CHAPTER XXII

STUDIES OF EXTRAORDINARY PROSE

I

THE ART OF SIMPLE POWER: THE NORSE WRITERS

IN speaking upon the various arts of prose, I do not intend to confine the study especially to something in English literature. For it happens that we can get better examples of the great art of prose writing in other literatures than English,—examples, too, which will better appeal to the Japanese student, especially as some of them bear resemblance to the best work of the old Japanese writers. In English literature it is not very easy to find examples of that simplicity, combined with great vividness, which is to be found in the old Japanese narrative. But we can find this very often in the work of the Norse writers; and their finest pages, translated into the kindred English tongue, do not lose the extraordinary charm of the original.

Now there are two ways of writing artistic prose (of course there are many different methods, but all can be grouped under two heads), both depending a good deal upon the character of the writer. There is a kind of work of which the merit is altogether due to vivid and powerful senses, well trained in observation. The man who sees keenly and hears keenly, who has been well disciplined how to use his eyes and ears both with quickness and caution, who has been taught by experience the value of accuracy and the danger of exaggeration (exaggeration being, after all, only an incorrect way of observing and thinking),—such a man, if he can write at all, is apt to write interestingly. The very best examples of strong simple prose are pages written by the old Norsemen who passed most of their lives

in fighting and hunting. We have here the result of that training which I have above indicated. The man who knows that at any hour of the day a mistake may cost his life and the lives of his children, is apt to be a man of exact observation. He is also apt to be a man with excellent senses and good judgment; for the near-sighted or deaf or stupid could scarcely have existed in the sort of society to which the Norse writers belonged. And I imagine, so far as it is in my power to judge, that some of the old Japanese writers have given in their work evidence of the same faculties of perception and discrimination. To-day we have some living examples of European writers whose power depends entirely upon the same qualities. Modern writers of this kind are much less simple, it is true, than the writers whom we are about to consider; they have been educated in modern technical schools or universities, and their education has given to their work a certain colour never to be found in the ancient literature. But one or two writers have preserved in a most extraordinary way the best qualities of the old Norse writers, — modern Norsemen, or at least Scandinavians. I thihk that perhaps the best is Björnstjerne Björnson. We shall have occasion to speak of him again at another time.

The other method of writing artistic prose is more particularly subjective; it depends chiefly upon the man's inner sense of beauty, — upon his power to feel emotionally, and to express the emotion by a careful choice of words. Upon this phase of prose writing we need not now dwell; we shall take it up later on. Suffice to say that it does not at all depend upon the possession of well developed exterior senses, nor upon faculties of quick perception and discrimination; indeed, some of its greatest masters have been physically imperfect men, or helpless invalids.

Now let us take an example of the old Norse style of narrative. It dates back to the early part of the thirteenth century; and the subject is a fight in a little island on the coast of Iceland. There was trouble at the time about a

Christian bishop called Gudmund, who had been sent out there. Some determined to kill him, others resolved to stand by him, — and among the latter were two brave friends Eyjolf and Aron. The summary opens at the point where the bishop's party had been badly handled, and nearly everybody killed except the two friends. Aron, who was the weaker of the two, wanted to stay on the ground and fight until he died. Eyjolf was determined that he should not, so he played a trick upon him in order to save him. The whole story is told in the Sturlunga Saga. I hope you will be interested by this; because it seems to me remarkably like some incidents in old Japanese histories.

Eyjolf took his way to the place where Aron and Sturla had met, and there he found Aron sitting with his weapons, and all about were lying dead men, and wounded. Eyjolf asks his cousin whether he can move at all. Aron says that he can, and stands on his feet; and now they both go together for a while by the shore, till they come to a hidden bay; — there they saw a boat ready floating, with five or six men at the oars, and the bow to sea. This was Eyjolf's arrangement, in case of sudden need. Now Eyjolf tells Aron that he means the boat for both of them, giving out that he sees no hope of doing more for the Bishop at that time.

"But I look for better days to come," says Eyjolf.

"It seems a strange plan to me," says Aron; "for I thought that we should never part from Bishop Gudmund in this distress. There is something behind this, and I vow that I will not go, unless you go first on board."

"That I will not, Cousin," says Eyjolf, "for it is shoal water here, and I will not have any of the oarsmen leave his oar to shove her off; and it is far too much for you to go about with wounds like yours. You will have to go on board."

"Well, put your weapons in the boat," says Aron, "and I will believe you."

Aron now goes on board, and Eyjolf did as Aron asked him. Eyjolf waded after, pushing the boat, for the shallows went far out. And when he saw the right time come, Eyjolf caught up a battle-axe out of the stern of the boat, and gave a shove to the boat with all his might.

"Good-bye, Aron," says Eyjolf; "we shall meet again when God pleases."

And since Aron was disabled with wounds and weary with loss of blood, it had to be even so; and this parting was a grief to Aron, for they saw each other no more.

Now Eyjolf spoke to the oarsmen, and told them to row hard, and not to let Aron come back again to Grimsey that day, and not for many a day, if they could help it.

They row away with Aron in their boat; but Eyjolf turns to the shore again, and to a boat-house with a large ferry-boat in it that belonged to the goodman (farmer) Gnup. And at the same nick of time he sees the Sturlung company come tearing down from the garth, having finished their mischief there. Eyjolf takes to the boat-house, with his mind made up to defend it, as long as his doom would let him. There were double doors to the boat-house, and he puts heavy stones against them.

Brand, one of Siglwat's followers, a man of good condition, caught a glimpse of a man moving, and said to his companions that he thought he had made out Eyjolf Karrson there, and that they ought to go after him. Sturla was not on the spot. There were nine to ten together. So they come to the boat-house. Brand asks who is there, and Eyjolf says that it is he.

"Then you will please to come out, and come before Sturla," says Brand.

"Will you promise me grace?" says Eyjolf.

"There will be little of that," says Brand.

"Then it is for you to come on," says Eyjolf, "and for me to guard, and it seems to me the shares are ill divided."

Eyjolf had a coat of mail, and a great axe, and that was all.

Now they came at him, and he made a good and brave defence; he cut their pike-shafts through — there were stout blows on both sides. And in that bout Eyjolf broke his axe-shaft, and caught up an oar, and then another, and both broke with his blows. And in the bout Eyjolf got a thrust under his arm, and it came home. Some say that he broke the shaft from the spearhead, and let it stay in the wound. He saw now that his defence was ended. Then he made a dash out, and got through them, before they knew. They were not expecting this; still, they kept their heads, and a man named Mar cut at him and caught his ankle, so that his foot hung crippled. With that he rolled down the beach and the sea was at the flood. In such

plight as he was in, Eyjolf set to and swam, and swimming he came twelve fathoms from shore to a shelf of rock, and knelt there; and then he fell full length upon the earth, and spread his hands from him, turning to the East, as if to pray.

Now they launched the boat and went after him. And when they came to the rock, a man drove a spearhead into him, and then another; but no blood flowed from either wound. So they turned to go ashore and find Sturla, and tell him the story plainly how it had all fallen out. Sturla held, and another man too, that this had been a glorious defence. He showed that he was pleased at the news.

Now, do you observe anything peculiar about this very human document? I think you must appreciate the power of it; but I doubt whether you have noticed how very differently from modern methods that power has been employed.

In the first place, notice that there are scarcely any adjectives; altogether there are nine or ten—suppose we say ten. There are two and a half pages of about three hundred words in a page, in the extract which you have written. That is to say, there are about seven hundred and fifty words, and there are only ten adjectives in the whole—or about one adjective and a fraction to every hundred words. I think that you would have to look through thousands and thousands of modern English books before you could find anything like this. And there is no word used which could be left out, without somewhat spoiling the effect. This may not be grace; but it is certainly the economy of force, which is the basis of all grace.

Next, observe that there is no description—not a particle of description. Houses are mentioned and rocks and boats, and a fight is narrated in the most masterly way; yet nothing is described. And nevertheless how well we see everything—that cold bay of the North Sea with the boat floating upon it, and the brave man helping his wounded cousin on board, and the unequal struggle at the boat-house, during which we can actually hear the noise of the oars breaking. There is no picture of a face; yet I am quite sure that you

can see the face of that brave man in every episode of the struggle. The Norse people were perhaps not the first to discover that description was unnecessary in great writing. They loved it in their poetry; they avoided it in their prose. But it requires no little skill to neglect description in this way,—to make the actions and incidents themselves create the picture. At first reading this might seem to you simple as a schoolboy's composition; but there is nothing in the world so hard to do.

Thirdly, observe that there is no emotion, no partiality, no sympathy expressed. It is true that in one place Eyjolf is spoken of as having made "a good and brave defence," but the Norsemen never spoke badly of their enemies; and if their greatest enemy could fight well, they gave him credit for it, not as a matter of sympathy but as a matter of truth. Certainly the end of the narration shows us that the adjectives "good" and "brave" do not imply any sympathy at all; for the lord of the men who killed Eyjolf was pleased to hear of the strong fight that he made. Notice this point carefully. Such men found no pleasure in killing cowards; they thought it glorious only to kill a good fighter in a good fight. The lord is glad because his men killed somebody well worth killing. So, as I have already said, there is not one particle of personal emotion in the whole story. Nevertheless what emotion it makes within the reader! And what a wonderful art this is to create emotion in the reader's mind by suppressing it altogether in the narration! This is the supreme art of realism, — about which you may have heard a great deal in these last few years. I know of only one writer of the nineteenth century who had this same realistic power,—the late French story-teller Guy de Maupassant. In the days before his brain weakened and madness destroyed his astonishing faculties, he also could create the most powerful emotion without the use of a single emotional word or suggestion. Some day I shall try to give you in English a short specimen of his power.

Now if you will consider these three things—the scarcity

of adjectives, the absence of description, and the suppression of emotion, I think that you will be able to see what a wonderful bit of writing that was. But it is no more than a single example out of a possible hundred. And in a certain way the secret of it is the same which gave such surprise and delight in modern times to the readers of Hans Andersen. This matchless teller of fairy tales and "wonder-stories" full of deep philosophical meanings, was, as you know, a Norseman,—even by blood a descendant of those same men who could write about the story of Eyjolf in the thirteenth century. I want to give you now another little story of the same kind from the old Icelandic saga of Njal. You will discover all the same qualities in it. The story told might almost be Japanese,—an incident of the old fierce custom of vengeance. Among the Norsemen, as among the men of old Japan, the brother was bound to avenge the death of the brother; the father had to avenge his son; everybody killed had some blood relative to avenge him. If there was no man to do this, there would often appear a brave woman willing and capable of doing it, and in the wars of Katakiuchi* there were many brave things done on both sides, even by the little boys and girls. In this case the victims are a little boy and his grandparents. They are locked in a wooden house that has been surrounded by their enemies and set on fire. There are many people in the house, and they all are about to be destroyed without pity, — for this is a fight between two clans, and there are many deaths to be avenged. But suddenly the leader of the conquering party remembers that the old man inside used to be his teacher (I think there is a Japanese incident of almost exactly the same kind in the story of a castle siege). Now we will make the old northern story-teller relate the rest.

Then Flosi went to the door and called out to Njal, and said he would speak with him and Bergthora.

* *Japanese*, vendetta.

Now Njal does so, and Flosi said—

"I will offer thee, master Njal, leave to go out, for it is unworthy that thou shouldst burn indoors."

"I will not go out," said Njal, "for I am an old man, and little fitted to avenge my sons, but I will not live in shame."

Then Flosi said to Bergthora—

"Come thou out, housewife, for I will for no sake burn thee indoors."

"I was given away to Njal young," said Bergthora, "and I have promised him this, that we should both share the same fate."

After that they both went back into the house.

"What councel shall we now take?" said Bergthora.

"We will go to our bed," says Njal, "and lay us down; I have long been eager for rest."

Then she said to the boy Thord, Kari's son: "Thee will I take out, and thou shalt not burn in here."

"Thou hast promised me this, grandmother," says the boy, "that we should never part so long as I wished to be with thee; but methinks it is much better to die with thee and Njal than to live after you."

Then she bore the boy to her bed, and Njal spoke to his steward and said—

"Now thou shalt see where we lay us down, and how I lay us out, for I mean not to stir an inch hence, whether reek or burning smart me, and so thou wilt be able to guess where to look for our bones."

He said that he would do so.

There had been an ox slaughtered, and the hide lay there. Njal told the steward to spread the hide over them, and he did so.

So there they lay down both of them in their bed, and put the boy between them. Then they signed themselves and the boy with the sign of the cross, and gave over their souls into God's hand, and that was the last word that men heard them utter.*

There are about four adjectives in all this; and, as in the former case, there is no description and no sympathy, — no sentiment. Very possibly this is an absolutely true incident, the steward, who was allowed to go out, having

* Sir George W. Dasent, *The Story of Burnt Njal*, (E. V. Lucas's Edition), p. 239.

been afterward able to make a faithful report of what the old people and the boy said in the house. The young men said other things, full of fierce mockery, things that manifest a spirit totally unlike anything in modern times. They stood up to be burned or to break their way out if a chance offered. One of the sons seeing the father lying down in the bed sarcastically observed, "Our father goes early to bed, and that is what was to be looked for, as he is an old man." This grewsome joke shows that the young man would have preferred the father to die fighting. But the old folks were busy enough in preparing the little boy for death. It is a terrible story,—an atrociously cruel one; but it shows great nobility of character in the victims, and the reader is moved in spite of himself by this most simple relation of fact.

Now perhaps you will think that this simple style can only produce such effects when the subject matter of the narrative is itself of a terrible or startling or extraordinary character. I am quite sure that this is not true, because I find exactly the same style in such a modern novel as "Synnövé Solbakken" by Björnson, and I find it in such fairy tales of Andersen as "The Ugly Duckling" and "The Little Mermaid." These simplest subjects are full of wonder and beauty for the eyes that can see and the mind that can think; and with such an eye and such a mind, the simple style is quite enough. How trifling at times are the subjects of Andersen's stories—a child's toy, a plant growing in the field, a snow image, made by children somewhat as we make a snow *daruma** in the farmyard, a rose-bush under the window. It would be nonsense to say that here the interest depends upon the subject matter! In such a story as "The Little Tin Soldier" we are really affected almost as much as by the story of Eyjolf in the old saga — simply because the old saga-teller and the modern story-teller wrote and thought very much in the same way. Or take another subject, of a more complicated character, the story of the "Nightingale

* Cf. "Otokichi's Daruma" in *A Japanese Miscellany* by L. Hearn.

of the Emperor of China and the Nightingale of the Emperor of Japan." There is a great deal more meaning here than the pretty narrative itself shows upon the surface. The whole idea is the history of our human life,—the life of the artist, and his inability to obtain just recognition, and the power of the humbug to ignore him. It is a very profound story indeed; and there are pages in it which one can scarcely read with dry eyes. It affects us both intellectually and emotionally to an extraordinary degree; but the style is still the style of the old sagas. Of course I must acknowledge that Andersen uses a few more adjectives than the Icelandic writers did, but you will find, on examining him closely, that he does not use them when he can help it. Now the other style that I was telling you about,—the modern artistic style, uses adjectives almost as profusely as in poetry. I do not wish to speak badly of it; but scarcely any writer who uses it has been able to give so powerful an impression as the Norse writers who never used it at all.

In the simple style there is something of the genius of the race. After all, any great literary manner must have its foundation in race character. The manner that I have been describing is an evidence of northern race character at its very best. Quite incidentally I may observe here that another northern race, which has produced a literature only in very recent times, shows something of the same simple force of plain style,—I mean Russian literature. The great modern Russian writers, most of all, resemble the old Norse writers in their management of effects with few words. But my purpose in this lecture has been especially to suggest to you a possible resemblance between old Japanese literary methods and these old northern literary methods. I imagine that the northern simple art accords better with Japanese genius than ever could the more elaborate forms of literature, based upon the old classic studies.

II

SIR THOMAS BROWNE

IN our first lecture on prose style you will recollect the extraordinary simplicity of the examples given from some of the old Norse writers. And you will have observed the lasting strength of that undecorated native simplicity. To-day I am going to talk to you about a style which offers the very greatest possible contrast and opposition to the style of the Norse writers,—a style which represents the extreme power of great classical culture, vast scholarship, enormous reading, — a style which can be enjoyed only by scholars, which never could become popular, and which nevertheless has wonderful merit in its way. I do not offer you examples with any idea of encouraging you to imitate it. But it is proper that you should be able to appreciate some of its fine qualities and to understand its great importance in the history of English literature. I mean the style of Sir Thomas Browne.

I have said that the influence of this style has been very great upon English literature. Before we go any further, allow me to explain this influence. Sir Thomas Browne was the first great English writer who made an original classic style. By classic style I mean an English prose style founded upon a profound study of the ancient classic writers, Greek and Latin, and largely coloured and made melodious by a skilful use of many-syllabled words derived from the antique tongues. There were original styles before. Sir Thomas Malory made a charming innovation in style. Lyly made a new style, too,—a style imitated from Spanish writers, extravagantly ornamented, extravagantly complicated, fantastic, artificial, tiresome, — the famous style called Euphuism. We shall have to speak of Euphuism at another time. It also was a great influence during a short period. But neither the delightful prose poetry of Sir Thomas Malory nor the extravagant and factitious style of Lyly has anything in common with the style of Sir Thomas

Browne. Sir Thomas Browne imitated nobody except the best Latin and Greek writers, and he imitated them with an art that no other Englishman ever approached. Moreover, he did not imitate them slavishly; he managed always to remain supremely original, and because he was a true prose poet, much more than because he imitated the beauties of the antique writers, he was able to influence English prose for considerably more than two hundred years. Indeed, I think we may say that his influence still continues; and that if he does not affect style to-day as markedly as he did a hundred years ago, it is only because one must be a very good scholar to do anything in the same direction as that followed by Sir Thomas Browne, and our very good scholars of to-day do not write very much in the way of essays or of poetry. The first person of great eminence powerfully affected by Sir Thomas Browne was Samuel Johnson. You know that Johnson affected the literature of the eighteenth century most powerfully, and even a good deal of the literature of the early nineteenth century. But Johnson was a pupil of Browne, and a rather clumsy pupil at that. He was not nearly so great a scholar as Sir Thomas Browne; he was much less broad-minded—that is to say, capable of liberal and generous tolerance, and he did not have that sense of beauty and of poetry which distinguished Sir Thomas Browne. He made only a very bad imitation of Sir Thomas, exaggerating the eccentricities and missing the rare and delicate beauties. But the literary links between Browne and the eighteenth century are very easily established, and it is certain that Browne indirectly helped to form the literary prose of that period. Thus you will perceive how large a figure in the history of English literature he must be.

He was born in 1605, and he died in 1682. Thus he belongs to the seventeenth century, and his long life extends from nearly the beginning to within a few years of the end. We do not know very much about him. He was educated at Oxford, and studied medicine. Then he established

himself as a doctor in the English country town of Norwich, famous in nursery-rhyme as the town to which the man-in-the-moon asked his way. In the leisure hours of his professional life he composed, at long intervals, three small books, respectively entitled "Religio Medici," "Pseudodoxia," and "Hydriotaphia." Neither the first, which is a treatise upon humanism in its relation to life and religion, nor the second, which is a treatise upon vulgar errors, need occupy us much for the present; they do not reveal his style in the same way as the third book. This "Hydriotaphia" is a treatise upon urn-burial, upon the habit of the ancients of burying or preserving the ashes of their dead in urns of pottery or of metal. It is from this book that I am going to make some quotations. During Browne's lifetime he was recognized as a most wonderful scholar and amiable man, but there were only a few persons who could appreciate the finer beauties of his literary work. Being personally liked, however, he had no difficulty in making a social success; he was able to become tolerably rich, and he was created a knight by King Charles II. After his death his books and manuscripts were sold at auction; and fortunately they were purchased afterwards for the British Museum. The whole of his work, including some posthumous essays, makes three volumes in the Bohn Library. Better editions of part of the text, however, have been recently produced; and others are in preparation. It is probable that Sir Thomas Browne will be studied very much again within the next fifty years.

The book about urn-burial really gives the student the best idea of Sir Thomas Browne. No other of his works so well displays his learning and his sense of poetry. Indeed, even in these days of more advanced scholarship, the learning of Sir Thomas Browne astonishes the most learned. He quotes from a multitude of authors, scarcely known to the ordinary student, as well as from almost every classic author known; likewise from German, Italian, Spanish and Danish writers; likewise from hosts of the philosophers of

the Middle Ages and the fathers of the church. Everything that had been written about science from antiquity up to the middle of the seventeenth century he would appear to have read,—botany, anatomy, medicine, alchemy, astrology; and the mere list of authorities cited by him is appalling. But to discover a man of the seventeenth century who had read all the books in the western world is a much less surprising fact than to find that the omnivorous reader remembered what he read, digested it, organized it, and everywhere discovered in it beauties that others had not noticed. Scholarship in itself is not, however, particularly interesting; and the charge of pedantry, of a needless display of learning, might have been brought against Sir Thomas Browne more than once. To-day, you know, it is considered a little vulgar for a good scholar to make quotations from Greek and Latin authors when writing an English book. He is at once accused of trying to show off his knowledge. But even to-day, and while this is the rule, no great critic will charge Sir Thomas Browne with pedantry. He quotes classical authors extensively only while he is writing upon classical subjects; and even then, he never quotes a name or a fact without producing some unexpected and surprising effect. Moreover, he very seldom cites a Latin or Greek text, but puts the Latin or Greek thought into English. Later on I shall try to show you what are the intrinsic demerits of his style, as well as its merits; but for the present let us study a few quotations. They will serve better than anything else to show what a curious writer he is.

In the little book about urn-burial, the first chapter treats generally about the burial customs of all nations of antiquity—indeed I might say of all nations in the world, together with the philosophical or religious reasons for different burial customs; and yet in the original book all this is told in about twenty pages. You will see therefore that Sir Thomas is not prolix; on the contrary, he presses his facts together so powerfully as to make one solid com-

position of them. Let us take a few sentences from this chapter :*

Some being of the opinion of Thales, that water was the original of all things, thought it most equal to submit unto the principle of putrefaction, and conclude in a moist relentment. Others conceived it most natural to end in fire, as due unto the master principle in the composition, according to the doctrine of Heraclitus; and therefore heaped up large piles, more actively to waft them toward that element, whereby they also declined a visible degeneration into worms, and left a lasting parcel of their composition. . . .

But the Chaldeans, the great idolators of fire, abhorred the burning of their carcasses, as a pollution of that deity. The Persian magi declined it upon the like scruple, and being only solicitous about their bones, exposed their flesh to the prey of birds and dogs. And the Parsees now in India, which expose their bodies unto vultures, and endure not so much as *feretra* or biers of wood, the proper fuel of fire, are led on with such niceties. But whether the ancient Germans, who burned their dead, held any such fear to pollute their deity of Herthus, or the Earth, we have no authentic conjecture.

The Egyptians were afraid of fire, not as a deity, but a devouring element, mercilessly consuming their bodies, and leaving too little of them; and therefore by precious embalmments, deposture in dry earths, or handsome inclosure in glasses, contrived the notablest ways of integral conservation. And from such Egyptian scruples, imbibed by Pythagoras, it may be conjectured that Numa and the Pythagorical sect first waved (modern *waived*) the fiery solution.

The Scythians, who swore by wind and sword, that is, by life and death, were so far from burning their bodies, that they declined all interment, and made their graves in the air; and the Icthyophagi, or fish-eating nations about Egypt, affected the sea for their grave; thereby declining visible corruption, and restoring the debt of their bodies. Whereas the old heroes, in Homer, dreaded nothing more than water or drowning; probably upon the old opinion of the fiery substance of the soul, only extinguishable by that element; and therefore the poet emphatically implieth the total destruction in this kind of death, which happened to Ajax Oileus.

So on, page after page crammed with facts and comments. He mentions even the Chinese burial customs — so

**Hydriotaphia*, chap. I., par. 7—12 (First Ed., pp. 6—8).

little known to Europeans of the seventeenth century; and his remarks upon them are tolerably correct, considering all the circumstances. You will acknowledge that a dry subject is here most interestingly treated; this is the art that can give life to old bones. But the main thing is the style, —remember we are still early in the seventeenth century, in the year 1658; see how dignified, how sonorous, how finely polished are these rolling sentences, all of which rise and fall with wave-like regularity and roundness. You feel that this is the scholar who writes, — the scholar whose ear has been trained to the long music of Greek and Latin sentences. And even when he uses words now obsolete or changed in meaning, you can generally know very well from the context what is meant. For instance, "relentment," which now has no such meaning, is used in the sense of dissolution, and "conclude," of which the meaning is now most commonly "to finish" in the literary sense, this old doctor uses in the meaning of "to end life, to finish existence." But you do not need to look at the glossary at the end of the book in order to know this.

We might look to such a writer for all the arts of finished prose known to the best masters of to-day; and we should find them in the most elaborate perfection. The use of antithesis, long afterwards made so famous by Macaulay, was used by Browne with quite as much art, and perhaps with even better taste. Certainly his similes are quite as startling:

> Though the funeral pyre of Patroclus took up an hundred foot, a piece of an old boat burnt Pompey; and if the burthen of Isaac were sufficient for an holocaust, a man may carry his own pyre.*

The subject is always made interesting, whether the writer be speaking of mathematics or of gardens, of graves or of stars. Hear him when he begins on the subject of ghosts—how curious the accumulation of facts, and how effective the contrasts:

* *Ibid*, chap. III, par. 16 (Ist Ed., p. 44).

The dead seem all alive in the human Hades of Homer, yet cannot well speak, prophesy, or know the living, except they drink blood, wherein is the life of man. And therefore the souls of Penelope's paramours, conducted by Mercury, chirped like bats, and those which followed Hercules made a noise but like a flock of birds.

The departed spirits know things past and to come; yet are ignorant of things present. Agamemnon foretells what should happen unto Ulysses; yet ignorantly enquires what is become of his own son. The ghosts are afraid of swords in Homer; yet Sibylla tells Æneas in Virgil, the thin habit of spirits was beyond the force of weapons. The spirits put off their malice with their bodies; and Cæsar and Pompey accord in Latin hell; yet Ajax, in Homer, endures not a conference with Ulysses: and Deiphobus appears all mangled in Virgil's ghosts, yet we meet with perfect shadows among the wounded ghosts of Homer.*

But these examples do not show Browne at his very best; they merely serve to illustrate his ordinary style. To show him at his best through quotation is a very difficult thing, as Professor Saintsbury recently pointed out. His splendours are in rare sentences which somehow or other light up the whole page in which they occur. Every student should know the wonderful passage about the use of Egyptian mummies for medicine,—mummy-flesh being a drug known to English medicine up to the year 1721. I should like to read the whole passage to you in which this sentence occurs, but this would require too much time; suffice to quote the conclusion:

Egyptian ingenuity was more unsatisfied, contriving their bodies in sweet consistencies, to attend the return of their souls. But all was vanity, feeding the wind, and folly. The Egyptian mummies, which Cambyses or time hath spared, avarice now consumeth. Mummy is become merchandise, Mizraim cures wounds, and Pharaoh is sold for balsams.†

If Sir Thomas Browne had lived in modern times he might have added that mummies were used on the steam-

* *Ibid*, chap. IV, par. 16—17 (Ist Ed., p, 62).

† *Ibid*, chap. V, par. 10 (Ist Ed., pp. 78—9).

boats of the Nile instead of coal—even within our own day. The bodies of common people were preserved mostly by the use of cheap resinous substances, such as pitch; therefore, as soon as it was found by the steamboat companies that they would burn very well indeed, they were burned by tens of thousands to make steam! Also I suppose that you may have heard how mummy dust was sold for manure, until English laws were passed to prevent the custom. Sir Thomas Browne's object in these pages is only to point out the folly of funeral pomp, or of seeking to maintain a great fame among men after death, because all things are impermanent and pass away; and his illustrations are always strikingly forcible. On the subject of human impermanency the book is full of splendid sentences, many of which are worth learning by heart. But let us turn to a less sombre subject — to a beautiful paragraph in the fourth chapter of "The Garden of Cyrus":

> Light that makes things seen, makes some things invisible; were it not for darkness and the shadow of the earth, the noblest part of the creation had remained unseen, and the stars in heaven as invisible as on the fourth day, when they were created above the horizon with the sun, or there was not an eye to behold them. The greatest mystery of religion is expressed by adumbration, and in the noblest part of Jewish types, we find the cherubims shadowing the mercy-seat. Life itself is but the shadow of death, and souls departed but the shadows of the living. All things fall under this name. The sun itself is but the dark *simulacrum*, and light but the shadow of God.

The little essay from which I have made this quotation, usually bound up with the work on urn-burial and called "The Garden of Cyrus", is a most curious thing. It is a dissertation upon the Quincunx, or, to use simpler language, a dissertation upon the mathematical, geometrical and mystical values of the number Five. The doctor, beginning his subject with some remarks about the merit of arranging trees in a garden by groups of five, is led on to consider the signification of five in all its relations to the universe. He discourses upon that number in the heavens and upon the

earth and even in the waters which are beneath the earth. He has remarked that not only in the human hand and foot do we find the divisions of five fingers and five toes, but we find like divisions in the limbs of countless animals and in the petals of flowers. He was very near a great discovery in these observations; you know that botany to-day recognizes the meaning of fives and sixes in floral division; and you know that modern physiology has established beyond any question the fact that even in the hoofs of a horse or of a cow we have the rudiments of five toes that anciently existed. If the doctor had lived a little later—say in the time of that country doctor, Erasmus Darwin, he might have been able to forecast many discoveries of Charles Darwin. Anyhow, his little essay is delightful to read; and if he did not anticipate some general laws of modern science, he was none the less able to establish his declaration that "all things began in order, so shall they end, and so shall they begin again; according to the ordainer of order and mystical mathematicks of the city of heaven."*

It would be wrong to call Sir Thomas Browne a mystic outside of the Christian sense. He was really a religious man, and he would not have ventured to put out theories which he believed the church would condemn. But no writer ever felt the poetry of mysticism more than he, or expressed its aspirations better without actually sharing them. Therefore his books have been classed with mystical literature, and are much admired and studied by mystics. It is impossible to read him and not be occasionally astonished by suggestions and thoughts that seem much too large for orthodox Christianity, but which would excellently illustrate the teaching of older eastern religions.

I shall be glad if these notes upon Sir Thomas Browne should serve to interest you in some of his best writings. But I think that his value for you will be chiefly in the suggestive direction. He is a great teacher in certain arts

* *The Garden of Cyrus*, chap. V, par. 13.

of style—in the art of contrast, in the art of compression, in the art of rhythm, and of melody. I do not think that you could, however, learn the latter from him. What you would learn would be the value of contrasts of metaphor, and of a certain fine economy of words; the rest is altogether too classical for you to apprehend the secret of it. Indeed, it is only a Greek and Latin training that can give full apprehension of what the beauties of his style are. But, like all true style, there is much there that means only character, personality, — the charm of the man himself, the grace of his mind; and all that, you can very well understand. I think you could scarcely read the book and not feel strange retrospective affection for the man who wrote it.

Now the great thing for you to remember about his place in English literature is that he was the father and founder of English classic prose. He was the source from which Dr. Johnson obtained inspiration; he was the first also to show those capacities of majesty and sonority in English prose which Gibbon afterwards displayed on so vast a scale; he was also the first to use effectively that art of contrast and of antithesis which was to make so great a part of the wonderful style of Macaulay. And even to-day no student can read Sir Thomas Browne without some profit. He is incomparably superior to Bacon and to not a few others who are much more widely known. I do not think that the study of Bacon's essays can be at all profitable to the student in the matter of style—rather the reverse. The value of Bacon is chiefly in his thinking. But Sir Thomas Browne offers you both thoughts and style in the very finest form.

Nevertheless I must utter a final word of disfavour. There is one drawback to all such style as that which we have been considering — not excepting the styles of Gibbon or Macaulay. It is the necessarily limited range of their power. You cannot appeal to the largest possible audience with a scholarly style. And what is worse, every such style, being artificial more than natural, contains within itself

certain elements of corruption and dissolution. We have to read Sir Thomas Browne with a glossary to-day—that is, if we wish to be very exact in our renderings of his thoughts; you will find an extensive glossary attached to his work. This you will not find in Gibbon or Macaulay, but this is only because they are still near to us in time. For all that, the language of the former is now found to be decidedly old-fashioned, notwithstanding its beauty; and the study of the latter will probably become old-fashioned during the present century. It is quite otherwise in the case of that simple northern style, of which I gave you specimens in a former lecture. That never can become old-fashioned, even though the language die in which it was originally written. Containing nothing artificial, it also contains no element of decay. It can impress equally well the most learned and the most ignorant minds, and if we have to make a choice at all between their perfectly plain style and the gorgeous music and colours of Sir Thomas Browne, I should not hesitate for a moment to tell you that the simple style is much the better. However, that is not a reason for refusing to give to the classic writers the praise and admiration which they have so justly earned.

III

BJÖRNSON

BEFORE studying some further wonderful prose I want to speak to you about what I believe to be a wide-spread and very harmful delusion in Japan. I mean the delusion that students of English literature ought to study in English only the books originally written in English,—not English translations from other languages. Of course, in these times, I acknowledge that there is some reason for distrust of translations. Translations are made very quickly and very badly, only for the purpose of gaining money, and a vast amount of modern translation is absolute trash, but it is very different in the case of foreign works which have been

long adopted into the English language, and which have become practically a common possession of Englishmen,—such as the translation of the "Arabian Nights," the grand prose translation of Goethe's "Faust," the translation of "Wilhelm Meister" by Carlyle, the translation of "Undine" which every boy reads, to mention only a few things at random. So with the translations of the great Italian and Spanish and Russian writers,—not to speak of French writers. In fact, if Englishmen had studied only English literature, English literature would never have become developed as it is now. And if Englishmen had studied foreign literature only in the original tongue, English literature would still have made very little progress. It has been through thousands of translations, not through scholarly study, that the best of our poetry, the best of our fiction, the best of our prose has been modified and improved by foreign influence. As I once before told you, the development of literature is only in a very limited degree the work of the scholars. The great scholars are seldom producers of enduring literature. The men who make that must be men of natural genius, which has nothing to do with scholarship; and the majority of them are not, as a rule, even educated beyond the ordinary. To furnish these men with the stimulus of exotic ideas, those ideas should be placed before them in their own tongue. Now it may seem to you very strange that foreign influence should operate chiefly through translations, but the history of nearly every European literature proves that such is the case. And I am quite sure that if Japan is to produce an extensive new literature in the future, it will not be until after fresh ideas have become widely assimilated by the nation through thousands of translations. For these reasons, I think it is a very unfortunate notion that the study of English literature should be confined to the study of books originally written in English, or even written by Englishmen.

How is the mind of the English boy formed? If you think about that, you will discover that English literature

really represents but a part and a small part of world influences on him. After the age of the nursery songs, most of which are really of English origin, comes the age of fairy tales, of which very few can be traced to English sources. Indeed I believe that "Jack the Giant Killer" and "Jack and the Beanstalk" are quite exceptional in the fact that they are truly English. "Puss in Boots" is not English, but French; "Cinderella" is French; "The Sleeping Beauty" is French; "The White Cat" is French; and "Bluebeard" is French. In fact the great mass of our fairy tales are translations from French authors such as Perrault and Madame d'Aulnoy, to mention only two. When the little boy has feasted himself to repletion upon this imaginative diet, what is the next course of reading? Other fairy tales, of a deeper character—half pure story, half moral teaching; and where do these stories come from? Well, they are not English at all; they are translations from other languages, chiefly German and Swedish. The most important of all works of this kind are those of Hans Andersen. Every child must read them and learn from them, and they have now become so much a part of English child life that we cannot help wondering what children did before Andersen was born. The best German work of this sort is the work of Grimm. Everybody knows something about that. After this reading, stories of adventure are generally taken up, or slight romances of some kind. There is "Robinson Crusoe," of course, which is English, and "Gulliver's Travels"; but excepting these two, I believe that most of the first class of juvenile romance consists of translations. For example, in my boyhood the romances of Henry Conscience were read by all boys; and they are translated from the Dutch. And even when a lad has come to delight in Sir Walter Scott, he has still foreign literary influences of even greater power working upon his imagination — such as the magic of the elder Alexandre Dumas. The wonderful stories of "Monte Cristo" and of "The Three Musketeers" have become indispensable readings for the young, and their

influence upon modern English fiction has been very great. Still later one has to read the extraordinary novels of Victor Hugo; and there is no time at which the English student is not directly or indirectly affected by French masters as well as by the German masters. Of course you will say that I am mentioning modern authors when I speak of Dumas and Hugo. Yes, they are even contemporaries. But when we look back to the times before these great men were heard of, we still find that foreign literature influenced Elizabethans quite as much as contemporary English literature. In the eighteenth century the influence was French, and other foreign influences were at work. Then everybody had to read the classic French authors, but even these were not dull; there were story-tellers among them who supplied what the authors of the romantic time supplied to the English youth of the nineteenth century. Also in the seveteenth century there was some French influence, mixed with Italian and Spanish. In the Elizabethan Age, education was not so widely diffused, but we know that the young people of those times used to read Spanish novels and stories, and that no less than one hundred and seventy Spanish books were then translated.

I think you will see from all this that English literature actually depends for its vitality upon translations, and that the minds of English youth are by no means formed through purely English influences. Observe that I have not said anything about the study of Greek and Latin, which are more than foreign influences; they are actually influences from another vanished world. Nor have I said anything about the influence of religious literature, vast as it is—Hebrew literature, literature of the Bible, on which are based the prayers that children learn at their mother's knee. Really, instead of being the principal factor in English education, English literature occupies quite a small place. If an Englishman only knew English literature, he would know very little indeed. The best of his literature may be in English; he has Shakespeare, for example; but the

greater part of it is certainly not English, and even to-day its yearly production is being more and more affected by the ideas of France and Italy and Russia and Sweden and Norway—without mentioning the new influences from many Oriental countries.

No: you should think of any foreign language that you are able to acquire, not as the medium for expressing only the thoughts of one people, but as a medium through which you can obtain the best thought of the world. If you cannot read Russian, why not read the Russian novelists in English or French? Perhaps you cannot read Italian or Spanish; but that is no reason why you should not know the poems of Petrarch and Ariosto, or the dramas of Calderon. If you do not know Portuguese, there is a good English translation of Camoens. I suppose that in Tokyo very few persons know Finnish; but the wonderful epic of the *Kalevala* can be read to-day in English, French and in German. It is not necessary to have studied Sanskrit in order to know the gigantic epics of India; there are many European translations of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* — indeed, there are English and French translations of most of the great Sanskrit writers, though the Germans have been perhaps the greatest workers in this field. You can read the Arabian and the Persian poets also in English; and there are Oriental classics that everybody should know something about — such as the *Shāhnāma* or "Book of Kings", of Firdusi; the *Gulistan* of Saadi; and the *Diwan* of Hafiz. And speaking of English translations only, both the written and the unwritten literatures of almost every people under the sun can be read in English — even the songs and the proverbs of the most savage tribes. There is one great defect in English work of this kind, — a great deal of such translation has been made in bad verse. For this reason the French translators who keep to prose are generally to be preferred. But you have certainly learned how great some English translators have proved themselves, even in verse, — for example, Fitzgerald; and

scarcely less interesting and sympathetic than Fitzgerald is Palmer's volume of translation from the ancient Arabian poets. However, what I am anxious to impress upon you is this,—that the English language can give you not only some knowledge of the productions of one race, but the intellectual wealth of the entire world. In England there are many thousands of persons who cannot read German, but there are no educated persons who have not read the German poets in English, and who cannot quote to you some verses of Heine.

Now if you are satisfied that the study of English means for you infinitely more than the study of English authors, you will know why I am not attempting to confine these lectures to original English prose. I shall take only the best examples that I can find in any kind of European prose for illustration; because everything depends upon the idea and the form, and neither the idea nor the form of prose (it is not the same in the case of poetry) can be restricted by the boundaries of language. In the last two lectures of this series I gave you two extremely different examples of style — one representing the old Norse or saga style; the other the elaborate, fantastic, almost pedantic, but matchlessly beautiful prose of Sir Thomas Browne. Both of these refer to the past; and the contrast was about as strong as it could be made. Now let us turn to modern times, to the nineteenth century, and again take two striking examples of the most simple and the most ornamental varieties of prose. The simple style will again be Norse; for the genius of the race, which showed itself so markedly in those quotations from the sagas which I gave you, again shows itself to-day in the nineteenth century prose of the very same people. Let us now talk about that.

You must not suppose that Norse literature remained unaffected by change through all the centuries — I am not speaking of language (that is not at all the same), but of method. On the contrary, the Norwegians and Swedes and Danes went through very much the same kind of literary

experiences as the English and the French, the Italians and the Germans. They had also their romantic and classic periods; even they became for a while artificial, especially the Danes; and the Danish culture remained very conservative in its classicism until well into the nineteenth century. And at that time it was Danish culture that especially affected education in Norway and Sweden. But in 1832 there was born a man destined to revive the ancient saga literature in modern times, and so make a new literature unlike anything that had been before it. That man was Björnstjerne Björnson. He went through the usual course of university education, and did not prove himself a good scholar. He was always dreaming about other things than Greek or Latin or mathematics, and instead of trying to compete for any university honours, he gave all his spare time to the reading of books having nothing to do with the university course. The ancient Norse literature especially interested him; he read everything relating to it that he could lay hands upon. He had hard work to pass his examinations, and his fellow-students never imagined that he would be able to do anything great in the world. But presently, after leaving the university, this dreaming young man suddenly developed an immense amount of unsuspected intellectual energy. He became a journalist, which, of all professions, is the worst for a man of letters to undertake; and in spite of it he produced a wonderful novel, within quite a short time, which attracted the attention of all Europe and has been translated into most European languages. This novel was "Synnövé Solbakken," a story of Norwegian peasant life. Björnson himself was a peasant's son, and he had lived and seen that which he described in this novel. But the wonder of the book was not in the story, not in the plot; it was in the astonishing method of the telling. The book reads as if it had been written by a saga man of the ninth or tenth century; the life described is indeed modern, but the art of telling it is an art a thousand years old, which scholars imagined could never be

revived again. Björnson revived it; and by so doing he has affected almost every literature in Europe. Perhaps he has especially affected some of the great French realists; at all events, he gave everybody interested in literature something new to think about. But this first novel was only the beginning of a surprising series of productions, — poetical, romantic, historical and political. Björnson went into politics, became a statesman, did honour to his country, did a great many wonderful things. But his chief merit is that he is the father and founder of a new literature, which we may call modern Norse. The study of the modern Norse writers ought to be of great service to Japanese students, for this strong and simple style accords remarkably well with the best traditions of Japanese prose. Moreover, the works of these writers have been put into English by scholarly men—masters of clear and pure English, who have been able to preserve the values of the original. This is easy to do in the case of the Northern dialects proper, which are very close to English — much closer than French, much closer even than German. The simpler the style, the less it loses by translation.

Moreover, you will find in the work of this man the most perfect pictures possible to make of the society and the character of a people. The people ought to interest you — ought to interest any student of English literature; for it was out of this far north that came the best element in the English race, the strongest and a good deal of the best feeling that expresses itself in English literature. You will find in these stories, or studies from real life, that the race has remained very much the same from ancient times. It is true that to-day in all the schools of Norway the students learn English and French; that modern science and modern philosophy are most diligently acquired; that Norway has produced poets, dramatists, men of science, and men of art, well worthy of being compared with those of almost any other country. It is true that writers like Björnson and Ibsen (the only other Norwegian man of letters of to-day

who can be compared with Björnson) have been actually able to influence English literature and European drama in general. But it is not in the cities nor in the most highly cultivated classes that the national distinctiveness in the character of a people can be judged. You must go into the country to study that; you must know the peasantry, who really form the body and strength of any nation. Björnson well knew this; and his university training did not blind him to the literary importance of such studies. The best of his fiction, and the bulk of it, treats of peasant life; and this life he portrayed in a way that has no parallel in European literature with the possible exception of the Russian work done by Turgénev and others. He has also given us studies of Norwegian character among the middle class, among the clergymen, and among the highly cultivated university people, who discuss the philosophy of Spencer and the ethics of Kant. But these studies are interesting only to the degree that they show the real Norse character, such as the peasant best exemplifies, in spite of modern education. It is a very stern, strong and terrible character; but it is also both lovable and admirable. Brutal at moments, it is the most formidable temperament that we can imagine; but in steadfastness and affection and depth of emotional power, it is very grand. At first you will think that these terrible fathers who beat their children, and these terrible young men who fight with demons on occasion, or who climb precipices to court the maiden of their choice, are still savage. But after the shock of the strange has passed, you will see that they are after all very human and very affectionate; and that if they are rougher than we in their ways, it is because they are stronger and better able to endure and to benefit by pain. Well, as I said, every kind of northern society is depicted in Björnson's tales, but the greatest of all is the story of "Synnövé Solbakken." It is a very simple story of peasant life. It describes the lives of a boy and girl in the country up to the time of their marriage to each other, and it treats especially of the inner life

of these two—their thoughts, their troubles, their affections. There is nothing unusual about it except the truth of the delineation. This delineation is done very much as the old Norse writers of whom I spoke to you before would have done it.

I shall quote only a little bit, — because the ancient extracts which I gave you from the saga must have served to show you what I mean. The scene described is that where the boy is taken to church for the first time, and there sees a little girl whom he is to marry many years later.

> There was a little girl kneeling on the bench, and looking over the railing. She was still fairer than the man — so fair that he had never seen her equal. She had a red streamer to her cap, and yellow hair beneath this, and she smiled at him—so that for a long time he could not see anything but her white teeth. She held a hymn-book in one hand, and a folded handkerchief in the other, and was now amusing herself by striking the handkerchief on the hymn-book. The more he stared the more she smiled; and now he chose also to kneel on the bench just as she was doing. Then she nodded. He looked gravely at her a moment; then he nodded. She smiled and nodded once more; he nodded again, and once more, and still once more. She smiled, but did not nod any more for a little while, until he had quite forgotten; then she nodded.

No more natural description was ever given of the manner in which two little children, still untrained, act upon seeing each other for the first time, without being able to get close enough to talk. They tried to talk by nods and smiles, when they like each other's looks. There is a very fine study of conversation when these two do come together —the random conversation of children, full of affection, also full of innocent vanity and innocent desire to please. But before they come together the little boy has a fight with another little boy, which is also admirably told. You feel that the writer of the book must have had this fight himself. Later on the hero is to have a very terrible fight, with a jealous and powerful man — a fight that almost takes the reader's breath away; and this is told just as a saga man

would have told it a thousand years ago. I am not going to attempt to quote it now, for it is too long; and one part cannot be extracted from the rest without injuring the effect of the whole. But some day when you read it, please to notice that quality in it by which northern writers surpass all others — I mean exactness in relating the succession of incidents. This is a quality to which Professor Ker has but lately called attention. I told you, when we were talking about the sagas, that I believed the style of these men depended upon the perfection of their senses—quickness of eye, accuracy of perception; and what Professor Ker has said in his lectures* upon this very style would seem to confirm this. For example, he remarks that a writer of to-day might write in English such a statement as "he felt the king come behind him and put both hands over his eyes." Professor Ker observes that a Norseman never could have written such a statement, because it is inaccurate in regard to the succession of incidents. The Norse writer would have said, "he felt some one touching him from behind; and before he could turn his head to look, a hand was placed over his eyes; and he knew, by the ring upon the hand, that it was the king." That is the proper way to relate the fact accurately. He could not know, when he first felt himself touched behind, that the king was touching him, nor could he know that the king's hands were placed before his eyes, until he saw something about or upon the hands, by which he could identify them. Seeing the king's ring upon a finger of the hand, he knew that he was being held by the king. In reality all this would happen in a second, and modern writers are not in the habit of studying the succession of the events within so short a time as a second. But the Norseman was obliged to do so; if he could not measure with his eye what took place within even the fraction of a second, he might lose his life at any moment. Now you will find in the description of this fight in "Synnövé Solbakken" exactly the same faultless accuracy as to

* W. P. Ker *Epic and Romance*, p. 312 *sq.*

succession of incidents. One man is drunk, and undertakes to fight because he is drunk; the other man, who is sober, does not wish to fight, nevertheless the fight is forced upon him by a succession of little circumstances, all of which could not have occupied more than five or ten minutes. An English story-writer of to-day would probably have compressed that ten minutes into two lines of prose. But Björnson gives three pages to those ten minutes, and by so doing he thrills you with all the excitement and passion of the moment as no English writer can do. Still, you must not think that he is prolix. Really he never describes anything which is not absolutely necessary. But he knows what is necessary much better than other writers. He does not avoid little details because they happen to be very difficult to recount. If any of you have been forced into a quarrel of a dangerous kind, I am sure you will remember that all the little details of those moments before the quarrel, although not remarked perhaps by others present, were extremely clear to your own perception. Danger sharpens the senses, quite independently of the fact that the person is brave or not brave. At any such time you can hear and you can see better than at ordinary times. Björnson knew this. That is what makes his account of the fight between two peasants one of the greatest things in modern fiction.

Now I want to interest you in Björnson as the founder of a school,—to make you remember his name, to tempt you to read his wonderful story. But I shall not talk more about him now. Enough to say that he has done in Norway what I hope some future Japanese writer will do in Japan. You know what I mean by Norse style both in ancient ages and in our own day—that is, you must be able after these lectures to have a general idea about it. And now for a contrast. Nothing is more strongly contrasted with this sharply cut hard short style of the Norse than the prose of the modern romantic movement. The romantic movement in prose did not reach its greatest height in England. The English language is not perfect enough in its prose form

for the supreme possibilities of prose. It was in France that romantic prose became most highly perfected; there were so many masters of style that it is hard to make choice among them. But only one conceived the idea of what we call poetical prose — that was Baudelaire; he was, you know, a great and strange poet who wrote a volume of splendid but very terrible verse called "Les Fleurs de Mal," or "Flowers of Evil" — perhaps "venomous or poisonous flowers" would better express the real meaning of the title. He also translated the stories of Poe into French; and he was in all things an exquisite artist.

IV

BAUDELAIRE

BAUDELAIRE believed that prose could be made quite as poetical as verse or even more so, for a prose that could preserve the rhythm of poetry without its monotony, and the melody of poetry without rhythm, might become in the hands of the master even more effective than verse. I do not know whether this is really true. I am inclined to think that it is; but I do not feel sufficiently learned in certain matters related to the question to venture a definite opinion. Enough to say that Baudelaire thought it possible, and he tried to make a new kind of prose; and the book containing these attempts entitled "Little Poems in Prose" is a wonderful treasure. But Baudelaire did not say anything very extravagantly in its preface. He only expressed the conviction that a poetical prose might be used with good effects for certain particular subjects,—dreams, reveries, the thoughts that men think in solitude, when the life of the world is not about them to disturb their meditations; his prose essays are all reveries, dreams, fantasies. I want to give you a specimen of one of these; and I am going to choose that one which Professor Saintsbury selected as the best. But let me tell you in advance that the English language cannot reproduce the real values of Baudelaire's

prose. I am not going to attempt an artistic translation for you, but only such a translation as may help to show you in a vague way what poetical prose means. The piece I am going to turn into English is called "Les Bienfaits de la lune," — that is to say, freely rendered, the Gifts of the Moon, — the word "Bienfaits" (literally, benefit) being here used in the meaning of the present or gift given to a child by a fairy god-mother.

The Moon, who is caprice itself, looked through the window while thou wert sleeping in thy cradle, and exclaimed: "That child pleases me!"

And she softly descended her stairway of clouds, and passed without sound through the panes of glass. Then she stretched herself above thee, with a mother's supple tenderness, and she put her own colours upon thy face. Wherefore thine eyes have always remained green and thy cheeks extraordinarily pale. It was while contemplating this visitor that thine eyes first became so fantastically large; and she compressed thy throat so tenderly that since that time thou hast always felt a constant desire to weep.

Meanwhile, in the expansion of her joy, the Moon filled the whole room, like a phosphoric atmosphere, like a luminous poison; and all that living light thought and spoke: "Thou shalt eternally endure the influence of my kiss. Thou shalt be beautiful after my fashion. Thou shalt love all I love, and all that loves me: the water, the clouds, the silence, and the night; the waters formless and multiform; the place where thou shalt never be; the lover thou shalt never know; the monstrous flowers; the perfumes that give delirium; the cats that stretch themselves upon pianos, and moan like women, with a hoarse sweet voice.

"And thou shalt be loved by my lovers, courted by my courtiers. Thou shalt be the queen of green-eyed men, whose throats I have also pressed in my nocturnal caress; those who love the sea, the immense, tumultuous green sea, the water formless and multiform, the place in which they are not, the woman they know not, the sinister flowers that resemble the censors of some unknown religion, the perfumes that confuse the will, and the wild and voluptuous animals that are the emblems of their madness."

Of course in the French this is incomparably more

musical and more strange. You will see that it has the qualities of poetry, although not poetry; it has the same resonance, the same groupings of vowel sounds, the same alliteration, the same cadences. It is very strange, and it is also really beautiful. Probably Baudelaire's poetical prose is the most perfect attempt of the kind ever made; and there is a good deal of it. But being a very great artist, he saw, as I have told you before, that this kind of prose is suitable only for reveries, dreams, philosophical fancies. And thereby comes the question as to whether a book of that kind should be written only in one style.

Now this may seem to you a queer question, but I think that it is a very important one. The French have solved it; the English have not. Everything depends upon the character of the book. If the book be composed of different kinds of material, it seems to me quite proper that it should be written in different styles to suit the differences of subjects. You cannot do this, however, except in a book which is a miscellany, a mixture of reflection and fact. Combinations of the latter kind are chiefly possible in works of travel. In a book of travel you cannot keep up the tone of poetical prose while describing simple facts; but when you come to reflect upon the facts, you can then vary the style. French books of travel are much superior to English in point of literary execution, because the writers of them do this. They do it so naturally that you are apt to overlook the fact that there are two styles in the same book. I know of only one really great English book of travel which has the charm of poetical prose, — that is the "Eothen" of Kinglake. But in this case the entire book is written in one dream tone. The author has not attempted to deal with details to any extent. Beautiful as the book is, it does not show the versatility which French writers of equal ability often display. While on this subject, it occurs to me to show you an example of the difference in English and French methods, as shown by two contemporary writers in describing Tokyo. The English writer is Kipling. He is

certainly the most talented English writer now living in descriptive and narrative work. The greatest living prose writer among the French is Pierre Loti (Julien Viaud), a French naval officer, and, you know, a member of the Academy. I hope that you have not been prejudiced against him by the stupid criticisms of very shallow men; and that you do not make the mistake of blaming the writer for certain observations regarding Japan, which were made during a stay of only some weeks in this country. Although he was here only for some weeks, and could only describe exactly what he saw, knowing nothing about Japan except through his eyes, yet his sketches of Japan are incomparably finer and truer than anything which has been done by any other living writer. His comments, his inferences may be entirely wrong (they often are); but that has nothing really to do with the merit of his descriptions. When he describes exactly what he sees, then he is like a wonderful magician. There is nobody else living who could do the same thing. I suppose you know that his reputation does not depend upon his Japanese work, however, but upon some twenty volumes of travel containing the finest prose that has ever been written. However, let us first take a few lines from the English traveller's letter. It is very simply phrased, and yet very effective.

Some folks say that Tokyo covers an area equal to London. Some folks say that it is not more than ten miles long and eight miles broad. There are a good many ways of solving the question. I found a tea-garden situated on a green plateau far up a flight of steps, with pretty girls smiling on every step. From this elevation I looked forth over the city, and it stretched away from the sea, as far as the eye could reach—one grey expanse of packed house-roof, the perspective marked by numberless factory chimneys. Then I went several miles away and found a park, another eminence, and some more tea-girls prettier than the last; and, looking again, the city stretched out in a new direction as far as the eye could reach. Taking the scope of an eye on a clear day at eighteen miles, I make Tokyo thirty-six miles long by thirty-six miles broad exactly; and there may be some more which I missed. The place roared with life through all its quarters.

Here is the work of a practical man with a practical eye—interested in facts above all things, though not indifferent at any time to what is beautiful. Now, anybody who reads that paragraph will have an idea of the size of Tokyo such as pages of description could not give. There is only one half line of description to note, but it is very strong; and the use of house-roof in the singular gives a particular force to it. That is quite enough to satisfy the average mind. But the Frenchman is an infinitely finer artist. He also gives you a description of Tokyo seen as a wilderness of roofs; but he first chooses a beautiful place from which to look and a beautiful time of the day in which to see it. Let me translate a few sentences for you:

Uyeno. A very large park; wide avenues, all gravelled,—bordered with magnificent old trees, and tufts of bamboos.

I halt upon an elevation, at a point overlooking the Lotos-lake—which reflects the evening, like a slightly tarnished mirror, all the gold of sunset. Yedo is beyond those still waters; Yedo is over there, half-lost in the reddish mist of the Autumn evening: a myriad of infinite little greyish roofs all alike;—the furthest, almost indistinguishable in the vague horizon, giving nevertheless an impression that that is not all,—that there are more of them, much more, in distances beyond the view. You can distinguish, amidst the uniformity of the low small houses, certain larger buildings with the angles of their roofs turned up. These are the temples. If it were not for them, you might imagine that you were looking at almost any great city quite as well as you could imagine that you were looking at Yedo. Indeed, it requires the effects of distance and of a particular light to make Yedo appear charming;—at this moment, for example, I must confess that it is exquisite to see.

It is dimly outlined in the faintest colours; it has the look of not really existing, of being only a mirage. Then it seems as if long bands of pink cotton were slowly unrolling over the world, drawing this chimerical city in their soft undulations. Now one can no longer distinguish the interval between the lake and the further high land upon which all those myriads of far-away shapes are built. One even doubts whether that really is a lake, or only a very smooth level, reflecting the diffused light of the sky,—or simply a stretch of vapour; nevertheless, some few long rosy gleams, still showing upon surface,

almost suffice to assure you that it is really water, and that Lotos-beds here and there make black patches against the reflecting surface.*

Although this rapid translation does not give you the colour and charm of the original French, you must be able to see even through it how very accurate and fine the description is—an effect of evening sunlight and rosy mist. I think that most of you have enjoyed the same view, and have noticed how black the lotos leaves really do seem, when the surface of the water is turned to gold by sunset. And then the description of the coming of the mists like long cloud bands of pink cotton is surely as beautiful as it is true. That is the way that a Japanese painter would paint a picture of Tokyo as seen from the same place at the same time. The Englishman would not have noticed all those delicate and dreamy colours, or if he did, would not trouble himself to try to paint them. Really it is a most difficult thing to do.

Now after this little digression let me come back to the subject of variety in style. Loti knows the art of it; so does many another French writer; but very few Englishmen do. What I am going to say is this, that an author ought to be able to choose a different style for different kinds of work,—that is, a great author. But it is so much trouble to master even one style perfectly well, that very few authors attempt this. However, I think it can be laid down as a true axiom that the style ought to vary with the subject in certain cases; and I think that the great writers of the future will so vary it. The poetical prose, of which I gave you an example from Loti, is admirably suited for particular kinds of composition—short and dreamy things. It is very exhausting to write much in such a style; it is quite as much labour as to write the same thing in verse. But a whole book upon one subject could not be written in this way. The simple naked style, on the other hand, is particularly adapted to story telling, to narrative, even to

* Cf. Loti *Japoneries d'automne*, pp. 292-3—Ed.

certain forms of history. The rhetorical style, ornamental without being exactly poetical, has also a special value; it is in such a style that logical argument and philosophical work in the form of essays can perhaps be most effectively presented. I think that some day this will be generally done. But once it becomes a fashion to do it, there will be danger ahead,—the danger of the custom hardening into conventionalism. Conventionalism kills style. The best way, I think, to meet the difficulty suggested will be to persuade oneself that sentiment, artistic feeling, absolute sincerity of the emotion and of the thought will guide the writer better than any rules as to what style ought to be used. If you try to imitate a model, you will probably go wrong. All literary imitation means weakness. But if you simply follow your own feeling and tastes, trying to be true to them, and to develope them as much as you can — then I think that your style will form itself and will naturally, without direction, take at last the particular form and tone best adapted to the subject.