

THE THEORY OF QUOTATION

The nobler method of quotation is not to quote at all. For why should one repeat good things that are already written? Are not the words in their fittest context in the original? Clearly, then, your new setting cannot be quite so congruous, which is, forthwith, an admission of incongruity. Your quotation is evidently a plug in a leak, an apology for a gap in your own words. But your vulgar author will even go out of his way to make the clothing of his thoughts thus heterogeneous. He counts every stolen scrap he can work in an improvement--a literary caddis worm. Yet would he consider it improvement to put a piece of even the richest of old tapestry or gold embroidery into his new pair of breeks?

The passion for quotation is peculiar to literature. We do not glory to quote our costume, dress in cast-off court robes, or furnish our houses from the marine store. Neither are we proud of alien initials on the domestic silver. We like things new and primarily our own. We have a wholesome instinct against infection, except, it seems, in the matter of ideas. An authorling will deliberately inoculate his copy with the inverted comma bacillus, till the page swims unsteadily, counting the fever a glow of pure literary healthiness. Yet this reproduction, rightly considered, is merely a proof that his appetite for books has run beyond his digestion. Or his industry may be to seek. You expect an omelette, and presently up come the unbroken eggs. A tissue of quotation

wisely looked at is indeed but a motley garment, eloquent either of a fool, or an idle knave in a fool's disguise.

Nevertheless at times--the truth must be told--we must quote. As for admitting that we have quoted, that is another matter altogether. But the other man's phrase will lie at times so close in one's mind to the trend of one's thoughts, that, all virtue notwithstanding, they must needs run into the groove of it. There are phrases that lie about in the literary mind like orange peel on a pavement. You are down on them before you know where you are. But does this necessitate acknowledgment to the man, now in Hades, who sucked that orange and strewed the peel in your way? Rather, is it not more becoming to be angry at his careless anticipation?

One may reasonably look at it in this way. What business has a man to think of things right in front of you, poke his head, as it were, into your light? What right has he to set up dams and tunnel out swallow-holes to deflect the current of your thoughts? Surely you may remove these obstructions, if it suits you, and put them where you will. Else all literature will presently be choked up, and the making of books come to an end. One might as well walk ten miles out of one's way because some deaf oaf or other chose to sit upon a necessary stile. Surely Shakespeare or Lamb, or what other source you contemplate, has had the thing long enough? Out of the road with them. Turn and turn about.

And inverted commas are so inhospitable. If you must take in another man's offspring, you should surely try to make the poor foundlings feel at home. Away with such uncharitable distinctions between the children of the house and the stranger within your gates. I never see inverted commas but I think of the necessary persecuted mediæval Jew in yellow gabardine.

At least, never put the name of the author you quote. Think of the feelings of the dead. Don't let the poor spirit take it to heart that its monumental sayings would pass unrecognised without your advertisement. You mean well, perhaps, but it is in the poorest taste. Yet I have seen Patience on a Monument honourably awarded to William Shakespeare, and fenced in by commas from all intercourse with the general text.

There is something so extremely dishonest, too, in acknowledging quotations. Possibly the good people who so contrive that such signatures as "Shakespeare," "Homer," or "St. Paul," appear to be written here and there to parts of their inferior work, manage to justify the proceeding in their conscience; but it is uncommonly like hallmarking pewter on the strength of an infinitesimal tinge of silver therein. The point becomes at once clear if we imagine some obscure painter quoting the style of Raphael and fragments of his designs, and acknowledging his indebtedness by appending the master's signature. Blank forgery! And a flood of light was thrown on the matter by a chance remark of one of Euphemia's aunts--she is a great reader of pure

fiction--anent a popular novel: "I am sure it must be a nice book," said she, "or she could not get all these people to write the mottoes for the chapters."

No, it is all very well to play with one's conscience. I have known men so sophisticated as to assert that unacknowledged quotation was wrong. But very few really reasonable people will, I think, refuse to agree with me that the only artistic, the only kindly, and the only honest method of quotation is plagiarism. If you cannot plagiarise, surely it were better not to quote.