JOHN WILSON'S PROSE STYLE: AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649348077

John Wilson's Prose Style: An Undergraduate Thesis by Fannie W. McLean

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Cover @ 2017

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FANNIE W. MCLEAN

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Trieste

Compliments of Albert S. Cook.

JOHN WILSON'S

PROSE STYLE

An Undergraduate Thesis

BY

FANNIE W. McLEAN

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

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BOSTON

PRINTED BY J. S. CUSHING & CO.

1886

INTRODUCTION.

THE wisdom of printing an undergraduate essay upon the prose of an intellectual giant like Christopher North may not unnaturally be called in question by literary adepts, and the only defence that can be pleaded must either be drawn from custom or sanctioned by a reasonable hope; in other words, must appeal to the past or point confidently to the future. If the theatre of observation be confined to America, it must be admitted that the past is not eloquent in favor of such a proceeding. Here, therefore, it will be necessary to attach credit to those unmistakable signs which herald innovation, and to contemporary events like the issue of the "Johns Hopkins Studies in Historical and Political Science."

In Germany it has long been the rule that dissertations shall be published, and these dissertations are essentially theses for graduation. It would be easy to show that they are the product of the seminaries which are connected with the various departments of the German universities, and that these seminaries, conversely, are the nurseries of original investigation. The relation of the two may best be gathered from an admirable

address delivered before the National Educational Association in 1882, by Professor Wright of Dartmouth, and entitled "The Place of Original Research in College Education."

Seminaries akin to those of the German universities have already been instituted in America, and it will be sufficient to refer to a few of the leading ones, such as the linguistic seminaries of Professors March at Lafayette, Allen at Harvard, and Gildersleeve and Warren at Johns Hopkins, or to the historical seminary of Professor C. K. Adams at Michigan, a prototype of the one under Professor H. B. Adams' leadership at Baltimore. But why, it may be asked, should there be seminaries of linguistics and history, and none of literature? Professor Wright justly contends that original research should have the same scope in this subject as in any other. He says: —

"In literature, both ancient and modern, it will rest upon and be conditioned by broad, comprehensive, and accurate reading of original documents, and will consist in analysis, inference, combination of conclusions, independently performed and recorded in carefully written theses, commentaries, or monographs."

The present essay is an attempt to realize this doctrine of original research in its application to literature. The instruction and discipline in English studies received by the writer was shared by her with the members of a class; and she may therefore be considered as a typical

senior student of English in the institution of which she was a member. In one sense, it is true, her essay is colored by personal idiosyncrasies, and it would be utterly valueless if it were not. In another, it is devoid of originality, inasmuch as the general mode of treatment and order of topics is that recommended by the example of Minto in his "Manual of English Prose Literature." The only originality to which it pretends is that of due conformity to a method already devised, and of an essential justness, if not profundity of view. That it should lack the robustness, allusiveness, and broad, free handling of its prototype will not be an occasion of wonderment to the initiated, who are aware that these qualities are partly personal, and partly the fruit of wide reading, long experience, and perfect command of literary *technique*. A few verbal errors have been corrected, but I can affirm that in no single instance has the statement of an opinion been modified, or its form materially altered, by my own or any other hand. That the paper has its imperfections and crudities, the writer herself would be the first to avow; but whatever its faults, or whatever its merits, they are to be ascribed solely to herself.

While justification for the hardihood here displayed has been sought in German precedents, that is, in an appeal to the past, may not grounds of extenuation be discovered in a forecast of the future? Should not the production of dissertations and monographs by under-

graduate as well as post-graduate students be encouraged? If possessed of sufficient merit, should they not be printed for the instruction, or perhaps warning of others?

For my own part, I see no reason why there might not be a direct friendly interchange of such monographs among the kindred departments of various colleges, or better still, why they should not be distributed by a National Intercollegiate Exchange, established in connection with the Smithsonian Institution, or as an independent agency with officers of its own. There can be little doubt that at present all our colleges are too much isolated, and even their best students too ignorant, in general, of what is occurring at other institutions. But learning, to be truly regenerative, should be cosmopolitan in its entire nature; and to be most amply humanizing and vivific, should be free from the taint of sectionalism and clannishness; it can never fulfil its highest ends, unless it is

> "Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,
> As broad and general as the casing air."

The Germans make university education national, if not cosmopolitan, by encouraging an interchange of intellectual products, producers, and recipients; that is, of learned works, professors, and students. They invoke the aid of a generous rivalry to promote this interchange, thereby stimulating each individual to his greatest intel-

lectual fecundity, and every institution to its highest efficiency. The resulting advantage accrues not only to scholarship, but to the State and the principle of national unity. In one sense the universities have liberated and consolidated Germany, and they certainly tend to perfect that liberation — *Veritas liberabit vòs* — and to increase as well the consciousness as the fact of solidarity.

Do our colleges constitute a similar bond, resolving all differences into the harmony of reason, and uniting all educated citizens in the pursuit and realization of a common good? To some extent, it must be conceded, this want is supplied by various societies. We have an Archæological Institute of America, an American Philological Association, one for Social Science, another for Physical Science, and still another for Modern Languages. All of these depend, professedly or indirectly, upon the colleges. But why should there not be even the semblance of unity among the colleges as such? And, supposing such unity desirable, would not one step towards it be taken by the increase of original investigation in all departments, the publication of its results, though confessedly crude, and a freer circulation of the monographs among the sister colleges of the land?

Nor would the reflex gain to the individual college be insignificant. The honor of being selected for the noble task of augmenting human knowledge would be eagerly sought for by the most highly gifted, energetic,

and unselfish students, and the more ordinary incentives of prizes, scholarships, and Commencement honors might be withdrawn, so completely would they be outshone by the more brilliant reward of application, the permission to serve one's *Alma Mater*, one's country, and one's race, the privilege of communicating to a sympathetic audience what had been achieved by severe toil, yet with the buoyancy begotten of magnanimous resolve and a yet undaunted hope.

That these imaginings are not altogether baseless I would fain believe, and am indeed partly convinced; and it is because of my conviction that this little essay is sent forth upon the world.

ALBERT S. COOK.

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA,
February 22, 1886.