

Philosophers as Writers

The average man feels, not without some justification, that as writers, philosophers are often painfully obscure and even deliberately perverse. In his essay “On Philosophical Style” Professor Brand Blanshard agrees that all too often these charges are true. He notes, for instance, Lord Macaulay’s complaint that he found Kant’s *Critique* “utterly unintelligible” (a criticism Mr. Blanshard substantiates by exhibiting a typical Kantian sentence). He quotes, again with approval, Hans Reichenbach’s reaction to Hegel and Bertrand Russell’s remark that an eminent logician’s definition of inquiry (“Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole”) applies as well to a “sergeant drilling a group of recruits, or a bricklayer laying bricks.” No, Mr. Blanshard admits, many philosophers do not write well at all. In the remainder of his essay, of which the following paragraphs are a brief selection, he discusses why this is so and what can be done about it. He writes so brilliantly that his essay, as much by its style as by its content, is prima-facie evidence that philosophical writing does not have to be dull and needlessly brain-wracking, that it can be, like philosopher Blanshard’s essay, beautifully lucid.

1 When we turn to look more closely at this craft of philosophic expression, we find to our relief that it is less exacting than the art of the true man of letters. What the philosopher must manage to embody in words is his intellectual part, his ideas and their connections. And his prime object must be to convey these to his readers at the cost of a minimum of effort on their part. He must get them to follow a process of distinguishing, abstracting, and inferring—in short, of thinking. That implies thinking on their part as well as his; and thinking is hard work.

2 Now the way to save work for the reader is simply to write clearly. How easy it is to say that! “Simply to write clearly”—as if that were not one of the hardest things in the world! It is hard even to say what clearness means, let alone exemplify it in speech and writing. Indeed, there is no such thing if taken by itself; it lies in the relation between a giver-out and a taker-in. If there is trouble, it is sometimes wholly with the taker-in. Many a schoolboy has thought Euclid abominably obscure, and so he was—to the schoolboy. We have all known students who sat helpless before philosophers who were classics of clarity. On the other hand there are some purveyors of philosophy who pass all understanding, no matter whose. A master expositor, W. K. Clifford, said of an acquaintance: “He is writing a book on metaphysics, and is really cut out for it; the clearness with which he thinks he will make his

fortune as a philosopher.” Unhappily, the gibe has point. There are philosophers, or pseudo-philosophers, to understand whom would be a reflection on the reader’s own wit. But suppose, to revert to our opening illustrations, that the reader happens to be Macaulay reading Kant, or Reichenbach reading Hegel, or Russell reading the logician whom we quoted. If there is failure to understand in cases like this, it is not normally because the writer has nothing to say, and certainly not because the hearer’s witless. The writer has simply failed to cross the bridge. Why?

3 There are many reasons for such failure. One of the commonest is excessive generality in statement. Look at the statement by the eminent logician whom Russell had trouble with. One’s thought has to travel so great a distance from the point where this generalization leaves it to the thing it is supposed to describe that it might lose itself in a hundred different directions before hitting on the right one. It is unjust, I grant, to tear a passage from its context in this way, and the context would undoubtedly help; but if the context is of the same sort, that too will be obscure.

4 Listen to this from a great philosopher. I leave out only the first word and ask you to form the best conjecture you can of what he is talking about: “X is the self-restoration of matter in its formlessness, its liquidity; the triumph of its abstract homogeneity over specific definiteness; its abstract, purely self-existing continuity as negation of negation is here set as activity.” You might guess the writer of this—it is Hegel—but I would almost wager the national debt that you do not have the faintest suggestion of what he is actually talking about. Well, it happens to be heat—the good familiar heat that one feels in the sunshine or around fireplaces. I strongly suspect that this farrago is nonsense, but that is not my point. My point is that even if it is not nonsense, even if a reader, knowing that heat was being talked about, could make out, by dint of a dozen rereadings and much knitting of eyebrows, some application for the words, no one has a right to ask this sort of struggle of his reader.

5 Barrett Wendell, in his admirable book on writing, points out that clearness and vividness often turn on mere specificity. To say that Major André was hanged is clear and definite; to say that he was killed is less definite, because you do not know in what way he was killed; to say that he died is still more indefinite because you do not even know whether his death was due to violence or to natural causes. If we were to use this statement as a varying symbol by which to rank writers for clearness, we might, I think, get something like the following: Swift, Macaulay, and Shaw would say that André was hanged. Bradley would say that he was killed. Bosanquet would say that he died. Kant would say that his mortal existence achieved its termination. Hegel would say that a finite determination of infinity had been further determined by its own negation.