Chapter VI.

LITERAL OR FIGURATIVE WORDS

All of us, every day of our lives, are unconsciously using figures of speech, or what were such till they were worn out by constant use. We say, for instance, that a man "broods" over his wrongs, "reflects" on a plan, "drives" a bargain, "ruminates" on a subject, "digests" an affront, takes a "degree," "eliminates" a figure, "tastes" the "sweets" of office. We speak of a "soft" voice, a "sharp" mind, an "uneven" temper, a "wild" idea, a "tame" disposition, a "striking" remark. We speak, too, of the "voyage" of life, the "ship" of state, the "course" of events, the "flight" of time, "fleecy" clouds. These, and hundreds of expressions like them, are constantly on the lips of men who never dream that they are talking what was once poetry; but even these an imaginative writer may revive.

> And let our Ship of State to harbor sweep,
> Her ports all up, her battle-lanterns lit,
> And her leashed thunders gathering for their leap!
>
> LOWELL.

In Lowell's "Washers of the Shroud," the old "Ship of State" renews its youth.

> Methought among the lawns together
> We wandered, underneath the young gray dawn,
> And multitudes of dense white fleecy clouds
> Were wandering in thick flocks along the mountains,
> Shepherded by the slow, unwilling wind.
>
> SHELLEY.

With Shelley's picture before our eyes, we forget how often we have heard of "fleecy clouds."

Writers rarely make a deliberate choice between literal and figurative expressions. The choice is made for each by his temperament, by the habits of his mind, or by circumstances. The thoughts of one man habitually present themselves in plain language, those of another in pictures. The imagination of a third is aroused when he is greatly interested, and only then.

Figures that are **not Figures.** — A writer who knows to which of the classes just named he belongs, and acts accordingly, will not go wrong; but one who thinks that he has imagination when he has none, and acts accordingly, exposes himself to treatment like that which Mr. Merivale receives from Lowell in the introduction to the second series of the "Biglow Papers." One of the passages there quoted from "The History of the Romans under the Empire" is as follows: —

> The shadowy phantom of the Republic continued to flit before the eyes of the Cæsar. There was still, he apprehended, a germ of sentiment existing, on which a scion of his own house, or even a stranger, might boldly throw himself and raise the standard of patrician independence.

"Now," says Mr. Lowell, "a ghost may haunt a murderer, but hardly, I should think, to scare him with the threat of taking a new lease of its old tenement. And fancy the *scion* of a *house* in the act of *throwing itself* upon a *germ of sentiment* to *raise a standard!* I am glad, since we have so much in the same kind to answer for, that this bit of horticultural rhetoric is from beyond sea."

Two other examples of this common fault may be taken from Dr. Johnson's "Life of Addison." The first is quoted from Addison's "Letter from Italy."

> Fired with that name,
> I bridle in my struggling muse with pain,
> That longs to launch into a nobler strain.

"To *bridle a goddess,*" roars the old Doctor, "is no very delicate idea; but why must she be *bridled?* Because she *longs to launch;* an act which was never hindered by a *bridle:* and whither will she *launch?* into a *nobler strain.* She is in the first line a *horse,* in the second a *boat;* and the care of the poet is to keep his *horse* or his *boat* from *singing.*"

On the next page, Dr. Johnson quotes the following couplet from Pope: —

> The well-sung woes shall soothe my pensive ghost;
> He best can paint them who shall feel them most.

"Martial exploits," adds Johnson, "may be *painted;* perhaps *woes* may be *painted;* but they are surely not *painted* by being *well-sung:* it is not easy to paint in song, or to sing in colors."

The mixed metaphors thus severely criticised are no worse than the following, which were produced by less distinguished writers: —

Reports indicate that the backbone of the cold wave is broken.

Stopping here in the teeth of a bitter wind.

Carlo received severe injuries at the hands of a bull-dog.

Each of us is an active member of the mosaic of the world.

He took the stump, platform in hand.

Under this religious trait is an undercurrent of keen, dry humor cropping out occasionally and flavoring his talk.

A sea of upturned faces was watching the bulletins, shouting and hissing as each new return came in.

Mrs. Trafford and her eldest flower took up the thread of life once more.

In some of these examples, the parts of the pretended figure of speech are inconsistent with each other; in others, though each of the several figures will bear examination by itself, they succeed one another so rapidly that they overlap, as it were, and thus produce the effect of a monstrous whole. In both classes of cases, the so-called figures of speech are

not figures in any just sense. They do not represent a picture which was in the writer's mind; and it would be impossible to make a picture out of them.

What Figures may do. — If the object in writing is to convey a thought from one mind to another, the only reason for using figurative instead of literal language is that it explains, illustrates, or enforces the thought; that it serves, like a diagram or an engraving, to bring the subject before the eye. Usually it effects this (when it does effect it), not directly, but by suggestion through the association of ideas, the happily chosen word putting the reader in a position to make his own illustration. Thus, —

> Yes, I answered you last night;
> No, this morning, sir, I say.
> Colors seen by candlelight
> Do not look the same by day.
>
> MRS. BROWNING.

> Men may rise on stepping-stones
> Of their dead selves to higher things.
>
> TENNYSON.

> Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
> Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn.
>
> KEATS.

> And this huge castle, standing here sublime,
> I love to see the look with which it braves
> — Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time —
> The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.
>
> WORDSWORTH.

> Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
> Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;
> So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,
> Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.
>
> LONGFELLOW.

All hearts confess the saints elect
Who, twain in faith, in love agree,
And melt not in an acid sect
The Christian pearl of charity!
WHITTIER.

If, however, a figure of speech does not help the reader to see more clearly or to feel more strongly what the writer sees or feels, it is a hindrance; for it either interrupts or obscures.

What makes a Good Figure. — A good figure springs naturally out of the subject in hand; it is not dragged into the text by the head and shoulders. It is not an end in itself, but a means to the general end in view.

A figure, then, like other things in this world, may be good in one place and bad in another. A good figure is harmonious with the tone and the spirit of the context. If subject and treatment are homely, it will be homely, — unless, indeed, the writer wishes to lift the reader's thoughts for a moment; if subject and treatment are on a high plane, it will naturally be poetical. A good figure, in short, — to borrow Emerson's words about a good quotation, — "illuminates the page."

Chapter VII.

PRINCIPLES OF CHOICE

THE use of one kind of words exclusively throughout a composition results in monotony, and monotony destroys the reader's interest. Bookish words unrelieved by a colloquial expression soon become tiresome; and even colloquial language, if persisted in too long, fatigues the mind by excessive vivacity. Pages of long words tire the attention in one way; pages of short words in another. General statements are more clearly understood and more surely remembered if they are followed by a specific instance which gives the doctrine in a portable form; specific statements are more easily grasped if the way for them is prepared by a general remark, or if they are summed up by a general remark at the end. A style that is never enlivened by a figure becomes tedious; a style that is all figures is bewildering.

If, in short, a writer sincerely wishes to communicate to another mind what is in his own mind, he will choose that one of two or more words equally in good use which expresses his meaning as fully as it is within the power of language to express it. If he wishes to be understood, he will choose the word that points straight to the object it represents, and to nothing else. If he wishes also to interest or to move his reader, he will choose the word that excites the desired feeling, either directly or indirectly, — by what it means, or by what it suggests through the association of ideas. In every case, he will choose the word that calls least attention to itself as a word, and thus enables the reader to give his whole mind to what it signifies or suggests.