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*October 2004*

# Correspondences Two

## Broadside opinions and conversations al fresco

Dear Reader,

In this second issue of *Correspondences*, we turn to Vygotsky. Susan Wells's searching comment clarifies both his philosophical purposes and his usefulness to us.

Lev Vygotsky, who has been called "the Mozart of psychologists," died of TB in the 1930s, before Stalin had a chance to kill him. His insistence that all study of language and thought must begin with "the unit of meaning," not adding it in as the "semantic component," is crucially important for an understanding of the kind of process composing is. We should read Vygotsky carefully (dialectically), alert to ambiguities inevitably faced when we read a difficult style in translation. It isn't enough to look up "composition" in the index of *Thought and Language*, as many researchers seem to do, retrieving a few remarks about the relationship of reading and writing before hurrying back to Piaget and Father Ong.

In *Reclaiming the Imagination* (Boynton/Cook, 1984), I have excerpted passages from Vygotsky's *Mind in Society* which set forth his argument about what makes human activity

symbolic and not a matter of stimulus and response. The analysis there offers, perhaps, the best point of departure in studying Vygotsky, but Susan Wells takes us to the heart of the matter in her discussion of Vygotsky's chapter on concept formation in *Thought and Language*. Warren Herendeen, philologist extraordinaire, has recently been reading Vygotsky in the course of his study of ESL theory and practice. His response will, I expect, get the dialectic going.

Letters and comment on this Vygotsky issue will appear in *Correspondences*, 4. Meanwhile, in our next issue, Eugene Green will read Walker Percy on "metaphor as mistake," and we will print responses to our first issue on porcupines, darning needles, and the hazardous practice of rappelling—modes of interpreting interpretations. Your letters are welcome.

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## Vygotsky Reads *Capital*

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Vygotsky has been important for composition teachers and theorists ever since James Britton summarized his experimental study of concept formation in *Language and Learning* (London: Penguin, 1970). But as the number of citations in composition journals has grown, the use of Vygotsky in composition theory has become perfunctory, reflecting less a critical encounter with his work than the obligation to display him as an authority. Vygotsky is called on to support such positions as the sociohistorical origin of speech, the complexity of concept formation, or the importance of inner speech. Such citations do not misrepresent Vygotsky, but it would be a shame if so brilliant a theorist were to be reduced, through constant invocation, to a standard authority. We might do well, then, to reread *Thought and Language* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1962) as if it were not the work of a major figure, attending to what is strange or embarrassing in it.

A convenient place to start is with the account of Vygotsky's experimental study of concept formation, the fifth chapter of *Thought and Language*. To read this chapter as a narrative is to be surprised by it. First, Vygotsky is surprisingly silent about his own experimental procedure. We know a great deal about that procedure, including the apparatus he used, how it was presented to his subjects, and how experimenters responded to the subjects' activities. But none of this information comes from the text of *Thought and Language*; it is supplied in a footnote by a helpful editor who discovered a parallel study. Surely, whatever conventions for reporting experiments Vygotsky acknowledged, the *sine qua non* of an experimental report is a narrative of the experiment. True, we know that Vygotsky's experimental reports were only schematic descriptions, and that he disagreed with the emphasis on measurement and reproducibility that was emerging in behaviorist research. But we also know that

Vygotsky was quite capable of providing some narrative of crucial experiments. In the essays collected in *Mind and Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), we can read descriptions of experimental studies of choice reaction, of the relations of gesture to language, and of writing and memory. All these accounts are informal, but they include both a narrative framework and considerable detail. If the precondition of any experimental report is the description of an experiment, a description Vygotsky was quite able to provide, why did he omit it here?

Matters do not become clearer as we read on. The heart of Vygotsky's report is a discussion of three phases of concept formation. But these phases are defined inconsistently: sometimes by the objects the child grouped, sometimes by perceptions imputed to him, sometimes by the strategies he used to form groups. And Vygotsky does not seem to be interested in defining the boundaries of his phases, or in demonstrating that he does not connect his three phases of concept formation to the behavior of children at any particular age; the experimental subjects themselves are very loosely defined as "children, adolescents, and adults" (TL, 58). And we are given no account of how children negotiate the transitions among phases. At one unspecified moment, the child thinks in heaps; at another, his egocentrism is "partly outgrown" and he thinks in complexes (TL, 61).

Vygotsky ends his initial exposition with a disclaimer. Although the experiment has uncovered what he calls the "very essence of the genetic process in a schematic form," he never meant it to provide a sequential, empirically verifiable account of individual development:

But an experimentally induced process of concept formation never mirrors the genetic development exactly as it occurs in life. The basic forms of concrete thinking that we have enumerated appear in reality in mixed states. The morphological analysis given so far must be followed by a functional and genetic analysis (TL, 69).

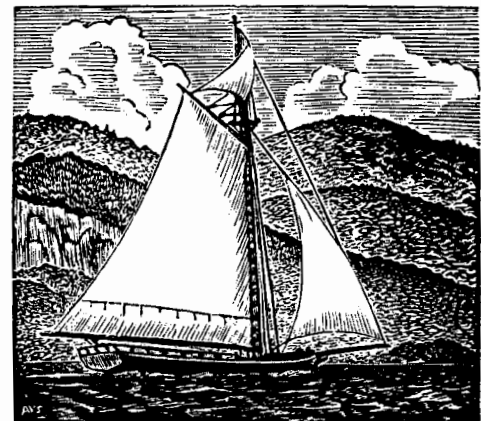
If Vygotsky's account of the phases of concept formation is not meant to mirror a concrete developmental sequence, we need not have been surprised by his casual treatment of the phases, their boundaries, and the relations among them. But the "functional and genetic analysis" that follows only confirms our uneasiness with Vygotsky's experimental report. It is a rag-bag of examples from developmental psychology, ancient languages, anthropology, etymology, sign language, and dream logic. After this heap of instances, Vygotsky resumes his experimental report with a description of the third phase of concept formation.

What has gone on here? What have we read? Next to Piaget, Vygotsky seems discontinuous, contradictory, even impressionistic. I hold, however, that while Vygotsky's

overt intention was to refute Piaget, the model for his own text was quite different. Piaget's early work, with its assertions of universal cognitive structures and a uniform developmental path, seemed to Marxist pedagogues both ethnocentric and conservative. Piaget seemed to them to be arguing for a solitary, self-motivated cognitive development; early Soviet education was collective and group-centered, focusing as much on political awareness as on cognitive skills. Vygotsky's critique of Piaget, then, was enacted within a charged political context, for an audience which did not read "genesis" as a fancy word for *beginning*. Rather, it invoked the compelling model of Marx's first volume of *Capital*, where he undertakes "the task of tracing the genesis of this money-form." Marx was not at all concerned with writing a history of money, but with uncovering hidden relations between money, commodities, and social forms. And indeed, Vygotsky read *Capital* in those terms, as an analytic rather than a historical document:

The whole of *Capital* is written according to the following method: Marx analyses a single living "cell" of capitalist society—for example, the nature of value. Within this cell he uncovers the structure of the entire system and all of its economic institutions (Unpublished notebook, quoted in "Introduction" to *Mind in Society*).

Such a method is closer to philosophic reflection than to empirical research; it implies moving from abstractions to the highly structured concrete instances in which they are encountered in social life. For Piaget, on the other hand, the term "genetic," as in "genetic psychology," is clearly descriptive, indicating the transitions between stages of mental development. And in later texts, Piaget was to define "genetic epistemology" as an application of the experimental method to the study of knowledge. In both cases, Piaget is interested in concrete developmental processes as they are empirically studied, rather than with conceptual relations.



The contrast between Marx's "genesis" and Piaget's might explain Vygotsky's account of his experiment: he has fused two contradictory methods. First he claims, following Marx, to have uncovered the "very essence" of a genetic process, and then admits, as if in dialogue with Piaget, that it does not "mirror genetic development" (TL, 69). Vygotsky had two available models of genesis; he may not have been aware of how deeply they were at odds. If, as I have been suggesting, Vygotsky was responding as much to Marx as to Piaget, it might be worthwhile to see how Marx's analysis in *Capital* unfolds, and whether this comparison suggests a new reading of Vygotsky.

Marx's analysis of commodities in the opening chapters of *Capital*, like Vygotsky's account of his experiment in concept formation, resists an empirical interpretation. Rather than investigating the relations among specific commodities, or developing an analysis of their actual prices, Marx focuses on the abstract values of commodities, the relations between them that make exchange possible. For Marx, such an abstract method was not an error in presentation, but an essential tool of thought. As he said in the Preface to the first German edition of *Capital*, "In the analysis of economic forms, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both." In this case, the force of abstraction operates through the concept of value.

Marx begins to trace the genesis of money by working with the simplest possible commodity relation—one article is exchanged for another. The commodities are named, but purely for the sake of convenience, and the exchange is interesting only because of the relations of equivalence it establishes. Marx moves from this simple, extremely abstract, exchange to more complex ones in three additional stages. In serial exchange, a stable amount of a single commodity can be exchanged for a whole series of items: linen, for example, is exchanged for a coat or tea or corn. In the third stage, Marx posits a universal equivalent which can be exchanged for all others and so brings them into relation with each other. In the last stage of the genesis, the universal equivalent takes the form of money. Marx used the tensions and contradictions among the abstract elements in his model to move them from one stage to another. His informing question is not "What happened next?" but "Given these oppositions, what is the next implication of this analysis?" Indeed, we might summarize Marx's genesis as an account in which the adverb "next" had a logical rather than a narrative force.

Marx's explicit statements of method may be a guide for reading Vygotsky, who—at least in some phases of his investigation—also seems interested in analyzing the relations among the basic elements of a concept rather than in narrating its concrete development. Certainly, Marx's

analysis of money resembles Vygotsky's stages of concept formation. Vygotsky's first stage, the "heap," is formed syncretically, on the basis of relations among individual blocks; what is revealed in the heap is the child's subjective relation to the objects he or she has grouped together. The heap thus presents in reduced form the basic relation expressed in all of the phases of concept formation: the relation between qualities of objects and the situation of the observer. This relation is mediated by the meaning of words, since it is through words that the objects are organized into groups, and it is words that guide the child's perception of objects. Analogous to Vygotsky's heap is the first stage in Marx's analysis of commodities. There, the basic tension of the system—that so many different objects can become equivalent to one another—is mediated by the concept of value.

Vygotsky's second stage, the complex, is equivalent to the second and third stages of Marx's commodity formation. At the beginning of Vygotsky's second stage, the child brought the blocks into loose but real relations with one another. In one early form of complex, each block was related to the one before it on a different basis, so that a red thick block led to a thick large block, which led to a large green block. A similar serial organization characterizes Marx's second stage of commodity formation: so much linen equals so many coats, so much oil, so much wool. In Marx's third stage, this series of equivalences functions simultaneously, so that a fixed quantity of linen can be exchanged for a whole set of equivalent commodities. Marx's "universal equivalent" resembles Vygotsky's "pseudo-concept": the universal equivalent has not yet become money because, even though this commodity can be exchanged for any other, it cannot express its own price. The pseudo-concept, similarly, is not a true concept because it does not include an understanding of its own logic. In both cases, a reflexive dimension is missing.

Neither Vygotsky nor Marx seems very interested in the final stage of the genesis they analyze. Vygotsky's discussion of the "true concept" is relatively brief, and Marx gives only a perfunctory account of the money form. For both theorists, what counts is conceptual unfolding, the resolution of complex idea into simple elements and primary relations, followed by its reconstruction, mediated by the internal tensions among these relations. The finished object—the true concept, the money form—is less revealing than the analysis that reconstructs it.



Vygotsky's analysis of concept formation is not, of course, a simple translation of Marx's analysis of the commodity form. And I am not suggesting that Vygotsky wrote *Thought and Language* with *Capital* open before him, but that his project evolved the logical forms of *Capital*: Vygotsky found in Marx the tropes and figures of thought that he needed.

Such a reading suggests that Vygotsky was not providing a description of how concept-forming skills develop so much as an analysis of the basic relations among objects, actions, and perceptions that determine the shape of concepts at whatever level of formation. If the experiment was not intended to show how concepts are generated, but to provide an analysis of them as structures of meaning, then precise experimental tactics were not very important to Vygotsky. If the "stages" of concept formation are representations of logical relations, then their correlation to concrete developmental steps is less important than what they reveal to an investigator. And, if Vygotsky's stages provide the means for investigating such relations rather than for categorizing behaviors, then they will necessarily be defined by constellations of objects, actions, and perceptions, rather than by more conventional criteria.

But if this reading explains some anomalies in *Thought and Language*, it raises questions of its own. If Vygotsky was actually writing an abstract analysis, why did he bother to perform and report an experiment? The answer lies, at least in part, in the Soviet transformation of Marxist theory into a body of data rather than a critical method. Marx's polemics were being presented to Soviet readers as scientific monographs; Lenin's occasional pamphlets were hailed as founding a "science of revolution." In such a context, "science" became a very elastic concept; the most unorthodox Marxists described their work as scientific. As long as Brecht maintained his political affiliations with the Soviet Union, he claimed that his iconoclastic plays simply applied the science of Marxism to the theater. And the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, a close friend of Vygotsky's, called for a film form that would be a "synthesis of art and science," in which a shot would function as an analytic cell analogous to Marx's *value*. Vygotsky, too, conceived his work as founding a new science. Especially in his polemics with Piaget, he assimilated his unorthodox procedures to normal experimental methods, allowing his central term, "genesis," to become equivocal. My reading of *Thought and Language* suggests that it is shaped by deep contradictions between Vygotsky's understanding of his work as normal science and the critical impulse that informed it.

How does this analysis affect our reading of *Thought and Language*? I think it should make us pay more attention to what Vygotsky's text *does*, and perhaps less to what it *says*. The less we are misled by the work's presentation, the more

we can learn from its intent. Consider two influential readings of Vygotsky, those by Andrea Lunsford ("Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," *College English* 41, September 1979, 39-46) and Linda Flower ("Writer-Based Prose: a Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," *College English* 41, September 1979, 19-37). These composition theorists use Vygotsky quite differently, but both present him as a source of information about how the ability to conceptualize develops. Unfortunately, this project requires that the shakiest parts of Vygotsky's work bear the most weight.

Lunsford presents Vygotsky's stages of concept formation as a developmental series, a cognitive ladder for students to ascend. This reading controls Lunsford's interpretation of *Thought and Language*; any distinction in that text will be read as a developmental narrative. For example, Vygotsky distinguishes spontaneous from scientific concepts by their origins; spontaneous concepts are produced by reflection, while scientific concepts come from instruction. Lunsford reads this as a developmental path: the scientific concept is elevated into the "true" concept and later conflated with awareness of one's own mental processes, a quite different sort of ability. So uneasily does Vygotsky support a developmental interpretation that everything in the text must be modified if coherence is to be assured.

Linda Flower's approach to Vygotsky is different. While she agrees with Lunsford in diagnosing basic writers as thinking in complexes, she uses this notion analytically, identifying the organization and stylistic traits of the complex and relating those traits to certain writing strategies. But Flower's approach disjoins precisely those elements—objects, mental processes, and strategies—that have been fused in Vygotsky's account. Such an analytic approach makes protocol analysis simpler, but it may not be the best use we can make of Vygotsky. No empirical researcher can use Vygotsky's categories as they stand; those categories enable us to reflect on the relations between thought and action, but not to design conventionally valid studies of them. Vygotsky's categories enable us to consider concepts as subjective relations, as attempts to grasp a material and social world, and as communicative strategies—in a word, they enable us to analyze concepts *rhetorically*. We miss much of the conceptual richness of these categories if we use them as a kind of conceptual spare parts bank for designing quasi-experimental studies.

The complexity of *Thought and Language* can stand as an example of the contradiction between the critical intent of an investigation and its scientific presentation. Such contradictions are not confined to Marxism. They are simply dramatic instances of the tension between any theoretical framework and its concrete development, tensions that can

be understood, but not simply dissolved. *Thought and Language* also suggests, perhaps, that we have some work to do in understanding the basic concepts that shape our discipline before we can profitably engage in empirical studies. Some thorough reflection about writing as a relation between the writer, the language, the text, and the material and social world, reflection that did not assume that "writing" was something already known, might teach us as much as any number of diagnostic studies of individual writers.

Vygotsky once wrote that "to formulate the categories and concepts that are specifically relevant to a new field of study" was "to create one's own *Capital*" (MS, 8). In *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky was creating the categories and concepts of a new psychology, writing his own *Capital*. For us, as theorists and teachers of writing, that task is still incomplete.

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For the status of Vygotsky's experimental reports and his place in the development of Soviet psychology, see Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner's introduction to Vygotsky's *Mind in Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

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## Talking Leaves: Conversations with White Paper

Warren Herendeen

*Mercy College*

Sequoia, chief of the Cherokee, was fascinated by the spectacle of American soldiers being talked to by their mail and talking back to blank white leaves which were then folded, sealed, and dispatched. Sequoia noticed many other conversations the soldiers had, with books and newspapers; all was so different from Cherokee ways of communication. Suddenly, an idea was born: Sequoia would discover how to make the leaves speak Cherokee. He listened carefully, counted the syllables in his language, devised a syllabary,

laboriously learned how to record the sounds, and then on heaps of bark chips wrote every Cherokee word he knew or heard. Unfortunately, his wife, in the indignation of her ignorance, burned his heaps. He left, on a quest for a better system and for a new wife more sympathetic to Cherokee linguistics.

Finally, he succeeded in inventing an alphabetic system that could perfectly analyze the Cherokee language. Placing his trained young daughter in a Cherokee meeting, he left while discussion ensued, returning to read back to the amazed Cherokee his daughter's verbatim record of the meeting. Thus was the transforming concept of writing brought to the Cherokee. It was not a heap of broken bark chips, nor a complex of words organized by similarities of sounds or spellings, nor a pseudo-concept such as an assessment of the skill demonstrated by his daughter in taking the minutes of the meeting. Rather, it was a concept, an abstract method that permitted the exchange of one mode of expression for another, of orality for literacy. It expressed its own value no matter what literary form it took and embodied a reflective dimension. This is writing, essential tool of thought in civilized societies.

Susan Wells has provided an invaluable analogue to Sequoia's brilliant achievement in her commentary on Vygotsky's theory of concept-formation. The effect of her new reading of Vygotsky, which brings semantics to the forefront, is not so much to disprove Flower's and Lunsford's interpretations of Vygotsky as to displace them from so central a position as they have occupied. Wells/Vygotsky's different emphasis on cognitive processes as they relate to the composing activity highlights concept-formation as a supreme critical tool for the human species. Inner speech is examined as a dynamic mode of self-regulatory thought. Vygotsky, it now seems clear, was more interested in identifying critical tools than in establishing experimentally the precise stages or the exact ages (if they exist) at which one is thinking in heaps, complexes, pseudo-concepts, or concepts.

But where does this leave the composition teacher whose classroom is filled with "basic writers," who allegedly cannot think in concepts? I must confess that one explicit assumption underlying Lunsford's essay—that basic writers lack conceptual ability—runs counter to my experience with nontraditional students and non-students—inmates of the New York State prison system, a South Bronx gang I helped organize into a block improvement council, and ESL speakers with little formal training in their first language. I recall no instance in which these persons demonstrated an inability to think conceptually. In one instance, one of the South Bronx group, a high school dropout after his freshman year, had composed a dozen notebooks containing chapters organized by various techniques (dreams, TV skits, adventures on and off the block, et al.).

Basic writers have limited experience of writing as a form of thinking, but that does not mean they cannot think conceptually; indeed, it can be seen that that is what they are trying to do, if we look at their writing in a Vygotskian perspective. Error-filled writing can be seen as a rendition of inner speech. Basic writers frequently objectify in written form their verbal thought about some matter being analyzed; it is part of the process of thinking for oneself. Basic writing can thus be characterized as the representation of a concept that is forming, as analysis/synthesis proceeds. We should be careful not to interrupt that process.

One large university has perfected a system of training students to write a five-paragraph expository essay according to a certain formula; the emphasis is on heaps, complexes and pseudo-concepts. From personal observation I would not be surprised if, to escape the nonconceptual straitjacket, teachers and students might sometimes utter poetic phrases (such as, perhaps, "Out of the muffin tin we come, endlessly composing"). Since the system actually helps the student realize his ambition of improving his socio-economic position in life, one is naturally reluctant to remove this operable cell in his educational program. Wells, Vygotsky, and Sequoia warn us, however, that the chip is part of a heap, whether bark or microcomputer. Students need to write, both as a scribal and cognitive activity; piling up heaps has a certain value, but only in a conceptual context.

In the past decade many imaginative developments have occurred—writing across-the-curriculum programs, collaborative writing projects, the Bank Street authoring program, dialectical notebooks—which enable writers to practice writing in many different forms. Artful teachers have taken to offering mini-lessons in grammar and rhetoric based on writers' needs as indicated in the writing itself. They have used writing as a cognitive tool and have avoided the bias against narration. They have rejected the idea that exposition is superior to narration, not finding the modern world's fascination for sequencing and evolutionary process a sufficient reason for thinking the novels of Henry James must be inherently of less value than the essays of T. S. Eliot. One's dialectical notebook on a day may eventuate in a short story, a poem, or an expository essay—or a letter, or a commentary, or a conversation with a white sheet of paper or a talking leaf. Vygotsky helps reverse the generally narrowing tendency in the conception of writing.

Vygotsky's famous book on *Thought and Language*, published in 1934, is about one-fourth the length of the original manuscript. Wells is perhaps correct in her analysis of the eccentric character of Vygotsky's scientific method,

but until the rest of the manuscript is available, we cannot be sure what evidence was omitted from the published text. Vygotsky was out of court in the Stalin years and *Thought and Language* was not reissued until 1956. It is only now that his collected (including unpublished) works are being published in Moscow and are scheduled to be translated and then published in English by Plenum Press.

Meanwhile, we would do well to attend to some Vygotskian developments, such as Soviet activity theory, which may provide a pragmatic and transforming structure of support for the views of purposive writing expressed in Flower's and Lunsford's influential essays. Professor James V. Wertsch of Northwestern University has written of this theory, discussing Leont'ev and Levina's post-Vygotskian analyses of the importance of goals in any cognitive activity. It is argued that an inkling of the final realization of the concept comes prior to synthetic and analytic cognitive activity. If goals are first, as in Sequoia's case, then the writer may be aided by the teacher in many ways, as by walking the writer through the stages that are unfamiliar to him, intervening at moments which are known from experience to be critical in furthering cognitive development, helping him "link fancy unto fancy, *thinking*." One follows the traces of the concept that is forming and clears away impediments, urging a dialectical movement in the growth of thought. With too much attention to the fragments of self-regulatory inner speech, the more important features of the writing activity may be overlooked. This proves especially true in the new and developing field of ESL composition. A study of Paulo Freire should be of value for those who wonder how to generate goals and ideas prior to the writing activity.

In this new world of writing, departments will no doubt see themselves as mediators of the word rather than as wardens of the five-paragraph expository essay. The better model Flower and Lunsford have desired may already exist.

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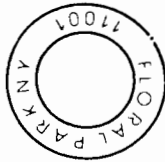
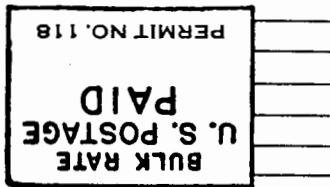
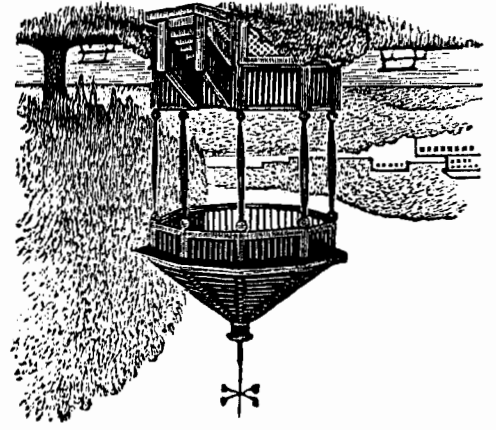
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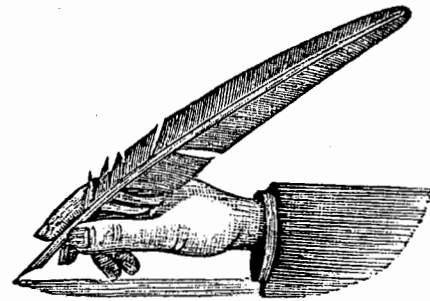




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