

"Twenty years ago, and still Jess sat at the window, and still she heard that woman scream."¹

"And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"²

In trying not to be prolix, one should beware of the opposite extreme, should avoid ellipses difficult to bridge, compression that takes the life out of language, laborious conciseness of every kind. These are the very faults into which a verbose writer is apt to fall; for when such a writer, impatient of his slow progress, tries to get on faster, he usually succeeds in omitting, not what his readers know, but what he knows best himself, and thus sacrifices clearness to misplaced brevity.

With a master of style, on the other hand, every word adds to the effect. Take a single example from Milton:—

"From morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day, and with the setting sun
Dropt from the zenith, like a falling star."³

"What art," says Webster, "is manifest in these few lines! The object is to express great distance, and great velocity, neither of which is capable of very easy suggestion to the human mind. We are told that the angel fell a day, a long summer's day; the day is broken into forenoon and afternoon, that the time may seem to be protracted. He does not reach the earth till sunset; and then, to represent the velocity, he 'drops,' one of the very best words in the language to signify sudden and rapid fall, and then comes a simile, 'like a falling star.'"⁴

¹ J. M. Barrie: *A Window in Thrums*, chap. vi.

² 2 Samuel xviii. 33.

³ Milton: *Paradise Lost*, book i. line 742.

⁴ Daniel Webster: *Private Correspondence*; To Rev. Mr. Brazer, Nov. 10, 1828.

SECTION III.

EASE.

In so far as EASE is affected by the number of words, it has more in common with clearness than with force; for it usually suffers from excessive conciseness rather than from redundancy. Authors noted for force—George Eliot, Browning, Emerson—leave gaps for their readers to supply: those noted for ease—Goldsmith, Irving, Cardinal Newman—are copious rather than compact.

From the point of view of ease, the shortest word, sentence, or paragraph is not necessarily the best. "Languor is," no doubt, "the cause or the effect of most disorders;"¹ but "it is silly to argue that we gain ground by shortening on all occasions the syllables of a sentence. Half a minute, if indeed so much is requisite, is well spent in clearness, in fulness, and pleasurable expression, and in engaging the ear to carry a message to the understanding."²

On the other hand, there is danger in making ease the primary consideration in determining the number of words. So long as a writer spends his time "in engaging the ear to

¹ Landor: *Conversations*, Third Series; Southey and Porson.

² *Ibid.*; Johnson and Horne (Tooke). Quintilian has a sentence to the same effect: "quod intellexerit, ut fortasse ubique, in narratione tamen praecipue media haec tenenda sit via dicendi, 'quantum opus est et quantum satis est.' quantum opus est autem non ita solum accipi volo, quantum ad indicandum sufficit, quia non inornata debet esse brevitatis, alioqui sit indocta; nam et fallit voluptas, et minus longa quae delectant videntur, ut amoenum ac molle iter, etiamsi est spatii amplioris, minus fatigat quam durum aridumque compendium."—*Inst. Orator.* iv. ii. xlv.

carry a message to the understanding," to the heart, or to the imagination, he spends it well; but if, by multiplying words, he obscures the meaning of the "message," or weakens its force, he purchases ease at the cost of things far more important.

CHAPTER III.

ARRANGEMENT.

SUCCESS in either spoken or written discourse depends even less upon choice or number of words than upon ARRANGEMENT. In a theoretically perfect arrangement, the order of the language would distinctly indicate the relative importance of each constituent part of the composition. Of such an arrangement no human language is susceptible; but a writer should come as near to it as is permitted by the peculiarities of the language in which he writes.

SECTION I.

CLEARNESS.

CLEARNESS requires that the words and the groups of words which are near to one another in thought shall be near in expression, and that those which are separate in thought shall be separate in expression. A writer who conforms to this principle will give to each word the position that shows its relation to other words, and to each part of a sentence the position that shows its relation to other parts.

Obscurity may be caused by an arrangement that puts a pronoun before the noun which it represents. For example:—

Position of
pronouns.

"In adjusting *his* rate of wages for the future, the working man should realize that politics does not enter into the matter."¹