

CHAPTER IV.

DESCRIPTION.

381. We mean by a **description** the delineation of some object or scene. Narration deals with successive facts; description with objects that exist at the same time. We rarely find any literary production of great length which is entirely descriptive; but descriptions are often introduced into narratives with happy effect. Sometimes they serve the purpose of making the narration impressive, by moving the passions of the reader. At other times they are intended to make the events more intelligible. Thus we have seen that some narratives of battles are hard to follow because the writer has neglected to give us a clear description of the battle-field. Descriptions frequently serve as ornaments, affording an agreeable variety to the narration, and presenting scenes of striking interest to the imagination.

We shall divide this chapter so as to treat, first, of the description of things; secondly, of the description of persons or characters.

ARTICLE I. DESCRIPTION OF THINGS.

382. *Rule 1.*—In all cases the description should be of **a piece with the rest** of the composition, and not look like a purple patch sewed on a common garment.

383. *Rule 2.*—Descriptive passages must have a natural **connection** with the main subject, or be properly introduced.

384. To acquire skill in description it is necessary to form a **habit of close observation**, to study natural objects and the various characters of men. The exercises laid down in a preceding chapter on Object-Lessons are a useful preparation for descriptive compositions.

385. We have already remarked, when treating of narrations, that **brief descriptions** are constantly blended with them to great advantage, making them vivid and impressive. But **long descriptions** are not of very frequent occurrence, because they labor under serious difficulties; the study of these difficulties and of the ways to overcome them will suggest the chief precepts for the management of descriptions.

386. **I. The first difficulty** is that it is impossible to express in words all that the eye would take in if the scene were actually witnessed.

This difficulty is obviated by making a judicious **choice of the salient features** of the scene. For, in reality, when we behold a landscape, for example, the mind does not pay attention to all the particulars presented to the eye; it notices distinctly a few striking points, and sees the rest vaguely or not at all. Hence we learn that the great art of description, as of painting and drawing, consists chiefly in the skilful selection of those very items which the eye would rest on if the whole scene were present. We may apply to description what Macaulay remarks of history:

“No history and no picture can present us with the whole truth; but those are the best pictures and the best histories which exhibit such parts of the truth as most nearly produce the effect of the whole. . . . An outline scrawled with a pen which seizes the marked features of a countenance will give a much stronger idea of it than a bad painting in oils. Yet the worst painting in oils that ever hung in Somerset House resembles the original in many more particulars.”—*Essays, History.*

Though Macaulay's practical use of this principle is not always defensible, the principle itself is universally acknowledged.

387. Another point of comparison between history and painting is likewise applicable to description:

"History has its foreground and its background, and it is principally in the management of its perspective that one artist differs from another. Some events must be represented on a large scale, others diminished; the great majority will be lost in the dimness of the horizon, and a general idea of their joint effect will be given by a few slight touches."—*Id.*

So in description a few objects will be **fully dwelt upon**, others **briefly pointed out**, and the rest will be suggested by some general terms.

388. We quote as an **example** of this process a passage of Washington Irving's *Sketch-Book* in which he describes his first landing in England:

"It was a fine sunny morning when the thrilling cry of 'Land!' was given from the masthead. None but those who have experienced it can form an idea of the delicious throng of sensations which rush into an American's bosom when he first comes in sight of Europe. There is a volume of associations with the very name. It is the land of promise, teeming with everything of which his childhood has heard or on which his studious years have pondered.

"From that time until the moment of arrival it was all feverish excitement. The ships-of-war that prowled like guardian giants along the coast, the headlands of Ireland stretching out into the Channel, the Welsh mountains towering into the clouds—all were objects of intense interest. As we sailed up the Mersey I reconnoitred the shores with a telescope. My eye dwelt with delight on neat cottages with their trim shrubberies and green grass-plots. I saw the mouldering ruin of an abbey overrun with ivy, and the taper spire of a village church rising from the brow of a neighboring hill. All were characteristic of England.

"The tide and wind were so favorable that the ship was enabled

to come at once to the pier. It was thronged with people, some idle lookers-on, others eager expectants of friends or relatives. I could distinguish the merchant to whom the ship was consigned; I knew him by his calculating brow and restless air. His hands were thrust into his pockets; he was whistling thoughtfully, and walking to and fro, a small space having been accorded him by the crowd in deference to his temporary importance. There were repeated cheerings and salutations interchanged between the shore and the ship as friends happened to recognize each other.

"All was now hurry and bustle—the meetings of acquaintances, the greetings of friends, the consultations of men of business. I alone was solitary and idle. I had no friend to meet, no cheering to receive. I stepped upon the land of my forefathers, but felt that I was a stranger in the land."

389. The same happy selection of circumstances may be noticed in his description of a poor man's funeral in the sketch entitled "The Widow and her Son," and in the following pen-picture by Longfellow:

"The first snow came. How beautiful it was, falling so silently all day long, all night long, on the mountains, on the meadows, on the roofs of the living, on the graves of the dead! All white save the river, that marked its course by a winding black line across the landscape; and the leafless trees, that against the leaden sky now revealed more fully the wonderful beauty and intricacies of their branches. What silence, too, came with the snow, and what seclusion! Every sound was muffled, every noise changed to something soft and musical. No more tramping hoofs, no more rattling wheels! Only the chiming sleigh-bells, beating as swift and merrily as the hearts of children."

390. **II. The second difficulty** arises from the fact that a description, unlike a painting, can present only one feature at a time. To realize the whole scene the reader must exert himself and group the various features in his imagination. Now, ordinary readers are not apt to take so much trouble, unless they feel an unusual interest in the

scene presented; they soon fail to follow the guidance of the writer, the scene becomes confused, and all effort to follow the description is abandoned.

391. **One means of removing** this inconvenience is never to attempt a long description, except when sufficient attention has been aroused, either by the importance of the matter itself or by some special sympathy or curiosity awakened in the reader. The main points, then, to be studied in this connection are:

1. To see by what process we can arouse the reader's attention; and especially,

2. To study how we can lessen the strain on his imagination.

392. 1. **To arouse attention** we may show the importance of conceiving the scene distinctly; we may also enlist the feelings of the reader in our subject. Nothing is more conducive to attention than a deep interest felt in the objects described. Whatever will inspire sympathy, love, affection, or any of the gentler emotions or stronger passions, will quicken the imagination to realize the scene described. We may instance the lengthy description of Westminster Abbey in Irving's *Sketch-Book*. The reflections introduced at every step sustain the attention amid scenes which it is difficult to delineate in a striking manner. Instead of such reflections as Irving introduces in that description, we may keep the reader's sympathies enlisted in a subject by viewing it in connection with one of the persons or characters in whom special interest is felt. Thus Irving describes the scene at the landing of Columbus as seen by that hero; and Abbott, the various phases of the battle of Waterloo as observed by Napoleon. Thus, too, Homer describes the chief Grecian heroes through the lips of Helen, who points them out to Priam from the top of the Trojan walls.

393. 2. **To lessen the exertion** required of the reader's imagination several means may be suggested:

(a) Place the reader in a **favorable position** to observe the whole scene.

394. (b) **Begin with a striking feature**, or with a view of the general outline, and proceed next to fill up the scene in an orderly manner. Both these rules are well exemplified in this extract from Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* (vol. ii. b. iii. c. 6):

"Nothing could be more grand than the view which met the eye from the area on the truncated summit of the pyramid. Toward the west stretched that bold barrier of porphyritic rock which nature has reared around the Valley of Mexico, with the huge Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl standing like two colossal sentinels to guard the entrance to the enchanted region. Far away to the east was seen the conical head of Orizaba soaring high into the clouds, and nearer the barren though beautifully-shaped Sierra de Malinche throwing its broad shadows over the plains of Tlascalala. Three of these are volcanoes higher than the highest mountain peak in Europe, and shrouded in snows which never melt under the fierce sun of the tropics. At the foot of the spectator lay the sacred city of Cholula, with its bright towers and pinnacles sparkling in the sun, reposing amidst gardens and verdant groves, which then thickly studded the cultivated environs of the capital. Such was the magnificent prospect which met the gaze of the conquerors, and may still, with slight change, meet that of the modern traveller, as from the platform of the great pyramid his eye wanders over the fairest portion of the beautiful plateau of Puebla."

395. (c) Use all the **ornaments of style** that may please the imagination; as Irving does in this description of a farm-yard:

"A great elm-tree spread its broad branches over it, at the foot of which bubbled up a spring of the softest and sweetest water, in a little well formed of a barrel, and then stole sparkling away through the grass to a neighboring brook that babbled along among the alders and dwarf willows. Hard by the farm house was

a vast barn that might have served for a church, every window and crevice of which seemed bursting forth with the treasures of the farm; the flail was busily resounding within it from morning to night; swallows and martins skimmed twittering about the eaves; and rows of pigeons, some with one eye turned up, as if watching the weather, some with their heads under their wings or buried in their bosoms, and others swelling and cooing and bowing about their dames, were enjoying the sunshine on the roof. Sleek, unwieldy porkers were grunting in the repose and abundance of their pens, whence sallied forth, now and then, troops of sucking pigs, as if to snuff the air. A stately squadron of snowy geese were riding in an adjoining pond, convoying whole fleets of ducks; regiments of turkeys were gobbling through the farm-yard, and guinea-fowls fretting about it, like ill-tempered house-wives, with their peevish, discontented cry. Before the barn-door strutted the gallant cock, that pattern of a husband, a warrior, and a fine gentleman, clapping his burnished wings and crowing in the pride and gladness of his heart—sometimes tearing up the earth with his feet, and then generously calling his ever-hungry family of wives and children to enjoy the rich morsel which he had discovered.”

396. (*d*) Let the **rule of unity**, necessary in all compositions, be strictly observed in every description—that is, let only one object be described, or let a variety of objects be united by one leading idea into a moral whole, the embodiment of one sentiment. Thus Bancroft, in his *History of the United States* (vol. ii. p. 266, old edition), describes the site where New York was afterwards built, and gives unity to all the leading parts by means of the one dominant idea of wildness; next (p. 268) he presents the site as it is now, as an embodiment of civilization.

397. (*e*) It is a great help, where it can be done, to introduce into a long description a **connected narrative** that will unite the various parts of the scene, as when a person is made to visit successively various portions of a landscape.

398. (*f*) Sometimes we may introduce brief narratives

of **incidents** or of historical reminiscences; at other times reflections of an agreeable or elevated kind. These precepts are exemplified in numerous passages of Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*, in particular in his description of the Valley of Mexico (vol. ii. p. 68).

399. The **style** in description should be concise: every word should add light to the picture, and no useless feature should be presented to the imagination. Still, description need not be bare of ornament; on the contrary, it may be richly adorned, as we have explained (No. 395). We add one instance in point from the pen of Fenimore Cooper, “Venice at Night”:

“The moon was at the height. Its rays fell in a flood on the swelling domes and massive roofs of Venice, while the margin of the town was brilliantly defined by the glittering bay. The natural and gorgeous setting was more than worthy of that picture of human magnificence; for at that moment, rich as was the Queen of the Adriatic in her works of art, the grandeur of her public monuments, the number and splendor of her palaces, and most else that the ingenuity and ambition of man could attempt, she was but secondary in the glories of the hour.

“Above was the firmament gemmed with worlds and sublime in immensity. Beneath lay the broad expanse of the Adriatic, endless to the eye, tranquil as the vault it reflected, and luminous with its borrowed light. Here and there a low island, reclaimed from the sea by the patient toil of a thousand years, dotted the lagunes, burdened by the group of some conventual dwellings, or picturesque with the modest roofs of a hamlet of the fishermen. Neither oar, nor song, nor laugh, nor flap of sail, nor jest of mariner disturbed the stillness. All in the near view was clothed in midnight loveliness, and all in the distance bespoke the solemnity of nature at peace. The city and the lagunes, the gulf and the dreamy Alps, the interminable plain of Lombardy and the blue void of heaven, lay alike in a common and grand repose.”

400. **1st Exercise.**—Analyze various model passages of the best authors, noticing:

1. What object or aim the author wishes to attain ;
2. What features he has selected for distinct treatment, what others for a brief sketch ;
3. How he starts out ;
4. What order he follows in the development ;
5. What sentiments he has introduced ;
6. What special artifices he has used to excite interest, or to enable the reader to follow him with ease.
7. How naturally the description is introduced, and how naturally it is laid aside to return to the narration.

401. **2d Exercise.**—Compare the descriptions of the same or of analogous subjects as drawn by various great writers, noticing how the style will differ with the general aspect of their works. For instance, compare the Pestilence in Athens, by Thucydides (book ii.), with the London Pestilence of A.D. 1665 as described by Lingard (vol. vii. pp. 278–282), by De Foe (Chambers' *Cyclopædia of Literature*, vol. i. p. 621), by Armstrong (*id.* ii. p. 69).

402. **The study of description** is one of the best means of improving the style of narrations, and, in fact, of all literary compositions. It is to his remarkable descriptive power that Prescott, for instance, owes that special charm which makes him so popular among all classes of readers, so that children, who find unadorned history too dry for their taste, will pore over his pictured page as they would over a touching story. As one more specimen of the descriptive style of this author we will refer to the crossing of the Sierra (vol. ii. pp. 461–465).

403. **3d Exercise.**—Mention briefly the items you would select to describe a city, a village, river, picnic-ground, country—putting all the items in good order.

404. **4th Exercise.**—Point out the faults against order in this sketch, a description of a room :

1. The room is nearly square.
2. It is dark and unattractive, having but two small windows on the east side.
3. It is twenty-four feet long and twenty-two feet wide.
4. It is in the southeast corner of the building.
5. It is a low room, the ceiling being only nine feet from the floor.
6. It has a recess on the west side.
7. The walls are plastered.

405. **5th Exercise.**—Describe a pleasant scene in spring, a busy scene in a city, a pompous funeral, a scene of devotion in a church, a scene of distress, one of lively enjoyment, one of solemn grandeur.

ARTICLE II. DESCRIPTIONS OF CHARACTERS.

406. We mean by **descriptions of characters** the pointing-out of those peculiarities by which certain persons are distinguished from the generality of men. Such compositions are far less in use than descriptions of things ; but they are occasionally very appropriate in historical or fictitious works, and as beautiful, when skilfully drawn, as they are difficult to compose.

407. "The drawing of characters," says Blair, "is one of the most splendid and, at the same time, **one of the most difficult ornaments of historical composition.** For characters are generally considered as professed exhibitions of fine writing; and an historian who seeks to shine in them is frequently in danger of carrying refinement to excess from a desire of appearing very profound and penetrating. He brings together so many contrasts and subtle oppositions of qualities that we are rather dazzled with sparkling expressions than entertained with any clear conception of a human charac-

ter. A writer who would characterize in an instructive and masterly manner should be simple in his style and should avoid all quaintness and affectation; at the same time not contenting himself with giving us general outlines only, but descending into those peculiarities which mark a character in its most strong and distinctive features." —*Blair*, Lect. xxxvi.

408. There are **two kinds** of these descriptions: one depicts *general* and one *individual* characters. The latter describes a real or imaginary person by a multiplicity of traits; the former presents one trait only, common to a whole class of men. The former usually occurs in the course of histories, biographies, or novels; of the latter kind Theophrastus among the ancients has left us some good specimens. Marshall, in his *Comedy of Convocation*, gives us some general characters as elegant as they are unpretending. See also "The Bashful Man" (*Models of English Lit.*, p. 59).

409. One of the most admired descriptions of **individual character** is that of the great Carthaginian general Hannibal, which occurs in the twenty-first book of Livy's history of Rome; another, that of Catiline in Sallust's history of that depraved Roman (n. 5). The following by Walter Scott is distinct and truthful:

"**Robespierre** possessed this advantage over Danton, that he did not seem to seek for wealth, either for hoarding or expending, but lived in strict and economical retirement, to justify the name of the 'Incorruptible' with which he was honored by his partisans. He appears to have possessed little talent, saving a deep fund of hypocrisy, considerable powers of sophistry, and a cold, exaggerated strain of oratory as foreign to a good taste as the measures he recommended were to ordinary humanity. It seemed wonderful that even the seething and boiling of the revolutionary caldron should have sent up from the bottom, and long supported on the surface, a thing so miserably void of claims to public distinction; but Robespierre had to impose upon the minds of the vulgar, and he knew

how to beguile them by accommodating his flattery to their passions and scale of understanding, and by acts of cunning and hypocrisy, which weigh more with the multitude than the words of eloquence or the arguments of wisdom. The people listened as to their Cicero when he twanged out his apostrophes of 'Pauvre Peuple, Peuple vertueux!' and hastened to execute whatever came recommended by such honeyed phrases, though devised by the worst of men for the worst and most inhuman of purposes," etc.

410. The **general character is exemplified** in this selection from Marshall's *Comedy of Convocation*:

"**The Good and Easy Clergyman** was a more agreeable type, and one which he had frequent opportunities of studying. One of this school was incumbent of a large and fashionable chapel not half a mile from his own parish church. His voice and manner were so tender that he seemed to be always on the point of making everybody an offer of marriage. His life appeared to glide away in a mild and amiable conflict between the claims of piety and good breeding. Sometimes his eye would kindle, and you would have said he was going to launch a rebuke against some popular sin; but good taste came promptly to the rescue, and the sinner's sensibility was greatly spared. His sermons were generally a tender panegyric of the natural virtues. He considered them in every aspect, and drew such ravishing pictures of the 'devoted mother,' or 'the Christian at home,' or 'the good parent's reward,' that people said his sermons were as good as a novel; and so they were. He was quite sure he never once alluded to hell during his whole career," etc.

411. **Rules for the Description of Characters.**

1st Rule.—They should present the individual, or the class of persons described, by **striking traits** which will enable the reader to form a lively and distinct conception of the subject.

2d Rule.—These traits of character must be **consistent with one another**, and the whole picture must be true to nature, so that the highest probability be attained.

3d Rule.—Above all, the characters of real persons must be presented with strict **regard to truth**. For truth is the

chief quality of all historical compositions; and no good can come to mankind from falsehood and misrepresentation. And still it is certain that many descriptions of character, occurring in works of great reputation, are very untruthful, often very unjust to the persons described.

412. There are **two chief causes** of this defect. The first is the difficulty of finding out the truth. It is hard enough for us to understand fully those with whom we daily converse, and to picture them to others in their true light without exaggerating or lessening their merit; it is far more difficult to do so with persons who lived in distant ages and in foreign lands. The second source of difficulty lies in the fact that a character drawn with strict regard for the truth is apt to be too tame for the taste of ordinary readers. Most persons, especially the uneducated, want what is striking and sensational in literature. It is easy enough to pander to such taste and to draw flashy portraits in the brightest colors, or, like Carlyle, "to give sketches alternately in chalk or charcoal, that exhibit his saints and his demons, now in ghastliest white and then in the most appalling blackness" (President Porter, *Books and Reading*, p. 162). But to qualify discreetly our praise and blame, to trace those delicate lineaments of the mind and heart which make up a man's individual character, is a task which few can successfully accomplish.

413. How far a straining after effect has injured the truthfulness of historical writings is well explained by President Porter:

"The fact deserves notice in this connection that, of late, professed historians have indulged somewhat freely in romancing, and so in a sense turned their histories into quasi-historical novels; especially when they attempt to give elaborate and eloquent portraits of their leading personages, in which the most lavish use is made of effective epithets and pointed antitheses," etc.—*Id.*

414. As much light may be thrown upon one character by comparing or contrasting it with another, we sometimes meet with **Parallel Characters**, as such descriptions are called. In these, two characters are explained at the same time, every trait in the one being compared with an analogous trait in the other.

415. The following is a specimen of this kind, as elegant in style as it is judicious in thought.

"Homer and Virgil compared":

"Homer was the greater genius, Virgil the better artist. In one we most admire the man, in the other the work, Homer hurries and transports us with a commanding impetuosity, Virgil leads us with attractive majesty. Homer scatters with a generous profusion, Virgil bestows with a careful magnificence. Homer, like the Nile, pours out his riches with a boundless overflow; Virgil, like a river in its banks, with a gentle and constant stream. When we behold their battles, methinks the two poets resemble the heroes they celebrate: Homer, boundless and irresistible as Achilles, bears all before him, and shines more and more as the tumult increases; Virgil, calmly daring like Æneas, appears undisturbed in the midst of the action, disposes all about him, and conquers with tranquillity. And when we look upon their machines, Homer seems like his own Jupiter in his terrors shaking Olympus, scattering the lightnings and firing the heavens; Virgil, like the same power in his benevolence, counselling with the gods, laying plans for empires, and regularly ordering his whole creation."—*Pope.*

See a similar passage with which Blair concludes Lecture xliii. The ancients have left us admirable models of parallel characters; for instance, the comparison between Cæsar and Cato in Sallust's history of Catiline's Conspiracy (liv.)

416. To facilitate the writing of exercises in this species of composition attention is called to the following **items**:

1. A general appreciation of the person's worth.
2. His race, family, age, fortune, station, resources.

3. Bodily aspect, general bearing, complexion, looks, voice, gesture, manners.
4. Qualities of mind and heart, virtues, vices, inclinations.
5. Intercourse with superiors, equals, inferiors, relations, friends, enemies, strangers.
6. Influences acting on him, and exerted by him on others. Etc.

For an analysis of Parallel Characters see "Socrates and Seneca," in *Zanders' Outlines of Composition* (p. 167).

417. **Exercises:**

- 1 Write a general character of a fop, a troublesome friend, a politician, a spendthrift, a miser. (Compare Saxe's "My Familiar.")
2. Write an individual character of Washington, Napoleon I., St. Francis Xavier, Mary Queen of Scots.
3. Write a contrast between a rich man and a poor man from the cradle to the grave.

CHAPTER V.

ESSAYS.

418. **Essays** are attempts to state one's own reflections upon a given subject. They are of different lengths and kinds, ranging from learned treatises to the first attempts of a school-boy at putting his own thoughts on paper. **As school exercises**, to be beneficial they require careful management. Nothing is easier than for a teacher to tell a pupil to write an essay "On the beautiful" or "On the sublime," etc.; but nothing is more difficult for a pupil than, unassisted, to carry out such an order. Or, if he finds no difficulty in the task, it is perhaps owing to the fact that sense and nonsense are equally welcome to his youthful mind, provided he can cover a few pages of foolscap with well-sounding sentences.

419. **The main difficulty** in this matter is that the boy is thus called upon to express his thoughts on a subject on which he has no clear thoughts to express, and he has not been instructed how to gather thoughts for himself. The first step, therefore, in treating of essay-writing is to teach pupils how to collect appropriate thoughts by a thorough study of the subject assigned.

420. We have said **appropriate thoughts**, for we wish to warn both teachers and learners against an error which has gained ground in our day, and which directs pupils to write down any thought that comes to their minds, no matter how little it be to the point. "At first," says a modern rhetorician, "aim only at copiousness, correcting no faults