

VII

A COLLEGE MAGAZINE

I

All through my boyhood and youth, I was known and pointed out for the pattern of an idler;[1] and yet I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write. I kept always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in. As I walked, my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; when I sat by the roadside, I would either read, or a pencil and a penny version-book would be in my hand, to note down the features of the scene or commemorate some halting stanzas. Thus I lived with words. And what I thus wrote was for no ulterior use, it was written consciously for practice. It was not so much that I wished to be an author (though I wished that too) as that I had vowed that I would learn to write. That was a proficiency that tempted me; and I practised to acquire it, as men learn to whittle, in a wager with myself. Description was the principal field of my exercise; for to any one with senses there is always something worth describing, and town and country are but one continuous subject. But I worked in other ways also; often accompanied my walks with dramatic dialogues, in which I played many parts; and often exercised myself in writing down conversations from memory.

This was all excellent, no doubt; so were the diaries I sometimes

tried to keep, but always and very speedily discarded, finding them a school of posturing[2] and melancholy self-deception. And yet this was not the most efficient part of my training. Good though it was, it only taught me (so far as I have learned them at all) the lower and less intellectual elements of the art, the choice of the essential note and the right word: things that to a happier constitution had perhaps come by nature. And regarded as training, it had one grave defect; for it set me no standard of achievement. So that there was perhaps more profit, as there was certainly more effort, in my secret labours at home. Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful and always unsuccessful; but at least in these vain bouts, I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction and the co-ordination of parts. I have thus played the sedulous ape to Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Baudelaire and to Obermann.[3] I remember one of these monkey tricks, which was called The Vanity of Morals: it was to have had a second part, The Vanity of Knowledge; and as I had neither morality nor scholarship, the names were apt; but the second part was never attempted, and the first part was written (which is my reason for recalling it, ghostlike, from its ashes) no less than three times: first in the manner of Hazlitt, second in the manner of Ruskin,[4] who had cast on me a passing spell,

and third, in a laborious pasticcio of Sir Thomas Browne. So with my other works: Cain, an epic, was (save the mark!) an imitation of Sordello: Robin Hood, a tale in verse, took an eclectic middle course among the fields of Keats, Chaucer and Morris: in Monmouth, a tragedy, I reclined on the bosom of Mr. Swinburne; in my innumerable gouty-footed lyrics, I followed many masters; in the first draft of The King's Pardon, a tragedy, I was on the trail of no lesser man than John Webster; in the second draft of the same piece, with staggering versatility, I had shifted my allegiance to Congreve, and of course conceived my fable in a less serious vein--for it was not Congreve's verse, it was his exquisite prose, that I admired and sought to copy. Even at the age of thirteen I had tried to do justice to the inhabitants of the famous city of Peebles[5] in the style of the Book of Snobs. So I might go on for ever, through all my abortive novels, and down to my later plays,[6] of which I think more tenderly, for they were not only conceived at first under the bracing influence of old Dumas, but have met with, resurrections: one, strangely bettered by another hand, came on the stage itself and was played by bodily actors; the other, originally known as Semiramis: a Tragedy, I have observed on bookstalls under the alias of Prince Otto. But enough has been said to show by what arts of impersonation, and in what purely ventriloquial efforts I first saw my words on paper.

That, like it or not, is the way to learn to write; whether I have profited or not, that is the way. It was so Keats learned,[7] and

there was never a finer temperament for literature than Keats's; it was so, if we could trace it out, that all men have learned; and that is why a revival of letters is always accompanied or heralded by a cast back to earlier and fresher models. Perhaps I hear someone cry out: But this is not the way to be original! It is not; nor is there any way but to be born so. Nor yet, if you are born original, is there anything in this training that shall clip the wings of your originality. There can be none more original than Montaigne,[8] neither could any be more unlike Cicero; yet no craftsman can fail to see how much the one must have tried in his time to imitate the other. Burns[9] is the very type of a prime force in letters: he was of all men the most imitative. Shakespeare himself, the imperial, proceeds directly from a school. It is only from a school that we can expect to have good writers; it is almost invariably from a school that great writers, these lawless exceptions, issue. Nor is there anything here that should astonish the considerate. Before he can tell what cadences he truly prefers, the student should have tried all that are possible; before he can choose and preserve a fitting key of words, he should long have practised the literary scales;[10] and it is only after years of such gymnastic that he can sit down at last, legions of words swarming to his call, dozens of turns of phrase simultaneously bidding for his choice, and he himself knowing what he wants to do and (within the narrow limit of a man's ability) able to do it.

And it is the great point of these imitations that there still shines beyond the student's reach his inimitable model. Let him try as he

please, he is still sure of failure; and it is a very old and a very true saying that failure is the only highroad to success. I must have had some disposition to learn; for I clear-sightedly condemned my own performances. I liked doing them indeed; but when they were done, I could see they were rubbish. In consequence, I very rarely showed them even to my friends; and such friends as I chose to be my confidants I must have chosen well, for they had the friendliness to be quite plain with me. "Padding," said one. Another wrote: "I cannot understand why you do lyrics so badly." No more could I! Thrice I put myself in the way of a more authoritative rebuff, by sending a paper to a magazine. These were returned; and I was not surprised nor even pained. If they had not been looked at, as (like all amateurs) I suspected was the case, there was no good in repeating the experiment; if they had been looked at--well, then I had not yet learned to write, and I must keep on learning and living. Lastly, I had a piece of good fortune which is the occasion of this paper, and by which I was able to see my literature in print, and to measure experimentally how far I stood from the favour of the public.

II

The Speculative Society is a body of some antiquity, and has counted among its members Scott, Brougham, Jeffrey, Horner, Benjamin Constant, Robert Emmet, and many a legal and local celebrity besides. By an accident, variously explained, it has its rooms in the very buildings

of the University of Edinburgh: a hall, Turkey-carpeted, hung with pictures, looking, when lighted up at night with fire and candle, like some goodly dining-room; a passage-like library, walled with books in their wire cages; and a corridor with a fireplace, benches, a table, many prints of famous members, and a mural tablet to the virtues of a former secretary. Here a member can warm himself and loaf and read; here, in defiance of Senatus-consults, he can smoke. The Senatus looks askance at these privileges; looks even with a somewhat vinegar aspect on the whole society; which argues a lack of proportion in the learned mind, for the world, we may be sure, will prize far higher this haunt of dead lions than all the living dogs of the professorate.

I sat one December morning in the library of the Speculative; a very humble-minded youth, though it was a virtue I never had much credit for; yet proud of my privileges as a member of the Spec.; proud of the pipe I was smoking in the teeth of the Senatus; and in particular, proud of being in the next room to three very distinguished students, who were then conversing beside the corridor fire. One of these has now his name on the back of several volumes, and his voice, I learn, is influential in the law courts. Of the death of the second, you have just been reading what I had to say. And the third also has escaped out of that battle of life in which he fought so hard, it may be so unwisely. They were all three, as I have said, notable students; but this was the most conspicuous. Wealthy, handsome, ambitious, adventurous, diplomatic, a reader of Balzac, and of all men that I have known, the most like to one of Balzac's characters, he led a

life, and was attended by an ill fortune, that could be properly set forth only in the *Comédie Humaine*. He had then his eye on Parliament; and soon after the time of which I write, he made a showy speech at a political dinner, was cried up to heaven next day in the *Courant*, and the day after was dashed lower than earth with a charge of plagiarism in the *Scotsman*. Report would have it (I daresay, very wrongly) that he was betrayed by one in whom he particularly trusted, and that the author of the charge had learned its truth from his own lips. Thus, at least, he was up one day on a pinnacle, admired and envied by all; and the next, though still but a boy, he was publicly disgraced. The blow would have broken a less finely tempered spirit; and even him I suppose it rendered reckless; for he took flight to London, and there, in a fast club, disposed of the bulk of his considerable patrimony in the space of one winter. For years thereafter he lived I know not how; always well dressed, always in good hotels and good society, always with empty pockets. The charm of his manner may have stood him in good stead; but though my own manners are very agreeable, I have never found in them a source of livelihood; and to explain the miracle of his continued existence, I must fall back upon the theory of the philosopher, that in his case, as in all of the same kind, "there was a suffering relative in the background." From this genteel eclipse he reappeared upon the scene, and presently sought me out in the character of a generous editor. It is in this part that I best remember him; tall, slender, with a not ungraceful stoop; looking quite like a refined gentleman, and quite like an urbane adventurer; smiling with an engaging ambiguity; cocking at you

one peaked eyebrow with a great appearance of finesse; speaking low and sweet and thick, with a touch of burr; telling strange tales with singular deliberation and, to a patient listener, excellent effect. After all these ups and downs, he seemed still, like the rich student that he was of yore, to breathe of money; seemed still perfectly sure of himself and certain of his end. Yet he was then upon the brink of his last overthrow. He had set himself to found the strangest thing in our society: one of those periodical sheets from which men suppose themselves to learn opinions; in which young gentlemen from the universities are encouraged, at so much a line, to garble facts, insult foreign nations and calumniate private individuals; and which are now the source of glory, so that if a man's name be often enough printed there, he becomes a kind of demigod; and people will pardon him when he talks back and forth, as they do for Mr. Gladstone; and crowd him to suffocation on railway platforms, as they did the other day to General Boulanger; and buy his literary works, as I hope you have just done for me. Our fathers, when they were upon some great enterprise, would sacrifice a life; building, it may be, a favourite slave into the foundations of their palace. It was with his own life that my companion disarmed the envy of the gods. He fought his paper single-handed; trusting no one, for he was something of a cynic; up early and down late, for he was nothing of a sluggard; daily earwiggling influential men, for he was a master of ingratiating. In that slender and silken fellow there must have been a rare vein of courage, that he should thus have died at his employment; and doubtless ambition spoke loudly in his ear, and doubtless love also,

for it seems there was a marriage in his view had he succeeded. But he died, and his paper died after him; and of all this grace, and tact, and courage, it must seem to our blind eyes as if there had come literally nothing.

These three students sat, as I was saying, in the corridor, under the mural tablet that records the virtues of Machean, the former secretary. We would often smile at that ineloquent memorial, and thought it a poor thing to come into the world at all and leave no more behind one than Machean. And yet of these three, two are gone and have left less; and this book, perhaps, when it is old and foxy, and some one picks it up in a corner of a book-shop, and glances through it, smiling at the old, graceless turns of speech, and perhaps for the love of Alma Mater (which may be still extant and flourishing) buys it, not without haggling, for some pence--this book may alone preserve a memory of James Walter Ferrier and Robert Glasgow Brown.

Their thoughts ran very differently on that December morning; they were all on fire with ambition; and when they had called me in to them, and made me a sharer in their design, I too became drunken with pride and hope. We were to found a University magazine. A pair of little, active brothers--Livingstone by name, great skippers on the foot, great rubbers of the hands, who kept a book-shop over against the University building--had been debauched to play the part of publishers. We four were to be conjunct editors, and, what was the main point of the concern, to print our own works; while, by every

rule of arithmetic--that flatterer of credulity--the adventure must succeed and bring great profit. Well, well: it was a bright vision. I went home that morning walking upon air. To have been chosen by these three distinguished students was to me the most unspeakable advance; it was my first draught of consideration; it reconciled me to myself and to my fellow-men; and as I steered round the railings at the Tron, I could not withhold my lips from smiling publicly. Yet, in the bottom of my heart, I knew that magazine would be a grim fiasco; I knew it would not be worth reading; I knew, even if it were, that nobody would read it; and I kept wondering, how I should be able, upon my compact income of twelve pounds per annum, payable monthly, to meet my share in the expense. It was a comfortable thought to me that I had a father.

The magazine appeared, in a yellow cover which was the best part of it, for at least it was unassuming; it ran four months in undisturbed obscurity, and died without a gasp. The first number was edited by all four of us with prodigious bustle; the second fell principally into the hands of Ferrier and me; the third I edited alone; and it has long been a solemn question who it was that edited the fourth. It would perhaps be still more difficult to say who read it. Poor yellow sheet, that looked so hopefully in the Livingstones' window! Poor, harmless paper, that might have gone to print a Shakespeare on, and was instead so clumsily defaced with nonsense! And, shall I say, Poor Editors? I cannot pity myself, to whom it was all pure gain. It was no news to me, but only the wholesome confirmation of my judgment, when

the magazine struggled into half-birth, and instantly sickened and subsided into night. I had sent a copy to the lady with whom my heart was at that time somewhat engaged, and who did all that in her lay to break it; and she, with some tact, passed over the gift and my cherished contributions in silence. I will not say that I was pleased at this; but I will tell her now, if by any chance she takes up the work of her former servant, that I thought the better of her taste. I cleared the decks after this lost engagement; had the necessary interview with my father, which passed off not amiss; paid over my share of the expense to the two little, active brothers, who rubbed their hands as much, but methought skipped rather less than formerly, having perhaps, these two also, embarked upon the enterprise with some graceful illusions; and then, reviewing the whole episode, I told myself that the time was not yet ripe, nor the man ready; and to work I went again with my penny version-books, having fallen back in one day from the printed author to the manuscript student.

III

From this defunct periodical I am going to reprint one of my own papers. The poor little piece is all tail-foremost. I have done my best to straighten its array, I have pruned it fearlessly, and it remains invertebrate and wordy. No self-respecting magazine would print the thing; and here you behold it in a bound volume, not for any worth of its own, but for the sake of the man whom it purports dimly to represent and some of whose sayings it preserves; so that in this volume of Memories and Portraits, Robert Young, the Swanston gardener, may stand alongside of John Todd, the Swanston shepherd. Not that John and Robert drew very close together in their lives; for John was rough, he smelt of the windy brae; and Robert was gentle, and smacked of the garden in the hollow. Perhaps it is to my shame that I liked John the better of the two; he had grit and dash, and that salt of the Old Adam that pleases men with any savage inheritance of blood; and he was a wayfarer besides, and took my gipsy fancy. But however that may be, and however Robert's profile may be blurred in the boyish sketch that follows, he was a man of a most quaint and beautiful nature, whom, if it were possible to recast a piece of work so old, I should like well to draw again with a maturer touch. And as I think of him and of John, I wonder in what other country two such men would be found dwelling together, in a hamlet of some twenty cottages, in the woody fold of a green hill.

NOTES

This article made its first appearance in the volume *Memories and Portraits* (1887). It was divided into three parts. The interest of this essay is almost wholly autobiographical, telling us, with more or less seriousness, how its author "learned to write." After Stevenson became famous, this confession attracted universal attention, and is now one of the best-known of all his compositions. Many youthful aspirants for literary fame have been moved by its perusal to adopt a similar method; but while Stevenson's system, if faithfully followed, would doubtless correct many faults, it would not of itself enable a man to write another *Aes Triplex* or *Treasure Island*. It was genius, not industry, that placed Stevenson in English literature.

[Note 1: Pattern of an Idler. See his essay in this volume, *An Apology for Idlers*.]

[Note 2: A school of posturing. It is a nice psychological question whether or not it is possible for one to write a diary with absolutely no thought of its being read by some one else.]

[Note 3: Hazlitt, to Lamb, to Wordsworth, to Sir Thomas Browne, to Defoe, to Hawthorne, to Montaigne, to Beaudelaire, and to Obermann. For Hazlitt, see Note 19 of Chapter II above. Charles Lamb (1775-1834), author of the delightful *Essays of Elia* (1822-24), the tone of which book is often echoed in Stevenson's essays.... Sir

Thomas Browne (1605-1682), regarded by many as the greatest prose writer of the seventeenth century; his best books are *Religio Medici* (the religion of a physician), 1642, and *Urn Burial* (1658). The 300th anniversary of his birth was widely celebrated on 19 October 1905.... Daniel Defoe (1661-1731), an enormously prolific writer; his first important novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (followed by many others) was written when he was 58 years old.... Nathaniel Hawthorne, the greatest literary artist that America has ever produced was born 4 July 1804, and died in 1864. His best novel (the finest in American Literature) was *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).... Montaigne. Stevenson was heavily indebted to this wonderful genius. See Note 4 of Chapter VI above. ... Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) wrote the brilliant and decadent *Fleurs du Mai* (1857-61). He translated Poe into French, and was partly responsible for Poe's immense vogue in France. Had Baudelaire's French followers possessed the power of their master, we should be able to forgive them for writing.... Obermann. *Obermann* is the title of a story by the French writer Etienne Pivert de S nancour (1770-1846). The book, which appeared in 1804, is full of vague melancholy, in the Werther fashion, and is more of a psychological study than a novel. In recent years, *Amiel's Journal* and Sienkiewicz's *Without Dogma* belong to the same school of literature. Matthew Arnold was fond of quoting from S nancour's *Obermann*.]

[Note 4: Ruskin ... *Pasticcio* ... *Bordello* ... Morris ... Swinburne ... John Webster ... Congreve. These names exhibit the astonishing variety of Stevenson's youthful attempts, for they represent nearly

every possible style of composition. John Ruskin (1819-1900) exercised a greater influence thirty years ago than he does to-day Stevenson in the words "a passing spell," seems to apologise for having been influenced by him at all.... Pasticcio, an Italian word, meaning "pie": Swinburne uses it in the sense of "medley," which is about the same as its significance here. Sordello: Stevenson naturally accompanies this statement with a parenthetical exclamation. Sordello, published in 1840, is the most obscure of all Browning's poems, and for many years blinded critics to the poet's genius. Innumerable are the witticisms aimed at this opaque work. See, for example, W. Sharp's *Life of Browning ... William Morris (1834-96)*, author of the *Earthly Paradise (1868-70)*: for his position and influence in XIXth century literature see H.A. Beers, *History of English Romanticism, Vol. II...* Algernon Charles Swinburne, born 1837, generally regarded (1906) as England's foremost living poet, is famous chiefly for the melodies of his verse. His influence seems to be steadily declining and he is certainly not so much read as formerly.... For John Webster and Congreve, see Notes 37 and 26 of Chapter IV above.]

[Note 5: City of Peebles in the style of the Book of Snobs.

Thackeray's *Book of Snobs* was published in 1848. Peebles is the county town of Peebles County in the South of Scotland.]

[Note 6: My later plays, etc. Stevenson's four plays were not successful. They were all written in collaboration with W.E. Henley.

Deacon Brodie was printed in 1880: Admiral Guinea and Beau Austin in 1884: Macaire in 1885. In 1892, the first three were published in one volume, under the title Three Plays: In 1896 all four appeared in a volume called Four Plays. At the time the essay A College Magazine was published, only one of these plays had been acted, Deacon Brodie, to which Stevenson refers in our text. This "came on the stage itself and was played by bodily actors" at Pullan's Theatre of Varieties, Bradford, England, 28 December 1882, and in March 1883 at Her Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen, "when it was styled a 'New Scotch National Drama.'"--Prideaux, Bibliography, p. 10. It was later produced at Prince's Theatre, London, 2 July 1884, and in Montreal, 26 September 1887. Beau Austin was played at the Haymarket Theatre, London, 3 Nov. 1890. Admiral Guinea was played at the Avenue Theatre, on the afternoon of 29 Nov. 1897, and, like the others, was not successful. The Athenaeum for 4 Dec. 1897 contains an interesting criticism of this drama.... Semiramis was the original plan of a "tragedy," which Stevenson afterwards rewrote as a novel, Prince Otto, and published in 1885.]

[Note 7: It was so Keats learned. This must be swallowed with a grain of salt. The best criticism of the poetry of Keats is contained in his own Letters, which have been edited by Colvin and by Forman.]

[Note 8: Montaigne ... Cicero. Montaigne, as a child, spoke Latin before he could French: see his Essays. Montaigne is always original, frank, sincere: Cicero (in his orations) is always a

Poseur.]

[Note 9: Burns ... Shakespeare. Some reflection on, and investigation of these statements by Stevenson, will be highly beneficial to the student.]

[Note 10: The literary scales. It is very interesting to note that Thomas Carlyle had completely mastered the technique of ordinary prose composition, before he deliberately began to write in his own picturesque style, which has been called "Carlylese"; note the enormous difference in style between his *Life of Schiller* (1825) and his *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4). Carlyle would be a shining illustration of the point Stevenson is trying to make.]

No notes have been added to the second and third parts of this essay, as these portions are unimportant, and may be omitted by the student; they are really introductory to something quite different, and are printed in our edition only to make this essay complete.

VIII

BOOKS WHICH HAVE INFLUENCED ME[1]

The Editor[2] has somewhat insidiously laid a trap for his