

# SCIENCE AND LETTERS: A PROBLEM IN DEFINITION

E. W. NICHOLS

IF it were permitted to use one of the old-fashioned double-barrelled titles, this paper might be called "Some Suggestions regarding the Definition of Science and Letters, their method and function and the relation between them". I have three preliminary observations to make. In the first place, I have no polemical purpose. In the second place, there is nothing final about this discussion; as indicated above, its purpose is only to suggest. And in the third place, as a natural corollary, its method is discursive, and not severely logical. I have merely been feeling my way around a subject that I have found of interest.

Chesterton has spoken somewhere of terms that are too simple to be defined. He says, I think, that if a man needs to have them defined, he cannot understand them when they are defined. They do themselves define, and no amount of discussion can make them clearer. They are likely to be important and common words, with a long history and many associations; unless indeed they are the names of simple material objects that may be most easily elucidated by practical illustrations. And the definitions of simple material things are not always more lucid than the name. Dr. Johnson defined a net as "anything made with reticulated interstices." How can one define "bad" and "good" except in terms of themselves? On the other hand, mere technical terms are generally easily susceptible of definition, and, except to experts, of no great interest or value when defined. *Samprasarana*, *anaptyxis*, *antiperistasis*, mean nothing to the long-suffering man in the street, arouse, it may be, a moment's interest when explained, and leave him cold again. Between these extremes occur those words which seem most profitable to investigate, words of which everyone understands something and no one understands everything, capable of and yielding something to analysis. Such counters of speech arouse in the minds of their hearers a train of more or less familiar associations. They suppose themselves to understand something of the matter. We all suppose ourselves to understand something of the matter. Sometimes our comprehension is actually more limited than we may think.

If, for instance, a man asks "How is the building lighted"? and the answer is "By electricity", he acquiesces with content. What has he actually learned? That wires probably come into the building from outside, and that when one presses a button light appears behind glass bulbs. That is, to be sure, sufficient for his purpose; and language is very largely made up of words that are roughly sufficient for the purposes of a great many people. But unless our man is a physicist, it is not likely that he has any knowledge of what electricity is, or the ultimate cause of the appearance of light in the building. I do not presume to say whether physicists or anyone else can tell us what electricity is. If they can, they merely push the problem back a step. It is not hard to see that here and everywhere the foundation of all our systems, however long their day may be, is a combination of faith and experience.

It is perhaps worth while to consider what happens when one of these familiar words, more or less fully comprehended, is heard. Every man must make his own observations. There is here, of course, no attempt to show why certain airwaves are charged with meaning and produce this effect. In the first place, each man has his own life up to this date behind him to influence his attitude; and in the second place, fully to trace the complex phenomena would require a knowledge of all history. The little word, as well as the little flower, requires for its complete comprehension a comprehension of the entire universe. But we can watch, more or less, the process in the mind. There is first a comfortable warm emotion, a sense of familiarity as though one were settling into a well-known chair, or grasping an old and friendly pipe; after that, it depends. This comfortable feeling, as it were of acquaintance, ownership, seems to be first; and if the word is friendly or neutral in tone, it may be the most important thing; if, on the other hand, the word is known but hated, immediately after the glow of familiarity comes the cloud of anger. Then, in any case, come fragments of memories of concrete scenes, personal experiences with which the word is in any particular mind associated. To come no nearer home, the word "Democrat" or "Republican" will in some parts of this continent arouse these emotions and memories in the minds of many men who would be hard put to it to give any philosophical explanation of either term. A word, too, may arouse for some person no one definite emotion, but a mingled tangle of emotions of which it is hard to say whether the total result is pleasurable or painful. For language exists in its living reality only in the brains and on the tongues of men.

Books preserve it, to be sure, but they are touched to life only by the contact of the living mind; and each living mind is the mind of a definite person, rooted in and determined by the concrete experience of a definite life. These facts may seem merely odd or trivial; but they lie at the bottom of the problem of definition, and the problem of definition lies at the bottom of very many of our disputes and difficulties. It would be interesting to procure essays from a dozen men of different occupations and different schools of thought defining such words as "loyalty", "patriotism". It might even be suggested that it is a very difficult, perhaps an impossible, task to define "chair" in such a way as to include all chairs and exclude everything else on which people may sit down. One may see the difficulty in the attempt to define such words as "good" and "bad", and perhaps realize after a time that the question discussed by the schoolmen, that of the reality of universals, is still the most important intellectual problem that we have to face. Words are undoubtedly creatures of human habit. Do they stand for anything more ultimately real than themselves?

Socrates is credited with the introduction, or at least the persistent and annoying use, of the method of definition of abstract terms by induction from a number of concrete examples. He had at hand no dictionaries from which to extract a ready-made formula. He had to look at things and draw his own conclusions. But even a dictionary or other work of reference contains only: (1) statements of fact, resting on someone's investigation, presumably careful; and (2) statements of opinion, resting on someone's authority, presumably competent. Neither of these can take the place of independent autopsy; but the number of independent autopsies that can be made by one man on subjects of any importance is exceedingly small.

Consider, for example, the attempt to define "Science" in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. The discussion obviously amounts to what Sidgwick in his *Use of Words in Reasoning* would call an attempt at translation through definitions. If one wished to summarize the matter, perhaps "organized knowledge" would be as fair as anything. One wonders how long Socrates might continue argument to arrive at the essence of it all.

We have one source of information that was of very little use to Socrates, namely etymology. Like all intelligent people, the ancients were interested in words, but they had no sufficient basis of knowledge to make their etymologies of use. Plato in the *Cratylus* may have been merely amusing himself; but Varro was serious enough, and he gives nothing of value except occasional

observations on matters of fact. When, for example, he tells us that *meridies* is from *medius dies*, we pay no attention; but when he adds that he saw at Praeneste a sundial on which the word appeared as *medidies*, we believe it at once for what it is worth. Etymology, to be sure, is not yet certain, but it is much more accurate than it was. The old description of it as "a science in which the consonants count for little and the vowels for nothing at all" is no longer justified. The labours of the nineteenth century in this field have not been wholly in vain; and the sudden illumination that came to the West with the discovery of Sanskrit led to a great romantic adventure of scholarship that has added a kingdom of knowledge to our world and greatly widened our vision; though the use of the word "Aryan" in some circles in Germany seems to show that the knowledge has been forgotten in the country where so much of it was laboriously and joyfully acquired. And, however accurate an etymology may be, it can never be more than a starting-point to a correct apprehension of a word; a starting-point, too, that the word seems not infrequently to forget or ignore. A word is made by its contexts. But the concrete touch with its origin often adds richness and colour to our thought of it. If, for example, we pursue the word "science" behind its Latin origin, until we get as far as we can go with our present stock of knowledge—perhaps as far as we shall ever get with this particular subject—we find the root in a word with a meaning to "cut" or "split", and realize with something of a shock that science is etymologically a rather close relative of schism. Schism, perhaps, separates things where they ought not to be separated; but science has to separate, analyse, break up into bits that can be handled by a finite human mind; it makes us think with affection of the saying about the discursive reason in the old metaphysics book that so many of us studied: "The discursive reason is a necessary and valuable intermediary between a higher and a lower level of immediate apprehension". I think the idea of science as the divider, the analyst, does add a little to the force and value of the word. Such words as *discern*, *discretion*, *discrimination*, convey the notion of separating one thing from another. To separate things that ought to be separated is one of the necessities of a scientific life. Any honest and competent intellectual worker must distinguish between facts and his own opinions, between his opinions and his prejudices; we have all met the type of man who cannot be a scientist—whether he work in laboratory, library, or factory; the man for whom truth is what he feels like and justice is what he wants. We must all confess to moments when the description

fits ourselves; the danger comes when we cannot recognize its application.

Our *C. O. D.* informs us that "letters" means "literature, acquaintance with books, erudition", and the derivation from the Latin is too obvious to require comment; but when one attempts to proceed further, the investigation is not so satisfactory. "Littera" may or may not be connected with the word that means to smear or daub; if one studied the Greek word *gramma*, the result would be more definite, but not very helpful. On this end of the line one can find the words "grammar" and "grammarian", and on the other the Greek *grapho* of which the original sense is said to be "to scratch, scrape, graze", and one sees a picture of the art of composition in very early and laborious stages. But perhaps the most interesting phrase in the Greek is from a fragment of that lively but undesirable person, Critias, "the degenerate scholar of Socrates", as the historian of literature calls him, the man whom Macaulay's and a few other schoolboys remember from their Xenophon as the person who treated Theramenes so shamefully. The fragment concerns itself briefly with the characteristic achievements of various peoples of the ancient world; and he tells us *Phoinikes d'heuron grammata alexiloga*. I do not know where the tradition of the Phoenician invention of the alphabet started; among the Greeks, probably from the fact, as far as their own letters were concerned; but the chief interest of the verse lies in the epithet *alexiloga*. Whether or not the reading is sound, the epithet is suggestive. Liddell and Scott give a casual translation "promoting or supporting discourse", but I think we may go a little further than that. Since *logos* contains in itself both the spoken word and the unspoken thought, both *ratio* and *oratio*, it is not stretching the meaning to render it "defending, preserving thought". Letters are the preservers of thought by means of which the intellectual labours of one generation are passed on to the next. It is, to be sure, a commonplace that people come into the world quite innocent of science and letters. But we may sometimes need to remind ourselves that it is chiefly by means of language and the letters which preserve language that each individual must learn all those things that constitute his inheritance as a civilized human being and differentiate him from the savage and the beast. His peculiar human superiority, which seems not likely to be obscured or diminished by studies, psychological and other, of the ape and other friendly beasts, appears to lie in his capacity thus to absorb experience at second hand. Professor Grandgent, who should be well qualified to talk about language,

says: "My own notion is that speech is a distinctly human invention—the one invention that puts a great gulf between him and the other beasts"; again, "I have failed to discover (i.e. in animals) evidence of anything that I should call a language". However humble and devout our faith in evolution, we do not find nor expect to find dogs composing poetry or cats painting pictures, or the most highly trained monkeys conducting researches in mathematics and chemistry. Letters and science are and seem likely to remain a peculiarly human possession. If we grant that science is in a broad way organized knowledge, and that letters are at any rate the preservers of thought, what can we say about their relation? What we say need not be new. It should, if possible, be true.

I suppose the most common notions about science in the public mind are two: one, that it is a sort of mysterious power which has produced and steadily produces many machines and devices whereby humanity is saved from much labour and enabled to enjoy much comfort, though that trusting optimism has been running in a much diminished flood since the war. The second notion was, and perhaps in many places still is, that science has somehow disproved a great many things that people used to believe, and has therefore a dangerous fascination. Leading scientists presumably do not regard either of these notions with any great favour. I should suppose that a scientist who is interested in his problem would have a quite careless indifference to the invention of any sort of machine and to the opinion of the general public. His almost inevitable defect, whether he be devoted to natural, historical, or exact science, lies in his tendency to think his own subject the most important thing in the world, as indeed it is for him; and to forget that the man in the next study or laboratory feels the same way about something else. Perhaps we are all sufficiently far removed from James's *Psychology* to have forgotten the following passage: "Readers brought up on popular science may think that the molecular structure of things is their essence in an absolute sense, and that water is HOH more deeply and truly than it is a solvent of sugar or a slaker of thirst. Not a whit! It is all of these things with equal reality; and the only reason why for the chemist it is HOH primarily, and only secondarily the other things, is that for his purpose the HOH aspect is the most important one to bear in mind." Of his own subject, of which he is still, in the opinion of some who should be competent to judge, the greatest master, he says, apropos of the question of Free Will and Determinism: "A psychologist cannot be ex-

pected to be thus impartial, having a great motive in favour of determinism. He wants to build a science, and a science is a system of fixed relations. Wherever there are independent variables, there science stops". Now it is a very respectable ambition to want to build a science; but it is a more respectable ambition to want to find out what are the facts and to state them without prejudice or equivocation, regardless of whether William James or any other authority calls the result science or something else. For science, like all other living words, has a constantly fluctuating value, though the fluctuation affects only the edges of the word. I think James is a little narrow in his statement about independent variables. If there are no independent variables in science, then science has little concern with the humanities. Yet the geologist, the economist, the physicist, the philologist, can all, if they are educated men and not mere pedantic hacks, reach a point where they speak and understand a common language; a language, too, that is never more than vaguely comprehended by the layman. They press on to a common goal and use a common method; though the method must be adapted to different material. Each in his chosen field, they organize knowledge and draw conclusions therefrom. Each in his way, they contribute to the triumph of human knowledge, a knowledge dearly earned and precariously held, and help ultimately even against their will and at times quite unexpectedly to make the world a better place to live in. And the man who is seriously seized of his subject, is not likely to care much whether he is called a scientist or not. He loves the atom or the amoeba or the stars in their courses or the Greek drama or medieval architecture or the dative case, and he wants to tell everybody else about it. Whether someone calls him a scientist or an amateur is of small importance to the genuine investigator. He wants to know the truth, and will spare no effort to find it out. Here, as everyone will admit, is the proper business of science, of all this organizing and criticism of knowledge, merely the pursuit of truth; an exceedingly commonplace conclusion, but worth a little meditation. I think it was Archbishop Whately who said that it makes all the difference whether a man puts truth in the first place or in the second place. That is one reason why it is a good thing to give the young investigator in any field a problem to work at, difficult enough to make him work hard and not difficult enough to defeat him if he works honestly. He has here for once in his life nothing to do but to find out what is so, and if possible what it means. A great deal of ignorant criticism is sometimes directed against the *Ph. D.*, some of it by people

who should know better. The results of the investigation may quite probably be trifling; but the knowledge of the method is quite a different thing. There is perhaps no intellectual experience that gives a more authentic thrill, a deeper sense of contact with reality, that makes life seem more worth while, than the experience of seeing what were unintelligible facts fall into order upon a patient attempt to comprehend them. The result may not be what one wanted, it may upset hypotheses for which one entertained affection, but it brings none the less one of those rare moments of deep intellectual satisfaction in which reason and emotion are at one. A man who has once lived through such an experience is forever after a changed man. He has a better notion of what truth, even a small and not very important truth, is. He has had his little vision. He may turn his back on it and deny it, but it will pursue him to the end of his days. The patient student may be investigating the habits of earth-worms or electrons, the conduct of the war of 1812 or the range and functions of the Sanskrit locative; any of these and others will do the trick for the right man. This is the beginning of specialization, and some people sneer at specialization. I do not know who it was that perpetrated the epigram that a specialist was a man who learned more and more about less and less. This is, of course, a pointless jest. A specialist should be an educated man who can concentrate all the resources of his intellect upon his particular problem and advance the limits of human knowledge. For if they do not advance, they will recede. They cannot stand still. I believe that we cannot too often realize that every new generation comes to us totally ignorant, and it is only by hard labour that the gains of the ages, such as they are, can be kept secure. We sometimes hear men even in universities speak slightly of "cloistered learning". I wish our universities had more cloistered learners, who could pursue their researches regardless of the world outside and of all secondary aims. We should have a new and healthier atmosphere in our academic life, and there would be no danger of cloistered learning remaining in its cell. Students will inevitably make a path to the place where people can teach them things. And the cloistered atmosphere is the proper atmosphere for men to do concentrated mental labour. A very young science may, and probably will, require a great deal of what is comparatively mere brute labour, the amassing of facts; nor has any science ever advanced altogether beyond it; but most sciences would seem to require especially the use of the constructive imagination. There are facts sticking out all over them that need the help of some honest theory. And



theories can be developed and applied in general only in the quiet of the study. One need not elect the contemplative life; but if one does, one should be willing to pay the price of contemplation. It is necessary; for unless one applies the constructive imagination, the greatest compilation of facts may be a mere rope of sand without cohesion or purpose.

The origin of the alphabet does not concern this paper, nor could I say anything about it that could not be read in any good book on the subject. But one ought not altogether to forget even the primitive letter. Ullman remarks of picture-writing, "One remarkable fact is its general similarity in all parts of the world." "The modern mother with the newest ideas of child-training will be discouraged to learn that the symbol for 'child' is apparently the same in ancient Egypt, China, and North America—an infant sucking its thumb". That symbol is clear, definite, and natural. But consider the road that lies between the head of an ox and our letter "a". Yet the steps have been traced for us. And the representation of the most abstract and subtle of our concepts by a combination of attenuated remnants of what were some sort of pictures of concrete objects is a mysterious thing. To be sure, the abstract inheres for our minds in every representation of the concrete; but to draw it forth and imprison it in black marks on white paper is no small sort of miracle. Breasted tells only the truth, though in rather ponderous form: "The invention of writing and of a convenient system of records on paper has had a greater influence in uplifting the human race than any other intellectual achievement in the career of man. It was more important than all the battles ever fought and all the constitutions ever devised". When the arbitrary sign is made by convention to carry a definite meaning or a definite core of meaning around which different associations may play in different minds, the road is open for Shakespeare and Kant and Newton and Einstein.

The purpose of letters in the sense of literature is not immediately susceptible of reduction to a ready formula, though we perhaps think at once of "the criticism of life". But how? In what sense? What is there is common between the *Divine Comedy* and the *Leviathan* of Hobbes? The *Forsyte Saga* and *Kubla Khan*? The *Aeneid* and the *Essays* of Bacon? *Childe Harold* and the Letters of Pliny, O'Neill's Plays and the Elegies of Simonides? However we may define or limit literature, we require of it at least one thing: style. And what is style? The wise Frenchman says, the man himself. We seem to understand two things by "style", of which the narrower meaning is that of careful and ac-

curate choice of words and construction of sentences and paragraphs; the sort of thing that can be taught, and is always worth teaching. It can be mastered by men who have no more of the divine afflatus that makes style in its greater sense than has the harmless necessary grindstone. But the greatest geniuses neglect this patient drill at their peril. Consider our novelists. In some of those who are by universal consent great masters of letters the element of style in the narrow sense is tenuous to vacuity. Scott had, in this sense, no style; Dickens had no style, George Eliot had no style; Trollope had no style; but a college of writers of impeccable English could not produce *Old Mortality* or *Our Mutual Friend* or *Adam Bede* or the *Last Chronicle of Barset*. They perfectly satisfy in the larger sense the Aristotelian canon, perhaps to this day the best criterion of style, namely *to saphes* and *to prepon*. Thackeray had style in both senses; in the narrower sense a finished and mannered style. One does not therefore rank him higher than the others. *Henry Esmond* is a great book; but it does not strike one at first reading with more of a shock than *Ivanhoe* or *Barchester Towers*. Dreiser writes such sentences as one would chastise in a freshman's theme; but those who toil patiently through *The American Tragedy* find that the epic sweep and architectonic austerity of the book make it literature, and literature of power, however much one may deplore the crudity of treatment of some of the episodes.

The first condition of style in its larger sense is that one should have something to say. The Elder Cato gives the briefest and soundest bit of advice to those who have to write or speak: *rem tene, verba sequentur*. It would be hard to sum up better the really essential features of rhetoric. Walter Pater is at first sight perhaps as little like Cato as anyone in the range of literature, and is sometimes regarded as a writer of little substance; I think it is he who says—at any rate he distinctly implies—"The first requisite of style is a full, rich, and complex matter." "Full", I suppose, requires no explanations; "rich" is primarily emotional, I think, and "complex" intellectual. I think they are not mere synonyms. This precept taught by the hard-fisted old Roman and the aesthetic Fellow of Brasenose might be commended to all devotees of Art for Art's sake. Those who object to the intrusion of morals into art mean well; but they can never be allowed to obscure the fact that Art has a very stringent moral code of its own, which can be very briefly summarized. And it is a code according to which the writers mentioned above as having, in the narrow sense, no style, rank very high.

Consider a little farther Aristotle's criteria. They appear very simple. "Clear", one may say, everybody agrees upon. It holds, at any rate, for science and letters. With "appropriate" disputes begin. And here "clear" requires more consideration, because what is clear for one man or audience or circle of readers is not clear for another. The element of clarity for oneself is not difficult if one understands one's subject; merely the straightforward statement of what one has to say. But the moment one wishes to say anything to others, one must consider the apprehensive masses, as I believe they are called, of one's hearers. Nothing, as we know, is ever quite simple in itself. The Universe is a tangle of things, all somehow related. Lucretius said of his atoms that they were *solida primordia simplicitate*; but if they were in themselves endowed with solid singleness, as Munro puts it, nobody ever saw them, and the process of arriving at them is quite different. One can scarcely write a sentence in cold blood with a clear head (though, of course, when one is under the stress of emotion the significant statement leaps to the mind, and sometimes from tongue or pen with a magnificent disregard of all qualification) without seeing that it is not the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; and one cannot even be clear without considering the problem of the appropriate. What is *to prepon* here? What among the various possible words is least unfitted to convey the thought? One soon realizes that language is no perfect system of expression, but a distinctly imperfect method of approximation. Telling the truth is not as simple as Contract Bridge. Every significant word has a mass of associations, different for each person, which cause a chameleon play of varying shades of thought around its central core. And herein lies an outstanding difference between science and letters. Science must have accurate and abstract meaning for its symbols. This accurate and abstract meaning it must get by deliberately—for the purposes of science—abstracting all the associations, the overtones, of the word. In this respect all science is alike in purpose—to get at the facts; though the degree of abstraction from the concrete association of course goes farthest in logic and mathematics. In philology, as soon as one gets away from phonetics, the concreteness of the word is an element in the problem; and even in phonetics personalities enter. Jimmy wants his swearing to sound just like Tommy's, and Mrs. X tries hard to catch the precise shade of supercilious speech that distinguishes Mrs. Z. But a scientific symbol means or can mean the same thing in all languages; not that the experience on which such symbols rest is less concrete and

complex than other experience; but because from all the elements of the situation certain universals are separated that can be represented in definite logical propositions by definite and conventional symbols. In literature every word comes dragging from the whole past of human history a cloud of associations of varying shades of distinctness for each man that hears or uses the word, and for each inextricably intermingled, if the word is of any interest to him, in his own peculiar way. Whereas in science there are no significant overtones, and the more nearly the treatment of any matter comes to precise scientific method, the less do the overtones count, in literature their significance is of the greatest importance. When one uses words without attention to their etymology, one is a little careless; when one neglects the logical value of a word, one is culpable, and one's statements confuse and lose force; when one is careless with the associations and overtones of a word, one becomes, as a writer, merely futile and of none effect. That is a different thing from writing with an eye merely to the logical value of words, as, in effect, Mr. Abercrombie says is done by Thomas Hardy in the *Dynasts*. Hardy is not careless of associations and overtones, but sparing of them; and it is true of *The Dynasts*, magnificent piece of architecture as it is, that the skeleton is a little too bare.

Mr. Housman would not, perhaps, find his criterion of poetry here; but Egdon Heath and Thomas Tetuphany show that Hardy could use overtones when he would. These associations are infinite in variety and possibility of suggestion; it is by using them most skilfully, and at the same time doing no violence to the logical content of the word, that one writes most effectively. Associations, of course, go everywhere—sight, hearing, smell, touch. There are those to whom the rich scent of certain flowers compels the memory of death and funerals; at the smell, the coffin and the mourners come to mind; tears, and the falling clods, and the problem of death unsolved by human means. Chords of music suggest to one the crowded auditorium, the great musician, the thunder of applause; to another the crash of the waves on the cliff. Words have their emotional congruities as other things, and in addition they bore more deeply into the mind than most other things, they assault the intellect in addition to stimulating emotions. They have broad general lines of association common, for example, to all educated men, or, as in the K. J. Version, to everybody, lines determined by the history and usage of the civilized world; but the associations that sting most deeply are sometimes merely local or personal. It is, too, by reason of the associations of words,

their concrete roots and history, that no great work of literature can ever be fully or satisfactorily translated. Simple people who talk about studying the thought and not worrying about the words do not matter; except that they have votes. The more perfect our expression, and I do not mean literary, cultivated expression, but the words that anyone of us uses at any time, the more word and thought are one, and indissoluble; and the less can the precise thought be expressed without that word. And if one starts to write down anything, the difficulties to telling the truth are not merely moral, defects of doubt and taints of blood. One of the greatest difficulties in writing anything is almost physical—the difficulty of holding the attention to the point, of seeing what is and is not there. James speaks of that as the great difficulty of his drunkard. What one is holding before the mind may be a concept, an event, a landscape; in any case it is complex, and it is very difficult to observe it correctly in all its proportions. Take any scene that you remember from childhood. Are you sure on which side of the road the beech tree stood? Can you see it? And if you do see it, is that the image of it as you saw it when a child, or is it a sudden and deceitful image due to your own wishes? The natural desire to have done with hesitation and get on with things? The sort of thing, perhaps, that made Macaulay so sure of everything? And made it possible for Sir Walter Raleigh to use that portentous phrase “A greater than Macaulay, James Boswell.” This problem, the problem of holding the attention upon one’s subject until one can see it clearly, is the most difficult problem that faces the writer. As the image or concept wavers before consciousness, the tension of the will is always ready to relax; and one subsides into some thought-preventing epithet or formula. Here is where the artist in words shows himself: not by using fine words, not by any picturesque ornament, but by steadily focussing his attention on the thing until he can see what word, for him, fits it best. His life has been different from any other man’s life; and consequently his apprehension of the matter and the proper word for him to use may quite likely be different from those that are suitable for his neighbour. Inasmuch as there are no ultimately perfect words for anyone, and the necessities of intercommunication require some degree of abstraction in any language, it is probable that his word will suit many other men. In general, they understand him. In general, we understand each other. But it may be questioned if any two people would write exactly the same sentence in any given context. If one found two identical sentences written by different people, one would

suspect collusion or plagiarism, unless the two sentences were written in a foreign language by college students. And what the man is doing is, of course, chiefly rejecting. Words flit before his mind like snowflakes before the window. He must, if possible, secure the one that he wants. It is an old story, the artist must reject, reject, reject. And the purpose of this rejection, criticism, sorting, is simply to enable him, whatever his medium, to tell the truth insofar as the limits of the human intellect permit the truth to be told in this imperfect world. That is what I meant by saying that Art has a very stringent moral code of its own. The business of Art, including the art of letters, is the business of telling the truth. My paper is not a detective story—a form of letters for which I confess to a childlike affection—with a villain to be caught on the last page. It could be summed up in a very simple formula: the business of science is to find out the truth, the business of letters is to tell the truth. Insofar as they keep their paramount purpose paramount, they may include as harmless adjuncts the making of machines, the production of pleasure, the amelioration of man's lot. In practising the art of letters, one is easily exposed to temptations that are only the obverse side of virtues. One wishes to state what one has to say as forcibly as one can; one admires the neat formula, the cutting phrase, the biting wit. Well, they can all be handled, as dynamite can be handled, but they require care. And the moment a man puts wit or charm in the first place and truth in the second place, his career, as an artist, is over, and he should, to paraphrase Mr. Housman, forsake the business of letters and betake himself to any honest trade for which he is less unfit. The practice of smartness may be a commendable thing in boys who are learning their powers. It is also a charming thing to see a baby put his big toe in his mouth. When a grown man comes to us with a pun or relates his own witticisms seriously, we feel somewhat as we should if he were to sit down in the street and proceed to emulate the baby. But at the same time one wonders what this truth is, about which we hear so much. One will, however, find here no attempt to answer Pilate's question. It is assumed for our purposes that "truth" is one of those words that are too simple for definition; though one may be permitted to return upon the subject and perhaps consider a few examples.

Walter Pater, whom I have mentioned before, furnishes in his essay on Style a useful suggestion: "Truth! there can be no merit, no craft at all, without that. And further, all beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within." Again,

"In the highest as in the lowliest literature, then, the one indispensable beauty is, after all, truth;—truth to bare fact in the latter, as to some personal sense of fact, diverted somewhat from men's ordinary sense of it in the former". It is not that there are no other elements in style, but that here is the one indispensable thing. One remembers what Dr. Johnson said: "Accustom your children constantly to this; if a thing happened at one window and they, when relating it, say that it happened at another, do not let it pass, but instantly check them; you do not know where deviation from truth will end". Again, "The value of every story depends on its being true. A story is a picture either of an individual or of human nature in general: if it be false, it is a picture of nothing". I suspect that Johnson, like some other childless persons who unlike Johnson know all about children, did not sufficiently allow for the mythopoeic gifts; though I think his advice is sound wherever practicable. And the special interest of the second quotation lies in the "human nature in general". It is perhaps very close to Pater's "personal sense of fact". Not bare fact is the most important thing in truth, important as it is; but to state the fact in its relations as one sees it and as closely as the limitations of language will permit, adding no mere ornament, constructing no superfluous decoration, and making one's own personality a medium for, not an obstacle to, the presentation of one's theme. Why do people rewrite Macaulay? He did not understand Johnson; witness, at present, Tinker and others. He was flagrantly wrong about Bacon; see Spedding *passim*. His *Warren Hastings* is quite unfair to its subject; see a book on the career of the great proconsul written by a relative of his whose name I have forgotten. His *Strafford* is a mere partisan caricature of that great statesman; see *Lady Burghclere*; in fact, wherever the question of Whig and Tory was concerned, Macaulay could not tell the truth; and the severest attack upon him, an attack that, of course, loses some of its effect by reason of its vehemence, is that of Mr. Winston Churchill in defence of the name of his great ancestor. It is a curious thing, and I think not wholly without significance, that Macaulay would not work at mathematics at Cambridge. It is hardly possible that a man of his general intellectual ability could not have handled this subject; and it would seem that there was something repugnant to him in dealing with a train of argument that could not be deflected in the service of his prejudices. I do not mean to assert, or even to imply, that it is impossible for a mathematician to wander from the straight and narrow path of undeviating rectitude. There is usually in nature a fault of excess

to correspond to a fault of defect. Gibbon's words are familiar and worth consideration: "As soon as I understood the principles, I relinquished for ever the pursuit of the mathematics; nor can I lament that I desisted before my mind was hardened by the habit of rigid demonstration, so destructive of the finer feelings of moral evidence, which must, however, determine the actions and opinions of our lives". Truth is, after all, a great deal more than mere logic; but she can never ignore logic.

It is not, after all, a matter of logic, as to which very few people will disagree. It is a question of intellectual integrity; it may be of wanting to know what is so and to tell it as it actually seems to us; or, to make a transient personal reputation by the arts of sophistry. We have lately seen the rise and progress of a school of biography that has made for itself a vast reputation. It is as though someone had discovered the art of portraiture. No one can deny the elaborate stylistic labours and considerable stylistic achievements of that school; but it has, in my judgment, one capital defect; it is fundamentally insincere. I notice in the Letters of the late Bishop Burge of Oxford, formerly Headmaster of Winchester, two significant statements: July 29, 1922, he writes to his friend Arthur Kemball Cook: "Yes, I enjoyed Trevelyan's book immensely; it took away the nasty taste of Strachey." Again, to the same friend, May 4, 1923: "I was persuaded to read Guedalla's Napoleon—by the promise that it would interest me as much as Grant Robertson's Bismarck. But I was sadly disappointed. I don't like the superficiality of it—he seems to me to be what the Psalmist describes as a 'busy mocker'." I have no wish to be censorious, and I will not pursue the subject: I confess my agreement with the bishop. I do not know any better example to illustrate the fact that wit, industry, the lighter arts of style in high excellence, all are of no avail except for temporary advertisement—which may, of course, last for a generation—without the simple elementary virtue of sincerity. One page of Boswell—and I do not care what page it is—is worth the whole school several times over. I like Ruskin's remark: "No man is worth reading to form your style who does not mean what he says". These gentlemen say many things, some of interest. What they seem to me to mean is: "How clever we are to put it this way".

Consider, too, the virtues of the simple statement of fact in narrative. If one wants a tale of adventure at sea, "Two Years Before The Mast" is worth all the sea stories of Melville, and all the Moby Dicks in the ocean. Why is it that one is so sure to skip descriptions of natural scenery? They are likely to be deluged in



detail, not very much of which is significant. What can be added to the description that Tennyson gives of a scene that some of us could easily recognize as applicable a few miles from here? "On this side was the ocean, and on that was a great water, and the moon was full". Pindar can furnish straightforward description as simple and effective as any: *ephlexen euopidos selanas eraton phaos*. Translated simply in the precise order in which it occurs:—"Shone forth of the fair-faced moon the lovely light". No superfluous words, and nothing to add to the picture. There are the significant elements, free from encumbrance.

Here is a straightforward sentence from Bacon, rich in overtones, but without excrescences: "For a crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal where there is no love". This is a simple thing, but see some of the associations. "Company" suggests to anyone with even a little learning the friendly breaking of bread together; the gallery of pictures can be well understood only by those who have seen one, but everyone feels the sense of loneliness in an unresponsive crowd. The tinkling cymbal suggests the great utterance of Saint Paul, which in turn carries one backward and forward along the paths of history; and the love, so simple that everyone understands it, and each in his own way, raises in the mind of the scholar the question of the proper translation of *agape*, and the degradation of the word "charity" in common speech. The meaning is straightforward, and every man of straightforward mind, learned or simple, apprehends the central thought. Knowledge is neither here nor elsewhere any substitute for sincerity and simplicity of mind; but when these are granted, knowledge is an advantage even here: as always it is knowledge of and from the past that gives his peculiar power to the civilized man.

Jane Austen has here and there given examples of satire more direct and less subtle than is her habit. She never overworks the device; and it is perhaps not without interest to look at this passage: She is speaking of Maria Bertram—in *Mansfield Park*: "In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete; being prepared for matrimony by a hatred of home, restraint, and tranquillity; by the misery of disappointed affection, and contempt of the man she was to marry". It is perhaps sufficiently devastating. And I suggest as a mental exercise its precise relations to truth; for Jane Austen is a most truthful writer, and there is in her pages always a rest for those who are weary of the smartness of bright young stylists.

One might continue to suggest examples to the boredom of a patient reader. If I have not made any more suggestions, it is because I have

useless to continue. If I have, it is unnecessary. One might suggest *Kubla Khan*, and its authentic note of great literature. One might consider *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Adonais*, and ask why their truth is superior to the truth of Crabbe, good as that is. But there are limits to human endurance and human good nature, and I have only one closing word to say.

The unbiassed pursuit and accurate statement of truth are never easy things, and are not usually attended with gross material gain. It seems not altogether superfluous now, when the world is tired and restless, and does not know where to turn for relief, to remind ourselves of the importance and dignity of our calling. "The still air of delightful studies" is a tonic atmosphere now, when the noise and threats of the world are likely to leave many of us depressed and wearied for the future. Nor is this to advise a merely Epicurean bypath for the sluggard. For if we transgress for one moment the bounds of this paper, we may remember, even at a time when ordered freedom is less secure than it has been for many years, that we have excellent authority for holding that in the long run, both for men and nations, "the truth shall make you free".