Discourse on Style

Comte de Buffon

In this selection from his 1753 essay, Discourse *on Style, Buffon offers a strikingly classical view of style.*

Style is nothing but the order and movement according to which a man arranges his thoughts. If he ties them closely together, if he tightens them up, the style becomes firm, lively, and concise; if he lets them pile themselves loosely one upon another, and unites them only by means of words, however elegant these may be, the style will be diffuse, loose, dragging....

And yet, every subject is a whole; and, however great it may be, it can be covered in a single discourse. Breaks, rests, internal divisions, should be employed only in the treatment of diverse subjects or when, since it has to deal with vast, thorny, and disparate subjects, the march of the mind is interrupted by a multiplicity of obstacles and constrained by force of circumstances; otherwise, multiple divisions, far from making a work more solid, destroy it as a structural whole; the book may seem clear at a glance, but the author's plan remains obscure; he cannot make an impression on the mind of the reader, he cannot even make himself felt, save by the continuity of the thread of the work, by the harmonic interdependence of its ideas, by a successive development, a sustained gradation, a uniform movement which any interruption destroys or weakens.

Why are the works of nature so perfect? It is because each one of her works is a whole, and because she labors according to an immutable plan from which she never departs; she prepares in silence the seeds of her productions; she sketches by a unique act the original form of each living thing; she develops it, perfects it in a continuous movement within a prescribed time. The finished work astounds: but it is the divine imprint whose mark it carries that should impress us. The human mind can create nothing; it will produce only after having been made fecund by experience and reflection; the information it has amassed furnishes but the seeds of its end-products; but if the human mind will imitate nature in its movement and in its labor, if it will rise to the contemplation of the most sublime truths; if it will gather them together' in due order, if it will make a whole of them, a system, by reflection, it will establish on unshakeable foundations immortal monuments.

It is for lack of a plan, for not having reflected sufficiently on his purpose, that an intelligent man finds himself embarrassed and unable to decide where to begin to write. He entertains a great number of ideas; and since he has neither

compared them, nor subordinated them one to another, nothing determines him to prefer one over another; he remains in perplexity. But once he has made a plan, once he has assembled and put in order all the thoughts essential to his subject, he will be readily aware of the exact moment to take up his pen, he will recognize the point at which the mind is ready to produce, he will be anxious to hasten its work, he will indeed have no other pleasure than that of writing; ideas will follow one another easily and the style will be natural and unconstrained; warmth will be born of this pleasure, will spread throughout and give life to each expression; everything will grow livelier; the tone will be raised, objects will take on color; and emotion thus joined to penetration, will increase it, carry it further, make it pass from what is said to what is going to be said, and the style becomes interesting and luminous.

Nothing is more opposed to this warmth of style than the desire to put striking traits everywhere; nothing is more contrary to the penetrating light that ought to embody itself and spread itself evenly throughout a work than those sparks which are made only by force in the mutual shock of words, and which dazzle us for an instant only to leave us afterwards in the dark. These are the thoughts that shine only by artificial opposition; one aspect only of the object is shown, the others left in the shadow; and ordinarily the aspect chosen is a point, an angle, over which the mind may play with the more facility in that the great aspects on which good sense customarily dwells are pushed into the background....

To write well, a man must, then, possess his subject fully; he must reflect upon it sufficiently to see clearly the order of his thoughts, and to make of them a sequence, a continuous chain, of which each point represents an idea; and when he has taken up his pen, he must guide it with due sequence along this chain, without letting it wander, or bear too heavily anywhere, or make any movement save that which will be determined by the ground it has to cover. It is in this that severity of style consists, and it is this also that will make unity of style, and regulate its flow; and this alone also will suffice to make the style precise and simple, even and clear, lively and consecutive. If to the observance of this first rule, dictated by the very nature of things, there is added delicacy of taste, scrupulous attention to the choice of words, care to name things only by the most general term possible, then the style will have nobility. If there is added further a distrust of first impulses, a scorn for what is no more than brilliant, and a steady repugnance for the equivocal and the jesting, the style will have graveness, even, indeed, majesty. Finally, if a man write as he thinks, if he believe what he seeks to get believed, this good faith with himself, which insures propriety in the eyes of others, and makes for the truth of a style, will give style all its effect, provided that this interior conviction is not marked by a too violent enthusiasm, and that everywhere there is displayed more candor than assurance, more reason than heat.