III

ENGLISH COMPOSITION IN COLLEGES

In noticing a recent treatise on rhetoric the Nation remarked that "a whole library of books on English composition would not teach a man to express himself on a subject beyond the range of his interest, his knowledge, or his natural capacity. Hence the discipline surest of success is to be sought in narration and description, in making abstracts from good models, and in translation. The thinking may be left to take care of itself." Again in a note on President Eliot's report of 1889-90, the same journal calls the especial attention of the reader to "what is said about the effort to improve the gift of expression in English at Harvard—a problem needlessly complicated, as we believe, by the endeavor to cultivate by one and the same exercise the art of clearly stating what a man has to tell, and to force the brain to think." What the Nation says may usually be taken as the result of thoughtful first-hand observation of someone qualified to observe and to judge. It is worth while, then, to examine these two statements a little further. In substance they agree, and they agree in recommending a kind of instruction which was more common a generation ago than now, and to which many a man of middle age will perhaps look back with misgivings or regret. The prevalent theory then was that rhetoric—the art of writing well—should be taught by a system in which precept played a larger part than practice, and in which practice was often subordinated to the academic study of so-called models of style. This theory was as a whole sound, for it was based on the well-tested and universally applicable principles of the Latin rhetoricians—abstract rules, smacking (to the taste of to-day) of Pope and Boileau, and well fortified with apposite illustrations from authors whose suave, dignified, and slightly pompous diction make them appear to the hum-
ble reader impossible and unattainable ideals. Such a method and its results may be seen at its best in almost any Roman Catholic college, or in Du Cygne’s excellent *Ars Rhetorica*, from which docile English-speaking pupils are still taught to respond (in answer to the question: “Quid confert Imitatio ad eloquentiam?”) that “Imitatio confert ut optimo cuique Authori similes in dicendo evadamus, et quae sunt in eo summa, diligentem prosequamur.” Nor were the results of the older method unsatisfactory when the pupils received seriously and practiced earnestly the instruction given them. If you compare a paper published by the undergraduates of a Jesuit college with the average journal published by the undergraduates of a college in which “modern” methods of instruction are in full vogue, the former may generally be found to excel in the essential qualities of style. The disadvantage of such methods is, however, that the pupil rarely conceives of rhetoric as having much to do with his other work in college.

Lack of interest on the part of the student—this is the chief fault of what we may call the “old” system. The subjects prescribed for him were alien to his natural sympathies, remote in time and interest, foreign to his current thought and feeling. He translated—to follow the scheme the reviewer indicates—from Pliny or Lessing, he made abstracts of Burke’s speeches, he described the battlefield of Marathon or narrated the chief events of the siege of Syracuse. But all this, however excellent drill it may have been in the abstract, merely led the ordinary student to pretend an interest in that which was really distasteful to him; forced him to abhor such tasks as irrational, and to associate all composition with the conscious act of parading other people’s ideas in other people’s fine garments. Style then became for him something external, not woven of his own thought and emotion, but gained by imitation of accepted models. He must, he was taught, try to write with the brilliancy of Macaulay, or the swinging ponderosity of De Quincey, or the aphoristic unction of Matthew Arnold. But he must always make his bricks with the straw
and clay which the taskmaster furnishes; he must never forage for himself, never give his own thoughts the expression that seems to him natural and appropriate to them, never be taught how, with a given subject in mind, to collect information from the best and most suggestive sources, never be urged to ponder over and assimilate what he has read and heard until it becomes thoroughly his, never be aided in the art of arranging his own material so that it will be most intelligible and effective, never, in short, be helped to a man's birthright—that of mastering his own thought and conveying it by means of writing unchanged to the minds of others. Nor can we justly object, under such a system, to the idea that any subject matter will serve the student's turn. Why should it not? Unless we "needlessly complicate the matter by helping the student to think," about what he writes, he may as well choose for his exercise "Balaam" or "The Advantages of a Cheerful Spirit" as something about which he has already been thinking for himself. His duty is not to concern himself with the subject-matter of his work save as he can apply to it those principles of composition or of style which are most in favor with his preceptor. And so the pupil passes through the required routine, frequently in such a machine-like fashion that he never dreams that the art he is learning is one which he uses and is to use almost as often as his legs, or that both the theoretical and the practical part of his work is scarcely valuable at all if it does not bring him to that clear, terse, and strong thinking which is at the basis of clear, terse, and strong writing. To the young man trained in this fashion the study called rhetoric soon becomes a dim memory. The writer recently had occasion to question some twenty or more students, who had wholly or partially completed their regular course of work in various colleges and scientific schools, as to what they had done in "Rhetoric." They had all studied it for periods varying from one term to two years in the early part of their college curriculum, but scarcely one of them could remember the name of the text-book over which he had spent so many hours. The color, the size, the shape per-
haps lingered in his memory, but not the author's name or method.

In recent years, however, a far different method of teaching English composition has been followed to a greater or less degree in many of our colleges—at Harvard, perhaps, in particular. 'There, several processes of development have been steadily going on. First, on the rapid advance of the elective system has followed the slow retreat of all prescribed studies, including that of English composition, which is now reduced to a full course in the Freshman year, and to half a course in the two succeeding years. This prescribed drill is supposed to be sufficient for the needs of the average student. A number of elective courses, however, both in theory and practice, fully provide for the needs of those who wish to carry their studies further. Second, the character of the prescribed work has been changing no less steadily. In the Freshman year, to be sure, the drill is formal, and almost entirely prefatory to really independent writing, but in the Sophomore year the class or kind of subject alone is indicated by the instructors, the subject itself being left to the choice of the student, who is encouraged by them to express in his written work his own more serious thoughts or fancies. In the Junior year, finally, the student chooses a subject of discussion from a list suggested by the instructors in various courses in philosophy, history, and science as fitting topics for investigation and thought. He is advised to write on subject-matter familiar to him through his other studies, to read on both sides of the question, and to let his thesis bear the marks, not merely of clever phrasing or purely rhetorical skill, but of thought, of judgment, and of logical power. Such is a fairly typical prescribed course in English composition in the college of to-day, differing widely—and, it seems to me, wisely—from that characteristic of the older method. In each case the groundwork is the same, a thorough theoretical training based on some particular treatise on rhetoric; but what follows is, according to the modern system, regulated by the principle that spontaneity is a prime requisite, that the pupil
writes best and learns most when his subject-matter is to as
great an extent as possible of his own choosing and prescribed
by his own interests, although the transference of thought
from one mind to another which rhetoric implies is in all cases
one and the same effort, independent of the subject-matter
which it concerns. Such a system proves itself successful by
its success; the odium and irrational indifference with which
an English department used frequently to be regarded has
somewhat passed away, and teachers of rhetoric are beginning
to be reckoned, not with unnatural taskmasters, but with other
useful professors of other useful arts. We are, then, we may
assume, on the right track in the main. But are there no fur-
ther modifications of the system now in vogue that will make
our teaching still more effective? With the same expendi-
ture of force—to wit, with the same number of instructors,
with the same working hours on the part of both student and
lecturer (or theme-corrector), with the same mental wear
and tear on both sides, can we not arrive at results even more
satisfactory?

For, as a matter of fact, the English departments in our
colleges, in spite of the rapid progress made of late years, are
in many cases scarcely doing half the work that might on a
priori grounds be expected from efficient organizations. At
the outset the work is handicapped. Young men come to
college at an average age of eighteen or nineteen, and fre-
quently with more maturity of character than their ages would
indicate. But in nine cases out of ten they come badly
trained in English. This lack of training shows itself in two
forms: inability—coming from lack of knowledge—to avoid
plain grammatical errors, and inability—coming from lack of
practice—to begin the work of writing in anything resembling
a simple and businesslike manner. For half a year lecturing
instructors and correcting instructors are obliged to spend the
greater part of their time in discussing, in general and in par-
ticular, plain blunders of style which a boy of sixteen should
have done with once for all, in elaborately explaining such
fundamental principles as should have been familiar to the
same boy as soon as the axioms of geometry, and in what seems for months a fruitless attempt to bring the class up to a general level of information and intelligence that will enable it to attack successfully the real problems which face the young writer.

Again, the old indifference still remains. In most colleges, and especially in scientific schools, the bulk of a class is indifferent to the study of rhetoric, as now taught, escapes and evades it, and comes out of it scarcely better than when it went in. The fact is that everybody—students under the charge of the department and critics outside—appreciate the artificial character of the present system. For artificial it is in essence as long as men write for the mere sake of writing, with no distinct desire to communicate thought. The stronger men, therefore,—the obviously necessary drill of the Freshman year over,—neglect routine work in composition on the ground, maintained often and in so many words by wiser heads than theirs, that when they have something to express there will be time enough to think about the various ways of expressing it. Weaker men, on the contrary, learn to regard English work as a sort of foppish literary self-adornment. The majority of the class goes meanwhile heedlessly on its way, writing themes by the recipes which are given them by the instructor or which they find current among their friends, in very much the same way that the careless schoolboy applies the same formula to example after example in a branch of mathematics which he neither enjoys, understands, nor sees the importance of. Instructors, on the contrary, mostly earnest men, work seriously at criticising themes into which the writers have never dreamed of putting serious work. Candidates for the degree of B. A. or B. S., as a result, in theses, in reports, in their private or public letters, often write in a slovenly, haphazard fashion which is the despair of all who think it necessary that any man old enough to vote should be able to express such matters as he may have to treat in writing accurately, clearly, and forcibly.

The plain fact is, it seems to me, that departments of rhet-
oric still neglect an important factor. The difficulty of getting boys well trained in habits of expression before they enter college we can leave to be settled by the growing movement which is bringing up the preparatory school to a proper level of efficiency. But the point often overlooked is that no man or boy can be made to write really well unless he writes for the purpose of expressing thought. It is possible, indeed, that he may be seized with a desire to express ideas of his own to his preceptor in rhetoric in the routine themes demanded of him, but that is unlikely. Writing for his instructor, and for him alone, he is tempted beyond his power of resistance to mold his thought to suit his expression, not his expression to suit his thought. But every student is continual writing, unconscious of rhetorical rules or with only a confused idea of them in his memory, without particular instruction, but under the most appropriate conditions, matter which in many cases is just what his instructor tries in vain to secure from him in his routine work. What could be better drill in composition than these reports, theses, and the like, prepared for his instructors in history, philosophy, or science? Given, for instance, various lectures or other sources of theoretical or practical information, what, the student is asked to report, is the effect of algae growths in reservoirs and ponds, or what is to be said of pin bridges versus riveted bridges? Here the sound man comes to the front, not the turner of meaningless and quibbling phrases. The student who, in set works, in routine themes, broke every law of sense and taste in composition, now writes—clumsily, to be sure, but with his eye on what he wants to express and a steady effort to attain it. The man who thought punctuation a useless and finicky operation finds that he must master it if he wants to make perfectly intelligible what he has to say on metallurgical methods in the mines of Bolivia. The man who disdained the study of emphasis, climax, unity, or what not, finds it indispensable if he wants to make telling points in his plea for the abolition of grade crossings. Paragraph structure instantly becomes luminous, and even sentence structure, if the teacher
is skillful in following out the connection between thought and expression. The clever artificiality vanishes and industry, sense, and sound thinking come to the front.

Such a system may seem identical with that mentioned as already in use at Harvard—the so-called forensic system. There is, however, a decided distinction between them: in the first the student still writes for the English instructor. In the system which I propose, with much diffidence but on the basis of actual experiment, the student, after the necessary drill of the Freshman or sub-Freshman year, never writes expressly for his English instructor, but always for the department to which by subject-matter his thesis or report actually belongs. Subjected to criticism from both sides, on the basis of thought and that of expression, by both departments working together for their common good, the thesis or theme is thus treated as it should be. It would be surprising to see how nearly identical in purpose and in effect the criticism given to the student by the specialist in the department to which his essay belongs by right of subject-matter is with that given him by his instructor in rhetoric, were it not obvious that the best writers in the faculty of any college, university, or even scientific school are rarely those who represent the department of rhetoric. How, indeed, could it be otherwise? Expression implies thought, and he who thinks most clearly, definitely, forcibly, and broadly is likely, unless he has great defects in training or taste, to write better than he who, however much he is interested in the so-called art of expression, has too frequently narrowed his interests and perhaps even debauched his intellect by confining himself for years to the incessant reading of themes merely made to order by tired, lazy, or indifferent students.

Of course any large college would encounter many and perhaps great difficulties in adopting such a system and in giving it an organic structure. But such experiments as I have been able to carry on in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with students preparing for the technical professions, and what I have seen of the success of the somewhat similar
"forensic" system at Harvard, convince me that the reports
and theses which most teachers of rhetoric have for years
been passing by as unworthy of notice may be made of the
greatest value in teaching college boys to write. Good ele-
mental training, then, is what we need in the Freshman
year; after that as many elective courses as seems advisable;
but for the average man in his Sophomore, Junior, and Senior
years, constant practice in writing about what he really knows,
under the criticism not only of the instructors whose sole ob-
ject is to teach him to write, but also of those who, in what-
ever way, lead him toward knowledge or help him to think
for himself.

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