

246. The description of a **humorous character** supposes in its subject a blending of strikingly incongruous traits, as shrewdness with apparent simplicity in Sam Weller. Every act and word must accord with the character, and frequently remind us of its incongruous elements, as in Shakspeare's Falstaff.

## CHAPTER III.

### TASTE

247. **Taste** is the power of perceiving and properly appreciating the beauties of nature and of art. Some call it the *Æsthetic faculty*; but it is no special faculty at all: it is an exercise of the intellect. As such it is common to all men, though in different degrees of perfection. This difference is due partly to variety of natural powers, and partly to difference of education and of early associations.

248. Good taste should be characterized by two qualities, **delicacy** and **correctness**. The former, when highly developed, enables it to distinguish the nicest shades and varieties of beauty, in the same manner as some persons have so delicate a palate as to distinguish readily the flavor of any viand. The latter quality—correctness—enables it to discern accurately what is true from what is false beauty.

249. Of the two characteristics, correctness ought to be chiefly taught, both because it is more capable of being developed and because the want of it is more offensive. If correctness be carefully taught by precepts and examples, delicacy will follow of itself. The direct object of rhetorical rules is to accustom the student to appreciate true and reject false beauty. The difference between these two is that **true beauty** pleases, not only at first sight, but also after the closest scrutiny, and receives the full approbation of man's highest faculty—the intellect; while **false beauty** cannot bear to be closely examined without displaying a



want of good sense, of naturalness, delicacy, appropriateness, etc.

250. **The precepts of rhetoric** are not arbitrary laws, but the conclusions which the greatest thinkers have drawn from a careful study of literature. Aristotle's mind, the keenest, perhaps, that ever existed, examined the productions of the greatest geniuses that had preceded him, and drew a clear line between true and false beauty. Cicero, Horace, Quintilian, and others continued his labors, and subsequent ages have accepted most of their decisions, because these were found to be conformable to human reason. Still later critics have added their share to this treasury of common sense.

251. **Human reason** itself is the judge of beauty. Now, in matters of taste human reason speaks through the great critics and rhetoricians who have been recognized for ages as the judges of literature. Their unanimous verdict is practically the utterance of mankind itself. This is the **standard of taste**: what it approves is true beauty, what it condemns is false beauty. From time to time some eccentric genius will appear to set at naught all the rules of rhetoricians, imagining that his conceited mind is the great luminary of the world. His brilliant imagination may attract to him a number of admiring followers. Carlyle, in England, was a man of this character, but his departures from the laws of taste were too glaring to mislead many. Other geniuses of less offensive eccentricities have done more real harm to good taste by blending minor faults with superior beauties. It is the part of criticism to point out in the works of even the greatest geniuses any admixture of false beauty. It blames many long speeches and other extravagances in Homer; a want of spirit in some passages of Virgil; excessive self-praise and labored periods in Cicero; a considerable amount of coarse language, wan-

ton irregularities, ill-placed puns, etc., in Shakspeare. In fact, this last author, with all his uncommon beauties, is anything but a safe model on which to fashion the taste of young writers.

252. May there be, then, no **varieties in good taste**? There may be in different men a preference for different kinds of true beauty, and still all these may have good taste. One loves more what is bold or grand, another what is gentle and modest; one admires more the ideal, another the real; one loves sentiment and imagination, another sober sense. But if one person pronounces an object beautiful and another not beautiful, under the same circumstances, one or the other is clearly mistaken. In this sense it is not true that there is *no disputing about taste*. Varieties of taste are a kind dispensation of Providence that diversifies the aspect of human society as it diversifies the flowers of the field.

253. We add a few **general rules regarding taste** which apply to all kinds of composition.

**Rule 1.**—Let **good sense** pervade every literary production. This rule applies to poetry as well as to prose, to pleasantries as well as to philosophy and religion. But it is often **violated** by two kinds of writers: first, by those whose imagination and feelings are too lively to be controlled by their judgment, as are many orators, poets, and novelists; and, secondly, by some conceited philosophers and literati who put their individual views above the wisdom of all the world besides. Such are, for instance, the **Transcendentalists**, as they are called, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Matthew Arnold, and others, who extol culture and delicacy of taste above common sense.

254. Such, too, are the members of what is called "the **Satanic School**." Southey, in the preface to his "Vision of Judgment," was the first to use this degrading appella-



tion. Of the writers who have been included under it, Byron, Shelley, Moore, Bulwer, Rousseau, Victor Hugo, Paul de Kock, and George Sand are the most prominent.

"Immoral writers," says Southey, "men of diseased hearts and depraved imaginations, who, forming a system of opinions to suit their own unhappy course of conduct, have rebelled against the holiest ordinances of human society, and, hating that revealed religion which, with all their efforts and bravadoes, they were unable entirely to disbelieve, labor to make others as miserable as themselves by infecting them with a moral virus that eats into the soul. The school which they have set up may properly be called the Satanic School; for though their productions breathe the spirit of Belial in their lascivious parts, and the spirit of Moloch in their loathsome images of atrocities and horrors, which they delight to represent, they are more especially characterized by a satanic spirit of pride and audacious impiety, which still betrays the wretched feeling of hopelessness wherewith it is allied."—*Southey*.

It is just to add that Moore and Bulwer in their later years wrote in a better spirit.

255. *Rule 2.*—Every composition should have **unity**—unity of subject, unity of plan, unity of general tone, etc. But how this rule applies to various works we shall examine in detail when we come to speak of each species of composition. We shall here confine ourselves to the rule as stated by Horace:

"*Denique sit quidvis simplex dumtaxat et unum.*"

"Then learn this wandering humor to control,  
And keep one equal tenor through the whole."—*Francis*.

256. *Rule 3.*—Let perfect **appropriateness** characterize every part of your productions—the selection of your subject, your treatment of it, the thoughts, ornaments, expressions, etc., adapting every detail to the various circumstances of persons, times, places, etc., etc. There is a tendency in certain minds to ignore such proprieties. Some

preachers of great repute have gone so far as to introduce pantomime into the pulpit. Such an example, if not condemned by critics, would tend to debase the taste of the young. The *New York Sun* some time ago contained the following report:

"Pantomimic Efforts that made the Plymouth Congregation Laugh.—Mr. B— preached last evening upon the difficulty of acquiring correct religious habits, and the comparative ease of maintaining them when once they have become second nature. 'Many look upon religion,' he said, 'as an insurance policy against final loss by fire.' He described that kind of religion so funnily that the congregation laughed outright. 'They go to church every Sunday,' he said, pulling his coat close around him, drawing his face down dolorously, and rolling up his eyes. 'The hymns are doled out to them, a good, sound, dry sermon is preached to them, and the most eloquent passage of all is their going out. They attend prayer-meetings, too—most dismal prayer-meetings!' Here his lower jaw dropped, more of the whites of his eyes showed, and his hands were clasped before him," etc.