

LUDWIG BÖRNE

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How to Become an Original Writer in Three Days

There can be found today men and works which offer instruction in how to learn such things as Latin, Greek, and French in a mere three days, and such things as accounting in a mere three hours. How one might become in three days a truly original writer has, however, yet to be indicated. And yet it is such a simple thing! To do it there is nothing one needs to learn, only much one needs to *unlearn*. There is nothing new one need to experience, only much that one need forget.

In today's world, the minds and works of the learned might be compared to ancient manuscripts where one must scrape away the boring disputes of would-be Church Fathers and the ranting of inflamed monks to catch a glimpse of the Roman classic lying beneath. With the birth of every new mind comes the birth of beautiful new thoughts. With every individual, the world is reborn. And yet, somehow, the unnecessary and distracting scrawl of life and teaching conceals and obscures these original texts.

One can arrive at a fairly precise view of this state of affairs if one thinks of the following. We recognize an animal, a piece of fruit, a flower, and things of this sort as what they are. Could one, however, say that someone who knew partridges, raspberry bushes, or roses only by means of partridge pie, raspberry juice, or rose oil had a full and accurate understanding of these things? And yet, this is how the arts and sciences—and indeed all realms in which we first approach things through thought rather than the senses—proceed. These things are laid before us prepared and transformed and, in truth, in such fashion that we never come to know them in their raw and naked form. *Opinion* is the kitchen in which all truths are slaughtered, plucked, minced, stewed, and spiced. We are in need of nothing so much as *books without reason*—books, namely, that present to us actual *things* and not mere *opinions*.

There are but a tiny number of original writers and the best of them differ from those less good not nearly so much as we might, after a superficial consideration of the matter, think. One creeps, another runs, one limps, another dances, one drives, another rides to his destination. But route and destination are in every case the same. Only in solitude can one arrive at new and great thoughts.

The question is: how can one arrive at solitude? One might flee his fellow man—but then one finds oneself in the noisy market of books. One can throw

one's books away, but how does one free oneself from all the conventional knowledge that schooling has stuffed in one's head? In the true art of self-education, what is most needed and most beautiful, but also rarest and often poorly accomplished, is *the art of making oneself ignorant*. Just as in a million men only a thousand are thinkers, in a thousand thinkers only *one* truly thinks for himself. A people is like a porridge which receives its unity only from the pot in which it is found: the pithy and firm will only be found at the bottom, in the lowermost layer of a people: porridge remains porridge, and the golden spoon that takes from it a mouthful does not eliminate the principle of relation by separating the related from one another.

True striving in the cause of learning is not a voyage of discovery like that of Columbus, but a journey of adventure like that of Ulysses. Man is born abroad: to live means to search for one's homeland. And to think means to live. The fatherland of thought is the heart: at this well he who wishes to drink that which is fresh must himself create that freshness. Mind is but a stream. Thousands have set up camp along it and dirty its water with washing, bathing, and the like. Mind is the arm; will is the heart. One can acquire strength: one can make the strength grow.

But what good is strength without the courage to use it? A shameful and cowardly fear of thinking holds every one of us back. More repressive than any governmental censorship is the censorship which public opinion exercises over the works of our intellect. To become better than they are, most writers would not require more intelligence but more character. And this is a weakness that stems simply from vanity. The artist and the writer want to outstrip, want to tower above their comrades. But to tower above them they must stand next to them; to overtake them they must follow the same path. In doing so, good writers are very much like bad writers in that in the good writer can one find the bad writer entire. The good writer is simply something more: the good writer follows the same path as the bad writer, only he follows that path somewhat farther.

He who listens to his inner voice instead of the cries and clamor of the market, he who has the courage to teach to others what his heart has taught him, will always be *original*. Sincerity as regards oneself is the well of all brilliance and mankind would be more brilliant if it were simply more moral.

And now, here is the practical application I promised you: Take a stack of paper and write. Write everything that goes through your mind for three consecutive days with neither hesitation nor hypocrisy. Write down what you think of yourself, what you think of your wife, what you think of the war with the Turks, what you think of Goethe, of Fonk's trial, of the Last Judgment, of your superiors. At the end of the three days you will scarce be able to believe what new, unheard-of thoughts have come to you. And that, my friends, is how to become an original writer in just three days!

"The Art of Ignorance": An Afterword to Ludwig Börne

Arthur Schopenhauer did not observe the Sabbath. This is not surprising, as he was not Jewish and, though he was raised a Christian, he did not remain one. Why should he have observed it? He did however make a plea for the observance of an intellectual Sabbath.

In 1851, towards the end of a long life of reading, Schopenhauer wrote of the "high importance" of "the art of not reading." This was a response to new developments—what he called "the literature which in our days is spreading like weeds." This "*Unkraut der Literatur*" that, in his view, threatened to overrun the age is what he was seeking to address. His dialectical mind was not long in finding the means to this end. If there was *too much* to read, the solution was to *not* read.

For Schopenhauer, a singular danger awaited those who did not cultivate this "art of not reading." This was that the clever minds of the day might become "*der Tummelplatz fremder Gedanken*," the "playground of others' thoughts." To make the matter clear he offered a comparison. Just as in physical matters when someone never walks but only ever rides, he will sooner or later lose the ability to move of his own accord, so too, he reasoned, must things proceed in mental matters. Given the profusion of things to read, he worried that his age would "read itself stupid." It was to counter this danger that he recommended his special art.

The question of reading is always a delicate one for writers. The reader who would be a writer, so Schopenhauer's thinking went, needs to grant his mind a Sabbath, a time when the cramped thoughts of the week can relax, unfold their wings and fly about, alighting on this or that branch of remembrance, poking at this or that berry of inspiration. Without this Sabbath, there was a risk that one's independence might be lost, that one's mind might become nothing more than a place for others to bluster in and out of. What Schopenhauer advocated was a form of self-reliance. He wanted to free the striving self from the growing burden of all that writing so that it might stand up straight and walk. Towards what? That remained to be seen.

A generation earlier, Schopenhauer's countrymen Ludwig Börne had arrived at a similar conclusion. This led him to advocate "the art of making oneself ignorant." And it led him to offer instruction in the art of writing. He promised to teach anyone with good faith and three days how to stop

writing like others and start writing like him or herself.

Born Juda Löw Baruch in Frankfurt am Main's Jewish ghetto in 1786, Ludwig Börne proved himself from early on an original writer. He was a gifted scholar and pursued his studies in the most important centers of German learning. He began in the legendary university in Halle, specializing in medicine (the vocation that offered the greatest possibility of advancement for a German Jew of his day). In 1808, new political developments (Napoleon) changed the rules of political engagement and posts in the ministry and in civil service were opened to Jews. Börne took advantage of these winds of change blowing from the west, changed his course of study, and soon received his doctorate in political science. In 1811, he joined the civil service in his native Frankfurt. A few years later, the liberation of Frankfurt from Napoleonic control brought with it the repeal of Napoleon's liberal laws and unhappily forced Börne to seek a new career. The career he chose was the only one he saw left open to him: that of an original writer.

He quickly made a journalistic name for himself—at the same time creating a remarkable amount of work for the city's censor. Börne founded a review dedicated to the arts that he named *The Scale* (*Die Waage*). He was not only its editor, he was also its publisher and sole contributor. Censorship was particularly tight at this unstable time and writing openly of political affairs was no easy matter. In response, Börne wrote of painting, poetry, and theater, and in writing of these things managed also to write of the native rights of man. His by turns bantering and biting style, much like that of his friend and fellow Jew Heinrich Heine, left a lasting mark on German prose. Börne was neither shy nor slow to make enemies. He publicly judged no less a worthy than Goethe a "fool of convention" (*Stabilitätsnarr*). For more serious offences against public taste and political orthodoxy, *The Scale* was soon closed down by local officials and Börne fled to what was for him the homeland of freedom: France.

His journalistic production remained feverish as he journeyed back and forth from Paris to Frankfurt during the coming years. In 1824 he was diagnosed with an incurable lung illness and shortly thereafter his health began to deteriorate seriously. After the July Revolution of 1830 he moved permanently to Paris and it is from here that he wrote his most celebrated work: his *Letters from Paris*, addressed half to his love, Jeanette Wohl, and half to the German people. In the one of these letters he declared that, "the time for theory is over and the time for action has come. I no longer want to write, I want to do battle!" Frustrated at other writers' unwillingness to follow him in this resolve, he isolated himself—breaking publicly with Heine over the question of the writer's responsibility to society and the rectification of its ills. (Heine was to repay Börne for his attacks in a work published after

the latter's death.) Börne's health soon definitively worsened and he was buried in Paris' Père Lachaise cemetery at the age of fifty on February 12, 1837. Heine's posthumous publication helped cement the image of Börne as an *avant la lettre* literary Bolshevik. After the brief fame of his life, his works have, with each generation, fallen ever deeper into obscurity.

One year before Börne's death, the great champion of art for art's sake, Théophile Gautier, complained of poets who "write a hundred lines in succession without crossing anything out or even looking up at the ceiling." There are few things so annoying to careful writers as prodigious productivity and Gautier was sensitive to this. He was also sensitive to the fact that few things are so little conducive to the creation of great art as haste. And, yet, this is precisely what Börne recommended for the creation of original art.

Börne's essay, "How to Become an Original Writer in Three Days," was written at the dawn of a new era of mindless haste. For those ever more pressed by the Industrial Revolution, there were works which promised instruction in how to acquire all sorts of fantastic skills in a matter of days or hours (the spiritual forefathers of *TOEFL for Dummies*). Both aggravated and amused by this trend, Börne decided to top these competitors and teach his reader how to become nothing less than an original writer in no fewer than three days.

Börne's choice of adjective was a careful one. In 1823 to say *original* was to say a great deal. The word "originality" first entered German (and English), however, long before 1823. It entered, in point of fact, as a sin—the only one which we can do nothing about: original sin. It was employed as a translation for the Vulgate's "*peccatum originale*." In the eighteenth century, the word struck out on its own—and had little success. To say someone was "an original" in the eighteenth century was to say, essentially, that he was crazy. It was applied to those who pretended to be better and wiser than those who came before them, those who lacked respect for past achievement. To say that someone was "an original" was to say that what was original about them was not to be envied.

And then suddenly the word's fortune turned. The spark had been glowing for years and can be traced back to a warm room in the cold Dutch night. In his *Discours de la méthode*, Descartes sought to turn his mind from accepted ideas toward a light that shone from within. The philosophy of the Enlightenment would encourage what Börne, following Descartes and Kant before him, called "a shameful and cowardly fear of thinking" that "holds every one of us back." The first explicit manifesto for originality, Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition*, offered a golden rule in this regard:

Know thyself . . . dive deep into thy bosom; learn the depth, extent, bias, and full fort of thy mind; contract full intimacy with the stranger within thee; excite and cherish every spark of intellectual light and heat, however smothered under former negligence, or scattered through the dull, dark mass of common thoughts; and collecting them into a body, let thy genius rise (if a genius thou hast) as the sun from chaos; and if I should then say, like an Indian, Worship it.

With Indian enthusiasm like Young's—and Rousseau, Revolution, and Romanticism fanning it—the word's status rose rapidly. Originality soon became so precious that people began to fear that it was in short supply. Keats was much troubled by the idea that "there was nothing original to be written in poetry; that its riches were already exhausted—and all its beauties forestalled." By the latter half of the nineteenth century, aesthetic debates had become so saturated with the term, and it had come to be considered such an automatic good, that Schopenhauer's contrarian pupil Nietzsche could complain of "the modern rage for originality."

While the idea of becoming an "original" writer was not without its ironies in 1823, neither was Börne using it purely ironically. The voice he heard rang deep, but could scarcely be heard over the din. He wrote: "In today's world, the minds and works of the learned might be compared to ancient manuscripts where one must scrape away the boring disputes of would-be Church Fathers and the ranting of inflamed monks to at last catch a glimpse of the Roman classic lying beneath." Just as scholastic sermonizing tended to dim the glory of ancient texts with its dry glosses, so too did the voices of the day—the advice and adages with which the literary market was flooded—tend to drown out the original voice within.

Börne's method was as simple as it was strange. What he recommended for the finding of one's most personal originality is something to which we have given the least personal of names: automatic writing. Though the Surrealists made much of this technique, they were not its inventors. Before psychoanalysis was born, Freud was treating neurotics—with limited success. His principal tool was hypnosis. Dissatisfied with the short-lived ameliorations of neurotic symptoms brought about through hypnosis, he began to seek a new method. He found it in free association. By the mid-1890s, he had definitively renounced the use of hypnosis and placed free association at the center of his new analysis. He would henceforth refer to it as the principle means of intercepting the inner voice of his patients. What is surprising is how much of this took place on paper. Freud's first patient was himself and one of the techniques he developed upon himself was automatic writing.

Years later, in a brief and charming essay published anonymously, Freud

wrote of Börne. Originally enough, Freud speaks of himself in the third person and responds to Havelock Ellis' strategic compliment that psychoanalysis was a smart and splendid thing, but that it was not science, it was art. One of Ellis' arguments concerned the use of free association and Ellis quoted to this end a nineteenth-century Swedenborgian doctor who wrote mystical poetry in his spare time and who advocated, in a work from 1857, a form of free association.

The disguised Freud begins his response by adding to Ellis' bibliography more capital and relevant figures—first Schiller, and then, at greater length, Börne. He tells how a Hungarian doctor directed Ferenczi's attention to Börne's forgotten essay, who in turn questioned Freud about it. Freud, still writing of himself in the third person, reports that the volume of Börne's complete works in which the essay appeared was one which he had received as a gift when he was thirteen, and that it was the only one of the books from this period of his life that he still possessed. Börne "was the first writer in whose works Freud immersed himself." Freud claims that though he could still remember many of the essays contained in the volume, he had no memory of this essay on original writing and free association. Upon rereading, Freud recognized a number of his own original insights: into "censorship" of an internal rather than a merely external sort, into the value of honesty in the forming of a writer, and into free association. "It seems then that we can not rule out that this reference has uncovered one of those bits of cryptomnesia," wrote the encrypted Freud, "which in so many cases may be supposed to lie behind a seeming originality."

Freud wasn't the only detective on the case. Commentator Paul La Farge has noted:

Among the investigators who studied automatic writing in the hope that it would reveal the workings of the mind were William James, the French psychologist Pierre Janet, and the British team of F. W. Myers and Edmund Gurney, who, undiscouraged by what they discovered, would go on to found the Society for Psychical Research. Each of them came to more or less the same conclusion: Automatic writing was produced by a part of the mind of which the writer had no awareness. Myers called it the "co-conscious"; Janet called it "mental automatism," and James, prudently, called it nothing at all. A decade later Freud would call it the unconscious, and the name would stick.

Among the early experimentalists . . . was one of James's most brilliant students, a Harvard undergraduate named Gertrude Stein. Together with a graduate student named Leon Solomons, Stein con-

ducted experiments on “normal motor automatism,” the ability of the nervous system to operate without conscious control. Writing was one of the activities they studied: Stein put her arm in a sling and hid it from her view with a screen; Solomons distracted her while her writing hand went about its business. The results sound like . . . well, like Stein: “Hence there is no possible way of avoiding what I have spoken of, and if this is not believed by the people of whom you have spoken, then it is not possible to prevent the people of whom you have spoken of so glibly.” Stein’s literary work was not, as far as we know, automatically written, but the influence of automatic writing on her rhythm and syntax is unmistakable—so much so that B. F. Skinner jokingly argued that she could not claim to be the author of *Tender Buttons*, as it had so clearly been produced by forces more or less beyond her control.

While Stein was not ready to adopt the term or the practice, others were waiting in the wings—the Surrealists, the Italian Futurists, and a host of others.

More important than this question, however, is another one—a question more of the present than the past. Disguised in Börne’s playful style lies a serious question about the originality of what we write. When we scrape away the layers of moralizing and false learning of which he speaks, what lies beneath? Perhaps the text that lies beneath those layers is a text that we have read before. But is it not infinitely more likely that it is not a text at all but a blank sheet to which we might turn, at last, in full possession of our original powers? There is only one way to find out.

NOTE: Translation of “How to Be an Original Writer in Three Days” is based on Ludwig Börne’s *Sämtliche Schriften*, revised edition edited by Inge and Peter Rippmann (Düsseldorf: J. Melzer, 1964). Additional references in this essay are to Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (University Press, Manchester, 1918) and Paul LaFarge, “Stop Making Sense: How Automatic Writing Can Free Your Mind and Change the World,” *Village Voice*, April 11–17, 2001.