Good Writing

The good writer says no more than he thinks.¹ And much depends on that. For speech is not simply the expression but also the making real of thought. In the same way that running is not just the expression of the desire to reach a goal, but also the realization of that goal. But the kind of realization, whether it is precisely adapted to the goal, or whether it loosely and wantonly wastes itself on the desire—depends on the training of the person who is running. The more he has himself in hand and avoids superfluous, exaggerated, and uncoordinated movements, the more self-sufficient his position will be and the more economical his use of his body. The bad writer has many ideas which he lets run riot, just like the bad, untrained runner with his slack, overenthusiastic body action. And for that very reason, he can never say soberly just what he thinks. The talent of the good writer is to make use of his style to supply his thought with a spectacle of the kind provided by a well-trained body. He never says more than he has thought. Hence, his writing redounds not to his own benefit, but solely to the benefit of what he wants to say.

Reading Novels

Not all books are to be read in the same way. Novels, for example, are there to be devoured. To read them is a pleasure of consumption [Einverleibung]. This is not empathy. The reader does not put himself in the place of the hero; he absorbs what befalls the hero into himself. The vivid report on those events, however, is the enticing form in which a nourishing meal is presented at the table. Now, there is of course a raw, healthy form of experience, just as there is raw, healthy food for the stomach—namely, experiencing something for oneself. But the art of the novel, like the art of cooking, begins where the raw products end. There are many nourishing foodstuffs that are inedible when raw. Just as there are any number of experiences that are better read about than personally undergone. They affect many people so strongly that individuals would not survive them if they were to experience them in the flesh. In short, if there is a Muse of the novel—it would be the tenth—it must bear the features of a kitchen fairy. She raises the world from its raw state in order to produce something edible, something tasty. Read a newspaper while eating, if you must. But never a novel. For that involves two sets of conflicting obligations.

The Art of Storytelling

Every morning brings us news from all over the world.² Yet we are poor in remarkable stories. Why is that? It is because no events reach us without being permeated by explanations. In other words, hardly anything redounds to the advantage of the story; nearly everything, to that of information. In fact, half the art of storytelling is that of keeping it free of all explanations during the telling. In this respect the ancients, Herodotus above all, were masters. In Chapter 14 of Book III of his Histories, he tells the story of Psammenitus. The Egyptian king Psammenitus had been defeated and taken prisoner by the Persian king Cambyses; Cambyses was bent on humiliating his captive. He gave orders to place Psammenitus on the road on which the Persian triumphal procession was to pass. And he further arranged that the prisoner should see his daughter as a serving girl, taking her pitchet to the well. While all the Egyptians stood lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus alone stood silent and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground. And when soon after he saw his son in the procession, being led to execution, he likewise remained unmoved. But when he saw one of his old servants, an old man, reduced to beggary, in the ranks of the prisoners, he beat his head with his fists and gave every sign of the profoundest grief.—

From this story we can see the nature of true storytelling. The value of information does not survive the moment when it was new. It lives only at that moment. It has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to the moment without loss of time. A story is different; it does not expend itself. It preserves its strength concentrated within itself and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. Thus, Montaigne referred to the story of this Egyptian king, and asked himself why the king mourned only when he caught sight of his servant and not before. Montaigne answers: "Since he was already overwhelmed by grief, it took only the smallest addition for the dam to burst." The story can be understood in this way. But there is room for other explanations, too. Anyone can find out what these reasons are by
asking Montaigne's question in a circle of friends. For example, one of mine said, "The king is unmoved by the fate of those of royal blood, for it is his own." And another: "We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life. To the king, this servant is only an actor." And a third: "Great suffering builds up and only breaks forth with relaxation. The sight of his servant was the relaxation."—"If this story had taken place today," said a fourth, "all the papers would claim that Psammenitus loved his servant more than his children." What is certain is that every reporter would find an explanation at the drop of a hat. Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable of arousing astonishment and thought even after thousands of years. It resembles the seeds of grain that have lain hermetically sealed in the chambers of the Pyramids for thousands of years, and have retained their power to germinate to this very day.

After Completion

The origin of great works has often been conceptualized in terms of the image of birth. This image is dialectical; it embraces the process from two sides. One is concerned with creative conception and affects the feminine side of genius. This feminine aspect comes to an end with the completion of the work. It sets the work in motion and then it dies. What dies in the master with the finished creation is that part of him in which it was conceived. Now, however—and this is the other side of the coin—the completion of the work is no dead thing. It is not achievable from outside; filing and tinkering does not bring it about. It is perfected in the interior of the work itself. And here, too, we may speak of giving birth. In the act of completion, the created thing gives birth once more to its creator. Not in its feminine aspect, in which it was conceived, but on its masculine side. Ecstatic, the creator overtakes nature, for he will now be indebted to a brighter source for the existence that he received for the first time from the dark depths of the maternal womb. His home is not where he was born; rather, he comes into the world where his home is. He is the masculine firstborn of the work that he had once conceived.


Notes

1. See also the essay “Thought Figures” (section entitled “The Good Writer”) in this volume.
2. See also sections VI and VII of Benjamin's essay “Der Erzähler” (The Storyteller).

Experience and Poverty

Our childhood anthologies used to contain the fable of the old man who, on his deathbed, fooled his sons into believing that there was treasure buried in the vineyard. They would only have to dig. They dug, but found no treasure. When autumn came, however, the vineyard bore fruit like no other in the whole land. They then perceived that their father had passed on to us, either as threats or as kindly pieces of advice, all the while we were growing up: "Still wet behind the ears, and he wants to tell us what's what!" "You'll find out *erfahren* soon enough!" Moreover, everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside.—Where has it all gone? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story? Where do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring? Who can still call on a proverb when he needs one? And who will even attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of their experience?

No, this much is clear: experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. Perhaps this is less remarkable than it appears. Wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience? And what poured out from the flood of war books ten years later was anything