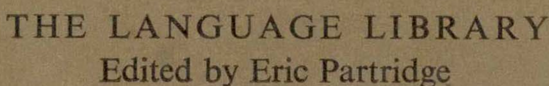

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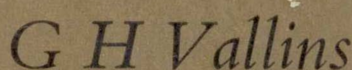

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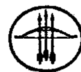

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PREFACE

In this book I have tried to remind the reader of certain techniques of composition – syntactical, idiomatic, rhythmical – he is bound to encounter in that kind of writing which we call literature, whether prose or verse. I have not essayed literary criticism in the ordinary sense, though of necessity it crops up here and there. Now and then, especially in my references to modern or 'modernist' literature, I have been provocative. For example, my chapter on Rhythm in Prose and Verse, in which I deliberately avoid the technicalities of Saintsbury and suggest that Hopkins's complicated account of his own 'sprung' rhythm (from which so much has developed in recent years) is a 'much ado about nothing', may seem an over-simplification to some, and merely perverse to others. However, there it is: I have at least tried to show that rhythm even in conventional verse is not a mere matter of iambs and anapaests vaguely related to the corresponding quantitative feet in the Classical languages; and that all rhythm, in prose and verse, has a kinship with the natural flow of ordinary speech, though this kinship is, as I think, exaggerated in, for example, the stream-of-consciousness technique, and in the more extreme experiments in modern poetry.

For the reader's convenience, I have, at the end, made a list of the chief books of reference and criticism mentioned in the text, together with a few others which he may find useful. Once again, I acknowledge with gratitude my debt to the Editor of the Language Library, Mr Eric Partridge, first for the stimulus and inspiration of his own books, and second for his encouragement and help in the preparation of this book of mine; and to my publishers, Andre Deutsch Ltd, for their unfailing kindness and courtesy.

CHAPTER I

USAGE

THIS book is, in the main, a study of memorable writing in prose and verse – the kind of writing which is commonly termed literature. It is not in the ordinary sense literary criticism, for the emphasis is on form and technique, on the construction of sentences, the choice of words, and the use of language generally. Not that (as is shown in later chapters) outward form can be separated from inward spirit. In memorable writing manner and matter are one; the prose (or verse) is, like the City of Jerusalem, at unity in itself. The inward spirit, indeed, defies analysis. But since the writer is bound by certain principles of language which he can neither escape nor ignore, the externals can in some measure be isolated, assessed, and criticised. Beyond the externals this book does not profess to go; it is a study of the interrelationship of literature and linguistic usage.

To begin with, then, literature suggests and indeed implies the written word. It is true that it may have its immediate origin in speech, as for example an old ballad like *Chevy Chase*, or an oration of Burke or Bright. But once the memorable spoken word, whether in verse or prose, takes upon itself the permanence of ink, once it moves from the realm of hearing to the realm of seeing, it becomes 'literature', the proper arrangement (to come back to ultimate meanings) of *litterae*, the letters of the alphabet. But here, straightway, we come face to face with a basic question: What is the relationship of the spoken to the written language? It is a question that crops up from time to time in the succeeding chapters; and to it there is no single or easy answer. All that need be said here may be summed up in a parable or simile. There may be and often is between the two – spoken and written – a wide and obvious gap. We are aware of this in our own experience. The syntax and idiom of the voice, in common conversation, are not the syntax and idiom of the pen. Indeed, the spoken often tends to looseness and vulgarity while the written, for fear of catching the plague, becomes literary (in the wrong sense) and formal. But when the gap is narrowed, and the two are divided by only the merest fraction, there may occur at least one manifestation of literature. The spark jumps, as it were,

between the points. 'When I am reading a book, whether wise or silly,' says Swift, 'it seems to me to be alive and talking to me.' It is an odd idea that a book should be actively talking rather than passively read; but for both writer and reader it is full of significance.

Since the term 'best English' is thus equated with literature, our approach must be historical; for what is memorably written defies (at least within our brief and finite reckoning) the onset of Time. Our English literature spans a period of well over a thousand years.

Swā clǣne hio·wæs oðfeallenu on Angelcynne ðætte swīðe fēawe wǣron behionan Humbre þe hiora ðēnunga cūðen understandan on Englisc oððe furðum ān ǣrendgewrit of Lædene on Englisc āreccan, ond ic wēne ðætte nāuht monige begeondan Humbre nǣren.

It is King Alfred writing in one of the finest passages of our earliest prose; but anyone unacquainted with the element of Old English could do no more than recognise an odd word here and there. This is only saying, by way of extreme example, that the best English marches with the development of the language. The modernised version[1] (given below in a footnote) of King Alfred's sentence makes this plain enough. Obviously, the word order is different from ours. There are also one or two differences of idiom: Alfred procures his emphasis, for example, by a clear and resounding double negative – '*not* many were *not*'. Less obviously, his vocabulary consists only of what we now call native words: it cannot draw upon the vast riches of derivatives that came into English after his time. Moreover, in the original several words have inflected forms that have long since disappeared. In brief, the best English of eleven hundred years ago and that of today are (or seem to be) poles apart. They are, in fact, two different manifestations – one at the beginning and one at the end – of the essential continuity of the living language, a continuity that is traceable in the written (or printed) word.

This progress, the change in vocabulary, syntax, and idiom, is obvious enough when we compare the language of King Alfred with

[1] From the Preface to Alfred's Translation of Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis*. Literal rendering: 'So cleanly (= completely) it (*i.e.* learning) was fallen away in England that very few [there] were on this side of Humber who their mass-book could understand in English or even a letter from Latin into English translate, and I think that not many beyond Humber [there] were not.'

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the language of Queen Elizabeth II. It is not quite so obvious when the comparison is made within the limits of what may be loosely called modern English, beginning, say, a little before the reign of the first Elizabeth. By that time inflections had disappeared except the few that now remain. Because of some differences of spelling the language appears a little strange to the modern eye; but that is all. It is comprehensible without the aid of glossary and grammar book:

> Now, of versifying there are two sorts, the one Auncient, the other Moderne: the Auncient marked the quantitie of each silable, and according to that, framed his verse: the Moderne, observing onely number (with some regarde of the accent), the chiefe life of it standeth in that lyke sounding of the words, which wee call Ryme. Whether of these be the most excellent, would beare many speeches. The Auncient (no doubt) more fit for Musick, both words and tune observing quantity, and more fit lively to expresse divers passions, by the low and lofty sounde of the well-weyed silable.

When we read that (it is from Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*, 1595), we are conscious of a different texture and pattern. But the meaning is not obscured; the language is recognisably our own. Nevertheless, we cannot apply to it the tests of modern grammar and usage. The custom of language changes like the custom of life; changes, indeed, with it, reflecting (however faintly) the differences in the succeeding generations. It is not necessary to go back nearly four hundred years to Sidney. Any two authors separated by no more than twenty or thirty years are not using precisely the same language. Some changes will have occurred even in so brief a time – imperceptibly, probably, in accidence and syntax but reasonably plain in vocabulary and idiom. Though the 'best English' is in a sense timeless, any judgement of it cannot be separated from the element of Time.

Yet that is, in some measure, an over simplification. 'The present,' says Landor, in a notable and beautiful passage, 'like a note in music, is nothing but as it appertains to what is past and what is to come.' That is as true of language as it is of all other human affairs. Speech cannot, of course, detach itself from the past, but it leans, on the whole, towards the present and the future; it gathers the harvest of the latest changes, and with words and phrases 'fire-new from the mint' anticipates those that are still to be. This is only to say that the 'livingness' of language is most clearly manifested in speech, which welcomes, assimilates, experi-

ments, leaving the ultimate rejection or acceptance to the permanence of writing. But the written language tends to look backwards; or, to put it another way, its onward progress is slower, since the writer is accustomed to weigh novelty against tradition, to exclude the informal or colloquial in favour of the formal or literary.[1] This is true of that ordinary English in which we communicate with one another. We never (or rarely) express ourselves in a letter as we do in conversation, either face to face or on the telephone. We try to marshal our words and give shape to our sentences: to forget colloquialism and remember grammar. As for business and official English, that is notoriously formalised. It retains constructions, phrases, words, which have by long use become (in Shakespeare's phrase) overworn, and survive only in a kind of living death. The history of officialese or gobbledygook, as it is picturesquely called, has been feelingly written in recent times by Fowler, Herbert, Partridge, Gowers, and others. It is a fascinating and melancholy theme, but is outside the scope and alien to the theme of this book.

Memorable writing – that is, literature – draws upon, or, more precisely, reflects the past in another way. A representative anthology of English prose, the *Oxford Book*, for example, is a kind of illustrative history of English syntax and idiom. If we study a few individual passages reasonably spaced in time we shall see how one convention, one mode of expression, succeeds another. Literature, as distinct from ephemeral writing and officialese, preserves what is best and most worthy out of the past and hands it on as a living tradition; and since it has permanence, we are conscious of the continuity. We are conscious too that the principles and rules which govern 'modern usage' are often upset by the example of literature; and for this very reason, that all literature written before our own age inevitably reflects a usage that is not modern; the past impinges on the present. Every writer upon what is called 'good English' has to recognise, though he may be embarrassed by this simple fact; and also to realise that, even in the realm of written (as distinct from spoken) English, the present slips into the past. His book grows out of date even as he writes it. The 'best English' transcends the particular contemporary period; it both determines and is determined by the usage and custom of succeeding generations, and represents the composite usage of them all.

[1] Throughout this book the term *literary* as an epithet for *language* is used as a convenient, though not satisfactory, antonym of *colloquial*.

ii

It so happened that just as I sat down to draft this chapter the BBC critics were settling down to discuss Mr Eric Partridge's *The Concise Usage and Abusage*. So I put aside pen and paper and listened. Miss C. V. Wedgwood opened the discussion. She observed that we talk nowadays of usage rather than rules, because rules are broken by so many good writers. Shakespeare, for example, was guilty of the double comparative; Defoe and Addison of the confused and misrelated participle. The truth was (she continued) that English grammar is accommodating, and has only one rule, that it should be clear: Ours is a democratic language, and affords us a freedom we ought not to abuse. Thus, with platitude and half-truth, she pronounced upon English and Mr Partridge. Others then began to join in. The chairman ventured the remark that 'nobody bothers to write grammatically', and declared that for her part she was not inclined to submit to correction. Another confessed that, having been accustomed to using tautology and literarisms, he was going to stick to them. A third asked who the book was for and was silently rebuked by a fourth, who managed to slip in the phrase 'for whom the book is written'. A fifth summed it all up in the ponderous statement that 'language must be the servant of the thought'. And so they passed on to Art.

They were, although they did not appear to notice it, touching upon this profound and difficult subject of the relationship of literature to language. I have shown in *The Pattern of English* that with the development, about the end of the seventeenth century, of what we more specifically call modern prose, there came a consciousness of right and wrong; in Dryden, for example, who condemned the preposition at the end of a sentence, and in Steele, whose *Petition of 'Who' and 'Which'* sought to determine the proper use of various forms of the relative pronoun. The grammarians of the next century or so – Lowth, Murray, Cobbett, in particular – tended, in their treatment of syntax, to the formulation of dogmatic rules. Their influence persisted until the beginning of the twentieth century. Nesfield, whose books belong to that period, may legitimately be called a grammarian of the rigid school; but it is significant that even he admitted certain compromises and modifications which, by recognising practice as well as theory, pointed the way to the modern approach through usage. The emphasis moved from what, theoretically, ought to be, to what –

however deplorable it might appear – in many writers undoubtedly was.

Grammatical dogmatism left us a legacy of superstitions, of which Dryden's condemnation of the preposition-at-end is an outstanding example. Ironically, in language (as indeed in other matters) rules have a fascination for most of us. We like to be able to distinguish black from white, and are suspicious of the neutral tones. But rule and custom are not separate or separable conceptions. The writer on usage, like the older type of grammarian, is a teacher rather than a mere recorder. On the face of it, he declares that this is right, or wrong, not according to some abstract law or principle but because custom has made it so. But usage has a way of rounding on him. If custom, or usage, does determine the shape of the sentence, the turn of a phrase, the defiance of formal grammar, the choice of a word, it should be frankly recognised as the arbiter. This is no more than to say 'Whatever is, is right'. And there the modern grammarian (to use a convenient but misleading term) quite naturally and on the whole justly demurs. He must harness usage to some kind of established rule or principle. This, he declares, is what thousands of people say or write, this crops up again and again in reputable newspapers and magazines – nevertheless it is wrong and therefore to be avoided. It is clear that in his mind sheer custom, the actual practice of those who use the language, has not the last word; it must be judged, and if necessary condemned, by some academic and nebulous tribunal of grammar. He is quite often proved wrong. Custom wins, and (if he lives long enough) he has to eat his words in a new edition. As a matter of fact, in English, which is not controlled by an Academy, it is usage that in the end prevails. A construction once very common may fall out of use; another long recognised may be frowned upon for some alleged ambiguity or awkwardness; another may come newly into favour. Over a long period the people who use the language fashion it, syntax, vocabulary, and idiom. The writer on usage, being (usually) intent upon guiding and teaching his contemporaries, isolates a particular period, his own. He is perfectly aware that the past confounds him, and that the future will outwit him. Meanwhile, he is content to make his record, and in so doing impose upon what might be a dangerous freedom a healthy discipline. Like other dealers in a living language, he cannot fully relate what is with what has gone before and what is likely to follow after. In a real sense he writes for today; but his book is also concerned with yesterday and tomorrow.

'Who is it for?' asked one of the critics referred to (in the first paragraph of section ii). The answer is, for the man or woman who wishes to converse well and with dignity, to write a letter, to draft a report, to write a leading article, a short story, a review, a critical essay; for all, in fact, who have occasion to write either voluntarily or perforce, to use English seriously for private or public communication. Fowler and Partridge and one or two others are not far from my elbow as I write this chapter. At any time, halting between two opinions, I may need their help and guidance. They are the guardian angels, as it were, of a language that, in the hands of most of us, is only too apt to fall into evil ways. Whenever the sentence becomes a little entangled, or a construction gets us in two minds, we hear the beating of their wings.

But behind that innocent question there was an honest doubt as well as (it must be confessed) a covert sneer. It is fairly plain that the critics themselves felt a little above *The Concise Usage and Abusage*. For whomever else it was, it was not for them. And we all, pondering the first clause of my last sentence, share their doubts. English, we murmur, is democratic, free, untrammelled by 'grammar'. There is a natural language, and a 'grammatical' language, and they do not always agree. 'Who is it for?' and 'Whoever else it is for?', being natural, are right. It is not a mere modern belief, a fashionable and facile acceptance of 'grammar without tears', but originates from an idea that when English lost its inflections it lost what we may call its central mechanism. In the *Grammar* which Johnson prefixed to his *Dictionary* (1755) he devotes about fourteen lines to syntax, the art of constructing sentences and putting them together. 'Our language,' he says blandly, 'has so little inflection or variety of terminations, that its construction neither requires nor admits many rules.' Once the bugbear of agreement was out of the way, syntax or construction could be left to look after itself.

In all this there is both truth and fallacy. Johnson was not, in fact, so far off the mark as we, living in the post-Fowler age, imagine him to be. The language of his time had greater freedoms than ours, as I have shown in my treatment of the participle phrase in *The Pattern of English* (pp. 67 ff.). The grammarians were only just beginning to study the language as it was written, in the main by great writers, and to consider not so much its accidence as its syntax. As I have already pointed out, the process was slow and did not come to fruition till our own century. But now that it has come to fruition, and we have been made conscious of those 'rules' which Johnson said were not required, we

cannot ignore them. It is because Johnson was not conscious of them that his statement contains an element of truth; its fallacy, or (more precisely) its inadequacy, is only observable in the light of the present.

But even for the ordinary writer today a question remains – whether this emphasis on what I have called the 'mechanism' of the language is either helpful or desirable. We may well ask whether it does not tend to set a gulf between speech and writing, to interfere with the natural and legitimate impact of the colloquial upon the written language, to set a brake, as it were, upon spontaneity. Whatever the answers to these questions may be – and they are given, often indirectly, at various places in this book – it is certain that the modern treatment of usage has set people thinking about English for its own sake. To that the arguments in office or school and much correspondence in the Press are abundant testimony. On the whole, it is a good thing that, as we sit down to write, we are aware of at least some of the pitfalls, and may, with a little concentrated study and persistent reference, avoid most of them. True, like Andrew Lang, we are almost afraid to put pen to paper; but a healthy fear may be, after all, better than a slapdash or careless abandon.

And yet – we have not quite settled the question. All this time we have been moving in the realm of 'good' and 'better' English, that which can hope to escape serious criticism and send away baffled 'the reader over our shoulder'. Most of us are like Alice in confusing 'I say what I mean' with 'I mean what I say'. To the writer of workaday prose – to you and me – the ways of words themselves are difficult to follow, and the proper ordering of them a perplexing business. Our difficulty is to make them say what we mean: to bridge the gap between thought and the expression of it in speech or writing. This very metaphor, by the way, begs a question, as we shall see later; but for the moment it may stand. As Keats said in the very act of writing a poem, 'the dull brain perplexes and retards', by which he meant that the very mechanism of language got in the way of inspiration. That is, as we all know in our less exalted way, always true, since language is, at best, an imperfect instrument. Only we try to make it as perfect as possible by studying and, as far as we are able, putting into practice certain rules and principles that govern, or seem to govern, it.

But what of the creative writer, the man who achieves what we call literature? Keats himself suggests that he has difficulties; but is he aware of that mechanism of which we are all too painfully conscious? The

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