

CHAPTER VIII.

§ I. THE STANZA, OR STROPHE.

This is a subject which presents few difficulties ; for the construction of a stanza appeals to the eye, and cannot be mistaken. A verse is the unit of every poem. Verses are combined in two ways, — either continuously, as in blank verse, the classic hexameter, and our Anglo-Saxon metre ; or they may be bound together in a stanza, which in its turn goes with other stanzas to make up a poem or a division of a poem. The simplest of these combinations is the *couplet*, which, however, in practice is not looked on as a stanza ; for the heroic couplet often has a continuous, epic effect. Next comes the *triplet*, which is decidedly stanzaic in effect : *cf.* Tennyson's *Two Voices*.

Strophe means literally "a turning" : *cf. verse*. At the end of the strophe we turn, and repeat the same conditions : it is "the return of the song to the melody with which it begins." *Stanza*, under another symbol, means the same thing. We demand for the stanza identity of structure and a close connection of statement and subject-matter. The two factors of the stanza are the *Refrain* and *Rime*. Thus Lamb's *Old Familiar Faces* has no rime ; but the recurrence of these three words marks the end of a strophe. The Refrain, according to Wolff (*Lais, Sequenzen*, etc.), "probably arose from the participation of the people or congregation in songs which were sung by one or more persons on festal occasions, — at church, play, or dance. The

whole people repeated in chorus single words, or verses, or whole stanzas . . . or in the pauses of the chief singer, they answered him with some repeated cry. . . . This became finally a regular form." Through the Provençal poetry these refrains came into England. They are common in the old folk-song, and the reader is familiar with them in many modern ballads ; *cf.* also the *Epithalamion*. The refrain may be in another tongue : *cf.* Byron's *Maid of Athens*.

But the prevailing method of combining verses is by end-rime ; and here we distinguish between stanzas where the verses are homogeneous, and stanzas made up of verses with a varying number of accents, though rarely with varying movement. It would require a volume to catalogue all the combinations in our poetry ; any one can easily determine the form of a stanza for himself by noting the order of rimes. A decidedly different effect is made by two stanzas which may be alike in movement and number of verses, but unlike in rime-order. Thus the common four-stress quatrain with alternate rime (the number *four* being very popular in lyric poetry) :

"How happy is he born and taught
That serveth not another's will ;
Whose armour is his honest thought,
And simple truth his highest skill,"

has a quite different effect from the arrangement of the *In Memoriam* stanza, — a combination found in Ben Jonson, Prior, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and others :—

"Now rings the woodland loud and long,
The distance takes a lovelier hue,
And drown'd in yonder living blue
The lark becomes a sightless song."

The first we denote by the letters *abab*; the second by *abba*. Still another variation is *aaba*, the stanza made popular in Fitzgerald's translation of the quatrains of Omar Khayyam.

But of these the simplest and by all odds the most popular is the first, — *abab*; or with only two rimes, *abcb*. Here, too, we may note another division of the simple stanza (*cf.* Schipper, p. 84). The rimes *bb* mark each the end of a "Period," — *i.e.*, they denote the *necessary* rime of the quatrain, and hence divide it into equal parts. Two verses make a period, two periods make a quatrain (if of this form), because one period exactly repeats the conditions of the other. To mark the end of this period, a *different ending* is often employed: thus, if *aa* (or *ac*) are masculine, *bb* will be feminine, and *vice versa*. Thus *abcb* (Burns): —

"Go fetch to me a pint o' wine,
And fill it in a silver tassie;
That I may drink before I go
A service to my bonnie lassie;"

or *abab* (Prior): —

"The merchant, to secure his treasure,
Conveys it in a borrowed name;
Euphelia serves to grace my measure,
But Chloe is my real flame."

Still more marked is the period when *bb* are verses with fewer or more stresses than *aa* (*ac*), as was the case with the divided Septenary (common measure) already noted, in which *bb* have fewer accents than *aa* (*c*); a case where *bb* have more is

"Art thou pale for weariness
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,
Wandering companionless
Among the stars that have a different birth?" — Shelley.

The quatrain, most popular of stanzas and the simplest, is also common in five-stress verse. The rime-order *abab* is that of our most read poem, the *Elegy*. Dryden used it in *Annus Mirabilis*, in imitation of Davenant's *Gondibert*; and we have seen even six-stress verse so combined. But there are more complicated forms. Thus to a quatrain we add a couplet, and so have the *three-part stanza*, consisting of two periods and the couplet; or we can combine differently — say *abcccb*, — the form of Shakspeare's song in Hen. VIII. — *Orpheus with his lute*; or, with *varying verse-lengths*, of Wordsworth's *Three years she grew in sun and shower*. Thence we pass to the far more intricate combinations of lyric stanzas, — combinations which we shall not here attempt to analyze. The study of these forms is of more importance for our early poetry than for modern, and is of too special a nature for our attention. Many treatises, from Dante's *De vulgari Eloquentia* down to the dissertations of to-day, have been written on this subject: they are well summed up by Schipper in his *Metrik*, §§ 134–145.

It will be enough for our purposes if we simply name a few prominent English stanzaic forms. Thus the favorite stanza of Chaucer, the *Rime Royal* of his *Troilus* and some of the *Canterbury Tales*, has for its scheme *ababbcc*, — *e.g.* (*Prioresses Tale*): —

"My conning is so wayk, O blisful quene,
For to declare thy grete worthinesse,
That I ne may the weighte nat sustene,
But as a child of twelf monthe old, or lesse,
That can unnethes any word expresse,
Right so fare I, and therfor I you preye,
Gydeþ my song that I shal of you seye."

Somewhat different is the stanza of his *Monk's Tale*: *ababbcbc*. Now if we add *c* to this, we have the famous *Spenserian Stanza*, — *ababbcbcc*, — the last line being an Alexandrine, the rest, like Chaucer's entire stanza, five-stress "iambic" verse. Cf. *Faery Queene*: —

"And, more to lulle him in his slumber soft,
A trickling streame from high rock tumbling downe,
And ever-drizzling raine upon the loft,
Mixt with a murmuring winde, much like the sowne
Of swarming bees, did cast him in a swowne.
No other noise, nor people's troublous cries,
As still are wont t' annoy the walled towne,
Might there be heard: but carelesse Quiet lyes
Wrapt in eternall silence far from enimies."

Mr. Arnold has justly praised the "fluidity" of the Spenserian stanza. Thomson (*Castle of Indolence*) and Byron (*Childe Harold*) have added to its popularity. Simpler than the above is the easy pace of the stanza (*Ottava Rima*), used by Spenser in some minor poems, and chosen by Byron for his *Don Juan*, and by Keats for his *Isabella*: *abababcc*.

It remains to mention two other kinds of stanza — what we may call the *run-on stanza*, and the irregular (and also regular) combinations of verses in the *Ode*. The *Terza Rima* of Dante's great poem was copied by Surrey (cf. the first poem in Tottel's Misc., ed. Arber), but without making it popular. Byron used it in his *Prophecy of Dante*, and Shelley in his *Ode to the West Wind*, though often the manner of printing conceals the metre. The stanzas of three lines are interlaced thus: *aba — bcb — cdc — ded*, etc.

"O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow and black and pale and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes! O thou
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow," etc.

Cf. also some of the French forms of verse mentioned below.

The *Ode* is mostly written in arbitrary stanzas of varying verse-lengths: cf. Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*. But there is also a regular arrangement: cf. the elaborate "Pindaric" Odes of Gray, — *The Progress of Poetry* and *The Bard*.¹ For classical exactness, see the Choruses of Swinburne's *Erechtheus*, where the elaborate structure of Strophe, Antistrophe and Epode is managed with great ability; the same is true of other Odes by Swinburne.

§ 2. THE SONNET.

There are certain combinations of verse in which a single element of rime-arrangement dominates the entire poem. Most practised and best known of these is the Sonnet. This word, as Mr. T. H. Caine (*Sonnets of Three Centuries*) has pointed out, meant originally "a little strain," and was used by Italian poets "to denote

¹ There are nine stanzas so arranged that the *first*, *fourth*, and *seventh* are alike in construction; likewise the *second*, *fifth*, and *eighth*; and the *third*, *sixth*, and *ninth*.

simply a short poem limited to the exposition of a single idea, sentiment, or emotion." The next step was to confine its *form*; *fourteen lines* became the fixed length of the sonnet. Lastly, these lines were required to be combined according to certain definite rules.

Our English sonnets, therefore, are of different kinds. Mr. Caine ranges under the first class sonnets like those of Shakspeare. This form is by no means that of the strict Italian Sonnets; "it does not . . . as in the Italian form, fall asunder like the acorn into unequal parts of a perfect organism, but is sustained without break until it reaches a point at which a personal appropriation needs to be made." That is, we have the symbol and then — mostly in the concluding couplet — the application. The Shaksperian form is thus:—

ababcdcdefefgg,

that is, three quatrains with alternate rime, followed by a couplet.

Different is the form in the noble sonnets of Milton. The rimes follow Petrarch's rule of four different vowel-sounds, and the whole is divided into two unequal parts, the *octave* and *sestette*. The scheme is thus:—

abbaabba || cdc dcd,

though the *sestette* can be differently arranged. Still, even here it is merely the form that is Italian. The progress of the idea is English. The sense flows on without break from the octave into the *sestette*; whereas the Italian sonnet was required at the end of the octave to have a complete change in the idea.

Much closer to the Italian model is the sonnet as written by more recent poets. The excellence of

Shakspeare's sonnet as critics esteem it, is the *climax* to which it rises by means of the closing couplet. Milton's sonnet has been compared to a rocket rapidly thrown off, then "breaking into light and falling in a soft shower of brightness." The later school, however, aim to write sonnets that shall reproduce the rise and fall of a billow, or its flowing and ebbing. The idea and the verse rise together in the octave, and in the *sestette* fall back again. The rime-order is Italian. For these three kinds of sonnet, let the reader study a good specimen of each, and compare the relative advantages, — say Shakspeare's *When to the sessions of sweet silent thought* (Sonnet 30); Milton *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont* (*Avenge, O Lord*); and Keats *On first looking into Chapman's Homer*. Wordsworth's sonnets sway between the two last kinds: *cf.* his *Westminster Bridge* with the sonnet beginning *The world is too much with us*.

§ 3. FRENCH FORMS.

Of late, considerable effort has been put forth to introduce into our English verse-system the forms known to French poetry (*cf.* p. 55) as *Rondel*, *Rondeau*, *Triolet*, *Villanelle*, *Ballade*, and *Chant Royal*. "The first three," says Mr. Gosse, "are habitually used for joyous or gay thought, and lie most within the province of *jeu d'esprit* and epigram; the last three are usually wedded to serious or stately expression, and almost demand a vein of pathos." So far, these forms are not naturalized as English measures; but they are practised to a considerable extent. It requires an immense talent to write them with that ease and grace which they always

demand ; the slightest trace of effort ruins them. We have space for but one example, — a *Triolet* by Austin Dobson : —

“ I intended an ode
 And it turned into triolets,
 It began *à la mode* :
 I intended an ode,
 But Rose crossed the road
 With a bunch of fresh violets ;
 I intended an ode,
 And it turned into triolets.”

The *Rondel* and *Rondeau* are also light measures. The latter has thirteen verses and only two rimes. The *Villanelle* has also only two rimes, and is written in stanzas continued at pleasure (or as one's rimes last), and made up of three verses each, with a couplet at the end. The *Ballade* and the *Chant Royal* are much more complicated. The details of construction of all these forms, with examples, can be found in Mr. Gosse's article on *Foreign Forms of Verse* in the *Cornhill Magazine* for July, 1877. There are also examples in Adams' collection of *Latter-Day Lyrics*; and Mr. Swinburne has recently published *A Century of Roundels*. The ingenuity, however, which is required for the construction of these stanzas makes it doubtful that they will ever voice the higher moods of poetry. The great lyric poets, like Goethe, do their best work in simple forms of verse, in that “popular tone” nearest to the heart of singer as well as hearer.

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