

CHAPTER V.

IMPROVEMENT OF STYLE.

ARTICLE I. PRACTICAL RULES FOR STYLE.

273. There are certain rules regarding style that should be observed by all writers on all subjects. The chief are these :

1. The **Rule of Clearness**.—Write so that no one can help seeing your exact meaning at the first glance. This is the most important rule of all. To write with clearness the great means is to have clear ideas yourself ; else how can you convey them to others ? Study your subject diligently before you write.

274. 2. The **Rule of Strength**.—Make your thoughts impressive by presenting them strikingly, with proper ornaments and feelings. A languid, feeble style is worthless. Still, distinguish strength from vehemence, as explained above (No. 263).

275. 3. The **Rule of Simplicity**.—The word *simplicity* has many meanings : such as the absence of many parts, as in a simple story ; the absence of much ornament, as in the dry and the plain style ; the absence of refinement, as in the simple manners of rustics ; the absence of shrewdness or intelligence, as in the simplicity of the credulous. Our rule means, write with *naturalness*, so as to avoid all appearance of labor. Labor there must be in writing ; but the labor should not be noticed by the reader. **Virgil** and **Gibbon** labored at their productions with uncommon industry, striving to express every thought to the best advan-

tage. Virgil's lines flow smoothly and as naturally as the warbling of a bird ; Gibbon's sentences are evidently labored, and often harsh and strained.

276. A simple style often appears so **artless** that a beginner imagines nothing is easier than to imitate it ; it is the perfection of art to reach all its purposes without making itself known. Such is the style in the *Sketch-Book* of Washington Irving, many essays of Addison, the novels of Conscience, Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales*, the *Stories for Children* of Canon Schmid, the fables of Æsop, of Phædrus, of La Fontaine, Rosa Mulholland's *Robinson Crusoe*. The ancients had more of this apparent artlessness than the moderns : Herodotus, Theocritus, Anacreon, Homer, Virgil, and Ovid abound in it. There is, however, in many recent writers, a return to the simplicity of classic taste.

277. When this simplicity assumes the character of child-like innocence it, is called by the French term *naïveté*, of which Xenophon furnishes a pleasing example in his narrative of Cyrus' conversation at the court of Astyages.

278. A slight **appearance of carelessness** in the midst of refinement is not unpleasant in proper season, as in familiar letters ; it resembles the manners of a truly refined gentleman among his intimate friends. But young people cannot let themselves down to it with safety. An appearance of carelessness is admired in those only who have established a name for superiority of mind.

279. 4. The **Rule of Appropriateness** is the most difficult of all to observe, and is necessary on all occasions. It requires that we adapt our style to our subject, to our hearers or readers, to our own talent and our age, and to circumstances of place, time, etc. "He is truly eloquent," says Cicero, "who can express what is simple plainly, what is great nobly, and what is ordinary with decency and mo-

deration"—*Is est eloquens qui et humilia subtiliter, et magna graviter, et mediocria temperate potest dicere*" (*Or.*, 29). Dr. Johnson, though a writer of great eminence, could not adapt his style to his theme, and it was wittily said of him that if he made little fishes talk he would make them speak like whales. **Excess of ornament** is a violation of appropriateness. It is bad taste, in language as in dress, to be ever displaying fineries.

280. Still, this excess is more easily **excused in the young**, whose imaginations are more developed than their judgments. Cicero is not displeased with the youth whose compositions are rather flowery :

"I wish to see exuberance in the youthful mind," he says; "for as it is easier to prune the superfluous branches of a vine than to add to its growth, so I like to see in the youth's production something to lop off" (*De Or.*, ii. 21).

ARTICLE II. WRITING AS A MEANS OF IMPROVEMENT.

281. **Writing** is the most important source of improvement in style and in all the other parts of literary composition. "The pen," says Cicero, "is the best and most efficient teacher of eloquence"—*Stylus optimus et præstantissimus dicendi effector ac magister*. Without practice no precepts are of any avail. For this reason we have so far proposed a variety of exercises, applying the several precepts in appropriate ways. Through the remainder of this work, however, fewer suggestions of this kind will be needed. The precepts themselves will directly suggest the exercises. All that the teacher need do is to select models for imitation, and themes or subjects for narrations, descriptions, etc., suited to the age and other circumstances of his pupils. But the exercises should by no means be neglected: in them lies the solid fruit of literary studies.

282. For the writing of **original composition** these rules should be carefully observed by the pupil :

Rule 1.—He should **think over the whole matter** to be treated, and trace a plan of it in his mind or on paper before he writes the first line of the composition itself.

Rule 2.—He should **compose slowly**, doing the best he can in the first draught; he will thus improve far more than by putting down every word or idea that presents itself. As in penmanship, so in composition, by writing well we learn to write rapidly, but by writing rapidly we do not learn to write well.

Rule 3.—Still, when the **mind is warmed up** by the subject the writer may allow himself, to some extent, to be carried away by his ardor, provided he does not wander from his theme.

Rule 4.—After writing should come **correction**—a task often neglected because less interesting. But the mind of the master should rule here, not the whim of the scholar. The *lima labor*—the careful finish—is the straight road to perfection in any art.

Rule 5.—When a composition is written for the eye of the public it should, if possible, be laid by for a while, and then carefully retouched. No one should ever **publish** what an honest and judicious friend condemns, no matter how perfect the composition appears to himself.

ARTICLE III. READING AS A MEANS OF IMPROVEMENT.

283. That **reading** is a copious source of improvement in composition is beyond dispute. Still, on this subject many vague and some erroneous notions are entertained. We shall enter into some details, suggested in part by President Porter's *Books and Reading*.

284. **I. As to the matter** or thought, reflect that when

you read you listen to a **real person**, speaking deliberately and for definite purposes, who undertakes to instruct or to please you. Therefore :

285. 1. **If you read for instruction**, begin by ascertaining whether the author is capable of imparting correct information. (a) Is he a *man of authority* on those matters? Or is he simply a fluent writer who can converse plausibly on any subject, though his knowledge of it may be very superficial? Such are many essayists. (b) Is he a *man of sound principles*? Can you abandon yourself with perfect confidence to his guidance? If you have reason to distrust him, see whether it would not be more expedient to look for information elsewhere, or at least whether there are not some points on which you ought to mistrust his insinuations.

286. Remark that **nearly every book instils certain principles** which may do the more evil as they are less suspected—e.g., Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* instils unbelief, seeing in the exchange of a temporal for a spiritual supremacy nothing but decay: it is thus that a pagan would have written. Hume, in his *History of England*, fails to appreciate any virtuous intentions in the nobles and the people; sneering at all things, he chills enthusiasm for every public and private virtue. *Blackwood's Magazine*, a Tory organ, is devoted to strengthen the throne and the Church of England; while the *Westminster Review*, with an opposite aim, tends to undermine the foundations of both.

As the *Fabiola* of Cardinal Wiseman instils purity, generosity, piety, thus many novels instil licentiousness, scepticism, worldliness.

287. 2. **If you read for pleasure**, see (a) whether the **writer** is a **moral** and conscientious man. If he is, do not stop to quarrel with every expression to which an improper meaning

might be attached. Like the bee, sip the honey and leave the poison for the spider. If he is not, ascertain first from others whether it is proper to read that work at all, or whether, at least, you are not to be on your guard against some particular danger. If such information cannot be had, see (b) whether the **pleasure** afforded is of a **healthy** kind, which not only cheers but also expands and elevates the mind, or at least produces a calm serenity.

288. **Southey's rule** may be of use :

“Would you know whether the tendency of a book is good or evil, examine in what state of mind you lay it down. Has it induced you to suspect that that which you have been accustomed to think unlawful may, after all, be innocent, and that that may be harmless which you hitherto have been taught to think dangerous? Has it tended to make you dissatisfied and impatient under the control of others? and disposed you to relax in that self-government without which both the laws of God and man tell us there can be no virtue and consequently no happiness? Has it attempted to abate your reverence for what is great and good? . . . has it defiled the imagination with what is loathsome? Throw the book into the fire.”

289. II. **As to the style**: 1. We improve more by reading **a few excellent writers** than by reading a multitude of indifferent ones.

2. Even in reading the best authors we learn more by reading **a few select passages** carefully and frequently than entire books cursorily—*non multa sed multum*.

3. There is an **abundance of good writings** of which the thoughts are proper, so that for style alone we need never read anything really dangerous.

4. The **best** should be read **from earliest childhood**.

5. **Faulty writers** do positive harm to the style of the young; now, many modern writers, highly admired by some, are full of faults.

6. Not mere reading, but a careful study by **analyzing**, is necessary for the acquisition of a good style.

7. Even in select models **distinguish the perfect** from the faulty; but be slow to condemn before understanding well.

290. **III. To read critically** is to judge for yourself of the real value of a book. This supposes the reader to be well versed in the matter treated, and to have read several other works on the same or on a similar subject, so as to be able to compare. Young people are rarely qualified to do so; it will be safer for them to seek information in particular cases from those of greater experience. Still, **some few hints** may be suggested:

1. See what the book professes to treat, what end to obtain. Is that end in itself desirable? Is it of present utility?

2. Can it be reasonably expected that the author, as far as he is known, is qualified to attain it?

3. Does he actually attain it?

4. Does he do so better than is done by any book yet published on that subject in the same language? else what is the use of a new book?

291. **IV. Read attentively.**—1. Do not, as a rule, read a book that cannot keep you awake and interested.

2. Read for a definite purpose—*e.g.*, to know such an author's views on such a question.

3. Know, however, that not every book requires the same closeness of attention.

4. Distracted reading does no good; pause when there occurs a thought worth entertaining.

5. In serious reading pause from time to time—*e.g.*, at a new chapter—to review in mind the matter read.

6. Some readings are so suggestive that but little should be read at a time; the more we reflect, the more we improve.

292. **V. What shall I read?** *Answer:* 1. **On what matter do you need most information** to do well what is expected of you? After settling this you may next inquire what book will best supply this particular want—*e.g.*, one engaged in studying the ancient languages will do well to read Ancient History, that he may understand the facts and circumstances to which classical literature constantly refers.

2. Generally **prefer what is of present use** to the information which may perhaps be useful some future day. Still, do not so confine yourself to your present narrow sphere as to neglect acquiring a certain amount of general information to fit you for a wider field of action in after-life.

3. **Do not read what you cannot at present understand**, and be honest enough to acknowledge your ignorance; but adapt your reading to your age and circumstances. Children should generally read narrations, descriptions, etc., in prose and verse, but these should always be such as inculcate sound principles; later on they will read essays, treatises, etc.

4. Generally **avoid wordy writers**, who say little in many words.

293. **VI. Poetry.**—1. As all will not enjoy the same authors and the same pieces, read only such as you can appreciate. You cannot readily enjoy poetry when you cannot **sympathize with the writer**; and as we should never sympathize with what is vicious, we must be most careful to select pure-minded authors.

2. The moral influence of a piece is good, no matter what the subject, if it **throws our affections aright** and leaves on the mind fit images and contemplations. Milton makes Satan odious, Byron and Goethe make the reader sympathize with the evil spirit against God.