

THE
ELEMENTS
OF
ENGLISH COMPOSITION.

CONTAINING
~~PRACTICAL~~ INSTRUCTIONS

FOR
WRITING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE WITH
~~PERSPICUITY AND ELEGANCE.~~

DESIGNED, IN THE PROGRESS OF EDUCATION, TO SUC-
CEED TO THE STUDY OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR, AND
OF THE LATIN AND GREEK CLASSICS.

BY DAVID IRVING, A. M.

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PREFACE.

THE work now presented to the public is chiefly intended for the perusal of those whose critical studies are yet in their commencement. To younger students, and to such as have not access to more extensive works, it may perhaps convey some useful instruction. It is not intruded upon those who are already conversant in polite literature. Should it be found a suitable introduction to this liberal study, the compiler will have attained the summit of his ambition.

Though it was my principal object to treat of prose composition, yet a few observations on poetry, incidentally occur. The remarks which have been suggested with regard to the nature of figurative language, apply equally to prose and to poetry; but the poets have furnished me with the most copious and beautiful illustrations.

The rules of criticism are more successfully inculcated by particular examples than by general precepts. I have therefore endeavoured to collect abundance of opposite quotations, in order to illustrate every branch of the subject. In many instances this was an easy task; but in the classification of the different characters of style, it was attended with the utmost difficulty. To refer the compositions of an author to a particular class, and produce examples from them in support of this decision, will always be found a hazardous attempt. Of this circumstance Cicero and Quintilian seem to have been fully aware. In treating of the general character of a writer's style, they content themselves with referring to the body of his works, in confirmation of their sentence. To such exemplifications as occur in the following treatise, they have never had recourse.

Without pretending to question the propriety of their method, it may be presumed, that to the class of

readers for whose perusal these *Elements of English Composition* are chiefly intended, a different mode of procedure may perhaps be extended with some advantage.

The variety of examples exhibited in the course of the work will, at least in this view, be found acceptable. Should they fail in their primary design, they may thus be rendered subservient to another purpose.

To illustrate the progressive improvement of English composition, I have subjoined a variety of quotations from eminent authors. They are arranged nearly according to the priority of publication in the works from which they are selected. This selection commences where Johnson's classes.* It includes all the most distinguished writers of our own times, except those who still live to enjoy the reputation which their talents have secured.

The volume concludes with a few miscellaneous observations on epistolary writing. To be able to maintain a friendly correspondence with propriety and elegance, is assuredly a very desirable accomplishment. This branch of composition ought therefore to be assiduously cultivated, especially by every younger student.

It may perhaps be alleged, that in my critical strictures I have often behaved too much severely of censure, and that in general I have been too solicitous to expose the faults of eminent writers. But let it be remembered, that in a work of this kind it was necessary to expose defects, as well as to extol beauties. Those errors which have received the sanction of great names are always dangerous. They frequently become the object of absurd imitation.

"Je fais," says Condillac on a like occasion, "qu'on trouvera mes critiques bien severes; et que la plupart

* Johnson's *History of the English Language*.

des passages que je blame ne manqueront pas de defenseurs. L'art de écrire est un champ de disputes, parce qu'au lieu d'en chercher les principes dans le caractère des pensées, nous les prenons dans notre gout; c'est-à-dire, dans nos habitudes de sentir, de voir, et de juger; habitudes qui varient suivant le temperament des personnes, leur condition, et leur âge."*

Towards living merit I am unconscious of having been guilty of the slightest instance of disrespect. If I have occasionally taken the liberty of pointing out a few trivial errors, this circumstance can afford no reasonable cause of offence. In exhibiting examples of the faults, as well as of the beauties, of composition, I have invariably had recourse to such works as seemed in some respects entitled to praise. If I have not treated living authors with all the delicacy and tenderness which has been recommended by St. Real,† I have at least refrained from every wanton attack.

In the following pages the reader needs not expect to discover any originality of observation. I desire to be regarded in no other view than that of a mere compiler. Concerning every critical subject that has fallen under my review, I have endeavoured to collect the most rational opinions of writers distinguished for their learning and judgment. For any valuable instructions which this compilation may chance to exhibit, the reader is principally indebted to Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric*, Kames's *Elements of Criticism*, Melmoth's *Letters of Fitosborne*, and Lowth's *Introduction to English Grammar*. To other occasional sources of information I have been careful to make the proper references: but when I availed myself of the treasures amassed by these excellent writers, I forbore to quote their names: "not that I might appropriate their labours or usurp their honours, but that I might spare a perpetual repetition by one general acknowledgment."

* Condillac, *Traite de l'Art d'Ecrire*, liv. ii. chap. i.
† St. Real de la Critique.

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CHAP. I. INTRODUCTION.

THE great and important object of language is, to express the various wants and affections of those by whom it is spoken. In the earliest stages of civil society, man is contented with such comforts as are easily procured, and the operations of the human mind are circumscribed within narrow limits. His vocabulary is consequently scanty, and the advance to which it is applied. But as luxury and refinement step in their gradual progress, the language of the community becomes more copious and elegant; it not only oversteps its ancient boundaries, but hastens to lay aside its ancient rudeness and barbarity. Material improvements, however, cannot be introduced by any sudden exertion; they must be the result of that experience, which a length of time only can bestow.

Before the elegancies of literature can lay claim to any considerable share of attention, a spirit of general improvement must have begun to pervade the state. Accordingly we find that vigour and originality of thought have always preceded beauty and accuracy of expression. In the first regard; such words as most readily occur to the recollection of the writer, are almost indiscriminately adopted; and these are generally arranged without much attention to elegance or propriety. Thus if we take a retrospective view of English literature at no very remote period, we shall often find the beauty of the thought obscured by the meanness of the expression. Its pages are frequently deformed with uncouthness and vulgarity. Nor is it altogether unattended with these faults in its present state. It would be difficult to point out a solitary instance of an English book wholly free from vulgar expressions and grammatical errors.

Propriety and beauty of style seem often to have been considered as below the attention both of an author and a reader. The ancients, however, regarded this subject in a different point of view. To be skilled in their native tongue, was esteemed among the number of the politest accomplishments, Julius Cæsar, who was not only a great warrior but also a man of fashion, was desirous of adding this accomplishment to his other shining qualities: and we are informed that he studied the language of his own country with much application, as we are sure he possessed it in the highest degree of purity and elegance. The literary world cannot sufficiently regret that the treatise which he wrote upon this subject, has perished along with many other valuable works of the same age. But, although we are deprived of the benefit of his observations, we are happily in possession of an illustrious instance of their effects; and his own *Commentaries* will ever remain as the brightest exemplar not only of true generalship, but also of fine writings. He published them, indeed, only as materials for the use of those who might be disposed to enlarge upon that remarkable period of the Roman History: yet the purity and gracefulness of his style are such, that no judicious writer afterwards dared to attempt the same subject.

Cicero frequently mentions as a very high encomium, that the celebrated Roman orators possessed the elegance of their native language.* He introduces Brutus declaring, that he should prefer the honour of being esteemed the great master and improver of Roman eloquence, even to the glory of many triumphs.

Beauty of composition tends to heighten the native charms of truth; it therefore ought never to be regarded as an object of small importance.—But it may be alledged, that truth does not require the aid of foreign ornament. It is not indeed necessary, that she should be exhibited in a glaring habit; but she ought certainly to be clothed with decency and propriety. A beautiful woman, in careless and sordid apparel, can never appear to great advantage.

To Locke, Cudworth, Clarke, and Butler, philosophy owes the most serious obligations; but would those great authors have diminished the utility of their literary labours by

* Cicero, de Claris Oratoribus.

employing more smooth and polished language? Quite the reverse. Never, indeed, does the force of reason more effectually subdue the human mind than when she is supported by the powerful assistance of manly eloquence: as on the contrary, the most legitimate arguments may be rendered unavailing by being attended with a feeble and unanimated expression. There is as much difference between comprehending a thought clothed in the language of Cicero, and that of an ordinary writer, as there is between viewing an object by the light of the sun and by the light of a taper.

Malebranche has assuredly fallen into a very strange conceit when he intimates, that the pleasure arising from the perusal of a beautiful composition is of a criminal nature, and has its source in the weakness and effeminacy of the human mind. That man must possess a very uncommon severity of temper, who can find any thing to condemn in the practice of embellishing truth with additional charms, and winning the heart by captivating the ear; in uniting roses with the thorns of science, and joining pleasure with instruction.

The mind is delighted with a fine style upon the same principle that it prefers regularity to confusion, and beauty to deformity. A taste for the beauties of composition is so far from being a mark of any depravity of our nature, that I should rather be inclined to consider it as an evidence of the moral rectitude of our mental constitution, since it furnishes a direct proof that we retain some relish of order and harmony.

No object has ever appeared of greater importance to wise men, than to tincture the young and susceptible mind with an early relish for the pleasures of taste. Easy in general is the transition from the pursuit of these to the discharge of the higher and more important duties of life. Sanguine hopes may be entertained of those whose minds have this liberal and elegant turn. It is favourable to the growth of many virtues: whereas, to be devoid of taste for the fine arts, is justly regarded as an unpromising symptom in youth, and raises suspicions of their being prone to low gratifications, or destined to drudge in the more vulgar and illiberal pursuits of life. There are few good dispositions of any kind with which the improvement of this faculty is not in some degree connected. A cultivated taste increases sensibility to all the tender and humane passions, by giving them frequent exercise; while, on the other hand, it tends to weaken the

more violent and fierce emotions; by exciting in us a lively sense of decorum.

From these observations it will appear, that the charge of Malebranche is not only ill-founded, but absolutely ridiculous. One would however be apt to suspect, that certain writers among us had considered the subject in the same gloomy point of view; or at least that they had studiously avoided every refinement in style, as unbecoming a lover of truth and wisdom. Their sentiments are debased by the lowest expressions; they seem condemned to the curse of creeping upon the ground all the days of their life.

But there is another extreme, which ought also to be carefully avoided. Some authors mistake pomp for dignity; and with the view of raising their expressions above vulgar language, elevate them above common apprehension. They seem to consider it as a mark of their genius, that it requires some ingenuity to discover their meaning. But when their meaning is discovered, it seldom repays the labour of the search.

CHAP. II.

OF PURITY OF STYLE.

STYLE has been defined to be the peculiar manner in which a man expresses his conceptions through the medium of language. It differs from mere language or words. Though the words which an author employs, be unexceptionable, yet his style may be chargeable with great faults; it may be dry, stiff, feeble, affected. The style of an author is always intimately connected with his manner of thinking. It is a picture of the ideas which arise in his mind, and of the manner in which they do arise. Hence the difficulty of drawing an exact line of separation between the style and the sentiment.

All that can be required of language is to convey our ideas clearly to the minds of others, and, at the same time, to clothe them in an advantageous dress. The two general heads of perspicuity and ornament, therefore, comprehend all

the qualities of a good style. Perspicuity demands our chief care; for, without this quality, the richest ornaments of language only glimmer through the dark, and puzzle, instead of pleasing, the reader. An author's meaning ought always to be obvious, even to the most careless and inattentive reader; so that it may strike his mind, as the light of the sun strikes our eyes, though they are not directed towards it. We must study, not only that every reader may understand us, but that it shall be impossible for him not to understand us. If we are obliged to follow a writer with much care, to pause, and to read over his sentences a second time, in order to comprehend them fully, he will never please us long. Mankind are too indolent to relish so much labour. They may pretend to admire the author's depth, after they have discovered his meaning; but they will seldom be inclined to bestow upon his work a second perusal.

In treating of perspicuity of style, it will be proper, in the first place, to direct our attention to single words and phrases, and afterwards to the construction of sentences.

Perspicuity, considered with respect to words and phrases, requires the qualities of purity, propriety, and precision. The two first of these are often confounded with each other; and, indeed, they are very nearly allied. A distinction, however, obtains between them. Purity of style consists in the use of such words, and such constructions, as belong to the idiom of the language which we use; in opposition to words and phrases which are imported from other languages, or that are obsolete, or new-coined, or used without proper authority. Propriety of style consists in the selection of such words, as the best and most established usage has appropriated to those ideas which we employ them to express. It implies the correct and happy application of them, according to that usage, in opposition to vulgarisms, or low expressions; and to words and phrases that would be less significant of the ideas which we intend to convey. Style may be pure, that is, it may be strictly English, without Scotticisms or Gallicisms, or ungrammatical and unwarranted expressions of any kind, and may, nevertheless, be deficient in propriety.* The words

* In this chapter it was proposed to enumerate such Scotticisms as most frequently occur; but the compiler has not yet collected a sufficient number of examples from writers of

Irving 1863
120, 214, 215

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CHAP. I. INTRODUCTORY.

THE great and important object of language is, to express the various wants and affections of those by whom it is spoken. In the earliest stages of civil society, man is contented with such comforts as are easily procured, and the operations of the human mind are circumscribed within narrow limits. His vocabulary is consequently scanty, though, at the same time, it may be fully adequate to every purpose to which it is applied. But as luxury and refinement advance in their gradual progress, the language of the community becomes more copious and elegant: it not only oversteps its ancient boundaries, but hastens to lay aside its ancient rudeness and barbarity. Material improvements, however, cannot be introduced by any sudden exertion; they must be the result of that experience, which a length of time only can bestow.

Before the elegancies of literature can lay claim to any considerable share of attention, a spirit of general improvement must have begun to pervade the state. Accordingly we find that vigour and originality of thought have always preceded beauty and accuracy of expression. In the first efforts of untutored genius, the harmony of periods is little regarded; such words as most readily occur to the recollection of the writer, are almost indiscriminately adopted; and these are generally arranged without much attention to elegance or propriety.

Thus if we take a retrospective view of English literature at no very remote period, we shall often find the beauty of the thought obscured by the meanness of the expression. Its pages are frequently deformed with uncouthness and vulgarity. Nor is it altogether untainted with these faults in its present state. It would be difficult to point out a solitary instance of an English book wholly free from vulgar expressions and grammatical errors.