

## Tagliacotian

### Upon Style and the Production of Books

I must confess to a partiality for the authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Bacon, Browne, Donne, Montaigne and others of those times. Their thoughts were expressed in stylish but simple prose so that to remove a sentence were to damage severely the flow of both thought and expression.

Style both in the writing and presentation of facts is conspicuously lacking these days. Is it right that this should be so? The soaring image and extravagant phrase are unlikely to sit well in a paper discussing the merits of tissue expanders, for example. A descriptive passage on the lines of "The refulgent swelling beneath the skin did honour to her remaining charms and presented a votive offering to Venus, which none but the most unfeeling that gazed upon it could fail to be affected thereby" would nowadays be rendered into "A satisfactory result was obtained which produced a pleasing balance of contour between the two breasts". It is interesting to speculate on the flights of linguistic expression which might be produced in answer to the profound question posed at a recent meeting of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons, "How can one produce, by surgical means, a cleavage between the female breasts?" Nonetheless, greater attention could be paid to the form of expression and presentation of an argument.

Medawar has delivered his magisterial judgement on the question of scientific writing in his essay *Science and Literature* (Medawar, 1982):

"Science and imaginative writing are utterly incongruous, in English anyway—the French tradition is more permissive—and the effect of combining them is merely absurd. In science the imaginative element lies in the conception, and not at all in the language by which the conception is made explicit or conveyed. (The 'language' might indeed use the symbolism of chemistry, mathematics or electronic circuitry.) Clarity can be, *must* be achieved, and with a natural stylist like D'Arcy Thompson, grace. But a scientist's fingers, unlike a historian's, must never stray

towards the diapason, and a falling cadence is allowed only to mark, and perhaps be the welcome evidence of, the end of a 'presentation'."

But if we cannot produce stylish prose there is still no excuse for poor content. These days so many books written about plastic surgical subjects are potboilers; vehicles whereby accounts of well-known and standard techniques, which do not add to the sum of plastic surgical knowledge or understanding, are foisted upon an hapless and unsuspecting profession. These dreary texts, often accompanied by photographic illustrations of doubtful propriety, only serve to underline the problems of low quality and indifferent standards. Perhaps the editors of learned journals could provide an annual list of books, each awarded points for content, originality, presentation and standard of production.

As the great Bacon wrote in his essay *Of Studies* (Bacon, 1669):

"Read not to Contradict and Confute, not to believe and take for granted, not to find Talk and Discourse, but to weigh and consider. Some *Books* are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some *Books* are to be read only in parts; others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with Diligence and Attention. Some *Books* also may be read by Deputy, and Extracts made of them by others: but that would be only in the less important Arguments, and the meaner Sort of *Books*, else distilled *Books* are like common distilled Waters, flashy things."

Regrettably, we have too few volumes to weigh and consider, but instead a plethora of "flashy things".

#### References

- Bacon, Francis (1669). *The Essays*, p. 220.  
Medawar, P. B. (1982). *Pluto's Republic*, p. 49. Oxford University Press.