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Phenomena of Literary Evolution

As an American essayist has said, this is the moment-mad century; the century “that first discovered how large a moment was; the century that makes a moment a colossal moment, as moments have never been made before; the century that with telephone and telegraph and printing-press, discovered the present tense and made all the world a voice on a wire.” It is also a very busy century. Never was the world in such a hurry as now; never were its thoughts so broad and deep, its aims and occupations so many and so diverse. It well behooves whosoever has ideas to sell to the world to seek out what impression all this makes upon the literature of the day, in what manner the century is being and should be represented by print and paper. Why have predication and sentence-length decreased? Why is the three-volume novel left behind with the rest of the rubbish of the musty past? Why is the ubiquitous short story in such demand? What bearing have the answers to these questions upon the structure of a sentence? the shaping of a figure? the drawing of a parallel? the construction of a story? the delineation of a character? or the presentation of a social phase? If the idea merchant cannot answer these questions, it is high time for him to get down to work. The world knows what it wants, but it will not trouble itself to speak up and tell him. The world has no concern with him; it is getting what it wants, and it will go on getting what it wants from others who have got down to work.

The comparison of the growth of the individual to the growth of the race, unlike most tricks of exposition, seems always to increase in strength and worth. From childhood to manhood, the mind of the individual moves from the simple to the complex. The thoughts of a child are few in number and small in stature. At first, in ratiocinative processes, its premises must cover little ground and be fully elaborated, and in the course of the deduction or induction there can be no omission of the smallest detail. Not an example can be avoided, not a step discarded. But the rounded mind of the man objects to such a slow procedure. It leaps swiftly from cause to effect, or vice versa, and concludes even as it leaps. The student refuses to sit under a professor who lectures after the fashion of the kindergarten. It drives him mad to have all things and the most obvious things explained at length. He would as soon sit down and read Defoe in words of one syllable or do sums in arithmetic on his fingers.

And so with the race. It has had its adolescence; it is man-grown by now. The literature which delighted the race in its youth still delights the youth of the individual; but the race is now in its prime, and its literature must be a reflection of that prime. In obedience to the general law of evolution, all thought and all methods of representing thought must be concentrative. Language, spoken and written, has not escaped the working of this law. Language, as a means of conveying thought, is primarily figurative. The commonest words, used in the commonest ways, are stereotyped figures—figures, once new-born and pink, fresh, vivid, strong, in an elementary stage when the tongues of men groped for clearer expression. A figure is the development of an analogy, the establishment of identity through resemblance. As the race’s first expression of the

simplest thought was figurative, so was its first aggregate of thoughts into one powerful or beautiful whole. What is the allegory but a sustained figure? And it is to allegory that all primitive peoples first resort. It appeals to them, who, if they think at all, think like children. But the race to-day no longer has need of that childish expedient. Spenser was the last great poet to use it. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is the only great allegory now extant, and it owed its immediate and subsequent popularity to the illiterate masses, because they were illiterate, and because it was simple, dealt with a vital question and was powerfully, though crudely executed.

As Professor Sherman has pointed out, the use of the analogy is to give to the material truth a spiritual setting—to make the reader feel as well as think. The allegory does this, and in a most sustained and expansive way. But the tendency of language is concentrative. Hence, the passing of the allegory, and with it the parable and fable. A study of the race's literature will reveal the replacement of these, in inexorable sequence, by the running metaphor, the clause metaphor, the phrase metaphor, the compound-word metaphor, and, lastly, the word metaphor. The sustained figure has been reduced to a single figure, the allegoric analogy to a word analogy. As the standard of mentality has risen, just so has the dictum of man gone forth that he must and will do his own thinking. He no longer wishes to have the thought iterated and reiterated and hammered in upon him again and again. Pleonasm is repellent to him.

Thomson wrote, "compelled by strong Necessity." "Compelled" is tautologised by "strong Necessity," but none the less Pope amended the passage thus: "Compelled by strong Necessity's supreme command." Imagine the race today countenancing such bosh! But in condensing the allegory into the word analogy, neither the material nor the spiritual dare be sacrificed. Nor have they been sacrificed by the masters. In token whereof no better instance can be cited than:

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Burned on the water.

There is the figure and the fact, the spiritual and the material, all represented by one word. It was not the poet's place to employ twenty lines of iambic pentameter in order to convey the semblance of burnished gold to fire, flames, the sun, etc., as the barge floated on the water; and it would have been highly inartistic had he done so. The reader is not a child. He receives pleasure in constructing the whole appearance from out of that one word, and he is exalted by realising the effect through his own effort. And that is just what the reader wants.

"That style which leaves most to fancy in respect to the manner in which facts or relations may be apprehended will be in so far the easiest to read." It is in accordance with this truth that the predication has decreased, and likewise the length of sentence. The tendency of sentences has long been toward brevity and point. The race wants its reading matter to be not only concentrative, compact, but crisp, incisive, terse. It tolerates Mr. James, but it prefers Mr. Kipling. To the sins of the past let the following sentence of Spenser attest:

Marry, soe there have been divers good plottes devised, and wise counsells cast alleready about reformation of that realme; but they say, it is the fatall desteny of that land, that noe purposes, whatsoever are meant for her good, will prosper or take good effect, which, whether it procede from the very GENIUS of the soyle, or influence of the starres, or that Almighty God has not yet appoynted the time of her reformation, or that he reserveth her in this unquiett state till for some secrett scourdge, which shall by her come unto England, it is hard to be knowen, but yet much to be feared.

Imagine the lustful blue pencil of the twentieth-century editor wading through a sentence as that! And contrast it with this from the pen of Emerson:

My friends, in these two errors, I think, I find the causes of a decaying Church and a wasting unbelief. And what greater calamity can fall upon a nation than the loss of worship? Then all things go to decay. Genius leaves the temple to haunt the senate or the market. Literature becomes frivolous. Science is cold. The eye of youth is not lighted by the hope of other worlds, and age is without honor. Society lives to trifles, and when men die we do not mention them.

A good illustration of the decline of sentence length is afforded by the following figures, which give the average words per sentence for five hundred periods:

FABYAN: 68.28
SPENSER: 49.78
HOOKER: 41.40
MACAULAY: 22.45
EMERSON: 20.58

Every form of present-day literature exemplifies this concentrative tendency. The growth of the short story has been marked by the decay of the long novel. In the last century, and in the first portion of this, novels of one volume were acceptable; but publishers preferred those of two and three; nor were they averse to one of four, while five and six volume novels were not at all uncommon. The average novel of to-day contains from forty to seventy thousand words. What publisher would dream of even reading a MS. of the cyclopean proportions of *Les Misérables*? Poe always contended that the tale should be such that it could be read at one sitting. The King's Jackal, recently brought out by Richard Harding Davis, contains about twenty-seven thousand words, while Mr. Kipling seems to have set the form for a novel of forty to fifty pages.

Again advantage from our text, what the race wants chiefly is the passing thing done in the eternal way. This makes our literature largely episodal, and this want of the race Mr. Kipling has satisfied. He is terse, bald, jerky, disconnected, but there is nothing superfluous in his work. It consists only of the essentials, and is fancy-exciting. And that is just what the race wants, for it is past the kindergarten stage; it can do its own thinking. Give it the bare essentials, and it will do the rest. It can think more rapidly than it can read the printed words of the writer, and it is in a hurry. Division of labor, labor-saving machinery, rapid transit, the telephone and the telegraph—a myriad and one devices has the race invented for the economizing of its energy and time. So in all things it demands the greatest possible amount crammed into the smallest possible space. And to this demand its literature must answer. The race does not want novels and stories teeming with superfluities. The unpruned shall be cast aside unread. What it wants is the meat of the matter, and it wants it now.