

# L E C T U R E S

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## R H E T O R I C

A N D

### B E L L E S L E T T R E S.

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LECT.

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## LECTURE XVIII.

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*Figurative Language — General Characters of  
Style — Diffuse, Concise — Feeble, Nervous —  
Dry, Plain, Neat, Elegant, Flowery.*

HAVING treated, at considerable length, of the figures of speech, of their origin, of their nature, and of the management of such of them as are important enough to require a particular discussion, before finally dismissing this subject, I think it incumbent on me, to make some observations concerning the proper use of figurative language in general. These, indeed, I have, in part, already anticipated. But, as great errors are often committed in this part of style, especially by young writers, it may be of use that I bring together, under one view, the most material directions on this head.

I begin with repeating an observation formerly made, that neither all the beauties, nor even the chief beauties of composition, depend upon

tropes and figures. Some of the most sublime and most pathetic passages of the most admired authors, both in prose and poetry, are expressed in the most simple style, without any figure at all; instances of which I have before given. On the other hand, a composition may abound with these studied ornaments; the language may be artful, splendid, and highly figured, and yet the composition be on the whole frigid and unaffecting. Not to speak of sentiment and thought, which constitute the real and lasting merit of any work, if the style be stiff and affected, if it be deficient in perspicuity of precision, or in ease and neatness, all the figures that can be employed will never render it agreeable: they may dazzle a vulgar, but will never please a judicious; eye.

In the second place, figures, in order to be beautiful, must always rise naturally from the subject. I have shown that all of them are the language either of imagination, or of passion; some of them suggested by imagination, when it is awakened and sprightly, such as metaphors and comparisons; others by passion or more heated emotion, such as personifications and apostrophes. Of course they are beautiful then only, when they are prompted by fancy, or by passion. They must rise of their own accord; they must flow from a mind warmed by the object which it seeks to describe; we should never interrupt the course of thought to cast about for figures. If they be sought after coolly,

and fastened on as designed ornaments, they will have a miserable effect. It is a very erroneous idea, which many have of the ornaments of style, as if they were things detached from the subject, and that could be stuck to it, like lace upon a coat: this is indeed,

Purpureus late qui splendeat unus aut alter  
Affluitur pannus \*— ARS POET.

And it is this false idea which has often brought attention to the beauties of writing into dispute. Whereas, the real and proper ornaments of style are wrought into the substance of it. They flow in the same stream with the current of thought. A writer of genius conceives his subject strongly; his imagination is filled and impressed with it, and pours itself forth in that figurative language which imagination naturally speaks. He puts on no emotion which his subject does not raise in him; he speaks as he feels; but his style will be beautiful, because his feelings are lively. On occasions, when fancy is languid, or finds nothing to rouse it, we should never attempt to hunt for figures. We then work, as it is said, “*invita Minerva* ;” supposing figures invented, they will have the appearance of being forced; and in this case, they had much better be wanted.

\* “Schreds of purple with broad lustre shine,  
“Sew’d on your poem.” FRANCIS.

In the third place, even when imagination prompts, and the subject naturally gives rise to figures, they must, however, not be employed too frequently. In all beauty, "*simplex munditiis*," is a capital quality. Nothing derogates more from the weight and dignity of any composition, than too great attention to ornament. When the ornaments cost labor, that labor always appears; though they should cost us none, still the reader or hearer may be surfeited with them; and when they come too thick, they give the impression of a light and frothy genius, that evaporates in show, rather than brings forth what is solid. The directions of the ancient critics, on this head, are full of good sense, and deserve careful attention. "*Voluptatibus maximis*," says Cicero, *de Orat* L. iii. "*fastidium finitimum est in rebus omnibus; quo hoc minus in oratione miremur.*" "In qua vel ex poetis, vel oratoribus possumus judicare, concinnam, ornatam, festivam sine intermissione, quamvis claris sit coloribus picta, vel poësis, vel oratio, non posse in delectatione esse diuturna. Quare, bene & præclare, quamvis nobis sæpe dicatur, belle & festive nimium sæpe nolo \*." To the same purpose,

\* "In all human things, disgust borders so nearly on the most lively pleasures, that we need not be surprised to find this hold in eloquence. From reading either poets or orators, we may easily satisfy ourselves, that neither a poem nor an oration, which, without intermission is showy and sparkling, can please us long. ——— Wherefore,

are the excellent directions with which Quintilian concludes his discourse concerning figures, L. ix. C. 3. “ Ego illud de iis figuris quæ vere fiunt, “ adjiciam breviter, sicut ornant orationem oportuna posita, ita ineptissimas esse cum immodice petuntur. Sunt, qui neglecto rerum pondere & viribus sententiarum, si vel inania verba in hos modos depravarunt, summos se judicant artifices; ideoque non desinunt eas necere; quas sine sententia sectare, tam est ridiculum quam quærere habitum gestumque sine corpore. Ne hæ quidem quæ rectæ sunt, defendendæ sunt nimis. Sciendum imprimis quid quisque postulet locus, quid persona, quid tempus. Major enim pars harum figurarum posita est in delectatione. Ubi vero, atrocitate, invidia, miseratione pugnandum est; quis ferat verbis contraposis, & confimilibus, & pariter cadentibus, irascentem, flentem, rogantem? Cum in his rebus, cura verborum deroget affectibus fidem; & ubicunque ars ostentatur, veritas abesse videatur \*.” After these judicious

“ though we may wish for the frequent praise of having “ expressed ourselves well and properly, we should not covet “ repeated applause, for being bright and splendid.”

\* “ I must add, concerning those figures which are proper “ in themselves, that as they beautify a composition when they “ are seasonably introduced, so they deform it greatly, if “ too frequently sought after. There are some, who, neglecting strength of sentiment and weight of matter, if they can “ only force their empty words into a figurative style, imagine



and useful observations, I have no more to add, on this subject, except this admonition.

In the fourth place, that without a genius for figurative language, none should attempt it. Imagination is a power not to be acquired; it must be derived from nature. Its redundancies we may prune, its deviations we may correct, its sphere we may enlarge; but the faculty itself we cannot create: and all efforts towards a metaphorical ornamented style, if we are destitute of the proper genius for it, will prove awkward and disgusting. Let us satisfy ourselves, however, by considering, that without this talent, or at least with a very small measure of it, we may both write and speak to advantage. Good sense, clear ideas, perspicuity of language, and proper arrangement of words and thoughts, will always command attention. These are indeed the foundations

“ themselves great writers; and therefore continually string  
 “ together such ornaments; which is just as ridiculous, where  
 “ there is no sentiment to support them, as to contrive gestures  
 “ and dresses for what wants a body. Even those figures which  
 “ a subject admits, must not come too thick. We must begin,  
 “ with considering what the occasion, the time, and the  
 “ person who speaks, render proper. For the object aimed  
 “ at by the greater part of these figures, is entertainment.  
 “ But when the subject becomes deeply serious and strong  
 “ passions are to be moved, who can bear the orator, who, in  
 “ affected language and balanced phrases, endeavours to express  
 “ wrath, commiseration; or earnest entreaty? On all such  
 “ occasions, a solicitous attention to words weakens passion;  
 “ and when so much art is shown, there is suspected to be  
 “ little sincerity. ”

of all solid merit, both in speaking and writing. Many subjects require nothing more; and those which admit of ornament, admit it only as a secondary requisite. To study and to know our own genius well; to follow nature; to seek to improve, but not to force it, are directions which cannot be too often given to those who desire to excel in the liberal arts.

When I entered on the consideration of style, I observed that words being the copies of our ideas, there must always be a very intimate connexion between the manner in which every writer employs words; and his manner of thinking; and that, from the peculiarity of thought and expression which belongs to him, there is a certain character imprinted on his style, which may be denominated his manner; commonly expressed by such general terms, as strong, weak, dry, simple, affected, or the like. These distinctions carry, in general, some reference to an author's manner of thinking, but refer chiefly to his mode of expression. They arise from the whole tenor of his language; and comprehend the effect produced by all those parts of style which we have already considered; the choice which he makes of single words; his arrangement of these in sentences; the degree of his precision; and his embellishment, by means of musical cadence, figures, or other arts of speech. Of such general characters of style, therefore, it remains now to speak, as the result of those underparts of which I have hitherto treated.

That different subjects require to be treated of in different sorts of style, is a position so obvious, that I shall not stay to illustrate it. Every one sees that treatises of philosophy, for instance, ought not to be composed in the same style with orations. Every one sees also, that different parts of the same composition require a variation in the style and manner. In a sermon, for instance, or any harangue, the application or peroration admits more ornament, and requires more warmth, than the didactic part. But what I mean at present to remark is, that amidst this variety, we still expect to find, in the compositions of any one man, some degree of uniformity or consistency with himself in manner; we expect to find some predominant character of style impressed on all his writings, which shall be suited to, and shall mark, his particular genius, and turn of mind. The orations in Livy differ much in style, as they ought to do, from the rest of his history. The same is the case with those in Tacitus. Yet both in Livy's orations, and in those of Tacitus, we are able clearly to trace the distinguishing manner of each historian; the magnificent fullness of the one, and the sententious conciseness of the other. The "*Lettres Persanes*," and "*L'Esprit des Loix*," are the works of the same author. They required very different composition surely, and accordingly they differ widely; yet still we see the same hand. Wherever there is real and native genius, it gives a determination to one kind of style rather than to

another. Where nothing of this appears; where there is no marked nor peculiar character in the compositions of any author, we are apt to infer, not without reason, that he is a vulgar and trivial author, who writes from imitation, and not from the impulse of original genius. As the most celebrated painters are known by their hand, so the best and most original writers are known and distinguished, throughout all their works, by their style and peculiar manner. This will be found to hold almost without exception.

The ancient critics attended to these general characters of style which we are now to consider. Dionysius of Halicarnassus divides them into three kinds; and calls them the austere, the florid, and the middle. By the austere, he means a style distinguished for strength and firmness, with a neglect of smoothness and ornament; for examples of which, he gives Pindar and Æschylus among the poets, and Thucydides among the prose-writers. By the florid, he means, as the name indicates, a style ornamented, flowing, and sweet; resting more upon numbers and grace, than strength; he instances Hesiod, Sappho, Anacreon, Euripides, and principally Isocrates. The middle kind is the just mean between these, and comprehends the beauties of both; in which class he places Homer and Sophocles among the poets; in prose, Herodotus, Demosthenes, Plato, and (what seems strange) Aristotle. This must be a very wide class indeed, which comprehends Plato and Aristotle under

one article as to style \*. Cicero and Quinctilian make also a threefold division of style, though with respect to different qualities of it; in which they are followed by most of the modern writers on Rhetoric; the *simplex*, *tenue*, or *subtile*; the *grave* or *vehemens*; and the *medium*, or, *temperatum genus dicendi*. But these divisions and the illustrations they give of them, are so loose and general, that they cannot advance us much in our ideas of style. I shall endeavour to be a little more particular in what I have to say on this subject.

One of the first and most obvious distinctions of the different kinds of style, is what arises from an author's spreading out his thoughts more or less. This distinction forms, what are called the diffuse and the concise styles. A concise writer compresses his thought into the fewest possible words; he seeks to employ none but such as are most expressive; he lops off, as redundant, every expression which does not add something material to the sense. Ornament he does not reject; he may be lively and figured; but his ornament is intended for the sake of force, rather than grace. He never gives you the same thought twice. He places it in the light which appears to him the most striking, but if you do not apprehend it well in that light, you need not expect to find it in any other. His sentences are arranged with compactness and strength, rather

\* De Compositione Verborum, Cap. 25.

than with cadence and harmony. The utmost precision is studied in them; and they are commonly designed to suggest more to the reader's imagination than they directly express.

A diffuse writer unfolds his thought fully. He places it in a variety of lights, and gives the reader every possible assistance for understanding it completely. He is not very careful to express it at first in its full strength; because he is to repeat the impression; and what he wants in strength, he proposes to supply by copiousness. Writers of this character generally love magnificence and amplification. Their periods naturally run out into some length, and having room for ornament of every kind, they admit it freely.

Each of these manners has its peculiar advantages; and each becomes faulty when carried to the extreme. The extreme of conciseness becomes abrupt and obscure; it is apt also to lead into a style too pointed, and bordering on the epigrammatic. The extreme diffuseness becomes weak and languid, and tires the reader. However, to one or other of these two manners, a writer may lean according as his genius prompts him: and under the general character of a concise, or of a more open and diffuse style, may possess much beauty in his composition.

For illustrations of these general characters, I can only refer to the writers who are examples of them. It is not so much from detached passages, such as I was wont formerly to quote for instances, as from the current of an author's style, that we

are to collect the idea of a formed manner of writing. The two most remarkable examples that I know, of conciseness carried as far as propriety will allow, perhaps in some cases farther, are Tacitus the historian, and the president Montesquieu in "*L'Esprit des Loix*." Aristotle, too, holds an eminent rank among didactic writers for his brevity. Perhaps no writer in the world was ever so frugal of his words as Aristotle; but this frugality of expression frequently darkens his meaning. Of a beautiful and magnificent diffuseness, Cicero is, beyond doubt, the most illustrious instance that can be given. Addison also, and Sir William Temple, come in some degree under this class.

In judging when it is proper to lean to the concise, and when to the diffuse manner; we must be directed by the nature of the composition. Discourses that are to be spoken, require a more copious style, than books that are to be read. When the whole meaning must be caught from the mouth of the speaker, without the advantage which books afford of pausing at pleasure, and reviewing what appears obscure, great conciseness is always to be avoided. We should never presume too much on the quickness of our hearer's understanding; but our style ought to be such, that the bulk of men can go along with us easily, and without effort. A flowing copious style, therefore, is required in all public speakers; guarding, at the same time, against such a degree of diffusion, as renders them languid and