

ELEMENTS

OF

RHETORICK AND BELLES LETTRES:

Prof.

COMPILED FOR THE USE OF SCHOOLS.



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poets of more polished times, we are to look for the graces of correct writing, for just proportion of parts, and skilfully conducted narration. In the midst of smiling scenery, and pleasurable themes, the gay and the beautiful will appear undoubtedly to more advantage. But amidst the rude scenes of nature and of society, such as Ossian describes; amidst rocks, and torrents, and whirlwinds, and battles, dwells the sublime; and naturally associates itself with that grave and solemn spirit which distinguishes the author of Fingal.

Virgil, Milton, and Shakespeare, have been already mentioned.

CHAPTER XI.

Of the Method of attaining a Good Style.

Q. Can the art of fine writing be taught by a series of mechanical rules?

A. To pretend to teach the art of fine writing by a series of mechanical rules, would be highly absurd. The young student may, however, be assisted by a few plain directions concerning the proper method of attaining a correct and elegant style.

Q. To how many heads may these directions be reduced?

A. They have been reduced to seven.

Q. Which is the first?

A. In the first place, we ought always to endeavour to obtain a clear and precise idea of every subject of which we propose to treat. This is a direction which may at first appear to have little relation to style. Its relation to it, however, is extremely close. The foundation of fine writing, is good sense accompanied with a lively imagination. The style and thoughts of a writer are so intimately connected, that it is frequently a difficult task to distinguish what depends upon the one, and what upon the other. Whenever the impressions of objects upon the mind are faint and indistinct, or perplexed and confused, our style, in treating of such subjects, can never be luminous or beautiful. Whereas what we conceive clearly and feel strongly, we shall naturally express with clearness and with strength. This then, we may be assured, is an important rule, to think closely of the subject, till we have attained a full and distinct view of the matter, which we are to clothe in words, till we become warm and interested in it: then, and not till then, shall we find expression begin to flow. Generally speaking, the best and most proper expressions are those, which a clear view of the subject suggests without much labour or enquiry.

Q. Which is the second direction?

A. In the second place, to form a good style the frequent practice of composing is indispensably necessary. Many rules concerning style have been delivered; but no rules will answer the end without exercise and habit. At the same time, it is

not every mode of composing that will improve style. This is so far from being the case, that, by careless and hasty composition, we shall inevitably acquire a very bad style; we shall have more trouble afterwards in unlearning faults and correcting negligences, than if we had been totally unaccustomed to composition. At first, therefore, we ought to write slowly and with much care. Let the facility and speed of writing be the fruit of longer practice. "I enjoin," says Quintilian, "that such as are beginning the practice of composition, write slowly and with anxious deliberation. Their great object, at first, should be, to write as well as possible; practice will enable them to write speedily. By degrees, matter will offer itself still more readily; words will be at hand; composition will flow; every thing, as in the arrangement of a well ordered family, will present itself in its proper place." The sum of the whole is this, that, by hasty composition, we shall never acquire the art of composing well; by writing well, we shall come to write speedily.

We must not, however, be too anxious about words: we must not retard the course of thought, nor cool the heat of imagination, by pausing too long on every word which we employ. There is, on certain occasions, a glow of composition which should be kept up, if we hope to express ourselves happily, though at the expense of allowing some inadvertencies to pass. These must afterwards be scrutinized with a critical eye. If the practice of composition be useful, the laborious work of cor-

recting is no less so; it is absolutely necessary to our reaping any benefit from the habit of composing. What we have written, should be laid aside till the ardour of composition be past, till our fondness for the expressions which we have used be worn off, and the expressions themselves be forgotten. By reviewing our work with a cool and critical eye, as if it were the performance of another, we shall discern many imperfections, which at first escaped our observations. It is then the season for pruning redundancies; for examining the arrangement of sentences; and for bringing style into a regular, correct, and supported form. To this labour of correction all those must submit, who would communicate their thoughts to others with proper advantage; and some practice in it will sharpen the eye to the most necessary objects of attention, and render the task much more easy and practicable than might at first be imagined.

Q. What is the third direction concerning the proper method of attaining a good style?

A. In the third place, with respect to the assistance which is to be derived from the writings of others, it is obvious, that we ought to render ourselves well acquainted with the style of the best authors. This is requisite both to form a just taste in style, and to supply us with a full stock of words on every subject.

Q. Which is the fourth direction?

A. In the fourth place, we must beware of falling into a servile imitation of any author whatsoever. Imitation is always dangerous. It fetters genius,

and is likely to produce a stiff manner. Those who are addicted to close imitation, generally imitate an author's faults as well as his beauties. No man will ever become a good writer or speaker, who has not some degree of confidence to follow his own genius. We ought to beware, in particular, of adopting any author's noted phrases, or transcribing passages from him. Such a habit will prove fatal to all genuine composition. It is much better to have something that is our own, though of moderate beauty, than to affect to shine in borrowed ornaments, which will at last betray the utter poverty of our genius. On these heads of composing, reading, and imitating, I would advise every student of oratory to consult what Quintilian has delivered in the tenth book of his institutions, where he will find a variety of excellent observations and instructions.

Q. Which is the fifth direction?

A. In the fifth place they who are ambitious of obtaining a beautiful style ought to study with attention the works of the most eminent poets. From this source is often derived a more delicate and elevated mode of expression, as well as of thinking. We find, that the most excellent prose writers both of ancient and modern times are those, who, during some part of their life, have applied themselves to the study of poetry. It will be sufficient to mention the names of Plato, Cicero, Temple, Dryden, Pope, Addison, Melmoth, Johnson, Goldsmith, Hamilton, Fenelon, and Voltaire.

Q. Which is the sixth direction?

A. In the sixth place, it is an obvious but material rule, that we always study to adapt our style to the subject, and also to the capacity of our hearers, if we are to speak in publick. Nothing merits the name of eminent or beautiful, which is not suited to the occasion, and to the persons to whom it is addressed. It is to the last degree awkward and absurd, to adopt a florid style on occasions when it should be our sole business to argue and reason; or to speak with elaborate pomp of expression, before persons who comprehend nothing of it, and who can only stare at our unseasonable magnificence. These are defects not so much in point of style, as what is much worse, in point of common sense. When we begin to write or speak, we ought previously to have, fixed in our minds, a clear conception of the end to be aimed at. This end we ought to keep steadily in view; and, to it, we ought to adapt our style. If we do not sacrifice, to this great object, every ill timed ornament that may occur to our fancy, we betray a want of judgment.

Q. What is the last rule?

A. The last rule is, that, in any case, and on any occasion, attention to style must not engross us so much, as to detract from a higher degree of attention to our thoughts. To your expression be attentive; but about your matter be solicitous.

PART THIRD.

OF THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF PROSE COMPOSITION.

Q. How are the different kinds of composition divided?

A. The most general division of the different kinds of composition, is, into those written in prose, and those written in verse.

Q. To begin with those written in prose: how are prose compositions divided?

A. Prose Compositions seem to be chiefly these; Historical Writing, Philosophical Writing, Dialogue Writing, Epistolary Writing, Fictitious History, The popular Essay, Orations.

CHAPTER I.

Of Historical Writing.

Q. What is the proper object and end of history?

A. The proper object and end of history is to record truth for the instruction of mankind.

Q. How many kinds of history are there?

A. A regular and legitimate work of history is chiefly of two kinds. Either the entire history of some state or kingdom through its different revolutions, such as Livy's Roman History; or the history of some one great event, or some portion or period of time which may be considered as making a whole by itself; such as Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian War, Davilas' History of the Civil Wars of France, or Clarendon's of those of England.

Q. In treating of history, how many things may be considered?

A. In treating of history, two things may be considered: first, the conduct of the subject; secondly, the qualities of the narration.

Q. In the conduct and management of the subject, what is required of an historian?

A. In the conduct and management of his subject, the first attention requisite in an historian, is, to give it as much unity as possible; that is, his history should not consist of separate unconnected parts merely, but should be bound together by some connecting principle, which shall make the impression on the mind of something that is one, whole, and entire. Whether pleasure or instruction be the end, sought by the study of history, either of them is enjoyed to much greater advantage, when the mind has always before it the progress of some one great plan or system of actions; when there is some