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The Scientific Author as I Have Known Him

HE is a happy man whose work has brought him association with the men and women of science rather than with, say, "personalities" of the entertainment world or politics, or the stuffed shirts of pseudo-Big Business. It is not only that the scientist brings to his work an exceptional competence and a singular assiduity; not only that his work probably does more for human welfare, in the long run, than any other; it is also that science seems to bring to its devotees integrity of mind and purpose and a refreshing modesty.

This rises, no doubt, from the character of the work itself. As each new exploration of a frontier enlarges the understanding, it also uncovers new vistas of ignorance. So there are few *prima donnas* in science. The atmosphere is rather that of a healthy humility, and few can breathe it without learning tolerance and the agreeable ability to grasp another's point of view. Although I am not a scientist myself, it has been my lot to have had much to do with scientists; and I count the privilege a great one.

I am speaking here, however, not to the point of the scientist *qua* scientist but of the scientist as an author. And first, one must observe that authorship is an inevitable part of the scientific job. Charles Darwin bemoaned the fact that he had to record and report as well as observe, but record and report he did. And every other scientist worth his salt must do the same. Writing is not a dainty accomplishment, like playing the guitar, which the scientist may or may not elect to do. Reporting is an integral and inescapable factor in any research, and no research is complete without the record.

It behooves the scientist, therefore, to make conscious effort to achieve a lucid and impeccable style—and many writers of science material have done this, either intuitively or deliberately. I could name names but the chance of important omission, which could seem invidious, is too great. Yet it has seemed to me that, over the course of the 30-odd years that have constituted my acquaintance

with science writers and writing, the quality of that writing has steadily deteriorated. This and what follows is, of course, a generality that ignores notable exceptions.

In the first place, it is much more difficult nowadays to get the scientist to write than it was 30 years ago. He is absorbed and preoccupied with his work, he devotes enormous time and energy to it, and the sheer labor of writing about it in addition apparently appalls him—he has no time for it and no taste for it if the time availed. Compelled at last to put pen to paper, he discovers (or, more accurately, his reader does) that he has lost or never acquired the necessary techniques, which means that, before the manuscript can be printed somebody must patch it.

It is almost axiomatic in a publishing office that nothing conclusive can be learned about an author's style and diction from his reprints. The reprints may have had very much, much, little, or very little of the soothing ministrations of an editor. An original manuscript is the only safe guide.

Whether anything can or should be done to alleviate this situation, I really do not know. Since the men and women of science are certainly not too stupid to learn the elements of English, a remedy could readily be found in more time spent on writing in science courses or, perhaps more to the point, in a general recognition of the fact that sound English is as much a part of training for science as for any other appropriate technique.

But this is, possibly, a millennial hope. We shall probably have to be content, the tempo and temper of the times being what they are, with ramshackle literary edifices, shored up to keep them from falling to pieces and patched and gilded here and there to make them presentable.

ROBERT S. GILL

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