

CHAPTER IV.

VARIETIES OF STYLE.

257. **Literary style** is the manner in which a person expresses his thoughts and feelings by means of language. It is not a person's language merely. The expression of the thought and feelings is intimately connected with the conception of them. Hence style depends on our conceptions as well as on our language. In fact, a work may be translated from one language into another, and the chief peculiarities of its style remain the same.

ARTICLE I. SOURCES OF VARIETY IN STYLE.

258. To understand the **sources of variety in style**, consider the different ways in which the same thought or feeling may be conceived by the mind. Thus suppose I become convinced that the pleasures of this world cannot satisfy the human heart. I may reach this conviction intellectually, by considering that our hearts long for infinite and lasting happiness, and that this world is necessarily finite and of short duration. I may express this reasoning in abstract language, and my style will be **philosophical**.

259. But in conceiving and expressing the same conviction I may be powerfully assisted by my imagination, and I may thus describe the fleeting show of this world's delights under various images, in a **figurative** and **descriptive** style, as is done in the fifth chapter of the Book of Wisdom :

"All those things are passed away like a shadow, and like a post that runneth on,

"And as a ship that passeth through the waves ; whereof when it is gone by, the trace cannot be found, nor the path of its keel in the waters :

"Or as when a bird flieth through the air, of the passage of which no mark can be found, but only the sound of the wings beating the light air, and parting it by the force of her flight ; she moved her wings, and hath flown through, and there is no mark found afterwards of her way :

"Or as when an arrow is shot at a mark, the divided air presently cometh together again, so that the passage thereof is not known :

"So we also being born, forthwith ceased to be ; and have been able to show no mark of virtue ; but are consumed in our wickedness."

260. While this brief passage is descriptive, the whole fifth chapter develops the same thought in a **narrative** style, bordering on the **dramatic**. It will be readily perceived that the chapter needs only metre to give it the **poetic** style. Thus language and mode of thought combine to shape the style of any composition.

261. "Wolsey's Soliloquy" presents the same thought as the Book of Wisdom, and expresses it in poetic language :

"This is the state of man : to-day he puts forth
The tender leaves of hope ; to-morrow blossoms,
And bears his blushing honors thick upon him :
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost ;
And, when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
His greatness is a-ripening, nips his root,
And then he falls, as I do. I have ventured,
Like little wanton boys that swim on bladders,
This many summers in a sea of glory ;
But far beyond my depth : my high-blown pride
At length broke under me, and now has left me,
Weary and old with service, to the mercy
Of a rude stream, that must for ever hide me.
Vain pomp and glory of this world, I hate ye ;
I feel my heart new-opened."—*Shakspeare.*

262. Horace deploras the shortness of earthly joys in the **lyric** style. See the fourteenth ode of his second book:

"Swift fly the rolling years, my friend!
Nor can your anxious prayers extend
The fleeting joys of youth;
The trembling hand, the wrinkled cheek,
Too plainly life's decay bespeak
With sad but silent truth.

The purple vineyard's luscious stores,
Secured by trebly-bolted doors,
Excite in vain your care:
Soon shall the rich and sparkling hoard
Flow largely o'er the festive board
Of your unsparing heir."—*Ralph Bernal.*

263. When thoughts are fully developed, as in the fifth chapter of *Wisdom*, just quoted, we have the **diffuse** style; when briefly expressed, the **concise**. Each of these is beautiful in its proper place (see Nos. 71, 72).

If an author grasps his subject vigorously and expresses it forcibly, his style is said to be **nervous** and strong; this is always a desirable quality, while its opposite, **feebleness**, is always a defect.

The **vehement** style is characterized by a glowing ardor, pouring out strong feelings with the rapidity and fulness of a torrent, as in most speeches of Demosthenes; it adds strong feeling to strong thought.

264. A chief source of difference in style, among various persons who write on the same subjects, is the difference of their **characters**. A firm character will produce a manly style, a weak, vacillating character a confused style; a generous, open character is favorable to clearness, richness, beauty of expression, while narrow-minded and deceitful dispositions will give a very different coloring to the thought. Whatever improves a person's character improves

his style. The social virtues are the sources of charming ornaments to all literature.

ARTICLE II. ORNAMENT OF STYLE.

265. One of the principal sources of variety in style consists in the **ornament** used to adorn the thought and the expression, in tropes, figures of thought, figures of diction, and harmonious constructions. In this respect Blair appropriately distinguishes five kinds of style, according to five degrees of ornament.

266. 1. The **dry style** rejects all ornament; it is proper in text-books on grammar, arithmetic, and any exact science, in legal documents, in business transactions, etc. The language of an educated man should always be correct and perspicuous, exhibiting great purity, propriety, and precision; but what is merely ornamental would, in the writings just mentioned, savor of affectation.

267. 2. The **plain style** uses ornament sparingly. Whatever subject admits of any play of the imagination or the emotions affords room for the ornaments of composition. All such productions are properly styled **literature**, and no others. Now, among these the plain style is appropriate to such as are either too exact to allow the imagination any great indulgence or too familiar or insignificant to justify much painstaking. Plain facts are best expressed in plain language, in proper words, with refined feeling, and with an occasional admixture of modest ornament. Dean Swift, even on important subjects, always wrote in the plain style, which best suited his earnest character. Clearness, strength, and a blunt honesty are his peculiar qualities.

268. 3. The **neat style** uses ornament more freely, but not copiously; and its ornament is ever modest, never strikingly brilliant or bold. It is a style equally capable of manly beauty and the most delicate refinement. To this

middle region belongs the bulk of good literature. Subjects of any elevation should be treated with neatness as a rule; plainness is an exception already explained; while the highest ornaments should be reserved for subjects and occasions of unusual dignity or excellence.

Washington Irving's prose works and Goldsmith's poems exhibit the perfection of the neat style.

269. 4. The **elegant style** possesses all the virtues of ornament without any of its defects. The noblest subjects, especially the loftiest portions of such subjects, call for the highest refinement and magnificence that human thought and human language can bestow. The solemn panegyric oration, the highest efforts of eloquence at the bar, in the pulpit, and in the popular assembly; the most important events narrated in dignified histories, real or fictitious; the description of the grandest scenes in nature; the most pathetic emotions poured out in lyric verse—present proper occasions for elegance of style.

270. Most great historians, philosophers, orators, novelists, and essayists compose **habitually in the neat style**, being more taken up with the matter treated than with the beauty of the expression: such are Lingard, Blair, Pitt, Chatham, Calhoun, Dickens, Cooper; Archbishop Spalding, Cardinals Newman and Manning, Brownson, and such poets as Pope, Longfellow, and Scott, and many other writers of didactic and ballad poetry. All these, however, rise to the elegant style when the occasion requires. Others aim more habitually at elegant language, such as Prescott, Father Faber, Edmund Burke, Webster, Irving, Cardinal Wiseman, Lowell; and in poetry Shakspeare, Milton, Willis, Moore, Byron, Young, etc.

271. **Compare the following three descriptions** of morning, noticing how they rise in ornament above one another:

“ See, the day begins to break
And the light shoots like a streak
Of subtle fire; the wind blows cold,
While the morning doth unfold;
Now the birds begin to rouse,
And the squirrel from the boughs
Leaps to get him nuts and fruit;
The early lark, that erst was mute,
Carols to the rising day
Many a note and many a lay.”—*Fletcher.*

“ Lo! here the gentle lark, weary of rest,
From his moist cabinet mounts up on high,
And wakes the morning, from whose silver breast
The sun ariseth in his majesty;
Who doth the world so gloriously behold,
The cedar-tops and hills seem burnish'd gold.”
—*Shakspeare.*

“ Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy.”
—*Shakspeare.*

272. 5. The **florid style** is marked by an excess of ornament, so that the reader is distracted from the matter treated and forced to notice how the writer labors to adorn his composition. This excess is always objectionable, but especially in serious works. Still, it may be combined with considerable excellences, and thus leave the composition valuable, though not perfect. This is the case with Harvey's *Meditations among the Tombs* and Rev. Xavier McLeod's *Devotion to the Blessed Virgin in North America*. Both these works are well suited to develop a taste for ornament in prose composition.