

SECTION II.

ARTISTIC DESCRIPTION.

Where words serve no higher purpose than they do in scientific description, — that is, where they serve only as means of identifying objects that are or are to be under the eye, — they give useful information, indeed, but pretend to no higher excellence. The purpose of description not scientific is less to convey information (though it may do that incidentally) than to affect the imagination, to produce illusion, to give pleasure. The writer of a description of this kind, like the writer of a scientific description, should have his eye on the object that he is describing. He should not, however, dwell on details as such: he should not invite attention to this or that part, unless it is a characteristic part, a part that represents the whole. This kind of description, as distinguished in purpose from scientific description, may be called ARTISTIC; as distinguished in method, it may be called SUGGESTIVE.

Artistic description is exemplified in the following lines from Wordsworth's "Green Linnet": —

"Amid yon tuft of hazel trees,
That twinkle to the gusty breeze,
Behold him perched in ecstasies,
Yet seeming still to hover;
There! where the flutter of his wings
Upon his back and body flings
Shadows and sunny glimmerings,
That cover him all over.

"My dazzled sight he oft deceives,
A Brother of the dancing leaves;
Then flits, and from the cottage-eaves
Pours forth his song in gushes."

Aim and
method of
artistic
description.

Wordsworth, it will be observed, gives no particulars about the bird's dimensions, shape of beak, or variations of color, nothing by which it could be identified; he leaves a reader who has never seen a green linnet to imagine one by recalling some bird that he has seen and coloring it with the green of the hazel tree; he adds nothing to the reader's knowledge, but he associates with knowledge already possessed a poet's fancies and emotions. The value of the poem to each reader must depend on that reader's intelligence, imagination, and sympathy.

Every master of suggestive description recognizes the limits of his art and makes the most of its advantages. He does not undertake to show us the color or the form of a flower, as the painter does; but he enables us to feel its beauty, he clothes it with poetic associations.

"It is not," says Matthew Arnold, "Linnæus, or Cavendish, or Cuvier who gives us the true sense of animals, or water, or plants, who seizes their secret for us, who makes us participate in their life; it is Shakespeare, with his

'daffodils

That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty;'

it is Wordsworth, with his

'voice . . . heard

In spring-time from the cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides;'

it is Keats, with his

'moving waters at their priestlike task
Of cold ablution round Earth's human shores;'

it is Chateaubriand, with his '*cime indéterminée des forêts*;' it is Senancour, with his mountain birch-tree: '*Cette écorce blanche, lisse et crevassée; cette tige agreste; ces branches qui s'inclinent vers la terre; la mobilité des feuilles, et tout cet abandon, simplicité de la nature, attitude des déserts.*'"¹

¹ Matthew Arnold: *Essays in Criticism*; Maurice de Guérin.

"In painting," says Burke, "we may represent any fine figure we please; but we never can give it those enlivening touches which it may receive from words. To represent an angel in a picture, you can only draw a beautiful young man winged: but what painting can furnish out any thing so grand as the addition of one word, 'the angel of the *Lord*?' . . . Now, as there is a moving tone of voice, an impassioned countenance, an agitated gesture, which affect independently of the things about which they are exerted, so there are words, and certain dispositions of words, which being peculiarly devoted to passionate subjects, and always used by those who are under the influence of any passion, touch and move us more than those which far more clearly and distinctly express the subject-matter. We yield to sympathy what we refuse to description."¹

In saying that "we yield to sympathy what we refuse to description," Burke suggests a characteristic of descriptive writing already noted in connection with "The Green Linnet," — the characteristic that communicates to the reader the writer's emotion in the presence of the object described. This communication of emotion may be made without distinct reference to its source in the objects observed, as it is in some modern English poetry and in many of the productions of the "symbolic" or "impressionist" school of writers in France. If, however, the end in view is nothing but the communication of feeling, language is not the appropriate means of expression. Vague emotion can be better expressed through songs without words than through songs with unmeaning words: for vague emotion the appropriate vehicle is music.

The problem for the writer is in what proportions to combine fancies and feelings with matters of fact. A writer who makes the matter-of-fact side of his descrip-

¹ Burke: *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, part v. sect. vii. This passage furnishes an example of skilful repetition similar to those on pages 150, 151.

tion prominent may be useful from the point of view of science, but he is not effective from the point of view of art. He may be intelligible to those who are in search of information, but he will not create interest: his work will have more accuracy than life. A writer who loses the sense of fact in a gush of emotion is disappointing to those who expect to find ideas behind words. He may move his readers, but he will fail to provide "a local habitation" for the feeling he evokes.

Writers of artistic description sometimes undertake to transfer their emotions to inanimate objects by means of what Mr. Ruskin calls "the pathetic fallacy." To explain this phrase, Mr. Ruskin quotes and comments upon a couplet by Dr. Holmes: —

"The spendthrift crocus, bursting through the mould
Naked and shivering, with his cup of gold."¹

"This is very beautiful," says Mr. Ruskin, "and yet very untrue. The crocus is not a spendthrift, but a hardy plant; its yellow is not gold, but saffron. How is it that we enjoy so much the having it put into our heads that it is anything else than a plain crocus?"

"It is an important question. For, throughout our past reasonings about art, we have always found that nothing could be good or useful, or ultimately pleasurable, which was untrue. But here is something pleasurable in written poetry which is nevertheless untrue. And what is more, if we think over our favourite poetry, we shall find it full of this kind of fallacy, and that we like it all the more for being so.

"It will appear also, on consideration of the matter, that this fallacy is of two principal kinds. Either, as in this case of the crocus, it is the fallacy of wilful fancy, which involves no real expectation that it will be believed; or else it is a fallacy caused by an excited state of the feelings, making us, for the time, more or less irrational. . . . Thus, for instance, in Alton Locke, —

¹ Oliver Wendell Holmes: *Spring*.

“They rowed her in across the rolling foam —
The cruel, crawling foam.’

“The foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the ‘Pathetic fallacy.’

“Now we are in the habit of considering this fallacy as eminently a character of poetical description, and the temper of mind in which we allow it, as one eminently poetical, because passionate. But I believe, if we look well into the matter, that we shall find the greatest poets do not often admit this kind of falseness, — that it is only the second order of poets who much delight in it.

“Thus, when Dante describes the spirits falling from the bank of Acheron ‘as dead leaves flutter from a bough,’ he gives the most perfect image possible of their utter lightness, feebleness, passiveness, and scattering agony of despair, without, however, for an instant losing his own clear perception that *these* are souls, and *those* are leaves; he makes no confusion of one with the other. But when Coleridge speaks of

“The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can,’

he has a morbid, that is to say, a so far false, idea about the leaf: he fancies a life in it, and will, which there are not; confuses its powerlessness with choice, its fading death with merriment, and the wind that shakes it with music. Here, however, there is some beauty, even in the morbid passage; but take an instance in Homer and Pope. Without the knowledge of Ulysses, Elpenor, his youngest follower, has fallen from an upper chamber in the Circean palace, and has been left dead, unmissed by his leader or companions, in the haste of their departure. They cross the sea to the Cimmerian land; and Ulysses summons the shades from Tartarus. The first which appears is that of the lost Elpenor. Ulysses, amazed, and in exactly the spirit of bitter and terrified lightness which is seen in Hamlet,¹ addresses the spirit with the simple, startled words: —

¹ “Well said, old mole! can’st work i’ the ground so fast?”

“Elpenor! How camest thou under the shadowy darkness? Hast thou come faster on foot than I in my black ship?”

Which Pope renders thus: —

“O, say, what angry power Elpenor led
To glide in shades, and wander with the dead?
How could thy soul, by realms and seas disjoined,
Outfly the nimble sail, and leave the lagging wind?”

“I sincerely hope the reader finds no pleasure here, either in the nimbleness of the sail, or the laziness of the wind! And yet how is it that these conceits are so painful now, when they have been pleasant to us in the other instances?

“For a very simple reason. They are not a *pathetic* fallacy at all, for they are put into the mouth of the wrong passion — a passion which never could possibly have spoken them — agonized curiosity. Ulysses wants to know the facts of the matter; and the very last thing his mind could do at the moment would be to pause, or suggest in any wise what was *not* a fact. The delay in the first three lines, and conceit in the last, jar upon us instantly like the most frightful discord in music. No poet of true imaginative power could possibly have written the passage.¹

“Therefore we see that the spirit of truth must guide us in some sort, even in our enjoyment of fallacy. Coleridge’s fallacy has no discord in it, but Pope’s has set our teeth on edge.

“Take two most exquisite instances from master hands. The Jessy of Shenstone, and the Ellen of Wordsworth, have both been

¹ “It is worth while comparing the way a similar question is put by the exquisite sincerity of Keats: —

“He wept, and his bright tears
Went trickling down the golden bow he held.
Thus, with half-shut, suffused eyes, he stood;
While from beneath some cumbrous boughs hard by
With solemn step an awful goddess came.
And there was purport in her looks for him,
Which he with eager guess began to read:
Perplexed the while, melodiously he said,
“How cam’st thou over the unfooted sea?””

betrayed and deserted. Jessy, in the course of her most touching complaint, says :

“If through the garden’s flowery tribes I stray,
Where bloom the jasmines that could once allure,
“Hope not to find delight in us,” they say,
“For we are spotless, Jessy ; we are pure.””

Compare this with some of the words of Ellen :

“Ah, why,” said Ellen, sighing to herself,
“Why do not words, and kiss, and solemn pledge,
And nature, that is kind in woman’s breast,
And reason, that in man is wise and good,
And fear of Him who is a righteous Judge, —
Why do not these prevail for human life,
To keep two hearts together, that began
Their springtime with one love, and that have need
Of mutual pity and forgiveness sweet
To grant, or be received ; while that poor bird —
O, come and hear him ! Thou who hast to me
Been faithless, hear him ; — though a lowly creature,
One of God’s simple children that yet know not
The Universal Parent, *how* he sings !
As if he wished the firmament of heaven
Should listen, and give back to him the voice
Of his triumphant constancy and love.
The proclamation that he makes, how far
His darkness doth transcend our fickle light.””

The perfection of both these passages, as far as regards truth and tenderness of imagination in the two poets, is quite insuperable. But of the two characters imagined, Jessy is weaker than Ellen, exactly in so far as something appears to her to be in nature which is not. The flowers do not really reproach her. God meant them to comfort her, not to taunt her ; they would do so if she saw them rightly.

Ellen, on the other hand, is quite above the slightest erring emotion. There is not the barest film of fallacy in all her thoughts. She reasons as calmly as if she did not feel. And, although the singing of the bird suggests to her the idea of its desiring to be heard in heaven, she does not for an instant admit any veracity in the thought. ‘As if,’ she says, — ‘I know he

means nothing of the kind ; but it does verily seem as if.’ The reader will find, by examining the rest of the poem, that Ellen’s character is throughout consistent in this clear though passionate strength.”¹

Here, as elsewhere, Mr. Ruskin is so eager to express his views strongly that he says more than he means. He certainly cannot intend to maintain, as he seems to do in the last part of the passage quoted above, that similes are to be preferred to metaphors, — that, for instance, it is better to speak of “foam that looks as if it were cruel and crawling” than to say “cruel, crawling foam.” Nor can he intend to warn writers of genius against representing the inanimate world as seen through their emotions or their imagination.² What Mr. Ruskin desires especially to condemn is the deplorable disposition of ordinary writers to attribute, consciously or unconsciously, their own feelings to natural objects in cases in which neither passion nor imagination justifies the fallacy.

This disposition appears in the following passages : —

“Through the green fields, where the grass, dew-drenched, was shedding myriad pearly tears of joy at the departure of darkness and the coming back of light ; where the daisies and the buttercups were half unclosing their coy lips, under the kisses of their kingly lover. Through them all she went, and then passed down to the shore of the great sea whose breast was heaving gently for the love of Hyperion, the mighty sun god, who was smiling welcomingly,³ coquettishly, under his burning eyes, through all her countless waves.”⁴

“Then would the gentle spirits of Nature shower on her their holy ministry, pitying the passion of the self-tormented human

¹ Ruskin : *Modern Painters*, vol. iii. part iv. chap. xii.

² See Lowell on “The Imagination.” *The Century Magazine*, March 1894.

³ See page 22.

⁴ Rhoda Broughton : *Not Wisely but Too Well*, chap. viii.

soul; then would the sweet evening wind breathe softly its cool kisses on her throbbing brows, and sing over her its soothing lullaby; then would the over-arching trees wave their green branches gently above her, whispering compassionately to each other of her woe; then would the serene evening-star come out in heaven, and look mildly down through the shaggy forest depths on the prostrate creature, who, calmed by these holy influences, would sink at length into slumber, which was, for a while, forgetfulness."¹

"During the sad funeral hours the October skies were weeping copiously, as if the heart of nature were touched by the all-pervading grief."²

If the principles that apply to descriptive writing have been correctly set forth, two things are obvious:

Resources of artistic description. (1) that a writer should not try to make language do more than it can do well; (2) that he should make the most of the advantages which language possesses over the other arts. It remains to speak of the ways in which he may secure these advantages.

Instead of wearying the reader with many details, a skilful writer describes by selecting a few telling characteristics that stimulate the imagination:

Telling characteristics. he expresses less than he suggests. For example:—

... "a bashful, shining, red-faced laird, with large white ears, and a smooth powdered head, who awkwardly mumbled out his acquiescence."³

"The monarch is a little, keen, fresh-coloured old man, with very protruding eyes, attired in plain, old-fashioned, snuff-coloured clothes and brown stockings, his only ornament the blue ribbon of his Order of the Garter."⁴

"Small, shining, neat, methodical, and buxom was Miss Peecher; cherry-cheeked and tuneful of voice. A little pin-cushion, a little

¹ Frances Anne Kemble: *Far Away and Long Ago*, chap. xv.

² American newspaper: editorial article on the funeral of Dr. Holmes

³ Miss Ferrier: *Destiny*, vol. i. chap. xxxix.

⁴ Thackeray: *The Virginians*, chap. lviii.

housewife, a little book, a little work-box, a little set of tables and weights and measures, and a little woman all in one. She could write a little essay on any subject, exactly a slate long, beginning at the left-hand top of one side and ending at the right-hand bottom of the other, and the essay should be strictly according to rule."¹

"Mrs. Gradgrind, a little, thin, white, pink-eyed bundle of shawls, of surpassing feebleness, mental and bodily; who was always taking physic without any effect, and who, whenever she showed a symptom of coming to life, was invariably stunned by some weighty piece of fact tumbling on her."²

"'A slight figure,' said Mr. Peggotty, looking at the fire, 'kiender worn; soft, sorrowful, blue eyes; a delicate face; a pritty head, leaning a little down; a quiet voice and way—timid a'most. That's Em'ly! . . . Cheerful along with me; retired when others is by; fond of going any distance fur to teach a child, or fur to tend a sick person, or fur to do some kindness tow'rds a young girl's wedding (and she's done a many, but has never seen one); fondly loving of her uncle; patient; liked by young and old; sowl out by all that has any trouble. That's Em'ly!'"³

"One moment had been burnt into his life as its chief epoch—a moment full of July sunshine and large pink roses shedding their last petals on a grassy court enclosed on three sides by a Gothic cloister. Imagine him in such a scene: a boy of thirteen, stretched prone on the grass where it was in shadow, his curly head propped on his arms over a book, while his tutor, also reading, sat on a camp-stool under shelter."⁴

"The animal he bestrode was a broken-down plough-horse, that had outlived almost every thing but his viciousness. He was gaunt and shagged, with a ewe neck and a head like a hammer; his rusty mane and tail were tangled and knotted with burrs; one eye had lost its pupil, and was glaring and spectral; but the other had the gleam of a genuine devil in it."⁵

"Sylvia Crane's house was the one in which her grandmother had been born, and was the oldest house in the village. It was

¹ Dickens: *Our Mutual Friend*, book ii. chap. i.

² *Ibid.*: *Hard Times*, chap. iv.

³ *Ibid.*: *David Copperfield*, chap. lxiii.

⁴ George Eliot: *Daniel Deronda*, book ii. chap. xvi.

⁵ Irving: *The Sketch Book*; *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

known as the 'old Crane place.' It had never been painted, it was shedding its flapping gray shingles like gray scales, the roof sagged in a mossy hollow before the chimney, the windows and the doors were awry, and the whole house was full of undulations and wavering lines, which gave it a curiously unreal look in broad daylight. In the moonlight it was the shadowy edifice built of a dream."¹

"Her little face is like a walnut shell
With wrinkling lines; her soft, white hair adorns
Her either brow in quaint, straight curls, like horns;
And all about her clings an old, sweet smell.
Prim is her gown and quakerlike her shawl.
Well might her bonnets have been born on her.
Can you conceive a Fairy Godmother
The subject of a real religious call?
In snow or shine, from bed to bed she runs,
Her mittened hands, that ever give or pray,
Bearing a sheaf of tracts, a bag of buns,
All twinkling smiles and texts and pious tales:
A wee old maid that sweeps the Bridegroom's way,
Strong in a cheerful trust that never fails."²

... "there at the window stood,
Framed in its black square length, with lamp in hand,
Pompilia; the same great, grave, grievful air
As stands i' the dusk, on altar that I know,
Left alone with one moonbeam in her cell,
Our Lady of all the Sorrows."³

"One stiff blind horse, his every bone a-stare,
Stood stupefied, however he came there."⁴

"Lo! sweeten'd with the summer light,
The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
Drops in a silent autumn night."⁵

... "a full-fed river winding slow
By herds upon an endless plain,
The ragged rims of thunder brooding low,
With shadow-streaks of rain."⁶

¹ Mary E. Wilkins: *Pembroke*, chap. ii.

² William Ernest Henley: *A Book of Verses*; In Hospital, Visitor.

³ Browning: *The Ring and The Book*; Giuseppe Caponsacchi.

⁴ *Ibid.*: "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

⁵ Tennyson: *The Lotos-Eaters*. ⁶ *Ibid.*: *The Palace of Art*

"At length I saw a lady within call,
Stillier than chisell'd marble, standing there;
A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,
And most divinely fair."¹

"A queen, with swarthy cheeks and bold black eyes,
Brow-bound with burning gold."¹

A good instance of the effective use of characteristic features is furnished by the well-known lines with which Tennyson begins "Ænone." To appreciate the excellence of these lines for purposes of description, we have but to read them after reading the poet's early attempt (in the volume published in 1833) to represent the same scene:—

"There is a dale in Ida, lovelier
Than any in old Ionia, beautiful
With emerald slopes of sunny sward, that lean
Above the loud glenriver, which hath worn
A path thro' steepdown granite walls below,
Mantled with flowering tendriltwine. In front
The cedarshadowy valleys open wide.
Far-seen, high over all the Godbuilt wall
And many a snowcolumned range divine,
Mounted with awful sculptures — men and Gods,
The work of Gods — bright on the dark blue sky
The windy citadel of Ilion
Shone, like the crown of Troas."²

These lines are manifestly inferior to those in the later volume:—

"There lies a vale in Ida, lovelier
Than all the valleys of Ionian hills.
The swimming vapour slopes upward the glen,
Puts forth an arm, and creeps from pine to pine,
And loiters, slowly drawn. On either hand
The lawns and meadow-ledges midway down
Hang rich in flowers, and far below them roars
The long brook falling thro' the clov'n ravine
In cataract after cataract to the sea.
Behind the valley topmost Gargarus

¹ Tennyson: *A Dream of Fair Women*.

² *Ibid.*: *Ænone* (edition of 1833).

Stands up and takes the morning: but in front
The gorges, opening wide apart, reveal
Troas and Ilion's column'd citadel,
The crown of Troas."¹

In the final form of this description, the addition of fog—of the specific kind of fog that “loiters” in the valley in a way familiar to lovers of mountain scenery—is effective. The substitution of “lawns and meadow-ledges” that “hang” for “emerald slopes of sunny sward” that “lean” is of doubtful value; but there can be no doubt about the improvement made by the expansion of “loud glenriver” etc., into

“roars
The long brook falling thro' the clov'n ravine
In cataract after cataract to the sea,”

and by the transformation of the vague lines beginning,

“In front
The cedarshadowy valleys open wide,”

into the far more striking passage,—

“Behind the valley topmost Gargarus
Stands up and takes the morning: but in front
The gorges, opening wide apart, reveal
Troas and Ilion's column'd citadel,
The crown of Troas.”

These lines set before us the mountains, the plain of Troy, the city, and the citadel with its columns. The transfer of the epithet “columned” from the mountains to the citadel, and the substitution, in the last line, of a metaphor for a simile, make the citadel the central feature of the landscape. “An ancient who stood on the deck of a trireme watching for the first glimpse of Troy would have seen just as much as is described here at the moment when the vessel swung round the promontory of Sigeum into the harbor. If asked to tell how the city looked, he would remember nothing but the columns of the citadel.”²

Well-selected characteristics may be made more effective by the addition of a happy phrase which the reader is sure to remember. For example:—

¹ Tennyson: *Ænone*.

² From a student's theme.

“But, whereas the girl was so dark-eyed and dark-haired, that she seemed to receive a deeper and more lustrous colour from the sun, when it shone upon her, the boy was so light-eyed and light-haired that the self-same rays appeared to draw out of him what little colour he ever possessed. His cold eyes would hardly have been eyes, but for the short ends of lashes which, by bringing them into immediate contrast with something paler than themselves, expressed their form. His short-cropped hair might have been a mere continuation of the sandy freckles on his forehead and face. His skin was so unwholesomely deficient in the natural tinge, that he looked as though, if he were cut, he would *bleed white*.”¹

“He [De Quincey] was a pretty little creature, full of wire-drawn ingenuities; bankrupt enthusiasms, bankrupt pride; with the finest silver-toned low voice, and most elaborate gently-winding courtesies and ingenuities in conversation: ‘What would n't one give to have him in a Box, and take him out to talk!’ (That was *Her* criticism of him; and it was right good.) A bright, ready and melodious talker; but in the end an inconclusive and long-winded. One of the smallest man-figures I ever saw; shaped like a pair of tongs; and hardly above five feet in all: when he sat, you would have taken him, by candlelight, for the beautifullest little Child; blue-eyed, blonde-haired, sparkling face,—had there not been a something, too, which said, ‘*Eccovi, this Child has been in Hell!*’”²

“The champaign with its endless fleece
Of feathery grasses everywhere!
Silence and passion, joy and peace,
An everlasting wash of air—
Rome's ghost since her decease.”³

Sometimes the phrase takes the form of a comparison, as when Thackeray likens *Beatrix Esmond* to a leopard, and *Ethel Newcome* to “*Diana*, whose looks were so cold and whose arrows were so keen,” or when *George Eliot* likens *Gwendolen Harleth* to a serpent. These comparisons are what we remember best about *Beatrix*, *Ethel*, and *Gwendolen*.

¹ Dickens: *Hard Times*, chap. ii.

² Carlyle: *Reminiscences*, edited by C. E. Norton; Edward Irving

³ Browning: *Two in the Campagna*.

Other examples of comparisons that give effectiveness to descriptions occur in the following passages:—

... "it was pleasant to look at Romola's beauty: to see her, like old Firenzuola's type of womanly majesty, 'sitting with a certain grandeur, speaking with gravity, smiling with modesty, and casting around, as it were, an odour of queenliness;' and she seemed to unfold like a strong white lily under this genial breath of admiration and homage."¹

"It was not long before Romola entered, all white and gold, more than ever like a tall lily. Her white silk garment was bound by a golden girdle, which fell with large tassels; and above that was the rippling gold of her hair, surmounted by the white mist of her long veil, which was fastened on her brow by a band of pearls, the gift of Bernardo del Nero, and was now parted off her face so that it all floated backward."²

"If the conventional Cherub could ever grow up and be clothed, he might be photographed as a portrait of Wilfer. His chubby, smooth, innocent appearance was a reason for his being always treated with condescension when he was not put down."³

"Guido Franceschini, — old

And nothing like so tall as I myself,
Hook-nosed and yellow in a bush of beard,
Much like a thing I saw on a boy's wrist,
He called an owl and used for catching birds."⁴

One well-
chosen word.

Sometimes a single well-chosen word fully answers the purposes of description.

"For a single thing," says Lessing, "Homer has commonly but a single epithet. A ship is to him at one time the black ship, at another the hollow ship, and again the swift ship. At most it is the well-manned black ship. Further painting of the ship he does not attempt. But of the ship's sailing, its departure and arrival, he makes so detailed a picture, that the artist would have to paint five or six, to put the whole upon his canvas."⁵

¹ George Eliot: Romola, chap. xix.

² Ibid., chap. xx.

³ Dickens: Our Mutual Friend, book i. chap. iv.

⁴ Browning: The Ring and the Book; Pompilia.

⁵ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: The Laocoön, sect. xvi. Translated by Miss Ellen Frothingham.

"The object in all *art*," says Mr. Ruskin, "is not to *inform* but to *suggest*, not to add to the knowledge but to kindle the imagination. He is the best poet who can by the fewest words touch the greatest number of secret chords of thought in his reader's own mind, and set *them* to work in their own way. I will take a simple instance in epithet. Byron begins something or other — 'T is midnight: on the mountains brown — The pale round moon shines deeply down.' Now the first eleven words are not poetry, except by their measure and preparation for rhyme; they are simple information, which might just as well have been given in prose — it is prose, in fact: It is twelve o'clock — the moon is pale — it is round — it is shining on brown mountains.

"Any fool, who had seen it, could tell us all that. At last comes the poetry in the single epithet 'deeply.' Had he said 'softly' or 'brightly' it would still have been simple information."¹

Poetry abounds in examples of single descriptive words. Such are "grim-visaged war,"² "flower-soft hands,"³ "Atlantean shoulders,"⁴ "Snowdon's shaggy side,"⁵ "loud-throated war,"⁶ "the ribbed sea-sand,"⁷ "the arrowy Rhone,"⁸ "deep-browed Homer,"⁹ "world-worn Dante,"¹⁰ "the plunging seas,"¹⁰ "the ringing plains of windy Troy,"¹¹ "deep-chested Chapman and firm-footed Ben."¹²

This method of description, when carried to excess, leads to caricature; for caricature is the exaggeration of

¹ Ruskin: Letters addressed to a College Friend during the years 1840-1845. Naples, Feb. 12, 1841.

² Shakspeare: Richard III. act i. scene i.

³ Ibid.: Anthony and Cleopatra, act ii. scene 2.

⁴ Milton: Paradise Lost, book ii. line 306.

⁵ Gray: The Bard.

⁶ Wordsworth: Address to Kilchurn Castle.

⁷ Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.

⁸ Byron: Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, canto iii. stanza lxxi.

⁹ Keats: On first looking into Chapman's Homer.

¹⁰ Tennyson: The Palace of Art.

¹¹ Ibid.: Ulysses.

¹² Lowell: Heartsease and Rue; Agassiz

one trait at the expense of others. Of this form of exaggeration Dickens is sometimes guilty: his Mr. Carker is all teeth, his Rosa Dartle all scar.

Sometimes a writer, instead of attempting to represent an object, contents himself with speaking of the effect which that object produces. This is the best way of giving an impression of great personal beauty; for beauty, being the result of an harmonious union of parts, is peculiarly difficult to represent by language, except in an indirect way.

Madame Récamier's remark about herself is worth pages of description. "I know," said she, "that I am no longer beautiful, for the chimney-sweeps have given up stopping work to look at me."

The famous Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, the duchess who bought a butcher's vote for Fox with a kiss, declared that the most gratifying compliment ever paid to her beauty was the exclamation which burst spontaneously from an impassioned coalheaver: "I could light my pipe at your eyes."¹

Walpole thus gives an impression of the beauty of the Gunning sisters: "They can't walk in the park, or go to Vauxhall, but such mobs follow them that they are generally driven away."² When one of them was presented, "even the noble mob in the drawing-room clambered upon chairs and tables to look at her. There are mobs at their doors to see them get into their chairs; and people go early to get places at the theatres when it is known they will be there."³ "The Gunnings are gone to their several castles, and one hears no more of them, except that such crowds flock to see the Duchess Hamilton pass, that seven hundred people sat up all night in and about an inn in Yorkshire to see her get into her post-chaise next morning."⁴

We get an idea of the majestic carriage of William Pitt the elder when we read in "The Virginians," "As I see that solemn

¹ Captain William Jesse: *The Life of Beau Brummel*, vol. i. chap. xii.

² Horace Walpole: Letter to Sir Horace Mann, June 18, 1751.

³ *Ibid.*, March 23, 1752.

⁴ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1752.

figure passing, even a hundred years off, I protest I feel a present awe, and a desire to take my hat off."¹

A striking instance of this method of description is the well-known passage in which Homer speaks of the effect which Helen's beauty produced upon the old men of Troy:—

"O'er her fair face a snowy veil she threw,
And, softly sighing, from the loom withdrew:
Her handmaids Clymenè and Æthra wait
Her silent footsteps to the Scæan gate.
"There sat the seniors of the Trojan race,
(Old Priam's chiefs, and most in Priam's grace)
The king the first; Thymoetes at his side;
Lampus and Clytius, long in council try'd;
Panthus, and Hicetæon once the strong;
And next, the wisest of the reverend throng,
Antenor grave, and sage Ucalegon,
Lean'd on the walls, and bask'd before the sun.
Chiefs who no more in bloody fights engage,
But wise through time, and narrative with age,
In summer-days like grasshoppers rejoice,
A bloodless race, that send a feeble voice.
These, when the Spartan queen approach'd the tower,
In secret own'd resistless beauty's power:
They cried, No wonder, such celestial charms
For nine long years have set the world in arms;
What winning graces! what majestic mien!
She moves a Goddess, and she looks a Queen!
Yet hence, oh Heaven! convey that fatal face,
And from destruction save the Trojan race."²

A natural and usually an effective way of giving life to a description is to use words that suggest motion. A successful example of this method is in Mr. Ruskin's description of the Roman Campagna:—

"Perhaps there is no more impressive scene on earth than the solitary extent of the Campagna of Rome under evening light. Let the reader imaginé himself for a moment withdrawn from the sounds and motion of the living world, and sent forth alone into

¹ Thackeray: *The Virginians*, chap. lviii.

² Homer: *The Iliad*, iii. 187. Pope's translation.