

LECTURE XIX.

STYLE.

I NOW approach the third department of our course, called in the regular classical treatises *Elocution*. I would remind you again that they employed this word, not in that limited sense of utterance and gesticulation to which the present American usage seems to restrict it, but in a meaning inclusive of style, figures, utterance, gesture; of all, in a word, which pertains to the outward expression of thought and feeling. Let us begin with style.

This word (derived from the *stylus*, or pen, with which the writing was performed) denotes the right use of words as vehicles of thought. It is not my purpose to repeat to you the discussions of this subject, or the classifications of the different kinds of figures and tropes, or the rules for their use, contained in the ordinary books of rhetoric. I assume that you have acquired this knowledge in your colleges and academies. My object will be to add some directions appropriate to your peculiar work, for the formation of style and the right use of language. But before I proceed to this, I must beg you to bear with me, while I recall your attention to the cardinal qualities of all good speaking and writing. These are so fundamental in importance that you can-

not be too well assured of your familiarity with them. They are *grammatical purity, perspicuity, energy* (or as Dr. George Campbell terms it, *vivacity*), *elegance* and *number*.¹

Grammatical purity is that syntactical correctness which is conformed to the standard of the present, national usage of approved English writers and speakers.² It carefully avoids barbarisms, solecisms and obsolete and newly-coined words and construction. The usage which is your rule must be, not an antiquated one, but that of the best contemporary scholars. It must be the usage, not of writers of questionable taste, but of those who are admitted by all to be undisputed models. It must be, not a sectional usage, but that which is equally recognized among educated men in all parts of the land.

To secure perspicuity the first requisite is clearness of thought. Next, let home-bred, vernacular words be preferred, and all unnecessary technicalities be avoided. Let words be employed uniformly and exactly in their recognized meanings. This canon of perspicuity is violated often from carelessness of thought and indistinct-

¹ Quintil., L. i., c. v., § 1. Omnia oratio tres habeat virtutes, ut *emendata*, ut *dilucida*, ut *ornata* sit (quia dicere *apte*, quod est præcipuum, plerique ornatui subjiunt). Cicero de Orat., L. iii., c. x., § 37. "Quinam igitur est modus melior, quam ut Latine, ut plane, ut ornate, ut ad id, quodcumque agetur, apte congruenterque agemus?"

² Quintil., L. i., c. vi., § 44, 45. Superest igitur *consuetudo*. . . . Quæ si ex eo, quod plures faciunt, nomen accipiat, periculosissimum dabit præceptum, non orationi modo, sed (quod maius est) vitæ. . . . Ergo *consuetudinem* sermonis vocabo consensum eruditorum; sicut vivendi, consensum bonorum.

ness of conception, as well as from ignorance of the exact shades of sense affixed by classic usage. But some writers outrage it from an unwholesome affectation and conceit. They imagine that by using a known word in a sense differing by some shade of meaning from its current one they display their ingenuity and refinement. You will find such writers, for example, taking especial pains to talk of the "utterances" of the Holy Spirit when they mean the things uttered. Whereas, in classic English "utterance" is an abstract noun, signifying a power or quality of speech. These writers speak of "philanthropies" when they intend benefactions, while correct speakers of English express by the word "philanthropy" a humane temper or quality. They delight to use the abstract for the concrete, and to talk of "ruined immortalities" when they mean ruined souls. This is a most perverse sin against perspicuity; and much of this species of pretended fine writing as truly needs to be translated into the language of sensible Englishmen, as though it were in a foreign tongue. Let your subtile discrimination be displayed, not in perverting by a nice shade the meaning of words, but in retaining the very shade given them by good usage. Perspicuity is promoted by a due intermixture of brevity and amplification. It avoids long and intricate sentences. It eschews ambiguous words and constructions, and is especially careful to evince the designed relation of every pronoun, so that doubt of it shall be impossible to the attentive hearer. Perspicuity forbids the speaker ever to keep the sense of a compound sentence suspended to its close. Even the periodic sentence, which holds the construction (not the

meaning) suspended to the end, is ill-suited for oral address.¹

Energy (or vivacity) is to be gained by preferring concrete to abstract, and specific to general terms. Applaud not abstract magnanimity, but the living, magnanimous man. Speak not of the *genus homo* as depraved or as guilty, but of the men before you. Speak not of them, but to them, and that in the second person and in the singular. Say, "Thou art 'the man.'" Energy requires the greatest conciseness compatible with perspicuity. It demands metaphor in preference to simile, and judicious synecdoche and impersonation.² King David, when he would describe the virulence of the slander of his enemies, says: "Their teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword." How would this be enfeebled were it expanded into a regular simile, which should describe "the words of malice issuing from their mouths as lacerating his good name and comfort as spears, arrows and swords lacerate, gall and wound the body of an adversary!" He who would have energy of style must sternly exclude every epithet which is not essential to the expression of his

¹ Cicero de Orat., L. iii., c. xiii., § 49. Quibus rebus assequi possumus, ut ea quæ dicamus intelligantur? Latine scilicet, dicendo, verbis usitatis ac proprie demonstrantibus ea quæ significari ac declarari volumus, sine ambiguo verbo aut sermone, non nimis longa continuatione verborum, non valde productis iis, quæ similitudinis causa ex aliis rebus transferuntur, non disceptis sententiis, non præposteris temporibus, non confusis personis, non perturbato ordine.

² Deinde videndum est, ne longe simile sit ductum. Syrtim patrimonii, scopulum libentius dixerim: Charybdim bonorum, voraginem potius. Facilius enim ad ea, quæ visa, quam ad illa quæ audita sunt, mentis oculi feruntur.—Cicero de Orat., L. iii., c. 41, § 163.

thought. He must employ the untechnical and vernacular words which the people easily understand. He must be suggestive rather than exhaustive in the development of ideas. In compound sentences, energy will be promoted by placing the shorter member last. In every sentence, the word which is entitled to the emphasis should be placed in the position of greatest prominence. This is usually at the beginning, at or near the end, or at the *cæsura* of the sentence.¹

Elegance of style is gained, first, by careful attention to the previous qualities. Next, euphony must be consulted, by avoiding the frequent recurrence of the same sounds (a vice always grating to the ear) and by the customary use of those words and sequences of syllables which are musical and liquid, in preference to those which are heterogeneous, guttural or sibilant. All coarseness of allusion and suggestion must be shunned ;

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, b. iii., c. x., teaches us that polite diction is secured by three means: Metaphor, antithesis and energy. The rhetorical metaphor (c. xi.) is that which makes the symbol *energize*—i. e., it imputes to it, by metaphor, attributes of life, as Hömer's "arrow longing to strike."

C. xiii. The diction of the writer he regards as less energetic, but more accurate and full. That of the speaker should be in the "agonistic style." This is less accurate in detail, disjointed, rapid, representing images as the outline picture does.

Aristotle here gives us a happy description of what I have called the suggestive style.

Hear also Cicero de Orat., L. iii., c. 25, §§ 97-99, warning the public speaker against a luscious nicety: "Genus igitur dicendi est eligendum, quod non solum delectet, sed etiam sine satietate delectet. . . . Ea quæ maxime sensus nostros impellunt voluptate, et specie prima acerrime commovent, ab iis celerrime fastidio quodam et satietate abalienemur. . . . Sic, omnibus in rebus, voluptatibus maximis fastidium finitimum est."

no trope or illustration must be admitted, however apt, which degrades the sentiment of the discourse; no broken metaphors or other disorders of thought and structure must be allowed. Yet it should be remembered that there is a polish which is too uniform, and an elegance which is sickly. It were better, if either fault must be committed, that the public speaker should sacrifice elegance to energy, than this to that. As the musician interposes an occasional discord in his sweetest strains, that the contrast may enhance the harmony, so in those phrases and sentences which require a strong emphasis, some harsh syllables may well have place: this redeems the style from effeminacy and heightens the euphony.

The fifth quality of rhetorical style is number. I use this word here in the sense of the prosodist. Says Aristotle, the oration must have rhythm, but not metre. Cicero, recognizing the propriety of number in the prose-speaker, advises that two or three of the same feet shall follow each other, and that then some other feet shall be introduced, in order that the speaker may not fall into a disagreeable mimicry of metre.¹ This always

¹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, b. iii., c. viii., Cicero *de Orat.*, L. iii., c. xlvii., § 182. Let the student inspect the most impressive passages from the standard English orators; he will find that the rhythm which is so obvious to the ear, and so characteristic of the strain of eloquence, is caused by an actual sequence of metrical feet, with frequent variations. I give, as an instance, a noted passage from Rev. Samuel Davies' grand sermon on the Judgment. The feet are marked for your assistance:

Ō trē | mēndōus | dōōm ! | Ēvery | wōrd is | bīg wīth | tērrōr, |
and shoōts | ā thun | dērbōlt | thrōugh thē | hēart. | “Dēpart: |

offends the ear, because it suggests the appearance of inappropriate and abortive effort. The occurrence of the modern rhyme in prose discourse is a positive sin against euphony. But when the oration flows in short but frequently varied chains of equal or equivalent feet, this adds great expressiveness and beauty to the style. Nature recognizes it: all primitive languages, like the

Āwāy | frōm m̄y prēs | enċe! Ī | cānōt | bēār sō | loāthsōmē ā
sīght. | Ī ōnċe | ĭnvi | tēd thēe | tō cōme | tō mē," | etc.

We have here, first, two *trochees* and a final long syllable; then three *trochees*, three *iambics*, and a final long syllable. Then follow two *iambics* and an *anapæst*; then three *trochees* and a *choriambus*. Next we have *five iambics* together; and this, the only strain in the passage which fails of the epic rhythm and majesty, confirms Cicero's precept, that not more than three or, at most, four feet of the same kind should follow each other without a change.

Take the following admired passage from the sermon of the Rev. R. Hall against Modern Infidelity. Does not every ear perceive a different rhythm, suited to express the different sentiment of reprehension? We find a different sequence of feet:

Ēter | nāl Gōd! | Ōn whāt | āre thīne ēn | ēmīes | ĭntēnt? |
Whāt āre | thōse ēn | tērpris | ēs ōf gūilt | ānd hōr | rōr thāt | fōr
thē | sārēty | ōf thēir pērfor | mers, rēquīre | tō bē ēnvēl | ōped ĭn ā
dārċ | nēss whīċh | thē ēye | ōf hēāv | ēn mūst | nōt piērcē? | etc.

The order here is three *iambics*, one *anapæst* and two *iambics*. Then one *spondee*, two *iambics*, one *anapæst*, two *iambics*, two *trochees*, one *pæan* 4th, an *anapæst*, two more *pæans* 4th, and five *iambics*.

The student will observe how uniformly these masters of speech comply with Aristotle's rule to close the sentence with a long syllable. Hall's biographer has left us a curious fact, that the author had written at the end of the passage "penetrate" for "pierce," but in reviewing it he struck his pen through it and substituted "pierce," saying, "That is too long a word." His correct ear demanded the closing long syllable.

Hebrew, tend, by their orthography and accent, toward a regular *arsis* and *thesis*. Many critics have supposed that the first continuous recitation of every people was in metre, and that their first composers were always poets or bards. In this sense, if they are correct, poetry is more natural than prose. All music has its rhythm, which is essential to melody. There is something naturally pleasing and impressive to the human ear in the reverberation of a regularly recurring emphasis. It seems to make the strain palpitate with sensibility, like the voice of a living heart. The different feet are, moreover, expressive of their different sentiments. The "*fortis iambus*" breathes vigour, haste, excitement; the *spondee* suggests pensive and meditative ideas; the *pæan* and *choriambus*, by their roll, express some advancing majesty. By clothing your prose with number, you add therefore to its expressiveness as well as to its euphony. Aristotle disallows to the orator the use of the heroic rhythm (composed of *spondees*, *dactyles* and *anapæsts*), as too stately. *Iambics* and *trochees* he deems too lyrical and colloquial. He therefore recommends that the several *pæan* feet and the *choriambus* be prevalently used. But the former feet are so domesticated in every part of the English language that it is vain to deny the orator their use; and the lyrical character of the shorter feet, to my apprehension, evinces their fitness for the rhetorical rhythm, which, like the lyric poem, is so often required to express animated emotions. The Greek philosopher enjoins that the sentence (and each important member thereof) must always end with a long syllable. This is necessary to enable that syllable to bear the closing cadence of the voice. We may be

allowed to modify this law, as was done by the Latin hexameter, to the extent of making the last syllable uniformly long by position, whether it was so by quantity or not; and indeed English sentences and clauses are harmoniously ended, like that metre, with a *dactyle* and *spondee*.

These five qualities—grammatical purity, perspicuity, energy, elegance and rhythm or number—will constitute a fine style. Let me remind you that most young speakers, in attempting to form themselves, have more need than they are aware to fix their attention upon the rudimental and simple qualities of style. In your efforts for improvement you are in danger of beginning too far in advance. Grammatical accuracy and perspicuity—the virtues which lie at the foundation and which also contribute so much to elegance—are not so commonly found in English speakers as is supposed. Until your style is endued with these more homely and solid virtues, an attempt to deck it with the lighter graces will be tawdry and poor. Such an error excites a disgust, like that which we feel at seeing a beggar tricked out with cheap finery, while her person presents the lack of comfortable and necessary raiment. If correctness and perspicuity are present, the style cannot be bad. Indeed, so true is this, that a writer who is strongly characterized by these plain excellences will, without any other graces, gain from most readers, as Dr. Franklin has done, the applause of elegance. Let me urge you, then, to look well to these modest virtues of style, before you indulge a higher ambition. Lord Chesterfield, himself no mean orator, testified, in his *Letters to his Son*, that while every man has not genius,

every man of common sense can gain a correct and lucid, and therefore a pleasing style. Is not any minister of the gospel, then, positively guilty who neglects to acquire this means for commending his Master's word?

The first requisite for good writing or speaking is good thinking. Clear, discriminating and careful thought must precede the attempt to compose. Let the matter to be expressed exist distinctly in the mind, and it will clothe itself in its most appropriate verbal dress, provided the speaker's taste and memory have been trained by the reading of good models and by exercise. I would recommend, then, that after satisfying yourself of the ideas which you desire to express, you shall suffer them to utter themselves, as nearly as may be. In the act of composition, let not your minds concern themselves chiefly about the verbal dress of the thought, but about the thought itself. The clear and just conception will not fail to clothe itself in lucid words. Language is only a *medium* for the transmission of ideas. The glass which is most transparent is the best. It is only when we look through it without perceiving it, as though the aperture were vacant, illuminated space, when the light passes through it without colour or refraction, when we are obliged to resort to tactual sensation to verify its presence, that we call the window-pane a perfect *medium*. So that style is best, which least attracts the hearer's attention from the thought to itself. If there were a perfect orator, men would come away from his discourse without having any conscious recollection concerning the qualities of his style; they would seem to themselves to have been witnessing, by a direct spiritual intuition, the working of a great mind and

heart. It follows also that, in the act of composition, the pen should be allowed to move as rapidly as the mind craves. I do not assert that only rapid composition can be nervous; for the speed which is natural to one mind is very different from that of others. What I would urge is, that you shall not halt in the career of thought to debate the propriety of a term or a construction, to cast about for words or tropes, to scan the effect of the phrase which suggests itself. Correctness or elegance thus acquired would be won at too heavy a cost. The ardour of the mind would be effectually chilled by so many harassing cares; the inspiration, the *afflatus* of enthusiasm generated by the heat of the soul's action expands and exalts all its powers. Give way, then, to the propitious gale when it begins to breathe, and be assured that the language will be as happy, in which your mind will clothe its teeming ideas at such an hour, as its thoughts will be fruitful and nervous. If your investigation and meditation have been thorough and your training in composition diligent, write as rapidly as the impulse prompts. Do you suspect that a loose construction or inelegant word has dropped from your pen? Do not regard it then, but sweep onward with the gale: the time for correction comes afterward.

This remark suggests the great importance of revision. When the writing is completed, it should be subjected to the most searching and laborious examination. This work is irksome, because the *afflatus* is now gone and the charm of novelty is no longer felt. But he who would become a correct and elegant writer or speaker must bend himself with determination to the repulsive task. Every thought should again be con-

sidered. Every clause should be scanned. The style should be dissected, first, with reference to grammatical purity and perspicuity, then with an eye to elegance, energy and rhythm. In one place, you will detect a faulty construction. Correct it. In another, you will find a pronoun with an ambiguous reference. Make it as lucid as the sunbeam. There you will find a harsh word. Replace it by a euphonious synonym. You will perceive that a given sentence has its meaning suspended or unnecessarily inverted. Reverse the statement, and make the expression of the thought direct. Another sentence will be seen to contain two elements of thought really independent. Divide it. Here is a trope or illustration which suggests an association out of harmony with your subject. Suppress it. There is a redundant epithet, a pleonasm or repetition. Erase it. Here a mixed or broken metaphor has intruded itself. Let it be moulded into harmony. There a figure or an illustration suggests itself as truly apt. Insert it.

Remember that the object of this painful revision is not mainly nor chiefly the perfecting of the composition in hand; your aim is to acquire thereby a ready accuracy in the employment of language for all future compositions. The work is, in this aspect, a species of literary *post mortem* autopsy. When the physician dissects the corpse of his deceased patient, in order to verify or correct his *diagnosis* and to test the manner in which the remedies have operated, he does not propose any benefit to the subject. For him means are too late; he is dead. But the practitioner seeks thereby to prepare himself for treating more successfully many future pa-

tients. Such will be your chief aim in the dissection of what you have composed. You will acquire, for subsequent efforts, mastery over the elements of a good style. It may have seemed to you that I imposed on you contradictory obligations. On the one hand, I told you that a perfect style was the result of attention to many varied and delicate points, affecting not only every thought, but every word. On the other hand, I forbade you to pause over these *minutiæ* in writing. The reconciliation is found in this labour of revision. By it the powers will be so disciplined that art will become easy, and accuracy and elegance will become natural to you. The mind will be drilled to the habit of right expression. Just in proportion as its exaltation and fire increase, will the nicest refinements of true style suggest themselves spontaneously. A pure style will become the easiest and most native dress of vigorous thought.

Nothing has caused more embarrassment to young speakers than the unfortunate notion that public speaking must be generically different from talking. Many have been the pupils of the rhetorical art, who have experienced the fate of *M. Jourdain* in Molière's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. He had been speaking prose from his childhood without effort, and without knowing prose from verse. After his learned master had taught him technically, he could only speak it ill and with labour. So men do not know that speaking is but talking; they could do the latter very well and naturally until they attempted to do it by artificial rule. Now one experiences no difficulty in stating or narrating, after his own customary way, what he thoroughly comprehends.

Why should rhetorical discourse be less easy, except as the embarrassment of publicity agitates the powers at the outset? It is because of the perverse idea which is adopted, that when one speaks he must needs employ a contracted phrasology, a different structure for his sentences, an opposite turn of expression, to all which he is unaccustomed. I affirm that speaking is but serious, earnest, correct and elevated talking. The facile, direct, unpretending structure of sentences which we employ in our conversation is the proper one for the oration. The thing which we have to do is not to cast this, our wonted method, away, and attempt one perfectly antipodal and unwonted, but to purify and ennoble that which is natural to us. You are embarrassed in your rhetorical style, because you are David in King Saul's armour. The free and graceful limbs of the mountain boy are unaccustomed to move in greaves. Take, then, your own crook and your sling and smooth stones out of the brook. You will not advance to the combat slouched, nor halting, nor with clownish antics, for the scene and occasion are august, but you will move with that very freedom which you learned in the fields at home. When one desires to pass from one point to another, what is easier to him than to walk? But if you were mounted upon the *cothurni* of ancient tragedy, you would move awkwardly and would perchance trip yourself and fall ludicrously before the spectators. Strip off your *cothurni*, descend from your stilts, let your mind advance in that mode which nature has taught it, remembering only the decorum and seriousness proper for one who moves to a sacred object, and in the presence of the great King.

But let me not be understood as sanctioning by this precept a style meanly colloquial, familiar or low. The natural style and phraseology must be purged of all looseness of syntax, of all familiar abbreviations and provincialisms, of every grovelling allusion. The language of the pulpit should never be undignified, and it is well that it should have in appropriate places elevation, solemnity, grandeur. But these are the opposites of artificial pomp. The noblest passages in the English classics will be found to be the most simple in structure and the least inflated in expression.¹

In style, as in action, the best teachers are good examples. You should, therefore, form yourselves by the study of the great models, both in prose and poetry. There are, in our day, so much printing, and so much reading, and so much of that which we read is as mean and crude in style as it is worthless in sentiment, that we are in constant danger of having our taste corrupted by infection. We must dwell much with the great masters, in order that we may inhale with them a more healthy atmosphere. We should read them with the closest attention both to their thought and expression. Our aim should be not servile imitation, but a knowledge of the proper application of the principles of

¹ See, for example, the speech of Satan in the *Paradise Lost*:

"What though the field be lost,
All is not lost. The unconquerable will
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield,
And what is else not to be overcome;
That glory never shall his wrath or might
Extort from me," etc.

See a still nobler instance in *Psalm lxxxix.* 7-9.

style, and an infusion of their elevated simplicity, warmth and strength.

The virtues of style which I have explained should be common to all public speakers. But the message of the preacher is peculiar, whence it naturally results that certain special qualities are exacted of him. These I would call *seriousness*, or *gravity*, *scripturalness* and *simplicity*.

But before I proceed to discuss these, let me urge the value of that quality of *popularity*, if I may so term it, which the style of the pulpit should have, in common with that of the *forum* and the senate. All public speakers should employ, as nearly as the dignity of subjects will allow, the dialect of the people, and use their vocabulary. It is true that every science must have some nomenclature of its own. But the preacher should use technical terms of theology as sparingly as he can. Some of these are so necessary, the ideas which they denote are so rudimental to a knowledge of redemption, that they should be the possession of every hearer of the gospel. Every preacher should feel that it is an important part of his public instructions to convey to the minds of all an exact and familiar conception of their meaning. Such are the words, guilt, satisfaction, justification, faith, new birth, repentance, sanctification. These and similar terms, I repeat, ought to be made in such a manner the common property of all hearers, that they should be no longer technical. But, in other respects, the minister should avoid pedantic or scientific terms. There is a deeper reason for this than the ignorance of a large part of every congregation concerning the language of books. Whenever you

accurately translate a technical idea out of the phrase of art into the vocabulary of common life, if it is done without impairing its dignity, you confer a great benefit upon the understandings of the better informed also. There is a strong tendency in men's minds to accept a familiarity with the sound of a technical word, instead of true acquaintance with its sense. Because they recognize the often heard phrase, they fancy that they have a due comprehension of the idea, when in fact their attention is only mechanical, and their understandings are nearly passive. But when they miss the familiar shibboleth, and the idea is defined to them in words untechnical, unheard before in this connection, and yet correct and plain, they are compelled to exercise a real intellectual discernment, or, at least, to discover their ignorance of what is taught. Such language also clothes old truths with a freshness which is delightful to the mind and ear.