

## BOOK II.

### RHETORICAL EXCELLENCE.

#### CHAPTER I.

##### CHOICE OF WORDS.

THE efficiency of all communication by language must depend on three things: (1) the choice of those words that are best adapted to convey to the persons addressed the meaning intended; (2) the use of as many words as are needed to convey the meaning, but of no more; (3) the arrangement of words, sentences, and paragraphs in the order most likely to communicate the meaning.

A writer should have not only ideas to express, but words with which to express them. The larger his vocabulary, the more likely he is to find in it just the form of expression he needs for the purpose in hand. It is from poverty of language quite as much as from poverty of thought that school and college compositions often suffer. Material which counts for little in the hands of a tyro, because of his inability to present it in appropriate language, would tell for much in the hands of a writer who has so many words at his command that he can find a fresh expression for every fresh thought or fancy.

To have words at one's command, it is not enough to know what they mean. Many that we understand in

books, and perhaps recognize as old friends, do not come to mind when we sit down to write. Others that we know a little better will not come without more effort than we are disposed to make. The easy, and therefore the usual, course is to content ourselves with those that we are in the habit of using; and most of us use very few. Even in Shakspeare the whole number of words is "not more than fifteen thousand; in the poems of Milton not above eight thousand. The whole number of Egyptian hieroglyphic symbols does not exceed eight hundred, and the entire Italian operative vocabulary is said to be scarcely more extensive."<sup>1</sup> The vocabulary of business has not been estimated, but it is certainly small. So is that of ordinary conversation.

Poverty of language is the source of much slang, a favorite word or phrase — as *nice*, *nasty*, *beastly*, *jolly*, *bully*, *ghastly*, *elegant*, *exciting*, *fascinating*, *gorgeous*, *stunning*, *splendid*, *awfully*, *utterly*, *vastly*, *most decidedly*, *perfectly lovely*, *perfectly maddening*, *how very interesting!* — being employed for so many purposes as to serve no one purpose well.

The modern use of slang "is vulgar," writes T. A. Trollope, "because it arises from one of the most intrinsically vulgar of all the vulgar tendencies of a vulgar mind, — imitation. There are slang phrases which, because they vividly or graphically express a conception, or clothe it with humour, are admirable. But they are admirable only in the mouths of their inventors.

"Of course it is an abuse of language to say that the beauty of a pretty girl strikes you with awe. But he who *first* said of some girl that she was 'awfully' pretty, was abundantly justified by the half humorous, half serious consideration of all the effects such loveliness may produce."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Marsh: Lectures on the English Language, lect. viii.

<sup>2</sup> T. A. Trollope: What I Remember, vol. i. chap. ii.

"There are certain words," says "The Lounger," in "The Critic," "that are good enough words in themselves, but which used in unusual connections become conspicuous and finally odious. Some time ago the favorite slang word of literature was 'certain.' Every heroine had a 'certain nameless charm,' etc., and every hero a 'certain air of distinction' about him, until you longed for one whose qualities were more uncertain in their nature or degree. 'Certain' seems to have had its day; and now the favorite slang word of literature is 'distinctly.' Heroines are now "distinctly regal" in their bearing, and there is about the heroes a manner that is 'distinctly fine,' or whatever the adjective may be. In a book that I read not many days ago, the word 'distinctly' used in this way appeared three times on one page, until I was distinctly bored and laid it down in disgust. 'Precious' used to be one of the tortured vocables, and there was a class of art-critics that went so far as to describe the paintings of their favorites as 'distinctly precious.'"<sup>1</sup>

"Nothing," says "The Saturday Review," "is gained, indeed much is lost, by calling the rocks 'weird.' 'Weird' is 'played out long ago,' as Mr. Swinburne says; it is smeared over the coarse pallet of the descriptive reporter. There are some other terms in the same hackneyed state; Ouida has got at them, and so have all the lady novelists who find language an insufficient vehicle for their thoughts that burn. Among these ill-used phrases are 'strange,' 'wild,' and 'glamour,' all which we regret to see that Mr. Symonds, in a certain passage, piles together: 'The Italy of the Renaissance fascinated our dramatists with a strange, wild glamour.' Mr. Symonds may remember the *Ars Poetica* of the author of *Alice in Wonderland*. The Master says:—

Now there are certain epithets  
Which suit with any word,  
As well as Harvey's Reading sauce  
With fish, or flesh, or bird;  
Of these 'wild,' 'lonely,' 'dreary,' 'strange,'  
Are much to be preferred.

The neophyte answers:—

Ah will it do, ah will it do,  
To take them in a lump,

<sup>1</sup> The [New York] Critic, March 11, 1893, p. 147.

As, 'the wild man went his dreary way  
To a strange and lonely pump'?

No, no, you must not hastily to such conclusions jump!

"For our part, when a writer declares that anything is weird, wild, or strange, we consider that he does not quite know what he wants to say."<sup>1</sup>

Other expressions that have been worked so hard of late that the life has gone out of them are: *epoch-making*, *clear-cut*, *factor*, *feature*, *galore*, *handicap*, *trend*; *atmosphere*, *feeling*, *technique*, *values*, from painters' dialect; *environment*, *tendency*, *struggle for existence*, *survival of the fittest*, from the dialect of modern science; *objects of interest*; *the near future*; *to the fore*; *in touch with*; *replete with interest*; *it seems to me*; *to detect the recurrence of*; *the irony of fate*; *along the line of* or *along these lines*; *a note of*, as in "There is a note of scholarship in the book;" *consensus*, as in "consensus of opinion;" *content*, as in "ethical content."<sup>2</sup> *For mercy's sake*, *for heaven's sake*, *thunder*, *Jupiter*, *confound it*, *the deuce take it*, and expressions still more objectionable, prevail among persons whose fund of language is small; for, as Mr. Crawford says, "Swearing is the refuge of those whose vocabulary is too limited to furnish them with a means of expressing anger or disappointment."<sup>3</sup>

The first thing, then, to be done by a man who would learn to speak or to write well is to enrich his vocabulary. How can he do this?

One way is to gather words from a dictionary, as Chat-

<sup>1</sup> The Saturday Review, May 17, 1879, p. 624.

<sup>2</sup> For other examples, see "Our English;" English in Newspapers and Novels, pp. 120-125.

<sup>3</sup> F. Marion Crawford: With the Immortals, chap. viii

ham<sup>1</sup> and Browning<sup>2</sup> did. Another way is to translate from the ancient classics, as the great advocate, Rufus Choate, used to do. Still another way is to become familiar with the classics of one's native tongue, taking care always to learn with the new word its exact force in the place where it occurs, — the plan followed by Benjamin Franklin and by Mr. Stevenson.

"About this time," writes Franklin, "I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it. With this view I took some of the papers, and making short hints of the sentiment in each sentence, laid them by a few days, and then, without looking at the book, try'd to compleat the papers again, by expressing each hinted sentiment at length, and as fully as it had been expressed before, in any suitable words that should come to hand. Then I compared my *Spectator* with the original, discovered some of my faults, and corrected them. But I found I wanted a stock of words, or a readiness in recollecting and using them, which I thought I should have acquired before that time if I had gone on making verses; since the continual occasion for words of the same import, but of different length, to suit the measure, or of different sound for the rhyme, would have laid me under a constant necessity of searching for variety, and also have tended to fix that variety in my mind, and make me master of it. Therefore I took some of the tales and turned them into verse; and, after a time, when I had pretty well forgotten the prose, turned them back again. I also sometimes jumbled my collections of hints into confusion, and after some weeks endeavored to reduce them into the best order,

<sup>1</sup> Chatham "told a friend that he had read over Bailey's English Dictionary twice from beginning to end." Lecky: History of England in the Eighteenth Century, vol. ii. chap. viii.

<sup>2</sup> "When the die was cast, and young Browning [at eighteen] was definitely to adopt literature as his profession, he qualified himself for it by reading and digesting the whole of Johnson's Dictionary." Mrs. Sutherland Orr: Life of Robert Browning, vol. i. chap. iv.

before I began to form the full sentences and compleat the paper. This was to teach me method in the arrangement of thoughts. By comparing my work afterwards with the criginal, I discovered many faults and amended them; but I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that, in certain particulars of small import, I had been lucky enough to improve the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious."<sup>1</sup>

"All through my boyhood and youth," writes Mr. Stevenson, "I was known and pointed out for the pattern of an idler; and yet I was always busy on my own private end, which was to learn to write. I kept always two books in my pocket, one to read, one to write in. As I walked, my mind was busy fitting what I saw with appropriate words; when I sat by the roadside I would either read, or a pencil and a penny version-book would be in my hand, to note down the features of the scene or commemorate some halting stanzas. Thus I lived with words. And what I thus wrote was for no ulterior use; it was written consciously for practice. It was not so much that I wished to be an author (though I wished that too) as that I had vowed that I would learn to write. That was a proficiency that tempted me; and I practised to acquire it, as men learn to whittle, in a wager with myself. Description was the principal field of my exercise; for to any one with senses there is always something worth describing, and town and country are but one continuous subject. But I worked in other ways also; often accompanied my walks with dramatic dialogues, in which I played many parts; and often exercised myself in writing down conversations from memory.

"This was all excellent, no doubt; so were the diaries I sometimes tried to keep, but always and very speedily discarded, finding them a school of posturing and melancholy self-deception. And yet this was not the most efficient part of my training. Good though it was, it only taught me (so far as I have learned them at all) the lower and less intellectual elements of the art, the choice of the essential note and the right word, — things that to a happier constitution had perhaps come by nature. And regarded as training, it had one grave defect; for it set me no standard of achieve-

<sup>1</sup> Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, edited by John Bigelow, vol. i. part i.

ment. So that there was perhaps more profit, as there was certainly more effort, in my secret labors at home. Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality. I was unsuccessful, and I knew it; and tried again, and was again unsuccessful and always unsuccessful; but, at least, in these vain bouts I got some practice in rhythm, in harmony, in construction, and the co-ordination of parts.

“That, like it or not, is the way to learn to write; whether I have profited or not, that is the way. It was so Keats learned, and there was never a finer temperament for literature than Keats’s; it was so, if we could trace it out, that all men have learned; and that is why a revival of letters is always accompanied or heralded by a cast back to earlier and fresher models. Perhaps I hear some one cry out: But this is not the way to be original! It is not; nor is there any way but to be born so. Nor yet, if you are born original, is there anything in this training that shall clip the wings of your originality. There can be none more original than Montaigne, neither could any be more unlike Cicero; yet no craftsman can fail to see how much the one must have tried in his time to imitate the other. Burns is the very type of a prime force in letters; he was of all men the most imitative. Shakespeare himself, the imperial, proceeds directly from a school. It is only from a school that we can expect to have good writers; it is almost invariably from a school that great writers, these lawless exceptions, issue. Nor is there anything here that should astonish the considerate. Before he can tell what cadences he truly prefers, the student should have tried all that are possible; before he can choose and preserve a fitting key of words, he should long have practised the literary scales; and it is only after years of such gymnastic that he can sit down at last, legions of words swarming to his call, dozens of turns of phrase simultaneously bidding for his choice, and he himself knowing what he wants to do and (within the narrow limit of a man’s ability) able to do it.

“And it is the great point of these imitations that there still shines beyond the student’s reach his inimitable model. Let him

try as he please, he is still sure of failure; and it is a very old and a very true saying that failure is the only high-road to success.”<sup>1</sup>

For a chosen few, conscious effort, such as Franklin and Mr. Stevenson made, is of priceless value; but for most young writers, the best practicable way to increase their vocabulary is by unconscious assimilation,—by absorbing words from books or from conversation, as children do, without thinking about processes or results. The danger of this method lies in the temptation to pick up words as words, without mastering their meaning. There is sometimes less promise in juvenile writers who take the first word that offers than in those who halt between two words. The facility of the former may be fatal to the acquirement of excellence: the slowness of the latter fosters a habit of seeking the right expression, which often develops into a faculty for finding it.

After making sure that a given word is English, a writer may ask himself whether it is (1) the word that will convey his exact meaning to his readers, (2) the word that will impress his meaning on his readers, (3) the word that will be agreeable to his readers. The relative attention to be given to each of these points varies with the nature of the subject-matter and the quality of the readers addressed.

## SECTION I.

### CLEARNESS.

A writer should choose that word or phrase which will convey his meaning with CLEARNESS. It is not enough to

<sup>1</sup> R. L. Stevenson: *Memories and Portraits*; A College Magazine, sect. i.