

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE IV.

SINCERITY IN LITERATURE.

BY OSCAR W. FIRKINS, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.

IN the literature of feeling, sincerity is the first of powers and graces; to obtain it and then to demonstrate it is one of the chief objects of that literature. Between feeling and form the interplay is constant and reciprocal: the emphasis shifts from one to the other. The retreat of feeling permits an increased attention to form, and the stress on form is relaxed as the emotion grows in energy and spontaneity. There is, accordingly, a degree of accomplishment which casts discredit on the genuineness of feeling. We doubt if the emotion in a sonnet is spontaneous, or if that in a rondel or sestina is real. We reason that strong feeling, even when unselfish, is self-engrossed, busy, primarily, with itself, and incapable of the labor, or rather of the interruption, implied in elaborate technique. Even if it achieved the sacrifice, we suspect that it would perish in the effort.

It is easy, however, to push reasoning of this kind too far. The objection to the sonnet or the rondel carries with it, initially at least, an objection to verse as such. The difficulties of versification in its simplest forms for most men in our day and perhaps for all men of an earlier time would make its use incompatible with the presence, or, at any rate, the maintenance, of any lively emotion in the craftsman. Common meter or the ballad measure would once have implied a degree of labor to which strong feeling could not, and would not, have

submitted. As practice induced skill, the attention was released from its enslavement to technique, and at last even strong feeling felt that it could spare the diminished effort now needed for the production of simple verse. There is clearly no reason why the process should not extend itself to more and more complications. The question is less one of complicated forms or elaboration as such than of difficulty; and less of difficulty, in the strict sense, than of effort. Any form is consistent with sincere and passionate feeling in the hands of an artist whose mastery of that form enables him to meet its demands without withdrawing any large measure of his power from higher objects. A sonnet carries with it a presumption of coldness and constraint; but that is no bar to its conveyance of the warmest and most impassioned feeling in the hands of metrists like Rossetti or Mrs. Browning, to whom the bonds of intricate verse are as small a matter as the green withes to the awakened Samson. The fact that the rondeau means the extinction of vitality for everybody else is no proof that it means anything of the kind for the supple and masterly gift of Mr. Austin Dobson. The truth is that it is not dexterity but the reverse, not the perfection, but the inadequacy, of accomplishment that makes us doubt the emotional probity of the highly finished poem. There is no reason in the nature of things why even acrostics, or the lozenges, eggs, and triangles instanced by old Puttenham, should not express sincere feeling, if any man of high emotional and technical gifts thought it worth his while to acquire the needful facility and address.

The degree of accomplishment, therefore, must be taken into account in testing the effect of elaboration on sincerity. The spoken diction which would be intolerably affected in a man of business or a woman of fashion, because it would

lie outside of the natural and facile movement of their speech, might be sincere and unobjectionable in a Macaulay or De Quincey; with these it would be a part of the supple and tractable medium of daily use. The same caution must be used in judging the highly wrought prose styles of past generations. The art in a sentence of Gibbon is a matter for measurement and scrutiny, but the artificiality, the deviation from spontaneity and nature, must be gauged, not by the pains which it would cost us or our masters to produce such a sentence, but by the cost in effort to an expert like Gibbon in an age which favored and prompted such exertions.

Artifice in expression is by no means a sure sign of the speaker's or writer's insincerity. It is well known that Dr. Johnson, in company, would sometimes utter his thoughts in plain English and then translate them into Johnsonese. A criticism of "The Rehearsal" in the form of "It has not wit enough to keep it sweet" would reappear in the bombastic version "It has not vitality enough to preserve it from putrefaction." Now there is no question that Dr. Johnson was equally sincere in both versions, and no question that he was entirely sincere in the first; and the same thing applies to all those pompous literary dicta, of which the Saxon original has unluckily perished.

The truth is that, with some reserves and exceptions, simple language implies that a man means what he says, but stilted language in a stilted period is no ground for an opposite inference. Sincerity, indeed, has a natural liking for direct and simple ways, but the usage of the time is stronger with almost all people, sincere and insincere, than the personal preference for simplicity. Custom is mighty, and it is only a mighty sincerity that is strong enough to cast off its yoke. When Pope tells us that "lavish nature paints the purple year," his

feeling for nature may have been quite genuine: the artificial diction does not prove the insincerity of the utterance; it merely — and this is enough to condemn it as literature — prevents him from proving the contrary. The difference between Pope's and Shelley's feeling for nature, great as it undoubtedly was, was probably not so great by a good deal as the difference in apparent truth between the landscapes in the "Pastorals" and the landscapes in "Prometheus Unbound." The encouragements to simplicity in an age of nature are strong enough to affect even those who incline naturally to the pomps and vanities of language, and the difference between works, in point of naturalness, is greater than the difference between men.

The conceits of Elizabethan or sixteenth-century literature are often held to be obviously insincere. The conceit is an unlovely and unholy thing, and a wise advocate will take his briefs from other clients. Still in our judgment of the state of mind of the conceit-maker, a seasoning of mercy is needed to meet the ends even of simple justice. We do not like to hear Juliet exclaim in a moment of passion:—

"Hath Romeo slain himself? say thou but 'I,'
And that bare vowel 'I' shall poison more
Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice."

We complain that this is labored and far-sought. As to labor, it is hardly fair for the unimaginative person to decide what is laborious for his imaginative brother; and, as to distance, we must remember that the Elizabethan thoroughfare traversed a different section of the land of make-believe from our own, and that the latitude of the excursions of its poets must be measured with respect to their own highway. Need passion always act as a check to fancy, or the presence of great interests as a bar to the perception of trifles? In the

days of Elizabeth the conceit was not an exotic to be obtained only by a journey and an outlay. It was rather a sort of mayweed or mustard bordering every road, and accessible even to those who had no other will to stay their journey for its sake. Its presence in tragedy might perhaps be compared to the fumiter, charlock, and cuckoo-flowers fantastically wreathed around the forehead of the mad Lear, snatched up in the very wantonness, the abstraction or inadvertency, of passion.

It is the fashion to call these conceits frigid; to many of them the word "torrid" would be quite as appropriate. Passion, like other things, is conventional in its language; that is, it adheres to the conventions of passion. Angry men never invent a new oath; and neither surprise nor affliction ever coins a new interjection. When all the world is proving the depth of its love to the satisfaction of its mistress by absurdities and ineptitudes, the man of real feeling is drawn, willingly or unwillingly, into the prevalent practice. Our age rebukes the conceits of the Elizabethans, but it tolerates, in the speeches and verses of lovers, an amount of extravagance and exaggeration at which the realism of posterity may be ready enough to shake its head. Passion and accuracy seldom house together. Men cannot say all that they feel without saying more than they believe. The expression of the truth does not convey all the feelings that the truth arouses. This is partly due no doubt to bad training and false standards, but it is a fact to be reckoned with in every catholic and generous estimate of the gravity of departures from the truth. The disadvantage of artificial forms is that to a great extent they put the true man on the same footing with the liar; they may even put out of court those modes of expression of which sincerity alone is master and which constitute the one certain proof of its existence.

Conventional language, of a sort, may be used, as we have seen, in moments of passion; but there are certain phrases which become so depleted and deadened by thoughtless and universal use that they are avoided by careful and intelligent writers. They imply insincerity, however, only in persons advanced enough to be aware of their hollowness and to be capable of an alternative. There is a stage of culture to which the despised convention reveals itself in the form of a discovery and an opportunity. Commonplaces in such a case are no proof of want of feeling. The hackneyed expressions in unlearned letters of condolence are often charged with more genuine feeling than the fresher language of writers with whom accomplishment has outstripped sympathy. Holmes in his life of Emerson quotes a sentence from one of that writer's college themes in which he censures the support of a case by unfair or hollow arguments in language which, as the biographer remarks, sounds like well-meaning commonplace. Such verbiage in the mouth of Emerson at the age of thirty or forty would have proved that he was insincere; at twenty or less it proved merely that he was young. The drawback to such words is not they are necessarily insincere, but that their sincerity is necessarily unattested. As Stephen Guest says in "The Mill on the Floss," "A man is occasionally grateful when he says 'Thank you.' It's rather hard upon him that he must use the same words with which all the world declines a disagreeable invitation."

Not all equally sincere persons have an equal command of the language of sincerity. Genuine feeling, like everything else, must make use of the prevailing vehicle of expression, and its success in unfolding itself will depend in part on its control of that vehicle. In the opening scene of "King Lear," Cor-

delia's sincerity is as unquestionable as that of Kent, but there is a ring of reality in such words as

"answer my life my judgment,
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least"

which the keenest or most partial ear can hardly find in Cordelia's

"Good, my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honor you."

In the tent scene at the end of the fourth act, on the other hand, her language is entirely convincing. The explanation is found in that form of the reserved temper which is unchangingly, even inexorably, sincere, but in which the power to make this quality visible and palpable is an intermittent gift, dependent on the dissolution of all the usual reserves and restraints in the solvent of some great emotion.

Of all the nineteenth-century English men of letters, Carlyle is possibly the first that would occur to most readers as a type of the sincere man producing sincere literature. There is no doubt that his unequalled mastery of English aided his character in the building-up of this impression. Certain forms in the language carry with them the aroma of sincerity; instinct, if upright, may choose wisely among the forms that it knows, but only knowledge can suggest that variety of forms essential to the supremely happy choice. Moreover, a man may be sincere, and may be, in his own fashion, a master of English; yet he may lack the power to select those words which convey an impression of sincerity, may even, indeed, be perversely endowed with a gift for picking out the very words which suggest the opposite impression. Such a man, perhaps, was George Meredith.

A mastery of language may be helpful, but the reverse or

opposite of mastery may also be a help. Next to knowing everything about the language, the best resource is to know very little. The effect of sincerity is often promoted or produced by awkwardness or poverty in the manner or materials of the speech. This is true only of those forms of awkwardness or poverty which are pronounced enough to be striking. We distrust the words that come too easily; we can readily understand how those to whom language offers no check should be tempted to dally with its possibilities, and, by a natural though perhaps fallacious instinct, we associate flexibility of tongue with that of conscience. The fluency of the Irish and Italians inspires a distrust in the taciturn Germanic peoples. On the other hand, we associate difficulty or imperfection of speech with veracity. Truth alone seems worth the pains of toilsome utterance. We find it hard to imagine that a man would struggle to lie. The broken speech of a little child, the efforts of the stammerer, the bumpkin's heavy and hesitating replies, act upon us in a way that is paralleled in literature by the labored and retarded utterance of the authors of the *Beowulf* and *Cædmon*. We find dialect more convincing than standard speech: Burns in Scotch seems veracious; when he writes English, we shrug our shoulders. We should find it harder to give the lie to Hosea Biglow than to Parson Wilbur. The very real ingenuousness of the stumbling foreigner with regard to English, we impute, with almost equal artlessness, to his entire character. Here, plainly, the inference is unwarranted. A broken and halting speech in one language may be quite consistent with perfect facility in another, and with deceit and imposture in both.

The application of the principle in literature is not limited to the primitive epic. The fluency and abundance of Chateaubriand, Hugo, De Quincey, and Swinburne excite an initial

distrust,—a distrust which succeeding experience may confirm or cancel. The rule has its exceptions: Browning and Ruskin are both expansive, but the rough frankness of the one and the fervent conviction of the other neutralize from the start the suggestion of insincerity. Contrariwise, the spare and terse styles lay the foundations of trust. Livy is more credible than Cicero, Tacitus than Livy. Horatio's word would gain nothing by the subscription of Hamlet; Hamlet's would profit incalculably by the endorsement of Horatio. The great liars of Shakespeare — Falstaff, Richard III., Iago — are great talkers. Brevity is a sign of fearlessness, and therefore of sincerity; expansiveness is the mark of that cowardice which hurries up reinforcements to support a weak position.

The interest felt by Alexandrian and Victorian periods in the literature of earlier and simpler epochs is a demand for genuineness induced by satiety of artifice. Men whose own literature has every charm but sincerity eventually reach a point where sincerity seems cheaply purchased at the price of every other charm, and the rude sagas of barbarous times find a second lease of life in the rebellion of civilization against itself. The rare trait is, of course, the valued trait; where, as in early periods, nearly all are or seem sincere, the great desideratum is accomplishment; in later times, when accomplishment flourishes, the great desideratum is sincerity. We pay for strawberries in October the same high prices that we pay for grapes in April.

Civilization increases the motives to insincerity. The only justification for writing poetry is a certain quality and intensity of feeling; but the incentives, unluckily, are more numerous than the justifications. Poetry attracts many persons whom it does not inspire; the name retains a sorcery which the thing has largely lost; men write verse to amuse their

leisure, to train their faculties, to win admiration, to confirm a literary foothold. The same motives operate, though to a less degree, in the production of decorative and sentimental prose. Such writers must feign what they cannot feel, and the result has been a surprising development of the faculty of simulation.

The poets are adepts in pretense, because the pretension is mixed with reality. To say that the perfect hypocrites are the partial hypocrites may seem like the idlest of word-play; it is really a precise statement of the fact. A little real feeling enables a man to command the appearance of a great deal, as a small cash payment becomes the basis of credit for a much larger sum; the dynamic force is in the nucleus of reality. In our own age there are any number of inchoate, reflected, imitative, sympathetic, exotic feelings, the feelings one remembers having or expects some day to have, the feelings one admires in others and covets for one's self, the visitors at the next house who have failed by some inexplicable oversight to leave cards at one's own door. These are reasons enough for writing verse when the wish to find reasons is strong.

The result is a form of poetry with just enough genuineness to make the detection of its insincerity difficult. The feeling is insincere, not because it contravenes the author's sentiments, but because it lacks the degree of force which is implied or presumed in the very fact of composition. We feel slightly hypocritical, when, to span the gaps in a broken conversation, we utter views, even real views, for whose sake we should never think of breaking the silence of the family circle; the fact of utterance assigns to these things a value to which neither the heart nor the conscience subscribes. Our current verse is largely of this perfunctory character.

The versatility of feeling which enables our own age to share, in a reflected or diminished form, in a wide variety of sentiments and affections, and the flexibility of nature which makes us able and willing to educe changes and perform experiments upon ourselves, have both contributed to our success in what we might call the field of histrionic poetry. The divorce between feeling and belief, between temperament and understanding, has also brought about curious results. The temper of the devotee has sometimes fraternized with the philosophy of the agnostic, and men find inspiration in ideas which oppugn their convictions. The result is the power to express spurious beliefs with something like genuine fervor.

Civilized ages mature and perfect the histrionic faculty, not only in the theater itself, but in the other fields of its operation, the parlor, the platform, and the library. Rude counterfeits are successful with rude peoples, but, as culture advances, the arts of simulation become more and more intellectual, delicate, and accurate. Nevertheless, in spite of the improved apparatus, deception is no easier in the twentieth century than in the tenth; the observer's penetration has kept abreast of the performer's skill. A feint of cordiality which would pass without question in a village tea-party would be instantly detected in a Parisian drawing-room, and the euphuism which deceived the quick-minded Elizabethans hardly misleads even the dullards of our own century. The respectful distance at which Pope's simulation followed nature sufficed for the easy task of hoodwinking the eighteenth century; but to-day the very schoolboys are conscious of the insincerity of Pope. The poets, however, have developed as well as the schoolboys, and a race ensues between growing skill and quickened penetration, resembling in some degree the modern contest between the increased thickness of the armor of battle-ships

and the heightened efficiency of the naval projectile; each force stimulates and countervails the other.

There is almost no literary quality for which the mimetic dexterity of our times is unable to provide a respectable imitation. At first the mere profession of feeling is enough; later on, the avowal must be energetic, but, energy once attained, it may indulge itself fearlessly, to its heart's content, in exaggeration, caricature, and bombast. But the inadequacy of these feints reveals itself in the course of time to the more sensitive readers, and the day arrives when one of these readers will undertake the task of deception himself. In his hands the temperance, the quietness, the seriousness, of reality will begin to tincture the imitations. Simplicity was once confined to the genuine product, but the masquers have been too cunning to leave to their rivals the monopoly of so excellent a device. The French, according to Matthew Arnold, have even set apart a distinct name, *simplesse*, for the counterfeit variety. The shepherdess is found even at Versailles.

Spontaneity, a quick, direct, eager movement, served at one time to authenticate feeling; imitations were deliberate and studied. But even this grace, this final proof, has been captured by the mimes. Nothing is more remarkable among the social accomplishments of women of fashion than the success with which they impart the semblance of this trait to greetings whose cordiality is factitious: and authorship is sufficiently feminine to be a sharer in this phase of mimicry. There is a buoyancy and elasticity in much of our current verse which would have been certain proof, a few centuries ago, of real and adequate inspiration. Why does it not prove as much to-day? Because these traits, in many instances, have passed upward or outward from the domain of feeling to that of accomplishment, and have undergone the depre-

ciation which justly and regularly occurs when an index of emotion shrinks into a mark of dexterity.

Conditions like these have favored the growth in our day of a large body of verse — particularly of lyric verse — the genuineness of which it is not easy either to disprove or establish. It is neither self-betraying nor self-attesting: the likeness to sincere work is evident and creditable; but it is a likeness which the skilled reader knows to be within the reach of the mimetic craft of the skilled practitioner. In an age of duller readers, it would have been instantly accepted as genuine; in an age of less expert craftsmen, it would have been actually so. But an age of deceivers is an age of skeptics; and agnosticism becomes the refuge of the literary, as of the scientific, critic. In an age in which the presumption is on the side of genuineness, belief is rightly accorded to all work not marked with obvious falsity; but can any one say that in the lyric verse of the last thirty years, the presumption of sincerity has been valid?

Hard as is the case of the lyrist, it is by no means hopeless. The faculty of imitation and the distrust of readers have their limits; and when sincerity attains a certain power and fullness, its accent even to-day is unmistakable. There is a depth and massiveness of utterance which carries conviction even to the captious ears of a doubting generation; and when this deep and satisfying chord is struck, all is well with author and reader alike. The hardship falls upon the genuine writer of the second class who is no master of this rare note of exceptional and decisive candor; his claim may be good, but his credentials are insufficient. The only test of sincerity, in verse at least, which we unquestioningly accept is one which the majority of sincere writers are not qualified to pass — the test of profound originality.