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ON THE FORMATION OF STYLE.

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It is familiar knowledge that the word *Style* is directly derived from the Latin term *Stylus*, which denoted a kind of pencil used by the Romans, having one end sharp and pointed, for writing on tablets coated with wax, and the other broad and smooth, so as to serve for making erasures. Hence the sound advice of an ancient teacher to all aspirants after excellence in the art of literary composition, frequently to "use the other end of their stylus"—that is, in other words, to be diligent in correcting their productions.

And although the word *Stylus* is never used in classical Latin, except in reference to the pen and the mechanical art of writing, yet it has come, in our language, to denote the peculiar manner of expression, or of literary composition which distinguishes particular authors or particular schools from one another.

There is a great *variety* of styles. Throughout all the works of God we see unity combined with inexhaustible variety, so that no two created objects, when attentively compared, will be found precisely alike. No bird, nor beast, nor tree, nor shrub, nor fruit, nor flower is identical with another. No two men's faces or minds are exact counterparts. Individuality is stamped upon each. And although the *general structure* of any

two human bodies or human minds will present very much that is common to both, yet will there always be apparent certain peculiarities in their several organizations and in the qualities and proportions of their physical and mental faculties, rendering one man evidently distinguishable from another.

And as the *organizations* of no two men will be precisely alike, so neither will their *productions* be altogether similar. As is the mould, such will be the casting. No two men, therefore, do any one thing in one and the same way, whether it be to walk or stand, to laugh or cry, or throw a stone, or sign a name, or read, or speak, write poetry or prose.

Every one's peculiar manner of doing anything is his style; and every natural and true man has a style of his own, which can no more be appropriately exchanged for that of any other man, than the bark, the foliage and the blossoms of an apple tree could be transferred to the stem and branches of a pine.

This great fact must lie at the very foundation of any correct notions concerning the formation of style. To set up certain authors, be they ever so eminent, as exclusive models, by a minute and slavish imitation of which true excellence can be obtained, is a huge mistake which must lead to insipid propriety, or nerveless, heartless affectation.

Every style, in order to be good, must be natural. Excellence in writing is only to be attained by letting Nature speak.

But it may be asked, "Why, then, should men be taught and trained to *form* their style? Why not leave every man's style to form itself, to grow up like a tree without pruning or clipping it, and twisting its branches this way and that? Would not any set rules for this purpose tend to make the style unnatural, and thus bad?"

I answer that there are good reasons why every writer should be trained, and why his style requires to be formed. In writing, as in reading, walking and speaking, it is natural to almost every one to be *unnatural*. We learn to do these things chiefly by imitation. But there are no perfect exemplars, and it is most natural because it is most *easy* to imitate the faults rather than the excellencies of our model—"Decipit exemplar vitii imitabile." And even were our model perfect, *i. e.*, were its way of doing what it does perfectly appropriate and the best possible for it author, yet for the imitator it might be the most inappropriate and the worst.