

On Authorship

drawn from Schopenhauer's Parerga

Arthur Schopenhauer

Translator's Preface

He deals with his subject broadly, and takes large and general views ; nor can anyone who knows anything of the philosopher suppose this to mean that he is vague and feeble. It is true that now and again in the course of these essays he makes remarks which are obviously meant to apply to the failings of certain writers of his own age and country ; but in such a case I have generally given his sentences a turn, which, while keeping them faithful to the spirit of the original, secures for them a less restricted range, and makes Schopenhauer a critic of similar faults in whatever age or country they may appear. This has been done in spite of a sharp word on page 8 of this volume, addressed to translators who dare to revise their author ; but the change is one with which not even Schopenhauer could quarrel.

The intelligent reader will observe that much of the charm of Schopenhauer's writing comes from its strongly personal character, and that here he has to do, not with a mere maker of books, but with a man who thinks for himself and has no false scruples in putting his meaning plainly upon the page, or in un-masking sham wherever he finds it. This is nowhere so true as when he deals with literature ; and just as in his treatment of life, he is no flatterer to men in general, so here he is free and outspoken on the peculiar failings of authors. At the same time he gives them good advice. He is particularly happy in recommending restraint in regard to reading the works of others, and the cultivation of independent thought; and herein he recalls a saying attributed to Hobbes, who was not less distinguished as a writer than as a philosopher, to the effect that "*if he had read as much as other men he should have been as ignorant as they.*"

Schopenhauer also utters a warning, which we shall do well to take to heart in these days, against mingling the pursuit of literature with vulgar aims. If we follow him here, we shall carefully distinguish between literature as an object of life and literature as a means of living, between the real love of truth and beauty, and that detestable false love which looks to the price it will fetch in the market. I am not referring to those who, while they follow a useful and honourable calling in bringing literature before the public, are content to be known as men of business. If, by the help of some second witch of Endor, we could raise the ghost of Schopenhauer, it would be interesting to hear his opinion of a certain kind of literary enterprise which has come into vogue since his day, and now receives an amount of attention very much beyond its due. We may hazard a guess at the direction his opinion would take. He would doubtless show us how this enterprise, which is carried on by self-styled *literary men*, ends by making literature into a form of merchandise, and treating it as though it were so much goods to be bought and sold at a profit, and most likely to produce quick returns if the maker's name is well known. Nor would it be the ghost of the real Schopenhauer unless we heard a vigorous denunciation of men who claim a connection with literature by a servile flattery of successful living authors—the dead cannot be made to pay—in the hope of appearing to advantage in their reflected light and turning that advantage into money.

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THERE are, first of all, two kinds of authors : those who write for the subject's sake, and those who write for writing's sake. While the one have had thoughts or experiences which seem to them worth communicating, the others want money ; and so they write, for money. Their thinking is part of the business of writing. They may be recognised by the way in which they spin out their thoughts to the greatest possible length ; then, too, by the very nature of their thoughts, which are only half-true, perverse, forced, vacillating ; again, by the aversion they generally show to saying anything straight out, so that they may seem other than they are. Hence their writing is deficient in clearness and definiteness, and it is not long before they betray that their only object in writing at all is to cover paper. This sometimes happens with the best authors ; now and then, for example, with Lessing in his *Dramaturgie*, and even in

many of Jean Paul's romances. As soon as the reader perceives this, let him throw the book away ; for time is precious. The truth is that when an author begins to write for the sake of covering paper, he is cheating the reader ; because he writes under the pretext that he has something to say.

Writing for money and reservation of copyright are, at bottom, the ruin of literature. No one writes anything that is worth writing, unless he writes entirely for the sake of his subject. What an inestimable boon it would be, if in every branch of literature there were only a few books, but those excellent ! This can never happen, as long as money is to be made by writing. It seems as though the money lay under a curse ; for every author degenerates as soon as he begins to put pen to paper in any way for the sake of gain. The best works of the greatest men all come from the time when they had to write for nothing or for very little. And here, too, that Spanish proverb holds good, which declares that honour and money are not to be found in the same purse—*honra y provecho no caben en un saco*. The reason why Literature is in such a bad plight nowadays is simply and solely that people write books to make money. A man who is in want sits down and writes a book, and the public is stupid enough to buy it. The secondary effect of this is the ruin of language.

A great many bad writers make their whole living by that foolish mania of the public for reading nothing but what has just been printed,—journalists, I mean. Truly, a most appropriate name. In plain language it is *journeymen, day-labourers* !

Again, it may be said that there are three kinds of authors. First come those who write without thinking. They write from a full memory, from reminiscences ; it may be, even straight out of other people's books. This class is the most numerous. Then come those who do their thinking whilst they are writing. They think in order to write ; and there is no lack of them. Last of all come those authors who think before they begin to write. They are rare.

Authors of the second class, who put off their thinking until they come to write, are like a sportsman who goes forth at random and is not likely to bring very much home. On the other hand, when an author of the third or rare class writes, it is like a *battue*. Here the game has been previously captured and shut up within a very small space ; from which it is afterwards let out, so many at a time, into another space, also confined. The game cannot possibly escape the sportsman ; he has nothing to do but aim and fire—in other words, write down his thoughts. This is a kind of sport from which a man has something to show.

But even though the number of those who really think seriously before they begin to write is small, extremely few of them think about *the subject itself*: the remainder think only about the books that have been written on the subject, and what has been said by others. In order to think at all, such writers need the more direct and powerful stimulus of having other people's thoughts before them. These become their immediate theme ; and the result is that they are always under their influence, and so never, in any real sense of the word, original. But the former are roused to thought by the subject itself, to which their thinking is thus immediately directed. This is the only class that produces writers of abiding fame.

It must, of course, be understood that I am speaking here of writers who treat of great subjects ; not of writers on the art of making brandy.

Unless an author takes the material on which he writes out of his own head, that is to say, from his own observation, he is not worth reading. Book-manufacturers, compilers, the common run of history-writers, and many others of the same class, take their material immediately out of books ; and the material goes straight to their finger-tips without even paying

freight or undergoing examination as it passes through their heads, to say nothing of elaboration or revision. How very learned many a man would be if he knew everything that was in his own books ! The consequence of this is that these writers talk in such a loose and vague manner, that the reader puzzles his brains in vain to understand what it is of which they are really thinking. They are thinking of nothing. It may now and then be the case that the book from which they copy has been composed exactly in the same way ; so that writing of this sort is like a plaster cast of a cast ; and in the end, the bare outline of the face, and that, too, hardly recognisable, is all that is left of your Antinous. Let compilations be read as seldom as possible. It is difficult to avoid them altogether; since compilations also include those text-books which contain in a small space the accumulated knowledge of centuries.

There is no greater mistake than to suppose that the last work is always the more correct ; that what is written later on is in every case an improvement on what was written before ; and that change always means progress. Real thinkers, men of right judgment, people who are in earnest with their subject,—these are all exceptions only. Vermin is the rule everywhere in the world : it is always on the alert, taking the mature opinions of the thinkers, and industriously seeking to improve upon them (save the mark !) in its own peculiar way.

If the reader wishes to study any subject, let him beware of rushing to the newest books upon it, and confining his attention to them alone, under the notion that science is always advancing, and that the old books have been drawn upon in the writing of the new. They have been drawn upon, it is true ; but how ? The writer of the new book often does not understand the old books thoroughly, and yet he is unwilling to take their exact words ; so he bungles them, and says in his own bad way that which has been said very much better and more clearly by the old writers, who wrote from their own lively knowledge of the subject. The new writer frequently omits the best things they say, their most striking illustrations, their happiest remarks ; because he does not see their value or feel how pregnant they are. The only thing that appeals to him is what is shallow and insipid.

It often happens that an old and excellent book is ousted by new and bad ones, which, written for money, appear with an air of great pretension and much puffing on the part of friends. In science a man tries to make his mark by bringing out something fresh. This often means nothing more than that he attacks some received theory which is quite correct, in order to make room for his own false notions. Sometimes the effort is successful for a time ; and then a return is made to the old and true theory. These innovators are serious about nothing but their own precious self : it is this that they want to put forward, and the quick way of doing so, as they think, is to start a paradox. Their sterile heads take naturally to the path of negation ; so they begin to deny truths that have long been admitted—the vital power, for example, the sympathetic nervous system, *generatio equivoca*, Bichat's distinction between the working of the passions and the working of intelligence ; or else they want us to return to crass atomism, and the like. Hence it frequently happens that *the course of science is retrogressive*.

To this class of writers belong those translators who not only translate their author but also correct and revise him ; a proceeding which always seems to me impertinent. To such writers I say : Write books yourself which are worth translating, and leave other people's works as they are !

The reader should study, if he can, the real authors, the men who have founded and discovered things ; or, at any rate, those who are recognised as the great masters in every branch of knowledge. Let him buy second-hand books rather than read their contents in new ones. To be sure, it is easy to add to any new discovery—*inventis aliquid addere facile est* ; and, therefore, the student, after well mastering the rudiments of his subject, will have to make himself

acquainted with the more recent additions to the knowledge of it. And, in general, the following rule may be laid down here as elsewhere : if a thing is new, it is seldom good ; because if it is good, it is only for a short time new.

What the address is to a letter, the title should be to a book ; in other words, its main object should be to bring the book to those amongst the public who will take an interest in its contents. It should, therefore, be expressive ; and since by its very nature it must be short, it should be concise, laconic, pregnant, and if possible give the contents in one word. A prolix title is bad ; and so is one that says nothing, or is obscure and ambiguous, or even, it may be, false and misleading ; this last may possibly involve the book in the same fate as overtakes a wrongly addressed letter. The worst titles of all are those which have been stolen, those, I mean, which have already been borne by other books ; for they are in the first place a plagiarism, and secondly the most convincing proof of a total lack of originality in the author. A man who has not enough originality to invent a new title for his book, will be still less able to give it new contents. Akin to these stolen titles are those which have been imitated, that is to say, stolen to the extent of one half ; for instance, long after I had produced my treatise *On Will in Nature*, Oersted wrote a book entitled *On Mind in Nature*.

A book can never be anything more than the impress of its author's thoughts ; and the value of these will lie either in *the matter about which he has thought*, or in the *form* which his thoughts take, in other words, *what it is that he has thought about it*.

The matter of books is most various ; and various also are the several excellences attaching to books on the score of their matter. By matter I mean everything that comes within the domain of actual experience ; that is to say, the facts of history and the facts of nature, taken in and by themselves and in their widest sense. Here it is the *thing* treated of which gives its peculiar character to the book ; so that a book can be important, whoever it was that wrote it.

But in regard to the form, the peculiar character of a book depends upon the *person* who wrote it. It may treat of matters which are accessible to everyone and well known ; but it is the way in which they are treated, what it is that is thought about them, that gives the book its value ; and this comes from its author. If, then, from this point of view a book is excellent and beyond comparison, so is its author. It follows that if a writer is worth reading, his merit rises just in proportion as he owes little to his matter ; therefore, the better known and the more hackneyed this is, the greater he will be. The three great tragedians of Greece, for example, all worked at the same subject-matter.

So when a book is celebrated, care should be taken to note whether it is so on account of its matter or its form ; and a distinction should be made accordingly.

Books of great importance on account of their matter may proceed from very ordinary and shallow people, by the fact that they alone have had access to this matter ; books, for instance, which describe journeys in distant lands, rare natural phenomena, or experiments ; or historical occurrences of which the writers were witnesses, or in connection with which they have spent much time and trouble in the research and special study of original documents.

On the other hand, where the matter is accessible to everyone or very well known, everything will depend upon the form ; and what it is that is thought about the matter will give the book all the value it possesses. Here only a really distinguished man will be able to produce anything worth reading ; for the others will think nothing but what anyone else can think. They will just produce an impress of their own minds ; but this is a print of which everyone possesses the original.

However, the public is very much more concerned to have matter than form ; and for this very reason it is deficient in any high degree of culture. The public shows its preference in this respect in the most laughable way when it comes to deal with poetry ; for there it devotes much trouble to the task of tracking out the actual events or personal circumstances in the life of the poet which served as the occasion of his various works ; nay, these events and circumstances come in the end to be of greater importance than the works themselves ; and rather than read Goethe himself, people prefer to read what has been written about him, and to study the legend of Faust more industriously than the drama of that name. And when Burger declared that “ people would write learned disquisitions on the question. Who Leonora really was,” we find this literally fulfilled in Goethe’s case ; for we now possess a great many learned disquisitions on Faust and the legend attaching to him. Study of this kind is, and remains, devoted to the material of the drama alone. To give such preference to the matter over the form, is as though a man were to take a fine Etruscan vase, not to admire its shape or colouring, but to make a chemical analysis of the clay and paint of which it is composed.

The attempt to produce an effect by means of the material employed—an attempt which panders to this evil tendency of the public—is most to be condemned in branches of literature where any merit there may be lies expressly in the form ; I mean, in poetical work. For all that, it is not rare to find bad dramatists trying to fill the house by means of the matter about which they write. For example, authors of this kind do not shrink from putting on the stage any man who is in any way celebrated, no matter whether his life may have been entirely devoid of dramatic incident ; and sometimes, even, they do not wait until the persons immediately connected with him are dead.

The distinction between matter and form to which I am here alluding, also holds good of conversation. The chief qualities which enable a man to converse well are intelligence, discernment, wit and vivacity : these supply the form of conversation. But it is not long before attention has to be paid to the matter of which he speaks ; in other words, the subjects about which it is possible to converse with him—his knowledge. If this is very small, his conversation will not be worth anything, unless he possesses the above-named formal qualities in a very exceptional degree ; for he will have nothing to talk about but those facts of life and nature which everybody knows. It will be just the opposite, however, if a man is deficient in these formal qualities, but has an amount of knowledge which lends value to what he says. This value will then depend entirely upon the matter of his conversation; for, as the Spanish proverb has it, *mas sabe el necio en su casa, que el sabio en la agena*—a fool knows more of his own business than a wise man of others’.

On Some Forms Of Literature.

In the DRAMA, which is the most perfect reflection of human existence, there are three stages in the presentation of the subject, with a corresponding variety in the design and scope of the piece.

At the first, which is also the most common, stage, the drama is never anything more than merely *interesting*. The persons gain our attention by following their own aims, which resemble ours ; the action advances by means of intrigue and the play of character and incident ; while wit and raillery season the whole.

At the second stage, the drama becomes *sentimental*. Sympathy is roused with the hero and, indirectly, with ourselves. The action takes a pathetic turn ; but the end is peaceful and satisfactory.

The climax is reached with the third stage, which is the most difficult. There the drama aims at being *tragic*. We are brought face to face with great suffering and the storm and stress of existence ; and the outcome of it is to show the vanity of all human effort. Deeply moved, we are either directly prompted to disengage our will from the struggle of life, or else a chord is struck in us which echoes a similar feeling.

The beginning, it is said, is always difficult. In the drama it is just the contrary ; for there the difficulty always lies in the end. This is proved by countless plays which promise very well for the first act or two, and then become muddled, stick or falter—notoriously so in the fourth act—and finally conclude in a way that is either forced or unsatisfactory or else long foreseen by every one. Sometimes, too, the end is positively revolting, as in Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*, which sends the spectators home in a temper.

This difficulty in regard to the end of a play arises partly because it is everywhere easier to get things into a tangle than to get them out again ; partly also because at the beginning we give the author *carte blanche* to do as he likes, but, at the end, make certain definite demands upon him. Thus we ask for a conclusion that shall be either quite happy or else quite tragic ; whereas human affairs do not easily take so decided a turn ; and then we expect that it shall be natural, fit and proper, unlaboured, and at the same time foreseen by no one.

These remarks are also applicable to an epic and to a novel ; but the more compact nature of the drama makes the difficulty plainer by increasing it.

E nihilo nihil fit That nothing can come from nothing is a maxim true in fine art as elsewhere. In composing an historical picture, a good artist will use living men as a model, and take the ground-work of the faces from life ; and then proceed to idealise them in point of beauty or expression. A similar method, I fancy, is adopted by good novelists. In drawing a character they take the general outline of it from some real person of their acquaintance, and then idealise and complete it to suit their purpose.

A NOVEL will be of a high and noble order, the more it represents of inner, and the less it represents of outer, life ; and the ratio between the two will supply a means of judging any novel, of whatever kind, from *Tristram Shandy* down to the crudest and most sensational tale of knight or robber. *Tristram Shandy* has, indeed, as good as no action at all ; and there is not much in *La Nouvelle Heloise* and *Wilhelm Meister*. Even Don Quixote has relatively little ; and what there is very unimportant, and introduced merely for the sake of fun. And these four are the best, of all existing novels.

Consider, further, the wonderful romances of Jean Paul, and how much inner life is shown on the narrowest basis of actual event. Even in Walter Scott's novels there is a great preponderance of inner over outer life, and incident is never brought in except for the purpose of giving play to thought and emotion ; whereas, in bad novels, incident is there on its own account. Skill consists in setting the inner life in motion with the smallest possible array of circumstance ; for it is this inner life that really excites our interest.

The business of the novelist is not to relate great events, but to make small ones interesting.

History, which I like to think of as the contrary of poetry is for time what geography is for space ; and it is no more to be called a science, in any strict sense of the word, than is geography, because it does not deal with universal truths, but only with particular details. [1] History has always been the favourite study of those who wish to learn something, without having to face the effort demanded by any branch of real knowledge, which taxes the intel-

ligence. In our time history is a favourite pursuit ; as witness the numerous books upon the subject which appear every year.

If the reader cannot help thinking, with me, that history is merely the constant recurrence of similar things, just as in a kaleidoscope the same bits of glass are presented, but in different combinations, he will not be able to share all this lively interest ; nor, however, will he censure it. But there is a ridiculous and absurd claim, made by many people, to regard history as a part of philosophy, nay, as philosophy itself ; they imagine that history can take its place.

The preference shown for history by the greater public in all ages may be illustrated by the kind of conversation which is so much in vogue everywhere in society. It generally consists in one person relating something, and then another person relating something else ; so that in this way everyone is sure of receiving attention. Both here and in the case of history it is plain that the mind is occupied with particular details. But as in science, so also in every worthy conversation, the mind rises to the consideration of some general truth.

This objection does not, however, deprive history of its value. Human life is short and fleeting, and many millions of individuals share in it, who are swallowed by that monster of oblivion which is waiting for them with ever-open jaws. It is thus a very thankworthy task to try to rescue something—the memory of interesting and important events, or the leading features and personages of some epoch—from the general shipwreck of the world.

From another point of view, we might look upon history as the sequel to zoology ; for while with all other animals it is enough to observe the species, with man individuals, and therefore individual events have to be studied ; because every man possesses a character as an individual. And since individuals and events are without number or end, an essential imperfection attaches to history. In the study of it, all that a man learns never contributes to lessen that which he has still to learn. With any real science, a perfection of knowledge is, at any rate, conceivable.

When we gain access to the histories of China and of India, the endlessness of the subject-matter will reveal to us the defects in the study, and force our historians to see that the object of science is to recognise the many in the one, to perceive the rules in any given example, and to apply to the life of nations a knowledge of mankind ; not to go on counting up facts *ad infinitum*.

There are two kinds of history ; the history of politics and the history of literature and art. The one is the history of the will ; the other, that of the intellect. The first is a tale of woe, even of terror : it is a record of agony, struggle, fraud, and horrible murder *en masse*. The second is everywhere pleasing and serene, like the intellect when left to itself, even though its path be one of error. Its chief branch is the history of philosophy. This is, in fact, its fundamental bass, and the notes of it are heard even in the other kind of history. These deep tones guide the formation of opinion, and opinion rules the world. Hence philosophy, rightly understood, is a material force of the most powerful kind, though very slow in its working. The philosophy of a period is thus the fundamental bass of its history.

The NEWSPAPER is the second-hand in the clock of history ; and it is not only made of baser metal than those which point to the minute and the hour, but it seldom goes right.

The so-called leading article is the chorus to the drama of passing events.

Exaggeration of every kind is as essential to journalism as it is to the dramatic art ; for the object of journalism is to make events go as far as possible. Thus it is that all journalists are,

in the very nature of their calling, alarmists ; and this is their way of giving interest to what they write. Herein they are like little dogs ; if anything stirs, they immediately set up a shrill bark.

Therefore, let us carefully regulate the attention to be paid to this trumpet of danger, so that it may not disturb our digestion. Let us recognise that a newspaper is at best but a magnifying-glass, and very often merely a shadow on the wall.

The *pen* is to thought what the stick is to walking ; but you walk most easily when you have no stick, and you think with the greatest perfection when you have no pen in your hand. It is only when a man begins to be old that he likes to use a stick and is glad to take up his pen.

When an *hypothesis* has once come to birth in the mind, or gained a footing there, it leads a life so far comparable with the life of an organism, as that it assimilates matter from the outer world only when it is like in kind with it and beneficial ; and when, contrarily, such matter is not like in kind but hurtful, the hypothesis, equally with the organism, throws it off, or, if forced to take it, gets rid of it again entire.

To gain *immortality* an author must possess so many excellences that, while it will not be easy to find anyone to understand and appreciate them all, there will be men in every age who are able to recognise and value some of them. In this way the credit of his book will be maintained throughout the long course of centuries, in spite of the fact that human interests are always changing.

An author like this, who has a claim to the continuance of his life even with posterity, can only be a man who, over the wide earth, will seek his like in vain, and offer a palpable contrast with everyone else in virtue of his unmistakable distinction. Nay more: were he, like the wandering Jew, to live through several generations, he would still remain in the same superior position. If this were not so, it would be difficult to see why his thoughts should not perish like those of other men,

Metaphors and *similes* are of great value, in so far as they explain an unknown relation by a known one. Even the more detailed simile which grows into a parable or an allegory, is nothing more than the exhibition of some relation in its simplest, most visible and palpable form. The growth of ideas rests, at bottom, upon similes ; because ideas arise by a process of combining the similarities and neglecting the differences between things. Further, intelligence, in the strict sense of the word, ultimately consists in a seizing of relations ; and a clear and pure grasp of relations is all the more often attained when the comparison is made between cases that lie wide apart from one another, and between things of quite different nature. As long as a relation is known to me as existing only in a single case, I have none but an *individual* idea of it—in other words, only an intuitive or perceptive knowledge of it ; but as soon as I see the same relation in two different cases, I have a *general* idea of its whole nature, and this is a deeper and more perfect knowledge.

Since, then, similes and metaphors are such a powerful engine of knowledge, it is a sign of great intelligence in a writer if his similes are unusual and, at the same time, to the point. Aristotle also observes that by far the most important thing to a writer is to have this power of metaphor; for it is a gift which cannot be acquired, and it is a mark of genius. [2]

As regards *reading*, to require that a man shall retain everything he has ever read, is like asking him to carry about with him all he has ever eaten. The one kind of food has given him bodily, and the other mental, nourishment ; and it is through these two means that he has grown to be what he is. The body assimilates only that which is like it ; and so a man retains

in his mind only that which interests him, in other words, that which suits his system of thought or his purposes in life. Everyone has purposes, no doubt ; but very few have anything like a system of thought. Few people take an objective interest in anything, and so their reading does them no good ; they retain nothing.

If a man wants to read good books, he must make a point of avoiding bad ones ; for life is short, and time and energy limited.

Repetitio est mater studiorum. Any book that is at all important ought to be at once read through twice ; partly because, on a second reading, the connection of the different portions of the book will be better understood, and the beginning comprehended only when the end is known ; and partly because we are not in the same temper and disposition on both readings. On the second perusal we get a new view of every passage and a different impression of the whole book, which then appears in another light.

It would be a good thing to buy books if one could also buy the time in which to read them ; but generally the purchase of a book is mistaken for the acquisition of its contents.

A man's works are the quintessence of his mind, and even though he may possess very great capacity, they will always be incomparably more valuable than his conversation. Nay, in all essential matters his works will not only make up for the lack of personal intercourse with him, but they will far surpass it in solid advantages. The writings even of a man of moderate genius may be edifying, worth reading and instructive, because they are his quintessence—the result and fruit of all his thought and study ; whilst conversation with him may be unsatisfactory.

So it is that we can read books by men in whose company we find nothing to please, and that a high degree of culture leads us to seek entertainment almost wholly from books and not from men.

[1] *Translator's Note.* — This line of argument is not likely to be popular now-a-days ; but if the reader is interested by it, he will find it more fully stated in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Vol. II., c. 38.

[2] *Poetics*, c. 22.

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