

# Originality.

An Extract from Wilhelm Jordan's Epic Letters.

(Translation from the German.)

In our times there seems to be a special wish to be considered original. very often we hear of persons being praised for their originality or inventive genius. But by closer scrutiny we can hardly think little enough of the originality of the individual. The so-called originator only finds himself in position to bring out and delineate some fact transmitted to him from preceding generations. The plant is built up from air and earthy matters, conformably to the germ which is in the seed. When the growth

the flow of the sap and building material has commenced, the atoms are differentiated and set together for the building up of a stem; from this again buds form from which leaves, buds and blooms are unrolled in several forms at once. Exactly so may be summed up the doings of the many in times long past in the work of one which wins a new form by binding together many old facts. Looking backward we are more inclined to think be surprised that this result had not been sooner attained. Long ago Seneca observed that small letters seen through a glass cylinder filled with water were greatly enlarged. Aristoph --- mentions

the burning glass.

The fineness of the cut of antique gems is first understood since magnifiers of clear amber have been found in the ruins of ancient Pompeii. Yet much over a century passed away before men learned to use this means for the correction of the common weakness of the sight of the old. Then for many long years concave and expensive spectacles glasses, were ground and finally after this art had become improved and different diffused and the power of the concave and convex combined became familiar through experiment. Further improvement could not but take place and the telescope was discovered by a number

unknown to each other. Every principal Roman carried a seal ring with which he printed not only pictures but his name and or phrases in sealing wax, as did also the Egyptians; many centuries before. Also the Roman Emperors possessed stamps with which they printed their names to decrees. Cicero unconsciously gave the entire theory of types, as he said that the person in possession of needful rules and with the assembled letters prepared from metal, which grouped before him would <sup>be able to</sup> make reproduce Homer's poems, though having ever so little of the art of oratory. Between Cicero and Guttenberg generations passed away, time, men printed books before Guttenberg

by cutting the entire page on blocks of wood how close they were to movable type as it was only necessary to cut the letters apart rearrange and use them again yet this door stood wide open for many decades before it was seen when finally it seems to have been seen by many at once. It was not the invention of one but the gradual progress of the many. The road from the round tree trunk which was placed under the heavy load to assist in moving it to the wagon wheel and wagon passes over unnumbered centuries again from this to the locomotive. Who invented the last? nobody and everybody, from the first wagon maker to Stephenson

and

In the same manner have proceeded the discoveries in science whose disciples move forward with the regularity of a well drilled army. The forward steps of the entire army and not the bravery of individual brings the result, though one may enter the citadel in advance. I remember particularly that in the year 1840 when I was a student in Königsberg to have heard Bessel state that the wavering of Uranus from its path, showed that it was influenced by an undiscovered planet-out side of its orbit. when Gall found Neptune by following Leveriers statements there lay in Gauss & Cambridge reckonings of like character

written by Adams years before. In poetry originality in its literal sense cannot be more highly spoken of, for\* poetry is really the art of tradition; inheritance is its principal support. Only such poets become great as give form to the living poetry of their people and their greatest works are those which they do not create, but which are created for them as Goethe's Faust, Schiller's Wallenstein and Fiel. That which condemns <sup>so much</sup> ~~most~~ of our recent poetry to die in a day is the effort to obtain originality.

The nation complains falsely that ideal thought is lost. If the poet only understands the handling of the treasures the nation will show him that the ideal

mind is not in the least weakened. It is very questionable if there would ever have been a ~~part~~ if men had possessed the art of writing from the beginning for the poetic form - the verse has resulted from the lack of writing the law of the content of poetry - its arrangement - has come very gradually to the knowledge of man through oral communication take. The history of the first representative - the legend in its oral communication it has gradually worked itself into poetry through the very nature of human thought, that which through its beauty - its sprightliness, be it the sound be it the meaning of the words which charms, that which aroused



consciousness enlivened sympathy affects the soul lives in the memory. Memory is a sieve which retains all the real poetry of the manifold legends that come into it. The same artifices which serve as handle and clasp to retain the embellishments through the weakness of the memory in the repeated communications from mouth to mouth unconsciously serves to drop out all that uncouth insignificant and dry.

Through such a sifting the story wins order and that which unconsciously impresses the mind. The best parts are remolded and embellished. That which a second relator puts harshly, a third

softens or forgets but every striking point that is ingenious or awakens sympathy is retained and in this way the legend obtains a form and beauty which fills the whole soul a completeness to which nothing can be added. This originally unconscious process was noticed however and laid hold of methodically by Homer, who lived in ancient Greece in the fairy time of this highly gifted people and took part while these things transpired, as they really did through oral communication by narrators of note through whole schools of poets who were limited to the sons of a few families and sons-in-law chosen for the profession. It was required that a man

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be bound to the profession for its highest perfection and yet it was seldom that a very great poet was obtained; but it was under the influence of these highly favorable surroundings that the ~~man~~ most beautiful flower bloomed, that the most extraordinary genius arose.

Such was the giant genius who on account of his literary performances was called Homer, because he raised the science of his school to the fullest and the most complete mastery and with it the entire poetic power of his nation. He followed the calling of his father and was a rhapsodist, <sup>first</sup> by inheritance, then by modeling from his father, after which he composed his own songs. Nothing however worked so

gradual

well for the perfection of his powers as the oft-repeated recital. Watching closely the eyes of his hearers he learned where his descriptions were too broad, when the attention was not held. Then brows were <sup>with</sup> ~~by~~ <sup>with</sup> ~~by~~ thought when a sentence was poorly constructed, or the easy flowing style was broken. The hollowed hand passed behind the ear, when the conception was not rendered clear. A peculiar tremor was noticed when a thrilling incident was thrown out too suddenly. But when a word or phrase sets the nerves of the heart in motion that moment every head is raised every wrinkle is smoothed out from the forehead every eye sparkles with expectation. Following these signs closely in the next recital, every point

is carefully connected. Here a description is shortened there lengthened and <sup>then</sup> strengthened. Here a shade of emotion is painted more darkly there a bright point of admiration more forcibly given. From such observations and improvements the song becomes perfected until it is given with a feeling of safety and with evidence that it pleases. Just so the real poetry must be built up. These known rules became to him as flesh and blood and finally he was able to fulfill the poetic idea without the necessity of previous recitation.

### Reflections.

Is it true that all real poetry must be built up in the manner described? Is it true that poetry is the necessary result

of the lack of writing? If so must we re-  
trograde in this art since the art of writing is  
becoming so widely <sup>generally</sup> diffused throughout the world.

Or can the intuitive mind seize the poetry  
of a people and weave it into a glorious song  
from the tips of the pen as well as the point of  
the tongue?

Is it also true that of re-  
peated recital is an absolute necessity to  
its highest perfection and that the present  
plan of books difficult or impossible to  
alter or amend, is an invention that must  
ruin the measure, impair the melody and de-  
stroy the sweetness of the songs of the modern  
world?

Do we owe the perfection of our  
tongue to the recital and amendment here  
attributed to Homer? Did Shakspeare perfect

his great plays by repeated recital by his stage companions and repeated amendment; and do we owe to this manner of composition his wonderful works?

What shall we say of this description of the advancement in science?

If advancement was nearly or quite continuous ages ago with the then feeble and poorly drilled armies, what must it become now that the workers are so increased?

Do not our eyes reaping the rewards of the battle and yet placing unnumbered reinforcements in the field to push the work forward. Then what may we anticipate for the future in the field of science.

Does this argue that the mind of the in