

BOOK V.

VERSIFICATION.

CHAPTER I.

HISTORY AND NATURE OF VERSIFICATION.

ARTICLE I. ITS RISE AND IMPORTANCE.

610. Verse has been from time immemorial the usual dress of poetry. We can easily believe that **in ancient times** poetic effusions were frequent. These effusions were the expression of uncommon emotion. They were the voice of lamentation or of triumph, an appeal to martial feeling, or an invitation to high festivity. In early days uncultivated tribes, like those of the present time, were strongly influenced by the manner of expression; and the manner of expression was suggested by the sentiment that held mastery at the moment. As, therefore, in those days passions were often more violent and more variable than now, when education is more general and control of feeling more complete, in like manner the expression was then more lively and more in accordance with the first impulses of nature. Hence the disposition to express strong emotion in an unusual form. A wail, for example, over the dead, low and tender at one moment, then loud and impassioned,

sioned, various in cadence as the degrees of passion or the bursts of feeling were various, was more natural and impressive than a wordy passage of prose could be.

611. Exultation likewise, and festive rejoicing, and stirring calls to arms found vent in unusual tones. We ourselves are often moved by a plaintive or a merry air to a state of feeling similar to that of him who executes it. **Poetry and Music** were thus naturally allied. The bard who made the song was the same in ancient times as the musician who sang it in accord with his instrument. Assuredly he adapted it to the step of the music. Hence the presumptive cause of the peculiar form which poetic composition adopted.

612. Moreover, verse was in early ages **almost a necessity**. It was a medium of communication which could not be dispensed with. Whatever was traditional was preserved by the memory alone; for writing was not yet invented. But as it was difficult to learn so many events by heart when recounted in prose, recourse was had to the poet's art, which aided the memory, pleased the fancy, and rendered the task delightful. The son studied the history of tribes and nations in the verses which he learned from his father. The priest knew the rites of the sacrifice from verse, and recited or chanted his prayers in verse. The science of war, the science of medicine, the laws of the land and of religion, the praises of heroes, and the rhapsodies of prophecy, all were communicated by the same means.

613. But **the form** in which they were communicated was not the same. One kind of subjects was calm and deliberate in its tenor, hence the strain of the verse was regular; another kind was light and gay, and a suitable strain was adapted to it; another was mournful, and a slow and solemn movement in the poetry and music was observed. The

supplication to the Deity and the wild, almost incoherent language of the prophet were embalmed, as we shall see, in a form irregular and broken. This accounts for the various kinds of verse taught in prosodies.

ARTICLE II. ITS INFLUENCE AT THE PRESENT DAY.

614. The **influence of verse in modern times** cannot be denied. It has power to elevate or degrade the multitude, to breathe into their hearts a healthy, moral tone, or imbue them with moral depravity and irreligion. One of these two effects it will inevitably produce, according as it is used to adorn thoughts truly poetical or to insinuate the venom of baneful thoughts. The Scotch statesman, Andrew Fletcher, said long ago: "The popular songs of a country are of more importance than its laws"; and O'Connell said: "Let me write the ballads of a country, and I care not who makes the laws." A national anthem is produced to make men patriotic; songs are distributed among the troops to make them brave; sacred melodies are given to the people to humanize them and turn their minds heavenward; and these efforts are often singularly successful.

615. On the other hand, the minstrel and comedian have scarcely sung their song, however vile or nonsensical it may be, before it is caught up and repeated with eagerness by the whole nation, often with a demoralizing effect. To be able to counteract this latter evil with the same instruments, or to discern and appreciate more fully the artistic merits of a poetical production, will amply **repay the labor of studying** the art of versification. All may not be able to write beautiful poetry, but every cultivated mind should be able properly to appreciate it.

ARTICLE III. THE NATURE OF THE ART.

616. We have said that **poetry and music** were originally united. Later, for evident reasons, they separated. Not every one whom nature endowed with poetic abilities could play on an instrument, and not every one familiar with the instrument was inspired with a poet's feeling. But poetry retained in its ordinary mode of structure, after the separation, many of the features received from music. It retained notably the musical count or beat, which to the accord of various sounds adds a melodious flow and an ingenious and an apt turn of expression. In these, judiciously handled, lies the art of poetic numbers.

617. Independent of the meaning conveyed by the language, there is in verse not only a diction peculiar to it and capable of arousing desired emotions, but, besides, a charming **melody** which arrests the ear and, far more than prose can do, affects the soul. We find a pleasure in listening to tones of varied movement, when there is **harmony** in the variation, for the same reason that music harmonious and accordant is pleasurable. The aim of versification is to present the most beautiful variations with perfect, or almost perfect, uniformity. And in proportion as verses blend these two qualities they are successful and delight the ear. It is for this reason that the lips are wont to repeat, with undiminished pleasure, the same idea embodied in the same expression. Do we not often hum to ourselves snatches of song, whether serious or humorous, without disgust or fatigue? Here is a specimen of a serio-comic. After reading it once or twice we shall find, in moments of sadness or gayety, one or other of its stanzas drumming in our head:

618. THE LAST LEAF.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. They say that in his prime,
Ere the pruning-knife of time
Cut him down,
Not a better man was found
By the crier on his round
Through the town.</p> | <p>4. My old grandma has said
(Poor old lady! she is dead
Long ago)
That he had a Roman nose,
And his cheek was like a rose
In the snow.</p> |
| <p>2. But now he walks the streets,
And he looks at all he meets,
Sad and wan ;
And he shakes his feeble head
Till it seems as if he said,
"They are gone."</p> | <p>5. But now he's old and thin,
And his nose hangs on his chin
Like a staff ;
And a crook is in his back,
And a melancholy crack
In his laugh.</p> |
| <p>3. The mossy marbles rest
On the lips that he has prest
In their bloom,
And the names he loved to hear
Have been carved for many a
year
On the tomb.</p> | <p>6. I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
At him here ;
But the old three-cornered hat,
And the breeches, and all that,
Are so queer.</p> |
7. And if I should live to be
The last leaf on the tree
In the spring,
Let them laugh as I do now
At the old forsaken bough
Where I cling —Holmes.

619. Here there is a charming but **uniform variation**. Express these thoughts in prosaic terms, and the effect is destroyed. The second, third, and seventh stanzas contain sentiments worthy of a passing reflection, but even they would, in prose, pass away to return no more.

620. On the other hand, many of the metrical compositions of the day, though containing ideas truly poetic, are thrown aside as worthless because they **lack the two qualities** insisted on above.

621. Listen now to the chime of—

- "1. Those evening bells ! those evening bells !
How many a tale their music tells
Of youth and home, and that sweet time
When last I heard their evening chime.
- "2. Those joyous hours are passed away,
And many a heart that then was gay
Within the tomb now darkly dwells,
And hears no more those evening bells.
- "3. And so 'twill be when I am gone :
Those evening bells will still ring on,
While other bards shall walk these dells
And sing your praise, sweet evening bells."

—Moore.

This idea expressed in prose becomes tame; expressed in bad verse it is almost insupportable.

622. To show more forcibly the **influence of numbers** on the mind and heart two more examples are given. These quotations are lengthy, but well adapted to several purposes—viz., to guide the taste, to drill the student in criticism, and to accustom him to note the beat of the verse. The words italicized should be uttered slowly and feelingly. There is a melancholy pleasure conveyed in the solemn tread of the following. It is the picture of the leper, whom the laws of his country send into solitude. The metre will keep pace with his movement :

623. "THE LEPER.

"And he went forth—*alone!* Not one of all
The many whom he loved, nor she whose name
Was woven in the fibres of the heart
Breaking within him now, *to come and speak*
Comfort unto him. *Yea, he went his way*
Sick and heart-broken and *alone—to die!*
For God had cursed the leper.

"It was noon,
And Helon knelt beside a stagnant pool
 In the lone wilderness, and bathed his brow,
 Hot with the burning leprosy, and touched
The loathsome water to his fevered lips,
 Praying that he might be *so blest—to die!*
 Footsteps approached, and, *with no strength to flee.*
He drew the covering closer on his lip,
 Crying, 'Unclean! Unclean!' And, in the folds
 Of the coarse sackcloth *shrouding up his face,*
 He fell upon the earth till they should pass.
 Nearer the stranger came, and, *bending o'er*
The leper's prostrate form, pronounced his name—
 'Helon!' *The voice was like the master tone*
 Of a rich instrument—*most strangely sweet;*
 And the dull pulses of disease awoke
 And for a moment *beat beneath the hot*
And leprous scales with a restoring thrill.
 'Helon! Arise!' And he *forgot his curse,*
 And rose and stood before HIM."

—Willis.

624. In the succeeding lines the rapid step of the verse makes us feel more sensibly the torrent of the speaker's eloquence. Italics are here unnecessary: the quick step reigns throughout:

"In stature majestic, apart from the throng
 He stood in his beauty, the theme of my song!
 His cheek pale with fervor, the blue orbs above
 Lit up with the splendors of youth and of love;
 Yet the heart-glowing raptures that beamed from those eyes
 Seemed saddened by sorrow and chastened by sighs—
 As if the young heart in its bloom had grown cold,
 With its loves unrequited, its sorrows untold.

"Such language as his I may never recall;
 But his theme was Salvation—Salvation to all;
 And the souls of a thousand in ecstasy hung
 On the manna-like sweetness that dropped from his tongue.

Nor alone on the ear his wild eloquence stole;
 Enforced by each gesture, it sank to the soul,
 Till it seemed that an angel had brightened the sod
 And brought to each bosom a message from God.

"He spoke of the Saviour—what pictures he drew!
 The scene of His sufferings rose clear on my view:
 The cross—the rude cross where He suffered and died;
 The gush of bright crimson that flowed from His side;
 The cup of His sorrow, the wormwood and gall;
 The darkness that mantled the earth like a pall;
 The garland of thorns and the demon-like crews
 Who knelt as they scoffed him—'Hail, King of the Jews!'

"He spake, and it seemed that his statue-like form
 Expanded and glowed as his spirit grew warm—
 His tone so impassioned, so melting his air,
 As, touched with compassion, he ended in prayer;
 His hands, clasped above the blue orbs, alone
 Still pleading for sins that were never his own;
 While that mouth, where such sweetness ineffable clung,
 Still spoke though expression had died on his tongue.

'O God! what emotions the speaker awoke!
 A mortal he seemed, yet a deity spoke;
 A man, yet so far from humanity riven!
 On earth, yet so closely connected with Heaven!
 How oft in my fancy I've pictured him there,
 As he stood in that triumph of passion and prayer,
 With his eyes closed in rapture, their transient eclipse
 Made bright by the smiles that illumined his lips.

"There's a charm in delivery, a magical art,
 That thrills like a kiss from the lip to the heart;
 'Tis the glance, the expression, the well-chosen word,
 By whose magic the depths of the spirit are stirred;
 The smile, the mute gesture, the soul-startling pause,
 The eye's sweet expression that melts while it awes,
 The lip's soft persuasion, its musical tone—
 Oh! such was the charm of that eloquent one!"

—Amelia Welby.