense concentration of the audience. In the ancient republics it was always the same city; and, therefore, the same audience, except in so far as it was spread through many generations. This has been otherwise in England; and yet, by newspaper reports, any great effect in one assize town, or electoral town, has been propagated to the rest of the empire, through the eighteenth and the present century. But all this, and the continual exemplification of style as a great agency for democratic effect, have not availed to win a sufficient *practical* respect, in England, for the arts of composition as essential to authorship. And the reason is, because, in the first place, from the intertexture of style and matter, from the *impossibility that the one should affect them otherwise than in connexion with the other*, it has been natural for an audience to charge on the superior agent what often belonged to the lower. This in the first place; and, secondly, because *the modes of style appropriate to popular eloquence being essentially different from those of written composition*, any possible experience on the hustings, or in the senate, would *pro tanto* tend rather to disqualify the mind for appreciating the more chaste and more elaborate qualities of style fitted for books; and thus a real advantage of the English in one direction has been neutralized by two causes in another.

Generally and ultimately, it is certain, that our British disregard or inadequate appreciation of style, though a very lamentable fault, has had its origin in the manliness of the British character; in the sincerity and directness of the British taste; in the principle of '*esse quam videri*,'¹⁰ which might be taken as the key to much in our manner, much in the philosophy of our lives; and finally, in that same love for the practical and the tangible which has so memorably governed the course of our higher speculations from Bacon to Newton.¹¹ But, whatever may have been the origin of this most faulty habit, whatever mixed causes now support it, beyond all question it is, that such a habit of disregard or of slight regard applied to all the arts of composition does exist in the most painful extent, and is detected by a practised eye in every page of almost every book that is published.

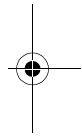
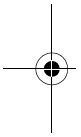
If you could look any where with a right to expect continual illustrations of what is good in the manifold qualities of style, it should reasonably be amongst our professional authors; but as a body, they are distinguished by the most absolute carelessness in this respect. Whether in the choice of words and idioms, or in the construction of their sentences, it is not possible to conceive the principle of lazy indifference carried to a more revolting extremity. Proof lies before you, spread out upon every page, that no excess of awkwardness, or of inelegance, or of unrhythmical cadence, is so rated in the tariff of faults as to balance, in the writer's estimate, the trouble of remoulding a clause, of interpolating a phrase, or even of striking the pen through a superfluous





WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

word. In our own experience it has happened, that we have known an author so laudably fastidious in this subtle art, as to have recast one chapter of a series no less than seventeen times; so difficult was the ideal or model of excellence which he kept before his mind; so indefatigable was his labour for mounting to the level of that ideal. Whereas, on the other hand, with regard to a large majority of the writers now carrying forward the literature of the country from the last generation to the next, the evidence is perpetual – not so much that they rest satisfied with their own random preconceptions of each clause or sentence, as that they never trouble themselves to form any such preconceptions. Whatever words tumble out under the blindest accidents of the moment, those are the words retained; whatever sweep is impressed by chance upon the motion of a period, that is the arrangement ratified. To fancy that men thus determinately careless as to the grosser elements of style would pause to survey distant proportions, or to adjust any more delicate symmetries of good composition, would be visionary. As to the links of connexion, the transitions, and the many other functions of logic in good writing, things are come to such a pass, that what was held true of Rome in two separate ages by two great rhetoricians, and of Constantinople in an age long posterior, may now be affirmed of England: the idiom of our language, the mother tongue, survives only amongst our women and children; not, Heaven knows, amongst our women who write books – they are often painfully conspicuous for all that disfigures authorship; but amongst well-educated women not professionally given to literature. Cicero and Quintilian, each for his own generation, ascribed something of the same pre-eminence to the noble matrons of Rome; and more than one writer of the lower empire has recorded of Byzantium, that in the nurseries of that city was found the last home for the purity of the ancient Greek. No doubt it might have been found also amongst the innumerable mob of that haughty metropolis, but stained with corruptions and vulgar abbreviations. Or wherever it might lurk, assuredly it was not amongst the noble, the officials, or the courtiers; else it was impossible that such a master of affectation as Nicetas Choniates,¹² for instance, should have found toleration. But the rationale of this matter lies in a small compass: why are the local names, whenever they have resulted from the general good sense of a country, faithful to the local truth, grave, and unaffected? Simply because they are not inventions of any active faculty, but mere passive depositions from a real impression upon the mind. On the other hand, wherever there is an ambitious principle set in motion for name-inventing, there it is sure to terminate in something monstrous and fanciful. Women offend in such cases even more than men; because more of sentiment or romance will mingle with the names they impose. Sailors again err in an opposite spirit: there is no affectation in their names, but there is too painful an effort after ludicrous allusions to the gravities of their native land – ‘Big Wig Island,’ or ‘the Bishop and his Clerks:’ or the name becomes a memento of real incidents, but too casual and personal to merit this lasting record of a name, such as *Point Fare-*





STYLE [NO. 1]

well, or *Cape Turn-again*. This fault applies to many of the Yankee * names, and to many more in the southern and western states of North America, where the earliest population has usually been of a less religious character; and, most of all, it applies to the names of the back settlements. These people live under influences the most opposite to those of false refinement: coarse necessities, elementary features of peril or embarrassment, primary aspects of savage nature, compose the scenery of their thoughts; and these are reflected by their names. *Dismal Swamp* expresses a condition of unreclaimed nature, which must disappear with growing civilisation. *Big Bone Lick* tells a tale of cruelty that cannot often be repeated. Buffaloes, like all cattle, derive medicinal benefit from salt; they come in droves for a thousand miles to lick the masses of rock salt. The new settlers observing this, lie in ambush to surprise them: twenty-five thousand noble animals, in one instance, were massacred for their hides. In the following year the usual crowds advanced; but the first who snuffed the tainted air wheeled round, bellowed, and 'recoiled' far into his native woods. Meantime the large bones remain to attest the extent of the merciless massacre. Here, as in all cases, there is a truth expressed; but again too casual and special. Besides that, from contempt of elegance, or from defect of art, the names resemble the seafaring nomenclature in being too rudely compounded.

As with the imposition of names, so with the use of the existing language, most classes stand between the pressure of two extremes – of coarseness, of carelessness, of imperfect art, on the one hand, of spurious refinement and fantastic ambition upon the other. Authors have always been a dangerous class for any language. Amongst the myriads who are prompted to authorship by the coarse love of reputation, or by the nobler craving for sympathy, there will always be thousands seeking distinctions through novelties of diction. Hopeless of any audience through mere weight of matter, they will turn for their last resource to such tricks of innovation as they can bring to bear upon language. What care they for purity or simplicity of diction, if at any cost of either they can win a special attention to themselves? Now, the great body of women are under no such unhappy bias. If they happen to move in polished circles, or have received a tolerable education, they will speak their native language of necessity with truth and simplicity. And supposing them not to be professional writers, (as so small a proportion *can* be, even in France or England,) there is always something in the situation of women which secures a fidelity to the idiom. From the greater excitability of females, and the superior vivacity of their feelings, they will be liable to far more irritations from wounded sensibilities. It is for such occasions chiefly that they seek to be effective in their language. Now, there is not in the world so certain a guarantee

* *'Yankee names.'* – Foreigners in America subject themselves to a perpetual misinterpretation by misapplying this term. *'Yankee,'* in the American use, does not mean a citizen of the United States as opposed to a foreigner, but a citizen of the Northern New England States (Massachusetts, Connecticut, &c.) opposed to a Virginian, a Kentuckian, &c.





WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

for pure idiomatic diction, without tricks or affectation, as a case of genuine excitement. Real situations are always pledges of a real natural language. It is in counterfeit passion, in the mimical situations of novels, or in poems that are efforts of ingenuity, and no ebullitions of absolute unsimulated feeling, that female writers endeavour to sustain their own jaded sensibility, or to reinforce the languishing interest of their readers by extravagances of language. No woman in this world, under a movement of resentment from a false accusation, or from jealousy, or from confidence betrayed, ever was at leisure to practise vagaries of caprice in the management of her mother tongue; strength of real feeling shuts out all temptation to the affectation of false feeling.

Hence the purity of the female Byzantine Greek. Such caprices as they had took some other course, and found some other vent than through their mother tongue. Hence, also, the purity of female English. Would you desire at this day to read our noble language in its native beauty, picturesque from idiomatic propriety, racy in its phraseology, delicate yet sinewy in its composition – steal the mail bags, and break open all the letters in female handwriting. Three out of four will have been written by that class of women who have the most leisure and the most interest in a correspondence by the post – that class who combine more of intelligence, cultivation, and of thoughtfulness, than any other in Europe – the class of unmarried women above twenty-five – an increasing class;* women who from mere dignity of character, have renounced all prospects of conjugal and parental life, rather than descend into habits unsuitable to their birth. Women capable of such sacrifices, and marked by such strength of mind, may be expected to think with deep feeling, and to express themselves (unless where they have been too much biased by bookish connexions) with natural grace. Not impossibly these same women, if required to come forward in some public character, might write ill and affectedly. They would then have their free natural movement of thought distorted into some accommodation to artificial standards, amongst which they might happen to select a bad one for imitation. But in their letters they write under the benefit of their natural advantages; not warped, on the one hand, into that constraint or awkwardness which is the inevitable effect of conscious exposure to public gaze; yet, on the other, not left to vacancy or the chills of apathy, but sustained by some deep sympathy between themselves and their correspondents.

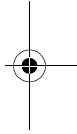
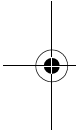
So far as concerns idiomatic English, we are satisfied, from the many beautiful female letters which we have heard upon chance occasions from every quarter of the empire, that they, the educated women of Great Britain – above all, the interesting class of women unmarried upon scruples of sexual

* *An increasing class*; but not in France. – It is a most remarkable moral phenomenon in the social condition of that nation, and one which speaks a volume as to the lower tone of female dignity, that unmarried women, at the age which amongst us obtains the insulting name of *old maids*, are almost unknown. What shocking sacrifices of sexual honour does this one fact argue?



STYLE [NO. 1]

honour – and also (as in Constantinople of old) the nurseries of Great Britain, are the true and best depositaries of the old mother idiom. But we must not forget, that though this is another term for what is good in English, when we are talking of a human and a popular interest, there is a separate use of the language, as in the higher forms of history or philosophy, which ought not to be idiomatic. As respects that which *is*, it is remarkable that the same orders cling to the ancient purity of diction amongst ourselves who did so in pagan Rome – viz., *women*, for the reasons just noticed, *and people of rank*. So much has this been the tendency in England, that we know a person of great powers, but who has in all things a one-sided taste, and is so much a lover of idiomatic English as to endure none else, who professes to read no writer since Lord Chesterfield.¹³ It is certain that this accomplished nobleman, who has been most unjustly treated from his unfortunate collision with a national favourite, and in part also from the laxity of his moral principles, where, however, he spoke worse than he thought, wrote with the ease and careless grace of a high-bred gentleman. But his style is not peculiar: it has always been the style of his order. After making the proper allowance for continual new infusions into our peerage from the bookish class of lawyers, and for some modifications derived from the learned class of spiritual peers, the tone of Lord Chesterfield has always been the tone of our old aristocracy; a tone of elegance and propriety, above all things free from the stiffness of pedantry or academic rigour, and obeying Caesar's rule of shunning *tanquam scopulum* any *insolens verbum*.¹⁴ It is, indeed, through this channel that the solitudes of our British nobility have always flowed: other qualities might come and go according to the temperament of the individual; but what in all generations constituted an object of horror for that class, was bookish precision and professional peculiarity. From the free popular form of our great public schools, to which nine out of ten amongst our old nobility resorted, it happened unavoidably that they were not equally clear of popular vulgarities; indeed, from another cause, *that* could not have been avoided – for it is remarkable that a connexion, as close as through an umbilical cord, has always been maintained between the very highest orders of our aristocracy and the lowest of our democracy, by means of nurses. The nurses and immediate personal attendants of all classes come from the same sources, most commonly from the peasantry of the land; they import into all families alike, into the highest and the lowest, the coarsest expressions from the vernacular language of anger and contempt. Whence, for example, it was, that about five or six years ago, when a new novel¹⁵ circulated in London, with a private understanding that it was a juvenile effort from two very young ladies of the very highest rank, nobody who reflected at all could feel much surprise that one of the characters should express her self-esteem by the popular phrase that she did not 'think small beer of herself.' Equally in its faults and its merits, the language of high life has always tended to simplicity and the vernacular ideal, recoiling from every mode of bookishness. And in this, as in so many other instances, it is singular

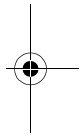
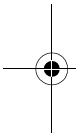




WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

to note the close resemblance between polished England and polished Rome. Augustus Caesar¹⁶ was so little able to enter into any artificial forms or tortuous obscurities of ambitious rhetoric, that he could not so much as understand them. Even the old antique forms of language, where it happened that they had become obsolete, were to him disgusting. And probably the main bond of connexion between himself and Horace was their common and excessive hatred of obscurity; from which quality, indeed, the very intellectual defects of both, equally with their good taste, alienated them to intensity.

The pure racy idiom of colloquial or household English, we have insisted, must be looked for in the circles of well-educated women not too closely connected with books. It is certain that books, in any language, will tend to encourage a diction too remote from the style of spoken idiom; whilst the greater solemnity, and the more ceremonial costume of regular literature must often demand such a non-idiomatic diction, upon mere principles of good taste. But why is it that in our day literature has taken so determinate a swing towards this professional language of books, as to justify some fears that the other extreme of the free colloquial idiom will perish as a living dialect? The apparent cause lies in a phenomenon of modern life, which, on other accounts also, is entitled to anxious consideration. It is in newspapers that we must look for the main reading of this generation; and in newspapers, therefore, we must seek for the causes operating upon the style of the age. Seventy years ago this tendency in political journals to usurp upon the practice of books, and to mould the style of writers, was noticed by a most acute observer, himself one of the most brilliant writers in the class of satiric sketchers and personal historians that any nation has produced. Already, before 1770, the late Lord Orford was in the habit of saying to any man who consulted him on the cultivation of style – ‘Style is it that you want? Oh, go and look into the newspapers for a style.’¹⁷ This was said half contemptuously and half seriously. But the evil has now become overwhelming. One single number of a London morning paper, which in half a century has expanded from the size of a dinner napkin to that of a breakfast tablecloth, from that to a carpet, and will soon be forced, by the expansions of public business, into something resembling the mainsail of a frigate, already is equal in printed matter to a very large octavo volume. Every old woman in the nation now reads daily a vast miscellany in one vol. royal octavo. The evil of this, as regards the quality of knowledge communicated, admits of no remedy. Public business, in its whole unwieldy compass, must always form the subject of these daily chronicles. Nor is there room to expect any change in the style. The evil effect of this upon the style of the age may be reduced to two forms. Formerly the natural impulse of every man was, spontaneously to use the language of life; the language of books was a secondary attainment not made without effort. Now, on the contrary, the daily composers of newspapers have so long dealt in the professional idiom of books, as to have brought it home to every reader in the nation who does not violently resist it by some domestic advantages. Time

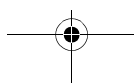




STYLE [NO. I]

was, within our own remembrance, that if you should have heard, in passing along the street, from any old apple-woman such a phrase as 'I will *avail myself* of your kindness,' forthwith you would have shied like a skittish horse – you would have run away in as much terror as any old Roman upon those occasions when *Bos loquebatur*.¹⁸ At present you swallow such marvels as matters of course. The whole artificial dialect of books has come into play as the dialect of ordinary life. This is one form of the evil impressed upon our style by journalism; a dire monotony of bookish idiom has encrusted and stiffened all native freedom of expression, like some scaly leprosy or elephantiasis, barking and hide-binding the fine natural pulses of the elastic flesh. Another and almost a worse evil has established itself in the prevailing structure of sentences. Every man who has had any experience in writing, knows how natural it is for hurry and fulness of matter to discharge itself by vast sentences, involving clause within clause *ad infinitum* – how difficult it is, and how much a work of time, to break up this huge fasciculus of cycle and epicycle¹⁹ into a graceful succession of sentences, long intermingled with short, each modifying the other, and arising musically by links of spontaneous connexion. Now the plethoric form of period, this monster model of sentence, bloated with decomplex intercalations, and exactly repeating the form of syntax which distinguishes an act of Parliament, is the prevailing model in newspaper eloquence. Crude undigested masses of suggestion, furnishing rather raw materials for composition and jotting for the memory, than any formal developments of the ideas, describe the quality of writing which *must* prevail in journalism: not from defect of talents, which are at this day of that superior class which may be presumed from the superior importance of the function itself; but from the necessities of hurry and of instant compliance with an instant emergency, granting no possibility for revision, or opening for amended thought, which are evils attached to the flying velocities of public business.

As to structure of sentence, and the periodic involution, *that* scarcely admits of being exemplified in the conversation of those who do not write. But the choice of phraseology is naturally and easily echoed in the colloquial forms of those who surrender themselves to such an influence. To mark in what degree this contagion of bookishness has spread, and how deeply it has moulded the habits of expression in classes naturally the least likely to have been reached by a revolution so artificial in its character, we will report a single record from the memorials of our own experience. Some eight years ago, we had occasion to look for lodgings in a newly-built suburb of London.²⁰ The mistress of the house, (with respect to whom we have nothing to report more than that she was in the worst sense a vulgar woman, that is, not merely a lowbred person – so much might have been expected from her occupation – but morally vulgar by the evidence of her own complex precautions against fraud, reasonable enough in so dangerous a capital, but not calling for the very ostentatious display of them which she obtruded upon us) was in regular



WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

training, it appeared, as a student of newspapers. She had no children: the newspapers were her children. There lay her studies, that branch of learning constituted her occupation, from morning to night: and the following were amongst the words which she – this semibarbarian – poured from her cornucopia during the very few minutes of our interview; which interview was brought to an abrupt issue by mere nervous agitation upon our part. The words, as noted down within an hour of the occasion, and after allowing a fair time for our recovery, were these: – first, ‘Category;’ secondly, ‘predicament;’ (where, by the way, from the twofold iteration of the idea – Greek and Roman – it appears that the old lady was ‘twice armed;’) – thirdly, ‘individuality;’ fourthly, ‘procrastination;’ fifthly, ‘speaking diplomatically, would not wish to commit herself;’ sixthly, ‘would spontaneously adapt the several modes of domestication to the reciprocal interests, &c.;’ and finally, (which word it was that settled us; we heard it as we reached the topmost stair on the second floor; and, without further struggle against our instincts, round we wheeled, rushed down forty-five stairs, and exploded from the house with a fury causing us to impinge against an obese or protuberant gentleman, and calling for mutual explanations; a result which nothing *could* account for, but a steel bow, or mustachios on the lip of an elderly woman: meantime the fatal word was,) seventhly, ‘anteriorly.’ Concerning which word we solemnly depose and make affidavit, that neither from man, woman, nor book, had we ever heard it before this unique rencontre with this abominable woman on the staircase. The occasion which furnished the excuse for such a word was this: From the staircase window we saw a large shed in the rear of the house: apprehending some nuisance of ‘manufacturing industry’ in our neighbourhood, – ‘What’s that?’ we demanded. Mark the answer: ‘A shed; and anteriorly to the existing shed there was—;’ *what* there was, posterity must consent to have wrapt up in darkness, for there came on our nervous seizure, which intercepted further communication. But observe, as a point which took away any gleam of consolation from the case, the total absence of all *malaprop* picturesqueness, that might have defeated its deadly action upon the nervous system. No: it is due to the integrity of her disease, and to the completeness of *our* suffering, that we should attest the unimpeachable correctness of her words and of the syntax by which she connected them.

Now, if we could suppose the case that the old household idiom of the land were generally so extinguished amongst us as it was in this particular instance – if we could imagine, as a *universal* result of journalism, that a coarse unlettered woman, having occasion to say, ‘this or that stood in such a place before the present shed,’ should take as a natural or current formula, ‘anteriorly to the existing shed there stood, &c.’ – what would be the final effect upon our literature? Pedantry, though it were unconscious pedantry, once steadily diffused through a nation as to the very moulds of its thinking, and the general tendencies of its expression, could not but stiffen the natural graces of composition, and weave fetters about the free movement of human thought. This



STYLE [NO. I]

would interfere as effectually with our power of enjoying much that is excellent in our past literature, as it would with our future powers of producing. And such an agency has been too long at work amongst us, not to have already accomplished some part of these separate evils. Amongst women of education, as we have argued above, standing aloof from literature, and less uniformly drawing their intellectual sustenance from newspapers, the deadening effects have been partially counteracted. Here and there, amongst individuals, alive to the particular evils of the age, and watching the very set of the current, there may have been even a more systematic counteraction applied to the mischief. But the great evil in such cases is this – that we cannot see the extent of the changes wrought or being wrought, from having ourselves partaken in them. *Tempora mutantur*; and naturally, if we could review them with the neutral eye of a stranger, it would be impossible for us not to see the extent of those changes. But our eye is *not* neutral: we also have partaken in the changes; *et nos mutamur in illis*.²¹ And this fact disturbs the power of appreciating those changes. Every one of us would have felt, sixty years ago, that the general tone and colouring of a style was stiff, bookish, pedantic, which, from the habituation of our organs, we now feel to be natural and within the privilege of learned art. Direct objective qualities it is always by comparison easy to measure; but the difficulty commences when we have to combine with this outer measurement of the object another corresponding measurement of the subjective or inner qualities by which we apply the measure; that is, when besides the objects projected to a distance from the spectator, we have to allow for variations or disturbances in the very eye which surveys them. The eye cannot see itself; we cannot project from ourselves, and contemplate as an object our own contemplating faculty, or appreciate our own appreciating power. Biases, therefore, or gradual warpings, that have occurred in our critical faculty as applied to style, we cannot allow for; and these biases will unconsciously mask, to our perceptions, an amount of change in the quality of popular style such as we could not easily credit.

Separately from this change for the worse in the drooping idiomatic freshness of our diction, which is a change that has been going on for a century, the other characteristic defect of this age lies in the tumid and tumultuary structure of our sentences. The one change has partly grown out of the other. Ever since a more bookish air was impressed upon composition without much effort by the Latinized and artificial phraseology, by forms of expression consecrated to books, and by ‘long-tailed words in *osity* and *ation*,’²² either because writers felt that already, in this one act of preference shown to the artificial vocabulary, they had done enough to establish a differential character of regular composition, and on that consideration thought themselves entitled to neglect the combination of their words into sentences and periods; or because there is a real natural sympathy between the Latin phraseology and a Latin structure of sentence; certain it is and remarkable, that our popular style, in



WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

the common limited sense of arrangement applied to words, or the syntaxes of sentences, has laboured with two faults that might have been thought incompatible: it has been artificial, by artifices peculiarly adapted to the powers of the Latin language, and yet at the very same time careless and disordinate. There is a strong idea expressed by the Latin word *inconditus*, disorganized, or rather *unorganized*. Now, in spite of its artificial bias, that is the very epithet which will best characterise our newspaper style. To be viewed as susceptible of organization, such periods must already be elaborate and artificial; to be viewed as not having received it, such periods must be careless.

But perhaps the very best illustration of all this will be found in putting the case of English style into close juxtaposition with the style of the French and Germans – our only very important neighbours. As leaders of civilisation, as *powers* in an intellectual sense, there are but three nations in Europe – England, Germany, France. As to Spain and Italy, outlying extremities, they are not moving bodies; they rest upon the past. Russia and North America are the two bulwarks of Christendom – East and west. But the three powers *at the centre* are in all senses the motive forces of civilisation. In all things they have the initiation; and they preside.

By this comparison we shall have the advantage of doing what the French express by *s'orienter* – the Germans by *sich orientiren*.²³ Learning one of our bearings on the compass, we shall be able to deduce the rest; and we shall be able to conjecture our valuation as respects the art, by finding our place amongst the artists.

With respect to French style, we can imagine the astonishment of an English author, practised in composition, and with no previous knowledge of French literature, who should first find himself ranging freely amongst a French library. That particular fault of style which in English books is all but universal, absolutely has not an existence in the French. Speaking rigorously and to the very letter of the case, we, upon a large experience in French literature, affirm, that it would be nearly impossible (perhaps strictly so) to cite an instance of that cumbrous and unwieldy style which disfigures English composition so extensively. Enough could not be adduced to satisfy the purpose of illustration. And to make a Frenchman sensible of the fault as a possibility, you must appeal to some *translated* model.

But why? The cause of this national immunity from a fault so common every where else, and so natural, when we look into the producing occasions, is as much entitled to our notice as the immunity itself. The fault is inevitable, as one might fancy, to two conditions of mind – hurry in the first place, want of art in the second. The French must be liable to the disadvantages as much as their neighbours: by what magic is it that they evade them or neutralize them in the result? The secret lies here; beyond all nations, by constitutional vivacity, the French are a nation of talkers: and the model of their sentences is moulded by that fact. Conversation, which is a luxury for other nations, is for them a necessity: by the very law of their peculiar intellect and of its social

STYLE [NO. 1]

training, they are colloquial. Hence it happens, that there are no such people endured or ever heard of in France as *alloquial wits*; people who talk *to* but not *with* a circle; the very finest of their *beaux esprits* must submit to the equities of conversation, and would be crushed summarily as monsters, if they were to seek a selfish mode of display, or a privilege of lecturing any audience of a *salon* who had met for purposes of *social* pleasure. 'De monologue,' as Madame de Staël,²⁴ in her broken English, described this mode of display when speaking of Coleridge,²⁵ is so far from being tolerated in France as an accomplishment, that it is not even understood as a disease. This kind of what may be called irresponsible talk, when a man runs on *perpetuo tenore*,²⁶ not accountable for any opinion to his auditors, open to no contradiction, has sometimes procured for a man in England the affix of River to his name: *Labitur et labetur in omne volubilis aevum*.²⁷ But that has been in cases where the talking impulse was sustained by mere vivacity of animal spirits, without knowledge to support it, and liable to the full weight of Archbishop Huet's sarcasm²⁸ – that it was a diarrhoea of garrulity, a *fluxe de bouche*.²⁹ But in cases like that of Coleridge, where the solitary display, if selfish, is still dignified by a pomp of knowledge, and a knowledge which you feel to have been fused and combined by the genial circumstances of the speaker's position in the centre of an admiring circle, – we English do still recognise the *métier* of a professional talker as a privileged mode of social display. People are asked to come and hear such a performer, as you form a select party to hear Thalberg or Paganini.³⁰ The thing is understood at least with us; right or wrong, there is an understanding amongst the company that you are not to interrupt the great man of the night. You may prompt him by a question; you may set him in motion; but to begin arguing against him would be felt as not less unseasonable than to insist on whistling Jim Crow³¹ during the *bravuras* and *tours de force* of the great musical artists.

In France, therefore, from the intense adaptation of the national mind to real colloquial intercourse, for which reciprocation is indispensable, the form of sentence in use is adjusted to that primary condition; brief, terse, simple; shaped to avoid misunderstanding, and to meet the impatience of those who are waiting for their turn. People who write rapidly every where write as they talk: it is impossible to do otherwise. Taking a pen into his hand, a man frames his periods exactly as he would do if addressing an audience. So far the Englishman and the Frenchman are upon the same level. Suppose them, therefore, both preparing to speak: an Englishman in such a situation has no urgent motive for turning his thoughts to any other object than the prevailing one of the moment – viz., how best to convey his meaning. That object weighs also with the Frenchman; but he has a previous, a paramount, object to watch – the necessity of avoiding *des longueurs*.³² The rights, the equities of conversation are but dimly present to the mind of the Englishman. From the mind of a Frenchman they are never absent. To an Englishman, the right of occupying the attention of the company seems to inhere in *things* rather than



WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

in persons: if the particular subject under discussion should happen to be a grave one, then, in right of *that*, and not by any right of his own, a speaker will seem to an Englishman invested with the privilege of drawing largely upon the attention of a company. But to a Frenchman this right of participation in the talk is a *personal* right, which cannot be set aside by any possible claims in the subject: it passes by necessity to and fro, backwards and forwards, between the several persons who are present; and, as in the games of battledore and shuttlecock, or of 'hunt the slipper,'³³ the momentary subject of interest never *can* settle or linger for any length of time in any one individual, without violating the rules of the sport, or suspending its movement. Inevitably, therefore, the structure of sentence must for ever be adapted to this primary function of the French national intellect – the function of communicativeness, and to the necessities (for to the French they *are* necessities) of social intercourse.

Hence it is that in French authors, whatever may otherwise be the differences of their minds, or the differences of their themes, uniformly we find the periods short, rapid, unelaborate – Pascal or Helvetius, Condillac or Rousseau, Montesquieu or Voltaire, Buffon or Duclos, – all alike are terse, perspicuous, brief. Even Mirabeau or Chateaubriand, so much modified by foreign intercourse, in this point adhere to their national models. Even Bossuet or Bourdaloue,³⁴ where the diffusiveness and amplitude of oratory might have been pleaded as a dispensation, are not more licentious in this respect than their compatriots. One rise in every sentence, one gentle descent, – that is the law for French composition; even too monotonously so – and thus it happens that such a thing as a long or an involved sentence could not be produced from French literature, though a sultan were to offer his daughter in marriage to the man who should find it. Whereas now, amongst us English, not only is the too general tendency of our sentences towards hyperbolical length, but it will be found continually, that instead of one rise and one corresponding fall – one *arsis* and one *thesis*³⁵ – there are many. Flux and reflux, swell and cadence, that is the movement for a sentence; but our modern sentences agitate us by rolling fires, after the fashion of those internal earthquakes that, not content with one throe, run along spasmodically like boys playing at what is called 'drake-stone.'³⁶

It is not often that a single fault can produce any vast amount of evil. But there are cases where it does; and this is one: the effect of weariness and of repulsion, which may arise from this single vice of unwieldy comprehensiveness in the structure of sentences cannot better be illustrated than by a frank exposure of what often happens to ourselves, and (as we differ as to this case only by consciously noticing what all feel) must often happen to others. In the evening, when it is natural that we should feel a craving for rest, some book lies near us which is written in a style, clear, tranquil, easy to follow. Just at that moment comes in the wet newspaper, dripping with the dewy freshness of its news; and even in its parliamentary memorials promising so much inter-

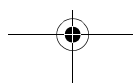
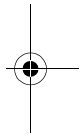
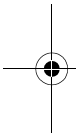




STYLE [NO. I]

est, that, let them be treated in what manner they may merely for the subjects, they are often commandingly attractive.³⁷ The attraction indeed is but too potent, the interest but too exciting. Yet, after all, many times we lay aside the journal, and we acquiesce in the gentler stimulation of the book. Simply the news we may read; but the discussions, whether direct from the editor, or reported from the Parliament, we refuse or we delay. And why? It is the subject, perhaps you think, it is the great political question – too agitating by the consequences it may happen to involve. No. All this, if treated in a winning style, we could bear. It is the effort, the toil, the exertion of mind requisite to follow the discussion through endless and labyrinthine sentences – this it is which compels us to forego the journal, or to lay it aside until the next morning. Those who are not accustomed to watch the effects of composition upon the feelings, or have had little experience in voluminous reading pursued for weeks, would scarcely imagine how much of downright physical exhaustion is produced by what is technically called the *periodic* style of writing: it is not the length, the *απεραντολογία*,³⁸ the paralytic flux of words; it is not even the cumbrous involution of parts within parts, separately considered, that bears so heavily upon the attention. It is the suspense, the holding-on, of the mind until what is called the *αποδοσις*³⁹ or coming round of the sentence commences – this it is which wears out the faculty of attention. A sentence, for example, begins with a series of *ifs*; perhaps a dozen lines are occupied with expanding the conditions under which something is affirmed or denied: here you cannot dismiss and have done with the ideas as you go along; all is hypothetical; all is suspended in air. The conditions are not fully to be understood until you are acquainted with the dependency; you must give a separate attention to each clause of this complex hypothesis, and yet, having done *that* by a painful effort, you have done nothing at all; for you must exercise a reacting attention through the corresponding latter section, in order to follow out its relations to all parts of the hypothesis which sustains it. In fact, under the rude yet also artificial character of newspaper style, each separate monster period is a vast arch, which, not receiving its keystone, not being locked into self-supporting cohesion, until you nearly reach its close, imposes of necessity upon the unhappy reader all the *onus* of its ponderous weight through the main process of its construction. The continued repetition of so Atlantean⁴⁰ an effort soon overwhelms the patience of any reader, and establishes at length that habitual feeling which causes him to shrink from the speculations of journalists, or (which is more likely) to adopt a worse habit than absolute neglect, which we shall notice immediately.

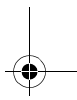
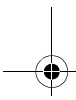
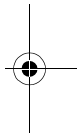
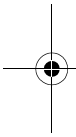
Meantime, as we have compared ourselves on this important point with the French, let us now complete our promise, by noticing our relation in the same point to the Germans. Even on its own account, and without any view to our present purpose, the character of German prose is an object of legitimate astonishment. Whatever is bad in our own ideal of prose style, whatever is repulsive in our own practice, we see there carried to the most outrageous





WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

excess. Herod is out-heroded, Sternhold is out-sternholded, with a zealotry of extravagance that really seems like wilful burlesque. Lessing, Herder, Paul Richter, and Lichtenberg,⁴¹ with some few beside, either prompted by nature or trained upon foreign models, have avoided the besetting sin of German prose. Any man of distinguished talent, whose attention has been once called steadily to this subject, cannot fail to avoid it. The misfortune of most writers has been, that, once occupied with the interest of *things*, and overwhelmed by the embarrassments of disputed doctrines, they never advert to any question affecting what they view, by comparison, as a trifle. The τὸ *docendum*, the thing to be taught, has availed to obscure or even to annihilate for their eyes every anxiety as to the mode of teaching. And, as one conspicuous example of careless style acts by its authority to create many more, we need not wonder at the results, even when they reach a point of what may be called monstrous. Among ten thousand offenders, who carry their neglect of style even to that point, we would single out Immanuel Kant.⁴² Such is the value of his philosophy in some sections, and partially it is so very capable of a lucid treatment, intelligible to the plainest man of reflective habits, that within no long interval we shall certainly see him naturalized amongst ourselves; there are particular applications of his philosophy not contemplated by himself, for which we venture to predict that the Christian student will ultimately be thankful, when the elementary principles have been brought under a clear light of interpretation. Attention will then be forced upon his style, and facts will come forward not credible without experimental proof. For instance, we have lying before us at this moment his *Critik der Practischen Vernunft* in the unpirated edition of Hartnoch – the respectable publisher of all Kant's great works. The text is therefore authentic: and being a 4th edition, (Riga, 1797,) must be presumed to have benefited by the author's careful revision: we have no time for search, but on barely throwing open the book, we see a sentence at pp. 70, 71⁴³ exactly covering one whole octavo page of thirty-one lines, (each line averaging forty-five to forty-eight letters.) Sentences of the same calibre, some even of far larger *bore*, we have observed in this and other works of the same author. And it is not the fact taken as an occasional possibility, it is the prevailing character of his style, that we insist on as the most formidable barrier to the study of his writings and to the progress of what will soon be acknowledged as important in his principles. A sentence is viewed by him, and by most of his countrymen, as a rude mould or elastic form admitting of expansion to any possible extent: it is laid down as a rude outline, and then by superstruction and *epi*-superstruction it is gradually reared to a giddy altitude which no eye can follow. Yielding to his natural impulse of subjoining all additions, or exceptions, or modifications – not in the shape of separate consecutive sentences, but as intercalations and stuffings of one original sentence, Kant might naturally enough have written a book from beginning to end in one vast hyperbolic sentence. We sometimes see an English Act of Parliament which does literally accomplish that end, by an artifice which in





STYLE [NO. 1]

law has a purpose and a use. Instead of laying down a general proposition, which is partially false until it has received its proper restraints, the framer of the act endeavours to evade even this momentary falsehood by coupling the restraints with the very primary enunciation of the truth: *e.g.* A shall be entitled, provided always that he is under the circumstances of *e*, or *i*, or *o*, to the right of X. Thus, even a momentary compliance with the false notion of an absolute unconditional claim to X is evaded; a truth which is only a conditional truth, is stated as such from the first. There is, therefore, a theoretic use. But what is the practical result? Why, that when you attempt to read an Act of Parliament where the exceptions, the secondary exceptions to the exceptions, the limitations and the sublimitations, descend *seriatim*, by a vast scale of dependencies, the mind finds itself overtasked: the energy of the most energetic begins to droop; and so inevitable is that result, that Mr Pitt,⁴⁴ a minister unusually accomplished for such process by constitution of mind and by practice, publicly avowed his inability to follow so trying a conflict with technical embarrassments. He declared himself to be lost in the labyrinth of clauses: the Ariadne's clue⁴⁵ was wanting for his final extrication: and he described his situation at the end with the simplicity natural to one who was no charlatan, and sought for no reputation by the tricks of a funambulist: 'in the crowd of things excepted and counter-excepted, he really ceased to understand the main point – what it was that the law allowed, and what it was that it disallowed.'⁴⁶

We might have made our readers merry with the picture of German prose; but we must not linger. It is enough to say, that it offers the counterpole to the French style. Our own popular style, and (what is worse) the *tendency* of our own, is to the German extreme. For those who read German there is this advantage – that German prose, as written by the mob of authors, presents, as in a Brobdignagian⁴⁷ mirror, the most offensive faults of our own.

But these faults – are they in practice so wearisome and exhausting as we have described them? Possibly not; and, where that happens to be the case, let the reader ask himself if it is not by means of an evasion worse in its effects than any fault of style could ever prove in its most exaggerated form. Shrinking, through long experience, from the plethoric form of cumulation and 'periodic' writing in which the journalist supports or explains his views, every man who puts a business value upon his time, slips naturally into a trick of short-hand reading. It is more even by the effort and tension of mind required, than by the mere loss of time, that most readers are repelled from the habit of careful reading. An evil of modern growth is met by a modern remedy. Every man gradually learns an art of catching at the leading words, and the cardinal or hinge-joints of transition, which proclaim the general course of a writer's speculation. Now it is very true, and is sure to be objected – that, where so much is certain to prove mere iteration and teasing tautology, little can be lost by this or any other process of abridgement. Certainly, as regards the particular subject concerned, there may be no room to apprehend



WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

a serious injury. Not there, not in any direct interest, but in a far larger interest – indirect for the moment, but the most direct and absolute of all interests for an intellectual being, the reader suffers a permanent debilitation. He acquires a factitious propensity, he forms an incorrigible habit of desultory reading. Now, to say of a man's knowledge, that it will be shallow, or (which is worse than shallow) will be erroneous and insecure in its foundations, is to say little of such a habit: it is by reaction upon a man's faculties, it is by the effects reflected upon his judging and reasoning powers, that loose habits of reading tell eventually. And these are durable effects. Even as respects the minor purpose of information, better it is, by a thousand-fold, to have read three score of books (chosen judiciously) with severe attention, than to have raced through the library of the Vatican at a newspaper pace. But, as respects the final habits acquired, habits of thinking coherently, and of judging soundly – better that a man should have not read one line throughout his life, than have travelled through the journals of Europe by this random process of 'reading short.'

Yet, by this Parthian⁴⁸ habit of aiming at full gallop – of taking flying shots at conspicuous marks, and, like Parthians also, directing their chance arrows whilst retreating, and revolting with horror from a direct approach to the object, – thus it is, that the young and the flexible are trained amongst us under the increasing tyranny of journalism. A large part of the evil, therefore, belongs to style: for it is this which repels readers, and enforces the short-hand process of desultory reading. A large part of the evil, therefore, is of a nature to receive a remedy.

It is with a view to that practical part of the extensive evil, that we have shaped our present notice of popular style, as made operative amongst ourselves. One single vice of periodic syntax, a vice unknown to the literature of Greece, and, until Paterculus,⁴⁹ even of Rome, (although the language of Rome was so naturally adapted to that vice), has with us counterbalanced all possible vices of any other order. Simply by the vast sphere of its agency for evil, in the habits of mind which it produces and supports, such a vice merits a consideration which would else be disproportionate. Yet, at the same time, it must not be forgotten, that if the most operative of all vices, after all it is but one. What are the others?

It is a fault, amongst many faults, of such works as we have on this subject of style – that they collect the list of qualities, good or bad, to which composition is liable, not under any principle from which they might be deduced *à priori*,⁵⁰ so as to be assured that all had been enumerated, but by a tentative groping, a mere conjectural estimate. The word *style* has with us a twofold meaning; one sense, the narrow one, expressing the mere *synthesis onomatōn*, the syntaxis or combination of words into sentences; the other of far wider extent, and expressing all possible relations that can arise between thoughts and words – the total effect of a writer, as derived from manner. Style may be viewed as an *organic* thing and as a *mechanic* thing. By organic, we mean that

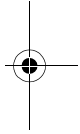
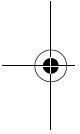




STYLE [NO. I]

which, being acted upon, reacts – and which propagates the communicated power without loss. By mechanic, that which, being impressed with motion, cannot throw it back without loss, and therefore soon comes to an end. The human body is an elaborate system of organs: it is sustained by organs. But the human body is exercised as a machine, and, as such, may be viewed in the arts of riding, dancing, leaping &c., subject to the laws of motion and equilibrium. Now the use of words is an organic thing, in so far as language is connected with thoughts, and modified by thoughts. It is a mechanic thing, in so far as words in combination determine or modify each other. The science of style, as an organ of thought, of style in relation to the ideas and feelings, might be called the *organology* of style. The science of style, considered as a machine, in which words act upon words, and through a particular grammar, might be called the *mechanology* of style. It is of little importance by what name these two functions of composition are expressed. But it is of great importance not to confound the functions; that function by which style maintains a commerce with thought, and that by which it chiefly communicates with grammar and with words. A pedant only will insist upon the names – but the distinction in the ideas, under some name, can be neglected only by the man who is careless of logic.

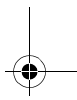
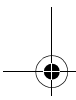
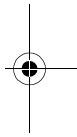
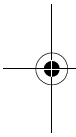
We know not how far we may be ever called upon to proceed with this discussion: if it should happen that we were, an interesting field of questions would lie before us for the first part, (the organology.) It would lead us over the ground trodden by the Greek and Roman rhetoricians; and over those particular questions which have arisen by the contrast between the circumstances of the ancients and our own since the origin of printing. Punctuation, trivial as such an innovation may seem, was the product of typography; and it is interesting to trace the effects upon style even of that one slight addition to the resources of logic. Previously, a man was driven to depend for his security against misunderstanding upon the pure virtue of his syntax. Miscollocation or dislocation of related words disturbed the whole sense: its least effect was, to give no sense; often it gave a dangerous sense. Now, punctuation was an artificial machinery for maintaining the integrity of the sense against all mistakes of the writer; and, as one consequence, it withdrew the energy of men's anxieties from the natural machinery, which lay in just and careful arrangement. Another and still greater machinery of art for the purpose of maintaining the sense, and with the effect of relaxing the care of the writer, lay in the exquisitely artificial structure of the Latin language, which, by means of its terminal forms, indicated the arrangement, and referred the proper predicate to the proper subject, spite of all that affectation or negligence could do to disturb the series of the logic or the succession of the syntax. Greek, of course, had the same advantage in kind, but not in degree; and thence rose some differences which have escaped all notice of rhetoricians. Here also would properly arise the question started by Charles Fox, (but probably due originally to the conversation of some far subtler friend, such as





WORKS OF DE QUINCEY: VOLUME 12

Edmund Burke,)⁵¹ how far the practice of foot-notes – a practice purely modern in its *form* – is reconcilable with the laws of just composition: and whether in virtue, though not in form, such foot-notes did not exist for the ancients, by an evasion we could point out. The question is clearly one which grows out of style in its relations to thought – how far, viz., such an excrescence as a note argues that the sentence to which it is attached has not received the benefit of a full developement for the conception involved; whether, if thrown into the furnace again and re-melted, it might not be so re-cast as to absorb the redundancy which had previously flowed over into a note. Under this head would fall not only all the differential questions of style and composition between us and the ancients, but also the questions of merit as fairly distributed amongst the moderns compared with each other. The French, as we recently insisted, undoubtedly possess one vast advantage over other nations in the good taste which governs the arrangement of their sentences; in the simplicity (a strange pretension to make for any thing French) of the modulation under which their thoughts flow; in the absence of all cumbrous involution, and in the quick succession of their periods. In reality this invaluable merit tends to an excess; and the *style coupé* as opposed to the *style soutenu*,⁵² flippancy opposed to gravity, the subsultory to the continuous, these are the too frequent extremities to which the French manner betrays men. Better, however, to be flippant, than, by a revolting form of tumour and perplexity, to lead men into habits of intellect such as result from the modern vice of English style. Still, with all its practical value, it is evident that the intellectual merits of the French style are but small. They are chiefly negative, in the first place; and, secondly, founded in the accident of their colloquial necessities. The law of conversation has prescribed the model of their sentences: and in that law there is quite as much of self-interest at work as of respect for equity. *Hanc veniam petimusque damusque vicissim.*⁵³ Give and take is the rule, and he who expects to be heard must condescend to listen; which necessity, for both parties, binds over both to be brief. Brevity so won could at any rate have little merit; and it is certain that, for profound thinking, it must sometimes be a hinderance. In order to be brief, a man must take a short sweep of view: his range of thought cannot be extensive; and such a rule, applied to a general method of thinking, is fitted rather to aphorisms and maxims as upon a known subject, than to any process of investigation as upon a subject yet to be fathomed. Advancing still further into the examination of style as the organ of thinking, we should find occasion to see the prodigious defects of the French in all the higher qualities of prose composition. One advantage, for a practical purpose of life, is sadly counterbalanced by numerous faults, many of which are faults of *stamina*, lying not in any corrigible defects, but in such as imply penury of thinking, from radical inaptitude in the thinking faculty to connect itself with the feeling, and with the creative faculty of the imagination. There are many other researches belonging to this subtlest of subjects, affecting both the logic and the ornaments of style, which would fall under the head of organology. But for instant





STYLE [NO. I]

practical use, though far less difficult for investigation, yet, for that reason, far more tangible and appreciable, would be all the suggestions proper to the other head of mechanology. Half-a-dozen rules for evading the most frequently recurring forms of awkwardness, of obscurity, of misproportion, and of double meaning, would do more to assist a writer in practice, laid under some necessity of hurry, than volumes of general disquisition. It makes us blush to add, that even grammar is so little of a perfect attainment amongst us, that with two or three exceptions, (one being Shakspeare, whom some affect to consider as belonging to a semi-barbarous age,) we have never seen the writer, through a circuit of prodigious reading, who has not sometimes violated the accidence or the syntax of English grammar.

Whatever becomes of our own possible speculations, we shall conclude with insisting on the growing necessity of style as a practical interest of daily life. Upon subjects of public concern, and in proportion to that concern, there will always be a suitable (and as letters extend, a growing) competition. Other things being equal, or appearing to be equal, the determining principle for the public choice will lie in the style. Of a German book, otherwise entitled to respect, it was said – *er lässt sich nicht lesen*,⁵⁴ it does not permit itself to be read: such and so repulsive was the style. Among ourselves, this has long been true of newspapers: they do not suffer themselves to be read *in extenso*, and they are read short – with what injury to the mind may be guessed. The same style of reading, once largely practised, is applied universally. To this special evil an improvement of style would apply a special redress. The same improvement is otherwise clamorously called for by each man's interest of competition. Public luxury, which is gradually consulted by every thing else, must at length be consulted in style.

