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CRITICAL MISCELLANIES

BY

JOHN MORLEY

**VOL. I.
Essay 4: Macaulay**

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MACAULAY.

'After glancing my eye over the design and order of a new book,' says Gibbon, 'I suspended the perusal till I had finished the task of self-examination, till I had revolved in a solitary walk all that I knew or believed or had thought on the subject of the whole work or of some particular chapter; I was then qualified to discern how much the author added to my original stock; and if I was sometimes satisfied by the agreement, I was sometimes warned by the opposition of our ideas.' It is also told of Strafford that before reading any book for the first time, he would call for a sheet of paper, and then proceed to write down upon it some sketch of the ideas that he already had upon the subject of the book, and of the questions that he expected to find answered. No one who has been at the pains to try the experiment, will doubt the usefulness of this practice: it gives to our acquisitions from books clearness and reality, a right place and an independent shape. At this moment we are all looking for the biography of an illustrious man of letters, written by a near kinsman, who is himself naturally endowed with keen literary interests, and who has invigorated his academic cultivation by practical engagement in considerable affairs of public business. Before taking up Mr. Trevelyan's two volumes, it is perhaps worth while, on Strafford's plan, to ask ourselves shortly what kind of significance or value belongs to Lord Macaulay's achievements, and to what place he has a claim among the forces of English literature. It is seventeen years since he died, and those of us who never knew him nor ever saw him, may now think about his work with that perfect detachment which is impossible in the case of actual contemporaries.[1]

That Macaulay comes in the very front rank in the mind of the ordinary bookbuyer of our day is quite certain. It is an amusement with some people to put an imaginary case of banishment to a desert island, with the privilege of choosing the works of one author, and no more than one, to furnish literary companionship and refreshment for the rest of a lifetime. Whom would one select for this momentous post? Clearly the author must be voluminous, for days on desert islands are many and long; he must be varied in his moods, his topics, and his interests; he must have a great deal to say, and must have a power of saying it that shall arrest a depressed and dolorous spirit. Englishmen, of course, would with mechanical unanimity call for Shakespeare; Germans could

hardly hesitate about Goethe; and a sensible Frenchman would pack up the ninety volumes of Voltaire. It would be at least as interesting to know the object of a second choice, supposing the tyrant in his clemency to give us two authors. In the case of Englishmen there is some evidence as to a popular preference. A recent traveller in Australia informs us that the three books which he found on every squatter's shelf, and which at last he knew before he crossed the threshold that he should be sure to find, were Shakespeare, the Bible, and Macaulay's Essays. This is only an illustration of a feeling about Macaulay that has been almost universal among the English-speaking peoples.

We may safely say that no man obtains and keeps for a great many years such a position as this, unless he is possessed of some very extraordinary qualities, or else of common qualities in a very uncommon and extraordinary degree. The world, says Goethe, is more willing to endure the [Pg 256] Incongruous than to be patient under the Insignificant. Even those who set least value on what Macaulay does for his readers, may still feel bound to distinguish the elements that have given him his vast popularity. The inquiry is not a piece of merely literary criticism, for it is impossible that the work of so imposing a writer should have passed through the hands of every man and woman of his time who has even the humblest pretensions to cultivation, without leaving a very decided mark on their habits both of thought and expression. As a plain matter of observation, it is impossible to take up a newspaper or a review, for instance, without perceiving Macaulay's influence both in the style and the temper of modern journalism, and journalism in its turn acts upon the style and temper of its enormous uncounted public. The man who now succeeds in catching the ear of the writers of leading articles, is in the position that used to be held by the head of some great theological school, whence disciples swarmed forth to reproduce in ten thousand pulpits the arguments, the opinions, the images, the tricks, the postures, and the mannerisms of a single master.

Two men of very different kinds have thoroughly impressed the journalists of our time, Macaulay and Mr. Mill. Mr. Carlyle we do not add to them; he is, as the Germans call Jean Paul, *der Einzige*. And he is a poet, while the other two are in their degrees serious and argumentative writers, dealing in different ways with the great topics that constitute the matter and business of [Pg 257] daily discussion. They are both of them practical enough to interest men handling real affairs, and yet they are general or theoretical enough to supply such men with the large and ready commonplaces which are so useful to a profession that has to produce literary graces and philosophical decorations at an hour's notice. It might perhaps be said of these two distinguished men that our public writers owe most of their virtues to the one, and most of their vices to the other. If Mill taught some of them to reason, Macaulay tempted more of them to declaim: if Mill set an example of patience, tolerance, and fair examination of hostile opinions, Macaulay did much to encourage oracular arrogance, and a rather too thrasonical complacency; if Mill sowed ideas of the great economic, political, and moral bearings of the forces of society, Macaulay trained a taste for superficial particularities, trivial circumstantialities of local colour, and all the paraphernalia of the pseudo-picturesque.

Of course nothing so obviously untrue is meant as that this is an account of Macaulay's own quality. What is empty pretension in the leading article, was often a warranted self-assertion in Macaulay; what in it is little more than testiness, is in him often a generous indignation. What became and still remain in those who have made him their model, substantive and organic vices, the foundation of literary character and intellectual temper, were in him the incidental defects of [Pg 258] a vigorous genius. And we have to take a man of his power and vigour with all his drawbacks, for the one are wrapped up in the other. Charles Fox used to apply to Burke a passage that Quintilian wrote about Ovid. 'Si animi sui affectibus temperare quam indulgere maluisset,' quoted Fox, 'quid vir iste præstare non potuerit!' But this is really not at all certain either of Ovid, or Burke, or any one else. It suits moralists to tell us that excellence lies in the happy mean and nice balance of our faculties and impulses, and perhaps in so far as our own contentment and an easy passage through life are involved, what they tell us is true. But for making a mark in the world, for rising to supremacy in art or thought or affairs—whatever those aims may be worth—a man possibly does better to indulge, rather than to chide or grudge, his genius, and to pay the penalties for his weakness, rather than run any risk of mutilating those strong faculties of which they happen to be an inseparable accident. Versatility is not a universal gift among the able men of the world; not many of them have so many gifts of the spirit, as to be free to choose by what pass they will climb 'the steep where Fame's proud temple shines afar.' If Macaulay had applied himself to the cultivation of a balanced judgment, of tempered phrases, and of relative propositions, he would probably have sunk into an impotent tameness. A great pugilist has sometimes been converted from the error of his ways, and been led zealously to cherish gospel graces, but the hero's discourses have seldom had the notes of unction and edification. Macaulay, [Pg 259] divested of all the exorbitancies of his spirit and his style, would have been a Samson shorn of the locks of his strength.

Although, however, a writer of marked quality may do well to let his genius develop its spontaneous forces without too assiduous or vigilant repression, trusting to other writers of equal strength in other directions, and to the general fitness of things and operation of time, to redress the balance, still it is the task of criticism in counting up the contributions of one of these strong men to examine the mischiefs no less than the benefits incident to their work. There is no puny carping nor cavilling in the process. It is because such men are strong that they are able to do harm; they may injure the taste and judgment of a whole generation, just because they are never mediocre. That is implied in strength. Macaulay is not to be measured now merely as if he were the author of a new book. His influence has been a distinct literary force, and in an age of

reading, this is to be a distinct force in deciding the temper, the process, the breadth, of men's opinions, no less than the manner of expressing them. It is no new observation that the influence of an author becomes in time something apart from his books: a certain generalised or abstract personality impresses itself on our minds, long after we have forgotten the details of his opinions, the arguments by which he enforced them, and even, what are usually the last to escape us, the [Pg 260] images by which he illustrated them. Phrases and sentences are a mask: but we detect the features of the man behind the mask. This personality of a favourite author is a real and powerful agency. Unconsciously we are infected with his humours; we apply his methods; we find ourselves copying the rhythm and measure of his periods; we wonder how he would have acted, or thought, or spoken in our circumstances. Usually a strong writer leaves a special mark in some particular region of mental activity: the final product of him is to fix some persistent religious mood, or some decisive intellectual bias, or else some trick of the tongue. Now Macaulay has contributed no philosophic ideas to the speculative stock, nor has he developed any one great historic or social truth. His work is always full of a high spirit of manliness, probity, and honour; but he is not of that small band to whom we may apply Mackintosh's thrice and four times enviable panegyric on the eloquence of Dugald Stewart, that its peculiar glory consisted in having 'breathed the love of virtue into whole generations of pupils.' He has painted many striking pictures, and imparted a certain reality to our conception of many great scenes of the past. He did good service in banishing once for all those sentimental Jacobite leanings and prejudices which had been kept alive by the sophistry of the most popular of historians, and the imagination of the most popular of romance writers. But where he set his stamp has been upon style; style in its widest sense, not merely on the grammar and mechanism of writing, but on [Pg 261] what De Quincey described as its *organology*; style, that is to say, in its relation to ideas and feelings, its commerce with thought, and its reaction on what one may call the temper or conscience of the intellect.

Let no man suppose that it matters little whether the most universally popular of the serious authors of a generation—and Macaulay was nothing less than this—affects *style coupé* or *style soutenu*. The critic of style is not the dancing-master, declaiming on the deep ineffable things that lie in a minuet. He is not the virtuoso of supines and gerundives. The morality of style goes deeper 'than dull fools suppose.' When Comte took pains to prevent any sentence from exceeding two lines of his manuscript or five of print; to restrict every paragraph to seven sentences; to exclude every hiatus between two sentences, or even between two paragraphs; and never to reproduce any word, except the auxiliary monosyllables, in two consecutive sentences; he justified his literary solicitude by insisting on the wholesomeness alike to heart and intelligence of submission to artificial institutions. He felt, after he had once mastered the habit of the new yoke, that it became the source of continual and unforeseeable improvements even in thought, and he perceived that the reason why verse is a higher kind of literary perfection than prose, is that verse imposes a greater number of rigorous forms. We may add that verse itself is perfected, in the hands of men of poetic genius, in proportion to the severity of this mechanical regulation. [Pg 262] Where Pope or Racine had one rule of metre, Victor Hugo has twenty, and he observes them as rigorously as an algebraist or an astronomer observes the rules of calculation or demonstration. One, then, who touches the style of a generation acquires no trifling authority over its thought and temper, as well as over the length of its sentences.

The first and most obvious secret of Macaulay's place on popular bookshelves is that he has a true genius for narration, and narration will always in the eyes, not only of our squatters in the Australian bush, but of the many all over the world, stand first among literary gifts. The common run of plain men, as has been noticed since the beginning of the world, are as eager as children for a story, and like children they will embrace the man who will tell them a story, with abundance of details and plenty of colour, and a realistic assurance that it is no mere make-believe. Macaulay never stops to brood over an incident or a character, with an inner eye intent on penetrating to the lowest depth of motive and cause, to the furthest complexity of impulse, calculation, and subtle incentive. The spirit of analysis is not in him, and the divine spirit of meditation is not in him. His whole mind runs in action and movement; it busies itself with eager interest in all objective particulars. He is seized by the external and the superficial, and revels in every detail that appeals to the five senses. 'The brilliant Macaulay,' said Emerson, with slight [Pg 263] exaggeration, 'who expresses the tone of the English governing classes of the day, explicitly teaches that *good* means good to eat, good to wear, material commodity.' So ready a faculty of exultation in the exceeding great glories of taste and touch, of loud sound and glittering spectacle, is a gift of the utmost service to the narrator who craves immense audiences. Let it be said that if Macaulay exults in the details that go to our five senses, his sensuousness is always clean, manly, and fit for honest daylight and the summer sun. There is none of that curious odour of autumnal decay that clings to the passion of a more modern school for colour and flavour and the enumerated treasures of subtle indulgence.

Mere picturesqueness, however, is a minor qualification compared with another quality which everybody assumes himself to have, but which is in reality extremely uncommon; the quality, I mean, of telling a tale directly and in straightforward order. In speaking of Hallam, Macaulay complained that Gibbon had brought into fashion an unpleasant trick of telling a story by implication and allusion. This provoking obliquity has certainly increased rather than declined since Hallam's day. Mr. Froude, it is true, whatever may be his shortcomings on the side of sound moral and political judgment, has admirable gifts in the way of straightforward narration, and

Mr. Freeman, when he does not press too hotly after emphasis, and abstains from overloading his account with super-abundance of detail, is usually excellent in the way of direct description. Still, [Pg 264] it is not merely because these two writers are alive and Macaulay is not, that most people would say of him that he is unequalled in our time in his mastery of the art of letting us know in an express and unmistakable way exactly what it was that happened; though it is quite true that in many portions of his too elaborated History of William the Third he describes a large number of events about which, I think, no sensible man can in the least care either how they happened, or whether indeed they happened at all or not.

Another reason why people have sought Macaulay is, that he has in one way or another something to tell them about many of the most striking personages and interesting events in the history of mankind. And he does really tell them something. If any one will be at the trouble to count up the number of those names that belong to the world and time, about which Macaulay has found not merely something, but something definite and pointed to say, he will be astonished to see how large a portion of the wide historic realm is traversed in that ample flight of reference, allusion, and illustration, and what unsparing copiousness of knowledge gives substance, meaning, and attraction to that resplendent blaze of rhetoric.

Macaulay came upon the world of letters just as the middle classes were expanding into enormous prosperity, were vastly increasing in numbers, and were becoming more alive than they had ever been before to literary interests. His Essays are as good as a library: they make an [Pg 265] incomparable manual and vade-mecum for a busy uneducated man, who has curiosity and enlightenment enough to wish to know a little about the great lives and great thoughts, the shining words and many-coloured complexities of action, that have marked the journey of man through the ages. Macaulay had an intimate acquaintance both with the imaginative literature and the history of Greece and Rome, with the literature and the history of modern Italy, of France, and of England. Whatever his special subject, he contrives to pour into it with singular dexterity a stream of rich, graphic, and telling illustrations from all these widely diversified sources. Figures from history, ancient and modern, sacred and secular; characters from plays and novels from Plautus down to Walter Scott and Jane Austen; images and similes from poets of every age and every nation, 'pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical;' shrewd thrusts from satirists, wise saws from sages, pleasantries caustic or pathetic from humorists; all these throng Macaulay's pages with the bustle and variety and animation of some glittering masque and cosmoramic revel of great books and heroical men. Hence, though Macaulay was in mental constitution one of the very least Shakesperean writers that ever lived, yet he has the Shakesperean quality of taking his reader through an immense gallery of interesting characters and striking situations. No writer can now expect to attain the widest [Pg 266] popularity as a man of letters unless he gives to the world *multa* as well as *multum*. Sainte-Beuve, the most eminent man of letters in France in our generation, wrote no less than twenty-seven volumes of his incomparable *Causeries*. Mr. Carlyle, the most eminent man of letters in England in our generation, has taught us that silence is golden in thirty volumes. Macaulay was not so exuberantly copious as these two illustrious writers, but he had the art of being as various without being so voluminous.

There has been a great deal of deliberate and systematic imitation of Macaulay's style, often by clever men who might well have trusted to their own resources. Its most conspicuous vices are very easy to imitate, but it is impossible for any one who is less familiar with literature than Macaulay was, to reproduce his style effectively, for the reason that it is before all else the style of great literary knowledge. Nor is that all. Macaulay's knowledge was not only very wide; it was both thoroughly accurate and instantly ready. For this stream of apt illustrations he was indebted to his extraordinary memory, and his rapid eye for contrasts and analogies. They come to the end of his pen as he writes; they are not laboriously hunted out in indexes, and then added by way of afterthought and extraneous interpolation. Hence quotations and references that in a writer even of equal knowledge, but with his wits less promptly about him, would seem mechanical and awkward, find their place in a page of Macaulay as if by a delightful process of complete [Pg 267] assimilation and spontaneous fusion.

We may be sure that no author could have achieved Macaulay's boundless popularity among his contemporaries, unless his work had abounded in what is substantially Commonplace. Addison puts fine writing in sentiments that are natural without being obvious, and this is a true account of the 'law' of the exquisite literature of the Queen Anne men. We may perhaps add to Addison's definition, that the great secret of the best kind of popularity is always the noble or imaginative handling of Commonplace. Shakespeare may at first seem an example to the contrary; and indeed is it not a standing marvel that the greatest writer of a nation that is distinguished among all nations for the pharisaism, puritanism, and unimaginative narrowness of its judgments on conduct and type of character, should be paramount over all writers for the breadth, maturity, fulness, subtlety, and infinite variousness of his conception of human life and nature? One possible answer to the perplexity is that the puritanism does not go below the surface in us, and that Englishmen are not really limited in their view by the too strait formulas that are supposed to contain their explanations of the moral universe. On this theory the popular appreciation of Shakespeare is the irrepressible response of the hearty inner man to a voice, in which he recognises the full note of human nature, and those wonders of the world which are not dreamt [Pg 268] of in his professed philosophy. A more obvious answer than this is that Shakespeare's popularity

with the many is not due to those finer glimpses that are the very essence of all poetic delight to the few, but to his thousand other magnificent attractions, and above all, after his skill as a pure dramatist and master of scenic interest and situation, to the lofty or pathetic setting with which he vivifies, not the subtleties or refinements, but the commonest and most elementary traits of the commonest and most elementary human moods. The few with minds touched by nature or right cultivation to the finer issues, admire the supreme genius which takes some poor Italian tale, with its coarse plot and gross personages, and shooting it through with threads of variegated meditation, produces a masterpiece of penetrative reflection and high pensive suggestion as to the deepest things and most secret parts of the life of men. But to the general these finer threads are indiscernible. What touches them in the Shakesperean poetry, and most rightly touches them and us all, are topics eternally old, yet of eternal freshness, the perennial truisms of the grave and the bride-chamber, of shifting fortune, of the surprises of destiny, and the emptiness of the answered vow. This is the region in which the poet wins his widest if not his hardest triumphs, the region of the noble Commonplace.

[Pg 269] A writer dealing with such matters as principally occupied Macaulay, has not the privilege of resort to these great poetic inspirations. Yet history, too, has its generous commonplaces, its plausibilities of emotion, and no one has ever delighted more than Macaulay did, to appeal to the fine truisms that cluster round love of freedom and love of native land. The high rhetorical topics of liberty and patriotism are his readiest instruments for kindling a glowing reflection of these magnanimous passions in the breasts of his readers. That Englishman is hardly to be envied who can read without a glow such passages as that in the History, about Turenne being startled by the shout of stern exultation with which his English allies advanced to the combat, and expressing the delight of a true soldier when he learned that it was ever the fashion of Cromwell's pikemen to rejoice greatly when they beheld the enemy; while even the banished cavaliers felt an emotion of national pride when they saw a brigade of their countrymen, outnumbered by foes and abandoned by friends, drive before it in headlong rout the finest infantry of Spain, and force a passage into a counterscarp which had just been pronounced impregnable by the ablest of the marshals of France. Such prose as this is not less thrilling to a man who loves his country, than the spirited verse of the Lays of Ancient Rome. And the commonplaces of patriotism and freedom would never have been so powerful in Macaulay's hands, if they had not been inspired by a sincere and hearty faith in them in the soul of the [Pg 270] writer. His unanalytical turn of mind kept him free of any temptation to think of love of country as a prejudice, or a passion for freedom as an illusion. The cosmopolitan or international idea which such teachers as Cobden have tried to impress on our stubborn islanders, would have found in Macaulay not lukewarm or sceptical adherence, but point-blank opposition and denial. He believed as stoutly in the supremacy of Great Britain in the history of the good causes of Europe, as M. Thiers believes in the supremacy of France, or Mazzini believed in that of Italy. The thought of the prodigious industry, the inventiveness, the stout enterprise, the free government, the wise and equal laws, the noble literature, of this fortunate island and its majestic empire beyond the seas, and the discretion, valour, and tenacity by which all these great material and still greater intangible possessions had been first won, and then kept, against every hostile comer whether domestic or foreign, sent through Macaulay a thrill, like that which the thought of Paris and its heroisms moves in the great poet of France, or sight of the dear city of the Violet Crown moved in an Athenian of old. Thus habitually, with all sincerity of heart, to offer to one of the greater popular prepossessions the incense due to any other idol of superstition, sacred and of indisputable authority, and to let this adoration be seen shining in every page, is one of the keys that every man must find, who would make a quick and sure way into the temple of contemporary fame. [Pg 271]

It is one of the first things to be said about Macaulay, that he was in exact accord with the common average sentiment of his day on every subject on which he spoke. His superiority was not of that highest kind which leads a man to march in thought on the outside margin of the crowd, watching them, sympathising with them, hoping for them, but apart. Macaulay was one of the middle-class crowd in his heart, and only rose above it by splendid attainments and extraordinary gifts of expression. He had none of that ambition which inflames some hardy men, to make new beliefs and new passions enter the minds of their neighbours; his ascendency is due to literary pomp, not to fecundity of spirit. No one has ever surpassed him in the art of combining resolute and ostentatious common sense of a slightly coarse sort in choosing his point of view, with so considerable an appearance of dignity and elevation in setting it forth and impressing it upon others. The elaborateness of his style is very likely to mislead people into imagining for him a corresponding elaborateness of thought and sentiment. On the contrary, Macaulay's mind was really very simple, strait, and with as few notes in its register, to borrow a phrase from the language of vocal compass, as there are few notes, though they are very loud, in the register of his written prose. When we look more closely into it, what at first wore the air of dignity and elevation, in truth rather disagreeably resembles the narrow assurance of a man who knows that he has with him the great battalions of public opinion. We are always quite sure that if Macaulay [Pg 272] had been an Athenian citizen towards the ninety-fifth Olympiad, he would have taken sides with Anytus and Meletus in the impeachment of Socrates. A popular author must, in a thorough-going way, take the accepted maxims for granted. He must suppress any whimsical fancy for applying the Socratic elenchus, or any other engine of criticism, scepticism, or verification, to those sentiments or current precepts of morals, which may in truth be very equivocal and may be much neglected in practice, but which the public opinion of his time requires to be treated in theory and in literature as if they had been cherished and held sacred *semper, ubique, et ab omnibus*.

This is just what Macaulay does, and it is commonly supposed to be no heavy fault in him or any

other writer for the common public. Man cannot live by analysis alone, nor nourish himself on the secret delights of irony. And if Macaulay had only reflected the more generous of the prejudices of mankind, it would have been well enough. Burke, for instance, was a writer who revered the prejudices of a modern society as deeply as Macaulay did; he believed society to be founded on prejudices and held compact by them. Yet what size there is in Burke, what fine perspective, what momentum, what edification! It may be pleaded that there is the literature of edification, and there is the literature of knowledge, and that the qualities proper to the one cannot lawfully be expected from the other, and would only be very much out of place if they should happen to be found there. But there are two answers to this. First, Macaulay in the course of his varied writings discusses all sorts of ethical and other matters, and is not simply a chronicler of party and intrigue, of dynasties and campaigns. Second, and more than this, even if he had never travelled beyond the composition of historical record, he could still have sown his pages, as does every truly great writer, no matter what his subject may be, with those significant images or far-reaching suggestions, which suddenly light up a whole range of distant thoughts and sympathies within us; which in an instant affect the sensibilities of men with a something new and unforeseen; and which awaken, if only for a passing moment, the faculty and response of the diviner mind. Tacitus does all this, and Burke does it, and that is why men who care nothing for Roman despots or for Jacobin despots, will still perpetually turn to those writers almost as if they were on the level of great poets or very excellent spiritual teachers. [Pg 273]

One secret is that they, and all such men as they were, had that of which Macaulay can hardly have had the rudimentary germ, the faculty of deep abstract meditation and surrender to the fruitful 'leisures of the spirit.' We can picture Macaulay talking, or making a speech in the House of Commons, or buried in a book, or scouring his library for references, or covering his blue foolscap with dashing periods, or accentuating his sentences and barbing his phrases; but can anybody think of him as meditating, as modestly pondering and wondering, as possessed for so much as ten minutes by that spirit of inwardness, which has never been wholly wanting in any of those kings and princes of literature, with whom it is good for men to sit in counsel? He seeks Truth, not as she should be sought, devoutly, tentatively, and with the air of one touching the hem of a sacred garment, but clutching her by the hair of the head and dragging her after him in a kind of boisterous triumph, a prisoner of war and not a goddess. [Pg 274]

All this finds itself reflected, as the inner temper of a man always is reflected, in his style of written prose. The merits of Macaulay's prose are obvious enough. It naturally reproduces the good qualities I of his understanding, its strength, manliness, and directness. That exultation in material goods and glories of which we have already spoken, makes his pages rich in colour, and gives them the effect of a sumptuous gala-suit. Certainly the brocade is too brand-new, and has none of the delicate charm that comes to such finery when it is a little faded. Again, nobody can have any excuse for not knowing exactly what it is that Macaulay means. We may assuredly say of his prose what Boileau says of his own poetry—'Et mon vers, bien ou mal, dit toujours quelque chose.' This is a prodigious merit, when we reflect with what fatal alacrity human language lends itself in the hands of so many performers upon the pliant instrument, to all sorts of obscurity, ambiguity, disguise, and pretentious mystification. Scaliger is supposed to have remarked of the Basques and their desperate tongue: ''Tis said the Basques understand one another; for my part, I will never believe it.' The same pungent doubt might apply to loftier members of the hierarchy of speech than that forlorn dialect, but never to English as handled by Macaulay. He never wrote an obscure sentence in his life, and this may seem a small merit, until we remember of how few writers we could say the same. [Pg 275]

Macaulay is of those who think prose as susceptible of polished and definite form as verse, and he was, we should suppose, of those also who hold the type and mould of all written language to be spoken language. There are more reasons for demurring to the soundness of the latter doctrine, than can conveniently be made to fill a digression here. For one thing, spoken language necessarily implies one or more listeners, whereas written language may often have to express meditative moods and trains of inward reflection that move through the mind without trace of external reference, and that would lose their special traits by the introduction of any suspicion that they were to be overheard. Again, even granting that all composition must be supposed to be meant, by the fact of its existence, to be addressed to a body of readers, it still remains to be shown that indirect address to the inner ear should follow the same method and rhythm as address directly through impressions on the outer organ. The attitude of the recipient mind is different, and there is the symbolism of a new medium between it and the speaker. The writer, being cut off from all those effects which are producible by the physical intonations of the voice, has to find substitutes for them by other means, by subtler cadences, by a more varied modulation, by firmer notes, by more complex circuits, than suffice for the utmost perfection of spoken language, which has all the potent and manifold aids of personality. In writing, whether it be prose or verse, you are free to produce effects whose peculiarity one can only define vaguely, by saying that the senses have one part less in them than in any other of the forms and effects of art, and the imaginary voice one part more. But the question need not be laboured here, because there can be no dispute as to the quality of Macaulay's prose. Its measures are emphatically the measures of spoken deliverance. Those who have made the experiment, pronounce him to be one of the authors whose works are most admirably fitted for reading aloud. His firmness and directness of statement, his spiritedness, his art of selecting salient and highly coloured detail, and all his other merits as a narrator, keep the listener's attention, and make him the easiest of writers to follow. [Pg 276]

Although, however, clearness, directness, and positiveness are master qualities and the

indispensable foundations of all good style, yet does the matter plainly by no means end with them. [Pg 277] And it is even possible to have these virtues so unhappily proportioned and inauspiciously mixed with other turns and casts of mind, as to end in work with little grace or harmony or fine tracery about it, but only overweening purpose and vehement will. And it is overweeningness and self-confident will that are the chief notes of Macaulay's style. It has no benignity. Energy is doubtless a delightful quality, but then Macaulay's energy is perhaps energy without momentum, and he impresses us more by a strong volubility than by volume. It is the energy of interests and intuitions, which though they are profoundly sincere if ever they were sincere in any man, are yet in the relations which they comprehend, essentially superficial.

Still, trenchancy whether in speaker or writer is a most effective tone for a large public. It gives them confidence in their man, and prevents tediousness—except to those who reflect how delicate is the poise of truth, and what steeps and pits encompass the dealer in unqualified propositions. To such persons, a writer who is trenchant in every sentence of every page, who never lapses for a line into the contingent, who marches through the intricacies of things in a blaze of certainty, is not only a writer to be distrusted, but the owner of a doubtful and displeasing style. It is a great test of style to watch how an author disposes of the qualifications, limitations, and exceptions that clog the wings of his main proposition. The grave and conscientious men of the seventeenth century insisted on packing them all honestly along with the main proposition itself, within the bounds of a single period. [Pg 278] Burke arranges them in tolerably close order in the paragraph. Dr. Newmann, that winning writer, disperses them lightly over his page. Of Macaulay it is hardly unfair to say that he despatches all qualifications into outer space before he begins to write, or if he magnanimously admits one or two here and there, it is only to bring them the more imposingly to the same murderous end.

We have spoken of Macaulay's interests and intuitions wearing a certain air of superficiality; there is a feeling of the same kind about his attempts to be genial. It is not truly festive. There is no abandonment in it. It has no deep root in moral humour, and is merely a literary form, resembling nothing so much as the hard geniality of some clever college tutor of stiff manners, entertaining undergraduates at an official breakfast-party. This is not because his tone is bookish; on the contrary, his tone and level are distinctly those of the man of the world. But one always seems to find that neither a wide range of cultivation, nor familiar access to the best Whig circles, had quite removed the stiffness and self-conscious precision of the Clapham Sect. We would give much for a little more flexibility, and would welcome ever so slight a consciousness of infirmity. As has been said, the only people whom men cannot pardon are the perfect. Macaulay is like the military king who never suffered himself to be seen, even by the attendants in his bed-chamber, until he had had time to put on his uniform and jack-boots. [Pg 279] His severity of eye is very wholesome; it makes his writing firm, and firmness is certainly one of the first qualities that good writing must have. But there is such a thing as soft and considerate precision, as well as hard and scolding precision. Those most interesting English critics of the generation slightly anterior to Macaulay,—Hazlitt, Lamb, De Quincey, Leigh Hunt,—were fully his equals in precision, and yet they knew how to be clear, acute, and definite, without that edginess and inelasticity which is so conspicuous in Macaulay's criticisms, alike in their matter and their form.

To borrow the figure of an old writer, Macaulay's prose is not like a flowing vestment to his thought, but like a suit of armour. It is often splendid and glittering, and the movement of the opening pages of his History is superb in its dignity. But that movement is exceptional. As a rule there is the hardness, if there is also often the sheen, of highly-wrought metal. Or, to change our figure, his pages are composed as a handsome edifice is reared, not as a fine statue or a frieze 'with bossy sculptures graven' grows up in the imaginative mind of the statuary. There is no liquid continuity, such as indicates a writer possessed by his subject and not merely possessing it. The periods are marshalled in due order of procession, bright and high-stepping; they never escape under an impulse of emotion into the full current of a brimming stream. What is curious is that though Macaulay seems ever to be brandishing a two-edged gleaming sword, [Pg 280] and though he steeps us in an atmosphere of belligerency, yet we are never conscious of inward agitation in him, and perhaps this alone would debar him from a place among the greatest writers. For they, under that reserve, suppression, or management, which is an indispensable condition of the finest rhetorical art, even when aiming at the most passionate effects, still succeed in conveying to their readers a thrilling sense of the strong fires that are glowing underneath. Now when Macaulay advances with his hectoring sentences and his rough pistolling ways, we feel all the time that his pulse is as steady as that of the most practised duellist who ever ate fire. He is too cool to be betrayed into a single phrase of happy improvisation. His pictures glare, but are seldom warm. Those strokes of minute circumstantiality which he loved so dearly, show that even in moments when his imagination might seem to be moving both spontaneously and ardently, it was really only a literary instrument, a fashioning tool and not a melting flame. Let us take a single example. He is describing the trial of Warren Hastings. 'Every step in the proceedings,' he says, 'carried the mind either backward through many troubled centuries to the days when the foundations of our constitution were laid; or far away over boundless seas and deserts, to dusky nations living under strange stars, worshipping strange gods, and writing strange characters from right to left. [Pg 281] The odd triviality of the last detail, its unworthiness of the sentiment of the passage, leaves the reader checked, what sets out as a fine stroke of imagination dwindles down to a sort of literary conceit. And this puerile twist, by the way, is all the poorer, when it is considered that the native writing is really from left to right, and only takes the other direction in a foreign, that is to say, a Persian alphabet. And so in other places, even where the writer is most deservedly admired for gorgeous picturesque effect, we feel that it is only the literary picturesque, a kind of infinitely glorified newspaper-reporting. Compare, for instance, the most

imaginative piece to be found in any part of Macaulay's writings with that sudden and lovely apostrophe in Carlyle, after describing the bloody horrors that followed the fall of the Bastille in 1789:—'O evening sun of July, how, at this hour, thy beams fall slant on reapers amid peaceful woody fields; on old women spinning in cottages; on ships far out in the silent main; on balls at the Orangerie at Versailles, where high-rouged dames of the Palace are even now dancing with double-jacketed Hussar officers;—and also on this roaring Hell-porch of a Hôtel de Ville!' Who does not feel in this the breath of poetic inspiration, and how different it is from the mere composite of the rhetorician's imagination, assiduously working to order?

This remark is no disparagement of Macaulay's genius, but a classification of it. We are interrogating our own impressions, and asking ourselves among what kind of writers he ought to be placed. Rhetoric is a good and worthy art, and rhetorical authors are often more useful, more instructive, more really respectable than poetical authors. But it is to be said that Macaulay as a rhetorician will hardly be placed in the first rank, by those who have studied both him and the great masters. Once more, no amount of embellishment or emphasis or brilliant figure suffices to produce this intense effect of agitation rigorously restrained; nor can any beauty of decoration be in the least a substitute for that touching and penetrative music, which is made in prose by the repressed trouble of grave and high souls. There is a certain music, we do not deny, in Macaulay, but it is the music of a man everlastingly playing for us rapid solos on a silver trumpet, never the swelling diapasons of the organ, and never the deep ecstasies of the four magic strings. That so sensible a man as Macaulay should keep clear of the modern abomination of dithyrambic prose, that rank and sprawling weed of speech, was natural enough; but then the effects which we miss in him, and which, considering how strong the literary faculty in him really was, we are almost astonished to miss, are not produced by dithyramb but by repression. Of course the answer has been already given; Macaulay, powerful and vigorous as he was, had no agitation, no wonder, no tumult of spirit to repress. The world was spread out clear before him; he read it as plainly and as certainly as he read his books; life was all an affair of direct categoricals.

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This was at least one secret of those hard modulations and shallow cadences. How poor is the rhythm of Macaulay's prose we only realise by going with his periods fresh in our ear to some true master of harmony. It is not worth while to quote passages from an author who is in everybody's library, and Macaulay is always so much like himself that almost any one page will serve for an illustration exactly as well as any other. Let any one turn to his character of Somers, for whom he had so much admiration, and then turn to Clarendon's character of Falkland;—'a person of such prodigious parts of learning and knowledge, of that inimitable sweetness and delight in conversation, of so flowing and obliging a humanity and goodness to mankind, and of that primitive simplicity and integrity of life, that if there were no other brand upon this odious and accursed civil war than that single loss, it must be most infamous and execrable to all posterity.' Now Clarendon is not a great writer, not even a good writer, for he is prolix and involved, yet we see that even Clarendon, when he comes to a matter in which his heart is engaged, becomes sweet and harmonious in his rhythm. If we turn to a prose-writer of the very first place, we are instantly conscious of a still greater difference. How flashy and shallow Macaulay's periods seem, as we listen to the fine ground-base that rolls in the melody of the following passage of Burke's, and it is taken from one of the least ornate of all his pieces:—

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> You will not, we trust, believe that, born in a civilised country, formed to gentle manners, trained in a merciful religion, and living in enlightened and polished times, where even foreign hostility is softened from its original sternness, we could have thought of letting loose upon you, our late beloved brethren, these fierce tribes of savages and cannibals, in whom the traces of human nature are effaced by ignorance and barbarity. We rather wished to have joined with you in bringing gradually that unhappy part of mankind into civility, order, piety, and virtuous discipline, than to have confirmed their evil habits and increased their natural ferocity by fleshing them in the slaughter of you, whom our wiser and better ancestors had sent into the wilderness with the express view of introducing, along with our holy religion, its humane and charitable manners. We do not hold that all things are lawful in war. We should think every barbarity, in fire, in wasting, in murders, in tortures, and other cruelties, too horrible and too full of turpitude for Christian mouths to utter or ears to hear, if done at our instigation, by those who we know will make war thus if they make it at all, to be, to all intents and purposes, as if done by ourselves. We clear ourselves to you our brethren, to the present age, and to future generations, to our king and our country, and to Europe, which as a spectator, beholds this tragic scene, of every part or share in adding this last and worst of evils to the inevitable mischiefs of a civil war.
>
> We do not call you rebels and traitors. We do not call for the vengeance of the crown against you. We do not know how to qualify millions of our countrymen, contending with one heart for an admission to privileges which we have ever thought our own happiness and honour, by odious and unworthy names. On the contrary, we highly revere the principles on which you act, though we lament some of their effects. Armed as you are, we embrace you, as our friends and as our brethren by the best and dearest ties of relation.

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It may be said that there is a patent injustice in comparing the prose of a historian criticising or describing great events at second hand, with the prose of a statesman taking active part in great events, fired by the passion of a present conflict, and stimulated by the vivid interest of

undetermined issues. If this be a well-grounded plea, and it may be so, then of course it excludes a contrast not only with Burke, but also with Bolingbroke, whose fine manners and polished gaiety give us a keen sense of the grievous garishness of Macaulay. If we may not institute a comparison between Macaulay and great actors on the stage of affairs, at least there can be no objection to the introduction of Southey as a standard of comparison. Southey was a man of letters pure and simple, and it is worth remarking that Macaulay himself admitted that he found so great a charm in Southey's style, as nearly always to read it with pleasure, even when Southey was talking nonsense. Now, take any page of the Life of Nelson or the Life of Wesley; consider how easy, smooth, natural, and winning is the diction and the rise and fall of the sentence, and yet how varied the rhythm and how nervous the phrases; and then turn to a page of Macaulay, and wince under its stamping emphasis, its over-coloured tropes, its exaggerated expressions, its unlovely staccato. Southey's History of the Peninsular War is now dead, but if any of my readers has a copy on his highest shelves, I would venture to ask him to take down the third volume, and read the concluding pages, of which Coleridge used to say that they were the finest specimen of historic eulogy he had ever read in English, adding with forgivable hyperbole, that they were more to the Duke's fame and glory than a campaign. 'Foresight and enterprise with our commander went hand in hand; he never advanced but so as to be sure of his retreat; and never retreated but in such an attitude as to impose upon a superior enemy,' and so on through the sum of Wellington's achievements. 'There was something more precious than these, more to be desired than the high and enduring fame which he had secured by his military achievements, the satisfaction of thinking to what end those achievements had been directed; that they were for the deliverance of two most injured and grievously oppressed nations; for the safety, honour, and welfare of his own country; and for the general interests of Europe and of the civilised world. His campaigns were sanctified by the cause; they were sullied by no cruelties, no crimes; the chariot-wheels of his triumphs have been followed by no curses; his laurels are entwined with the amaranths of righteousness, and upon his death-bed he might remember his victories among his good works.' [Pg 286]

What is worse than want of depth and fineness of intonation in a period, is all gross excess of colour, because excess of colour is connected with graver faults in the region of the intellectual conscience. Macaulay is a constant sinner in this respect. The wine of truth is in his cup a brandied draught, a hundred degrees above proof, and he too often replenishes the lamp of knowledge with naphtha instead of fine oil. It is not that he has a spontaneous passion for exuberant decoration, which he would have shared with more than one of the greatest names in literature. On the contrary, we feel that the exaggerated words and dashing sentences are the fruit of deliberate travail, and the petulance or the irony of his speech is mostly due to a driving predilection for strong effects. His memory, his directness, his aptitude for forcing things into firm outline, and giving them a sharply defined edge,—these and other singular talents of his all lent themselves to this intrepid and indefatigable pursuit of effect. And the most disagreeable feature is that Macaulay was so often content with an effect of an essentially vulgar kind, offensive to taste, discordant to the fastidious ear, and worst of all, at enmity with the whole spirit of truth. By vulgar we certainly do not mean homely, which marks a wholly different quality. No writer can be more homely than Mr. Carlyle, alike in his choice of particulars to dwell upon, and in the terms or images in which he describes or illustrates them, but there is also no writer further removed from vulgarity. Nor do we mean that Macaulay too copiously enriches the tongue with infusion from any Doric dialect. For such raciness he had little taste. What we find in him is that quality which the French call brutal. The description, for instance, in the essay on Hallam, of the licence of the Restoration, seems to us a coarse and vulgar picture, whose painter took the most garish colours he could find on his palette, and then laid them on in untempered crudity. And who is not sensible of the vulgarity and coarseness of the account of Boswell? 'If he had not been a great fool he would not have been a great writer ... he was a dunce, a parasite, and a coxcomb,' and so forth, in which the shallowness of the analysis of Boswell's character matches the puerile rudeness of the terms. Here again, is a sentence about Montesquieu. 'The English at that time,' Macaulay says of the middle of the eighteenth century, 'considered a Frenchman who talked about constitutional checks and fundamental laws as a prodigy not less astonishing than the learned pig or musical infant.' And he then goes on to describe the author of one of the most important books that ever were written, as 'specious but shallow, studious of effect, indifferent to truth—the lively President,' and so forth, stirring in any reader who happens to know Montesquieu's influence, a singular amazement. We are not concerned with the judgment upon Montesquieu, nor with the truth as to contemporary English opinion about him, but a writer who devises an antithesis to such a man as Montesquieu in learned pigs and musical infants, deliberately condescends not merely to triviality or levity, but to flat vulgarity of thought, to something of mean and ignoble association. Though one of the most common, this is not Macaulay's only sin in the same unfortunate direction. He too frequently resorts to vulgar gaudiness. For example, there is in one place a certain description of an alleged practice of Addison's. Swift had said of Esther Johnson that 'whether from easiness in general, or from her indifference to persons, or from her despair of mending them, or from the same practice which she most liked in Mr. Addison, I cannot determine; but when she saw any of the company very warm in a wrong opinion, she was more inclined to confirm them in it than to oppose them. It prevented noise, she said, and saved time.'[2] Let us behold what a picture Macaulay draws on the strength of this passage. 'If his first attempts to set a presuming dunce right were ill-received,' Macaulay says of Addison, 'he changed his tone, "assented with civil leer," and lured the flattered coxcomb deeper and deeper into absurdity.' To compare this transformation of the simplicity of the original into the grotesque heat and overcharged violence of the copy, is to see the homely maiden of a country village transformed into the painted flaunter of the city. [Pg 287] [Pg 288] [Pg 289]

One more instance. We should be sorry to violate any sentiment of το σεμνον about a man of Macaulay's genius, but what is a decorous term for a description of the doctrine of Lucretius's great poem, thrown in parenthetically, as the 'silliest and meanest system of natural and moral philosophy!' Even disagreeable artifices of composition may be forgiven, when they serve to vivify truth, to quicken or to widen the moral judgment, but Macaulay's hardy and habitual recourse to strenuous superlatives is fundamentally unscientific and untrue. There is no more instructive example in our literature than he, of the saying that the adjective is the enemy of the substantive. [Pg 290]

In 1837 Jeffrey saw a letter written by Macaulay to a common friend, and stating the reasons for preferring a literary to a political life. Jeffrey thought that his illustrious ally was wrong in the conclusion to which he came. 'As to the tranquillity of an author's life,' he said, 'I have no sort of faith in it. And as to fame, if an author's is now and then more lasting, it is generally longer withheld, and except in a few rare cases it is of a less pervading or elevating description. A great poet or a great *original* writer is above all other glory. But who would give much for such a glory as Gibbon's? Besides, I believe it is in the inward glow and pride of consciously influencing the destinies of mankind, much more than in the sense of personal reputation, that the delight of either poet or statesman chiefly consists.' And Gibbon had at least the advantage of throwing himself into a religious controversy that is destined to endure for centuries. He, moreover, was specifically a historian, while Macaulay has been prized less as a historian proper than as a master of literary art. Now a man of letters, in an age of battle and transition like our own, fades into an ever-deepening distance, unless he has while he writes that touching and impressive quality,—the presentiment of the eve; a feeling of the difficulties and interests that will engage and distract mankind on the morrow. Nor can it be enough for enduring fame in any age merely to throw a golden halo round the secularity of the hour, or to make glorious the narrowest limitations of the passing day. If we think what a changed sense is already given to criticism, what a different conception now presides over history, how many problems on which Macaulay was silent are now the familiar puzzles of even superficial readers, we cannot help feeling that the eminent man whose life we are all about to read, is the hero of a past which is already remote, and that he did little to make men better fitted to face a present of which, close as it was to him, he seems hardly to have dreamed. [Pg 291]

FOOTNOTES

[1] Since the following piece was written, Mr. Trevelyan's biography of Lord Macaulay has appeared, and has enjoyed the great popularity to which its careful execution, its brightness of style, its good taste, its sound judgment, so richly entitle it. If Mr. Trevelyan's course in politics were not so useful as it is, one might be tempted to regret that he had not chosen literature for the main field of his career. The portrait which he draws of Lord Macaulay is so irresistibly attractive in many ways, that a critic may be glad to have delivered his soul before his judgment was subject to a dangerous bias, by the picture of Macaulay's personal character—its domestic amiability, its benevolence to unlucky followers of letters, its manliness, its high public spirit and generous patriotism. On reading my criticism over again, I am well pleased to find that not an epithet needs to be altered,—so independent is opinion as to this strong man's work, of our esteem for his loyal and upright character.

[2] Forster's *Swift*, i. 265.

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