

verted point in language and style. But it will not follow from this, that grammatical rules are superseded as useless. In every language, which has been in any degree cultivated, there prevails a certain structure and analogy of parts, which is understood to give foundation to the most reputable usage of speech; and which, in all cases, when usage is loose or dubious, possesses considerable authority. In every language there are rules of syntax, which must be invariably observed by all who would either write or speak with any propriety. For syntax is no other than the arrangement of words in a sentence which renders the meaning of each word, and the relation of all the words to one another, most clear and intelligible.

All the rules of Latin syntax, it is true, cannot be applied to our language. Many of these rules arose from the particular form of their language, which occasioned verbs or prepositions to govern, some the genitive, some the dative, some the accusative or ablative case. But, abstracting from these peculiarities, it is to be always remembered, that the chief and fundamental rules of syntax are common to the English, as well as the Latin tongue; and indeed, belong equally to all languages. For, in all languages, the parts which compose speech are essentially the same; substantives, adjectives, verbs, and connecting particles: and wherever these parts of speech are found, there are certain necessary relations among them, which regulate their syntax, or the place which they ought to possess in a sentence. Thus, in English, just as much as in Latin, the adjective must, by position, be made to agree with its substantive; and the verb must agree with its nominative in person and number; because, from the nature of things, a word which expresses either a quality or an action, must correspond as closely as possible with the name of that thing whose quality, or whose action, it expresses. Two or more substantives, joined by a copulative, must always require the verbs or pronouns, to which they refer, to be placed in the plural number; otherwise, their common relation to these verbs or pronouns is not pointed out. An active verb must, in every language, govern the accusative; that is, clearly point out some substantive noun, as the object to which its action is directed. A relative pronoun must, in every form of speech, agree with its antecedent in gender, number, and person; and conjunctions, or connecting particles, ought always to couple like cases and moods; that is, ought to join together words which are of the same form and state with each other. I mention these as a

few exemplifications of that fundamental regard to syntax, which, even in such a language as ours, is absolutely requisite for writing or speaking with any propriety.

Whatever the advantages or defects of the English language be, as it is our own language, it deserves a high degree of our study and attention, both with regard to the choice of words which we employ, and with regard to the syntax, or the arrangement of these words in a sentence. We know how much the Greeks and the Romans, in their most polished and flourishing times, cultivated their own tongues. We know how much study both the French and the Italians have bestowed upon theirs. Whatever knowledge may be acquired by the study of other languages, it can never be communicated with advantage, unless by such as can write and speak their own language well. Let the matter of an author be ever so good and useful, his compositions will always suffer in the public esteem, if his expression be deficient in purity and propriety. At the same time, the attainment of a correct and elegant style is an object which demands application and labour. If any imagine they can catch it merely by the ear, or acquire it by a slight perusal of some of our good authors, they will find themselves much disappointed. The many errors, even in point of grammar, the many offences against purity of language, which are committed by writers who are far from being contemptible, demonstrate that a careful study of the language is previously requisite, in all who aim at writing it properly.\*

## LECTURE X.

### STYLE, PERSPICUITY, AND PRECISION.

HAVING finished the subject of language, I now enter on the consideration of style, and the rules that relate to it.

It is not easy to give a precise idea of what is meant by style. The best definition I can give of it, is the peculiar manner in which a man expresses his conceptions, by means of language. It is different from mere language or words. The

\* On this subject, the reader ought to peruse Dr. Lowth's Short Introduction to the English Grammar, with Critical Notes, which is the grammatical performance of highest authority; that has appeared in our time, and in which he will see what I have said, concerning the inaccuracies in language of some of our best writers, fully verified. In Dr. Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric, he

words which an author employs may be proper and faultless. and his style may, nevertheless, have great faults; it may be dry, or stiff, or feeble, or affected. Style has always some reference to an author's manner of thinking. It is a picture of the ideas which rise in his mind, and of the manner in which they rise there; and, hence, when we are examining an author's composition, it is, in many cases, extremely difficult to separate the style from the sentiment. No wonder these two should be so intimately connected, as style is nothing else, than that sort of expression which our thoughts most readily assume. Hence, of different countries have been noted for peculiarities of style, suited to their different temper and genius. The Eastern nations animated their style with the most strong and hyperbolical figures. The Athenians, a polished and acute people, formed a style accurate, clear, and neat. The Asiatics, gay and loose in their manners, affected a style florid and diffuse. The like sort of characteristic differences are commonly remarked in the style of the French, the English, and the Spaniards. In giving the general characters of style, it is usual to talk of a nervous, a feeble, or a spirited style; which are plainly the characters of a writer's manner of thinking, as well as of expressing himself: so difficult it is to separate these two things from one another. Of the general characters of style, I am afterwards to discourse; but it will be necessary to begin with examining the more simple qualities of it; from the assemblage of which, its more complex denominations, in a great measure, result.

All the qualities of a good style may be ranged under two heads—perspicuity and ornament. For all that can possibly be required of language, is, to convey our ideas clearly to the minds of others, and, at the same time, in such a dress, as by pleasing and interesting them, shall most effectually strengthen the impressions which we seek to make. When both these ends are answered, we certainly accomplish every purpose for which we use writing and discourse.

Perspicuity, it will be readily admitted, is the fundamental quality of style; \* a quality so essential in every kind of writing,

will likewise find many acute and ingenious observations, both on the English language, and on style in general. And Dr. Priestley's Rudiments of English Grammar will also be useful, by pointing out several of the errors into which writers are apt to fall.

\* "Nobis prima sit virtus perspicuitas, propria verba, rectus ordo, non in longum dilata conclusio; nihil neque desit, neque superfluat."—*QUINTILII*, lib. viii. 2, 22.

that, for the want of it, nothing can alone. Without this, the richest ornaments of style only glimmer through the dark; and puzzle instead of pleasing the reader. This, therefore, must be our first object, to make our meaning clearly and fully understood, and understood without the least difficulty. "Oratio," says Quintilian, "debet negliger quoque audientibus esse aperta: ut in animam audientis, sicut sol in oculos, etiam si in eum non intendatur, incurrat. Quare, non solum ut intelligere possit, sed ne omnino possit non intelligere curandum.\*" 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 take up his work a second time.

Authors sometimes plead the difficulty of their subject, as an excuse for the want of perspicuity. But the excuse can rarely, if ever, be admitted. For whatever a man conceives clearly, that it is in his power, if he will be at the trouble, to put into distinct propositions, or to express clearly to others: and upon no subject ought any man to write, where he cannot think clearly. His ideas, indeed, may, very excusably, be on some subjects incomplete or inadequate; but still, as far as they go, they ought to be clear; and wherever this is the case, perspicuity in expressing them is always attainable. The obscurity which reigns so much among many metaphysical writers, is for the most part, owing to the indistinctness of their own conceptions. They see the object but in a confused light; and, of course, can never exhibit it in a clear one to others.

Perspicuity in writing, is not to be considered as merely a sort of negative virtue, or freedom from defect. It has higher merit; it is a degree of positive beauty. We are pleased with an author, we consider him as deserving praise, who frees us from all fatigue of searching for his meaning; who carries us through his subject without any embarrassment or confusion; whose style flows always like a limpid stream, where we see to the very bottom.

The study of perspicuity requires attention, first, to single

\* "Discourse ought always to be obvious, even to the most careless and negligent hearer; so that the sense shall strike his mind, as the light of the sun does our eyes, though they are not directed upwards to it. We must study, not only that every hearer may understand us, but that it shall be impossible for him not to understand us."

words and phrases, and then to the construction of sentences. I begin with treating of the first, and shall confine myself to it in this lecture.

Perspicuity, considered with respect to words and phrases, requires these three qualities in them—purity, propriety, and precision.

Purity and propriety of language, are often used indiscriminately for each other; and, indeed, they are very nearly allied. A distinction, however, obtains between them. Purity, is the use of such words, and such constructions, as belong to the idiom of the language which we speak; in opposition to words and phrases that are imported from other languages, or that are obsolete, or new-coined, or used without proper authority. Propriety, is the selection of such words in the language, as the best and most established usage has appropriated to those ideas which we intend to express by them. 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, which would be less significant of the ideas that we mean to convey. Style may be pure, that is, it may all be strictly English, without Scotchisms or Gallicisms, or ungrammatical irregular expressions of any kind, and may, nevertheless, be deficient in propriety. The words may be ill chosen; not adapted to the subject, nor fully expressive of the author's sense. He has taken all his words and phrases from the general mass of English language; but he has made his selection among these words unhappily. Whereas, style cannot be proper without being also pure; and where both purity and propriety meet, besides making style perspicuous, they also render it graceful. There is no standard, either of purity or of propriety, but the practice of the best writers and speakers in the country.

When I mentioned obsolete or new-coined words as incongruous with purity of style, it will be easily understood that some exceptions are to be made. On certain occasions, they may have grace. Poetry admits of greater latitude than prose, with respect to coining, or, at least, new-compounding words; yet, even here, this liberty should be used with a sparing hand. In prose, such innovations are more hazardous, and have a worse effect. They are apt to give style an affected and conceited air; and should never be ventured upon, except by such whose established reputation gives them some degree of dictatorial power over language.

The introduction of foreign and learned words, unless where

necessity requires them, should always be avoided. Barron Langens may need such assistances; but ours is not one of these. Dean Swift, one of our most correct writers, valued himself much on using no words but such as were of native growth and his language may, indeed, be considered as a standard of the strictest purity and propriety, in the choice of words. At present, we seem to be departing from this standard. A multitude of Latin words have of late been poured in upon us. On some occasions, they give an appearance of elevation and dignity to style. But often also, they render it stiff and forced; and, in general, a plain native style, as it is more intelligible to all readers, so, by a proper management of words, it may be made equally strong and expressive with this latinized English.

Let us now consider the import of precision in language, which, as it is the highest part of the quality denoted by perspicuity, merits a full explication; and the more, because distinct ideas are, perhaps, not commonly formed about it.

The exact import of precision may be drawn from the etymology of the word. It comes from *præcidere* to cut off. It imports retrenching all superfluities, and pruning the expression so as to exhibit neither more nor less than an exact copy of his idea who uses it. I observed before, that it is often difficult to separate the qualities of style from the qualities of thought; and it is found so in this instance; for, in order to write with precision, though this be properly a quality of style, one must possess a very considerable degree of distinctness and accuracy in his manner of thinking.

The words which a man uses to express his ideas may be faulty in three respects: They may either not express that idea which the author intends, but some other which only resembles, or is akin to it; or they may express that idea, but not quite fully and completely; or, they may express it together with something more than he intends. Precision stands opposed to all these three faults: but chiefly to the last. In an author's writing with propriety, his being free from the two former faults seems implied. The words which he uses are proper; that is, they express that idea which he intends, and they express it fully; but to be precise, signifies that they express that idea, and no more. There is nothing in his words which introduces any foreign idea, any superfluous unseasonable accessory, so as to mix it confusedly with the principal object, and thereby to render our conception of that object loose and indistinct. This requires a writer to have, himself, a very clear

apprehension of the object he means to present to us ; to have laid fast hold of it in his mind ; and never to waver in any one view he takes of it : a perfection to which, indeed few writers attain.

The use and importance of precision may be deduced from the nature of the human mind. It never can view, clearly and distinctly, above one object at a time. If it must look at two or three together, especially objects among which there is resemblance or connexion, it finds itself confused and embarrassed. It cannot clearly perceive in what they agree, and in what they differ. Thus, were any object, suppose some animal, to be presented to me, of whose structure I wanted to form a distinct notion, I would desire all its trappings to be taken off, I would require it to be brought before me by itself, and to stand alone, that there might be nothing to distract my attention. The same is the case with words. If, when you would inform me of your meaning, you also tell me more than what conveys it ; if you join foreign circumstances to the principal object ; if, by unnecessarily varying the expression, you shift the point of view, and make me see sometimes the object itself, and sometimes another thing that is connected with it ; you thereby oblige me to look on several objects at once, and I lose sight of the principal. You load the animal you are showing me with so many trappings and collars, and bring so many of the same species before me, somewhat resembling, and yet somewhat differing, that I see none of them clearly.

This forms what is called a loose style ; and is the proper opposite to precision. It generally arises from using a superfluity of words. Feeble writers employ a multitude of words to make themselves understood, as they think, more distinctly ; but they only confound the reader. They are sensible of not having caught the precise expression, to convey what they would signify ; they do not, indeed, conceive their own meaning very precisely themselves : and, therefore, help it out as they can, by this and the other word, which may, as they suppose, supply the defect, and bring you somewhat nearer to their idea : they are always going about it, and about you, is always seen double ; and The image, as they set it before you, is always seen double ; and no double image is distinct. When an author tells me of his hero's *courage* in the day of battle, the expression is precise, and I understand it fully. But if, from the desire of multiplying words, he will needs praise his *courage* and *fortitude* ; at the moment he joins these words together, my idea begins to waver

He means to express one quality more strongly ; but he is, in truth, expressing two. *Courage* resists danger ; *fortitude* supports pain. The occasion of exerting each of these qualities is different ; and being led to think of both together, when only one of them should be in my view, my view is rendered unsteady, and my conception of the objects indistinct.

From what I have said, it appears that an author may, in a qualified sense, be perspicuous, while yet he is far from being precise. He uses proper words, and proper arrangement ; he gives you the idea as clear as he conceives it himself ; and so far he is perspicuous : but the ideas are not very clear in his own mind ; they are loose and general ; and, therefore, cannot be expressed with precision. All subjects do not equally require precision. It is sufficient, on many occasions, that we have a general view of the meaning. The subject, perhaps, is of the known and familiar kind ; and we are in no hazard of mistaking the sense of the author, though every word which he uses be not precise and exact.

Few authors, for instance, in the English language, are more clear and perspicuous, on the whole, than Archbishop Tillotson, and Sir William Temple ; yet neither of them are remarkable for precision. They are loose and diffuse ; and accustomed to express their meaning by several words, which shew you fully, whereabouts it lies, rather than to single out those expressions, which would convey clearly the idea they have in view, and no more. Neither, indeed, is precision the prevailing character of Mr. Addison's style ; although he is not so deficient in this respect as the other two authors.

Lord Shaftesbury's faults, in point of precision, are much greater than Mr. Addison's ; and the more unpardonable, because he is a professed philosophical writer ; who, as such, ought above all things to have studied precision. His style has both great beauties and great faults ; and, on the whole, is by no means a safe model for imitation. Lord Shaftesbury was well acquainted with the power of words ; those which he employs are generally proper and well sounding ; he has great variety of them ; and his arrangement, as shall be afterwards shown, is commonly beautiful. His defect, in precision, is not owing so much to indistinct or confused ideas, as to perpetual affectation. He is fond, to excess, of the pomp and parade of language ; he is never satisfied with expressing any thing clearly and simply ; he must always give it the dress of state and majesty. Hence perpetual circumlocutions, and many words and phrases em-

played to describe somewhat that would have been described much better by one of them. If he has occasion to mention any person or author, he very rarely mentions him by his proper name. In the treatise entitled, *Advice to an Author*, he descends for two or three pages together upon Aristotle, without once naming him in any other way, than the master critic, the mighty genius and judge of art, the prince of critics, the grand master of art, and consummate philologist. In the same way, the grand poetic sire, the philosophical patriarch, and his disciple of noble birth and lofty genius, are the only names by which he condescends to distinguish Homer, Socrates, and Plato, in another passage of the same treatise. This method of distinguishing persons is extremely affected; but it is not so contrary to precision, as the frequent circumlocutions he employs for all moral ideas; attentive, on every occasion, more to the pomp of language, than to the clearness which he ought to have studied as a philosopher. The moral sense, for instance, after he had once defined it, was a clear term; but how vague becomes the idea, when, in the next page, he calls it, "That natural affection, and anticipating fancy, which makes the sense of right and wrong!" Self-examination, or reflection on our own conduct, is an idea conceived with ease; but when it is wrought into all the forms of "A man's dividing himself into two parties, becoming a self-dialogist, entering into partnership with himself, forming the dual number practically within himself;" we hardly know what to make of it. On some occasions, he so adorns, or rather loads with words, the plainest and simplest propositions, as, if not to obscure, at least to enfeeble them.

In the following paragraph, for example, of the inquiry concerning virtue, he means to show, that by every ill action we hurt our mind, as much as one who should swallow poison, or give himself a wound, would hurt his body. Observe what a redundancy of words he pours forth: "Now, if the fabric of the mind or temper appeared to us, such as it really is; if we saw it impossible to remove hence any one good or orderly affection, or to introduce any ill or disorderly one, without drawing on, in some degree, that dissolute state which, at its height, is confessed to be so miserable; it would then, undoubtedly, be confessed, that since no ill, immoral, or unjust action can be committed, without either a new inroad and breach on the temper and passions, or a further advancing of that execution already done; whoever did ill, or acted in prejudice to his integrity, good-nature, or worth, would, of

necessity, act with greater cruelty towards himself, than he who scrupled not to swallow what was poisonous, or who, with his own hands, should voluntarily mangle or wound his outward form, or constitution, natural limbs or body.\* Here, to commit a bad action, is, first, "To remove a good and orderly affection, and to introduce an ill or disorderly one;" next, it is, "To commit an action that is ill, immoral, and unjust;" and in the next line, it is, "To do ill, or to act in prejudice of integrity, good-nature, and worth;" nay, so very simple a thing as a man wounding himself, is, "To mangle, or wound, his outward form or constitution, his natural limbs or body." Such superfluity of words is disgusting to every reader of correct taste; and serves no purpose but to embarrass and perplex the sense. This sort of style is elegantly described by Quintilian, "*Est in quibusdam turba inanium verborum, qui dum commentum loquendi morem reformidant, ducti specie nitoris, circumcunct omnia copiosa loquacitate quæ dicere volunt.*"† *Lib. vii. cap. 2.*

The great source of a loose style, in opposition to precision, is the injudicious use of those words termed synonymous. They are called synonymous because they agree in expressing one principal idea; but for the most part, if not always, they express it with some diversity in the circumstances. They are varied by some accessory idea which every word introduces, and which forms the distinction between them. Hardly in any language are there two words that convey precisely the same idea; a person thoroughly conversant in the propriety of the language will always be able to observe something that distinguishes them. As they are like different shades of the same colour, an accurate writer can employ them to great advantage, by using them so as to heighten and to finish the picture which he gives us. He supplies by one, what was wanting in the other, to the force, or to the lustre of the image which he means to exhibit. But in order to this end, he must be extremely attentive to the choice which he makes of them. For the bulk of writers are very apt to confound them with each other; and to employ them carelessly, merely for the sake of filling up a period, or of rounding and diversifying the language,

\* Characterist. Vol. ii. p. 85.

† "A crowd of unmeaning words is brought together by some authors, who, afraid of expressing themselves after a common and ordinary manner, and allured by an appearance of splendour, surround every thing which they mean to say with a certain copious loquacity."

as if their signification were exactly the same, while, in truth, it is not. Hence a certain mist, and indistinctness, is unwarily thrown over style.

In the Latin language, there are no two words we should more readily take to be synonymous, than *amare* and *diligere*. Cicero, however, has shown us, that there is a very clear distinction betwixt them. "Quid ergo," says he, in one of his epistles, "tibi commendem eum quem tu ipse diligis? Sed tamen ut scires eum non a me *diligi* solum, verum etiam *amari*, ob eam rem tibi hæc scribo.\*" In the same manner *tutus* and *securus*, are words which we should readily confound; yet their meaning is different. *Tutus* signifies out of danger; *securus*, free from the dread of it. Seneca has elegantly marked this distinction; "Tuta scelera esse possunt, securi non possunt.†" In our own language, very many instances might be given of a difference in meaning among words reputed synonymous; and, as the subject is of importance, I shall now point out some of these. The instances which I am to give, may themselves be of use; and they will serve to show the necessity of attending, with care and strictness, to the exact import of words, if ever we would write with propriety or precision.

*Austerity*; *severity*; *rigour*. Austerity, relates to the manner of living; severity, of thinking; rigour, of punishing. To austerity, is opposed effeminacy; to severity, relaxation; to rigour, clemency. A hermit, is austere in his life; a casuist, severe in his application of religion or law; a judge, rigorous in his sentences.

*Custom*; *habit*. Custom, respects the action; habit, the actor. By custom, we mean the frequent repetition of the same act; by habit, the effect which that repetition produces on the mind or body. By the custom of walking often in the streets, one acquires a habit of idleness.

*Surprised*; *astonished*; *amazed*; *confounded*. I am surprised, with what is new or unexpected; I am astonished, at what is vast or great; I am amazed, with what is incomprehensible; I am confounded, by what is shocking or terrible.

*Desist*; *renounce*; *quit*; *leave off*. Each of these words implies some pursuit or object relinquished; but from different motives. We desist, from the difficulty of accomplishing; we renounce, on account of the disagreeableness of the object, or pursuit; we quit, for the sake of some other thing which interests us more; and we leave off, because we are weary of the

design. A politician desists from his designs, when he finds they are impracticable; he renounces the court, because he has been affronted by it; he quits ambition, for study or retirement; and leaves off his attendance on the great, as he becomes old and weary of it.

*Pride*; *vanity*. Pride, makes us esteem ourselves; vanity, makes us desire the esteem of others. It is just to say, as Dean Swift has done, that a man is too proud to be vain.

*Haughtiness*; *disdain*. Haughtiness, is founded on the high opinion we entertain of ourselves; disdain, on the low opinion we have of others.

*To distinguish*; *to separate*. We distinguish, what we want not to confound with another thing; we separate, what we want to remove from it. Objects are distinguished from one another, by their qualities; they are separated, by the distance of time or place.

*To weary*; *to fatigue*. The continuance of the same thing wearies us; labour fatigues us. I am weary with standing; I am fatigued with walking. A suitor wearies us by his persistence; fatigues us by his importunity.

*To abhor*; *to detest*. To abhor, imports, simply, strong dislike; to detest, imports also strong disapprobation. One abhors being in debt; he detests treachery.

*To invent*; *to discover*. We invent things that are new; we discover what was before hidden. Galileo invented the telescope; Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood.

*Only*; *alone*. Only, imports that there is no other of the same kind; alone, imports being accompanied by no other. An only child, is one who has neither brother nor sister; a child alone, is one who is left by itself. There is a difference, therefore, in precise language, betwixt these two phrases, "Virtue only makes us happy;" and, "Virtue alone makes us happy." "Virtue only makes us happy," imports, that nothing else can do it. "Virtue alone makes us happy," imports, that virtue, by itself, or unaccompanied with other advantages, is sufficient to do it.

*Entire*; *complete*. A thing is entire, by wanting none of its parts; complete, by wanting none of the appendages that belong to it. A man may have an entire house to himself; and yet not have one complete apartment.

*Tranquillity*; *peace*; *calm*. Tranquillity, respects a situation free from trouble, considered in itself; peace, the same situation with respect to any causes that might interrupt it; calm, with



regard to a disturbed situation going before, or following it. A good man enjoys tranquillity, in himself; peace, with others and calm, after the storm.

*A difficulty; an obstacle.* A difficulty, embarrasses; an obstacle, stops us. We remove the one; we surmount the other. Generally, the first expresses somewhat arising from the nature and circumstances of the affair; the second, somewhat arising from a foreign cause. Philip found difficulty in managing the Athenians from the nature of their dispositions; but the eloquence of Demosthenes was the greatest obstacle to his designs.

*Wisdom; prudence.* Wisdom, leads us to speak and act what is most proper; prudence, prevents our speaking or acting improperly. A wise man employs the most proper means for success; a prudent man, the safest means for not being brought into danger.

*Enough; sufficient.* Enough, relates to the quantity which one wishes to have of any thing; sufficient, relates to the use that is to be made of it. Hence, enough, generally imports a greater quantity than sufficient does. The covetous man never has enough, although he has what is sufficient for nature.

*To avow; to acknowledge; to confess.* Each of these words imports the affirmation of a fact, but in very different circumstances. To avow, supposes the person to glory in it; to acknowledge, supposes a small degree of faultiness, which the acknowledgment compensates; to confess, supposes a higher degree of crime. A patriot avows his opposition to a bad minister, and is applauded; a gentleman acknowledges his mistake, and is forgiven; a prisoner confesses the crime he is accused of, and is punished.

*To remark; to observe.* We remark, in the way of attention, in order to remember; we observe, in the way of examination, in order to judge. A traveller remarks the most striking objects he sees; a general observes all the motions of his enemy.

*Equivocal; ambiguous.* An equivocal expression is, one which has one sense open, and designed to be understood; another sense concealed, and understood only by the person who uses it. An ambiguous expression is, one which has apparently two senses, and leaves us at a loss which of them to give it. An equivocal expression is used with an intention to deceive; an ambiguous one, when it is used with design, is, with an intention not to give full information. An honest man will never employ an equivocal expression; a confused man may often utter an-

ambiguous ones, without any design. I shall give only one instance more.

*With; by.* Both these particles express the connection between some instrument, or means of effecting an end, and the agent who employs it; but *with*, expresses a more close and immediate connection; *by*, a more remote one. We kill a man *with* a sword; he dies *by* violence. The criminal is bound *with* ropes *by* the executioner. The proper distinction in the use of these particles is elegantly marked in a passage of Dr. Robertson's History of Scotland. When one of the old Scottish kings was making an enquiry into the tenure *by* which his nobles held their lands, they started up, and drew their swords: "*By* these," said they, "we acquired our lands, and *with* these, we will defend them." "*By* these we acquired our lands," signifies the more remote means of acquisition by force and martial deed; and, "*with* these we will defend them;" signifies the immediate direct instrument, the sword, which they would employ in their defence.

These are instances of words in our language, which, by careless writers, are apt to be employed as perfectly synonymous, and yet are not so. Their significations approach, but are not precisely the same. The more the distinction in the meaning of such words is weighed, and attended to, the more clearly and forcibly shall we speak or write.\*

From all that has been said on this head, it will now appear, that, in order to write or speak with precision, two things are especially requisite; one, that an author's own ideas be clear and distinct; and the other, that he have an exact and full comprehension of the force of those words which he employs. Natural genius is here required; labour and attention still more. Dean Swift is one of the Authors, in our language, most distinguished for precision of style. In his writings, we seldom or never find any vague expressions, and synonymous

\* In French, there is a very useful treatise on the subject, the Abbé Girard's *Synonymes Françoises*, in which he has made a large collection of such apparent synonyms in the language, and shown, with much accuracy, the difference in their signification. It is to be wished, that some such work were undertaken in our tongue, and executed with equal taste and judgment. Nothing would contribute more to precise and elegant writing. In the meantime, this French treatise may be perused with considerable profit. It will accustom persons to beware of synonymous terms in our own language, analogous to those which he has pointed out in the French; and, accordingly, several of the instances above given were suggested by the work of this author.

words carelessly thrown together. His meaning is always clear, and strongly marked.

I had occasion to observe before, that though all subjects of writing or discourse demand perspicuity, yet all do not require the same degree of that exact precision, which I have endeavoured to explain. It is, indeed, in every sort of writing, a great beauty to have, at least, some measure of precision, in distinction from that loose profusion of words which imprints no clear idea on the reader's mind. But we must, at the same time, be on our guard, lest too great a study of precision, especially in subjects where it is not strictly requisite, betray us into a dry and barren style; lest, from the desire of pruning too closely, we retrench all copiousness and ornament. Some degree of this failing may, perhaps, be remarked in Dean Swift's serious works. Attentive only to exhibit his ideas clear and exact, resting wholly on his sense and distinctness, he appears to reject, disdainfully, all embellishment; which, on some occasions, may be thought to render his manner somewhat hard and dry. To unite copiousness and precision, to be flowing and graceful, and at the same time correct and exact in the choice of every word, is, no doubt, one of the highest and most difficult attainments in writing. Some kinds of composition may require more of copiousness and ornament; others, more of precision and accuracy; nay, in the same composition, the different parts of it may demand a proper variation of manner. But we must study never to sacrifice, totally, any one of these qualities to the other; and, by a proper management, both of them may be made fully consistent, if our own ideas be precise, and our knowledge and stock of words be, at the same time, extensive.

## LECTURE XI.

### STRUCTURE OF SENTENCES.

HAVING begun to treat of style, in the last lecture I considered its fundamental quality, perspicuity. What I have said of this, relates chiefly to the choice of words. From words I proceed to sentences; and as, in all writing and discourse, the proper composition and structure of sentences is of the highest importance, I shall treat of this fully. Though perspicuity be

the general head under which I, at present, consider language, I shall not confine myself to this quality alone, in sentences, but shall inquire also, what is requisite for their grace and beauty; that I may bring together, under one view, all that seems necessary to be attended to in the construction and arrangement of words in a sentence.

It is not easy to give an exact definition of a sentence, or period, further, than as it always implies some one complete proposition or enunciation of thought. Aristotle's definition is, in the main, a good one: *Ἀέτις ἔχουσα ἀρχὴν καὶ τελευτὴν καθ' αἶψαν, καὶ μέγεθος εὐσύντακτον*: "A form of speech which hath a beginning and an end within itself, and is of such a length as to be easily comprehended at once." This, however, admits of great latitude: for a sentence, or period, consists always of component parts, which are called its members: and as these members may be either few or many, and may be connected in several different ways, the same thought, or mental proposition, may often be either brought into one sentence, or split into two or three, without the material breach of any rule.

The first variety that occurs in the consideration of sentences, is the distinction of long and short ones. The precise length of sentences, as to the number of words, or the number of members, which may enter into them, cannot be ascertained by any definite measure. At the same time, it is obvious, there may be an extreme on either side. Sentences immoderately long, and consisting of too many members, always transgress some one or other of the rules which I shall mention soon, as necessary to be observed in every good sentence. In discourses that are to be spoken, regard must be had to the easiness of pronunciation, which is not consistent with too long periods. In compositions where pronunciation has no place, still, however by using long periods too frequently, an author overloads the reader's ear, and fatigues his attention. For long periods require, evidently, more attention than short ones, in order to perceive clearly the connection of the several parts, and to take in the whole at one view. At the same time, there may be an excess in too many short sentences also; by which the sense is split and broken, the connection of thought weakened, and the memory burdened, by presenting to it a long succession of minute objects.

With regard to the length and construction of sentences, the French critics make a very just distinction of style, into *style périodique*, and *style coupé*. The *style périodique* is, where the sentences are composed of several members linked together, and