

A practical system of rhetoric; or, The principles and rules of style: inferred from examples of writing. With an historical dissertation on English style

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A practical system of rhetoric; or The principles and rules of style, inferred from examples of writing. With an historical dissertation on English style

by Samuel Phillips Newman

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PREFACE.

The little work entitled "A Practical System of Rhetoric," now presented to the British public, was first published by Professor Newman, in the year 1827, as a Text-book for the use of the Students of Bowdoin College, at which time it was received with considerable favour, and has since come into general use in the United States of America.

The following extract from Mrs. Phelps's admirable little treatise, entitled, "The Female Student," will give some idea of the estimation in which the work is held.

"For a clear and interesting explanation of the Elements of Taste, and of its three most essential qualities, refinement, delicacy, and correctness, I would refer you to the valuable system of Rhetoric by Professor Newman. The author has taken up the subject in a philosophical and practical manner. He at once informs the student that the art of writing well is not to be obtained by a set of rules, but that 'the store-house of the mind' must be well filled; and he must have that command of his treasures which will enable him to bring forward 'whenever the occasion may require, what has been 'accumulated for future use.' He dwells particularly upon the necessity of mental discipline, especially the previous cultivation of the reasoning powers; and observes that 'the student who, in the course of his education, is called to search for truth in the labyrinth of 'metaphysical and moral reasonings, and to toil in the 'wearisome study of the long and intricate solutions of 'mathematical principles, is acquiring that discipline of 'the mind which fits him to distinguish himself as an 'able writer.'"

"The chapter on Literary Taste is well written, and calculated to give just ideas of the peculiar merits of different authors; it also happily illustrates the proper use of rhetorical figures. The chapter on Style is an interesting exposition of the qualities of a good style, and the modes of writing which characterize different individuals. This little work leads the pupil to a knowledge of the rules and principles of Rhetoric, in an easy and simple manner, and has the merit of more originality than many school books which profess to be improvements."

The present edition is undertaken with the concurrence of the author, who has made numerous improvements upon his last (the fifth) edition; and at the request of the publisher, adapted his illustrations to the use of the English student.

It is humbly suggested that it might form a highly useful exercise to require of the pupil a written analysis of those parts of the book in which the analytical method is adopted, particularly of what is said on the subject of Taste. A plan of this kind, if judiciously pursued, may well supply the place of Questions, and at the same time aid the student in the acquisition of valuable mental habits.

London, March, 1837.

INTRODUCTION.

The advantages proposed to be attained by the study of Rhetoric, are :— 1. Some acquaintance with the 'philosophy of the

2. The cultivation of the taste, and in connexion, the exercise of the imagination.

3. Skill in the use of language.

4. Skill in literary criticism.

5. The formation of a good style.

By the philosophy of rhetoric, I here refer to those principles in the science of the philosophy of mind, and in the philosophy of language, on which are founded those conclusions and directions which are applicable to literary criticism, and to the formation of style. Obviously, then, it may be answered, that an acquaintance with the science of intellectual philosophy, and with the philosophy of language, should precede the study of rhetoric. Hence, no doubt, Milton and others assign to this branch of study the last place in a course of education.

But it is known to all, that the prevalent opinion and practice are different from those recommended by Milton; so that our inquiry should be, what is the best practical method of acquainting the young with the philosophy of rhetoric—those whose minds are not accustomed to philosophical investigations, and who are ignorant of those sciences on which the art is founded.

I answer, that, while the attention should be directed to few principles, and those most essential in a practical view, instruction should be imparted principally by familiar, talking lectures. A text-book, if one is used, should contain but a mere outline,— some general principles plainly stated, and well illustrated.

Here I would more fully state, what I mean by familiar, talking lectures. Suppose I wish to make the student understand what I mean by taste, and in so doing, I have occasion to speak of the judgment, sensibility, imagination, emotions of beauty and sublimity. Now, should I attempt to effect my purpose by a definition, or an extended technical explanation of these terms, there would be little reason to hope for success. I would rather refer him directly to the operations of his own mind, point out to him instances where he forms a judgment, where his sensibility is excited, his imagination called into exercise, and emotions of beauty and sublimity kindled up in his own soul. It is true, he may not, after this, be able to give me an exact definition of these faculties and intellectual operations, but he has learned what is meant by the proposed terms; and when I have occasion to use them afterwards, I have no fear of not being understood.

No one will deny that instruction in this part of rhetoric is attended with difficulty. The subjects themselves are intricate; hard to be understood, and still harder to explain, especially to those whose minds are immature and unaccustomed to philosophical seasonings. Here, then, is room for much ingenuity in the instructor; and without a skilful effort on his part, the efforts of the pupil will be of little avail. Above all things, let not the mockery of set questions and set answers be practised, in teaching what pertains to the philosophy of rhetoric.

After all, it must be allowed, that with the most skilful instruction, and the best text-book, young

students will obtain but imperfect ideas in what pertains to the philosophy of rhetoric. Still, what is thus imperfectly acquired, will be of importance to them as opening some interesting fields of thought, which, with strengthened powers, they may afterwards explore; and further, as aiding them in better understanding the nature of the rules and directions founded on these important and somewhat intricate principles.

I have stated as a second object to be attained by the study of rhetoric, the cultivation of a literary taste, and, in connexion, the exercise of the imagination.

The cultivation of a literary taste must evidently depend principally on a familiarity with those productions, which are esteemed models of excellence in literature. In this respect, there is a close analogy to the cultivation of taste in painting, or in any of the fine arts. We may also learn something on this subject, from the course pursued by painters in the improvement of their taste. They visit the most celebrated galleries, and seek for models of excellence in their art; and these they make the objects of close, long-continued, and patient study. They inquire what there is to excite admiration in these paintings, and dwell on their different prominent beauties, and in this way cultivate and improve their tastes. Now it is in the same way that a literary taste is to be cultivated. And that the student may skilfully use his models of excellence in literature, and unite with his observation of them the application of those principles on which they depend, he needs the assistance of an instructor.

In stating the details of the course here recommended, I remark, that, by the aid of the text-book prepared with reference to the proposed method of instruction, the student may have brought to his view examples of those instances, where there is most frequent occasion for the exercise of literary taste. I here refer to what are termed the ornaments of style. In connexion with these examples, the nature of whatever in literary productions comes under the cognizance of literary taste, may be explained. The different ornaments of style may be pointed out to his notice, and he may be led fully to see why attempts of this kind are in some instances successful, and in other instances fail.

When the examples thus cited, and the comments upon them, have become familiar to the student, let his attention be directed to the finding of examples in English writers, which may exhibit similar ornaments of style, and in the examination of which, there is opportunity for the application of the same principles. Here it is that important aid may be rendered by the instructor, since, in conducting these inquiries and forming his decisions, the student needs both guidance and confirmation.

To make myself fully understood, I will here illustrate my remarks. Suppose that a student finds in his text-book the following comparison from the writings of Locke:— 'The minds of the aged are like the tombs to which they are approaching; where, though the brass and the marble remain, yet the inscriptions are effaced by time, and the imagery has mouldered away.' This comparison, he is told, is naturally suggested; and in connexion with the example, the meaning of this phrase is fully explained to him. And not only is he made to see what is meant by a comparison's being naturally suggested, but to feel, that in the absence of this trait, the pleasure to be derived from it, as exciting an emotion of taste, would be impaired. Let the student now be directed to bring forward from any author, instances of comparison, which are in the same manner naturally suggested; and in this way let him become familiar with the principle stated, and with its application. In the same manner, by directing the attention in succession to the different traits in the various ornaments of style, and illustrating, in connection with examples, the various principles on which these attempts to excite emotions of taste are founded, the pupil is led to a full acquaintance with this part of rhetoric. He is enabled at once, when reading the productions of any author, to perceive the beauties of style and to classify and arrange them, or in other words, he acquires a good literary taste.

But there is another point connected with this part of my subject. I refer to the exercise thus given to the imagination. In our courses of study, we have discipline for the memory, the reasoning powers, and the invention; but no regard is paid to the exercise and improvement of the imagination. And this, not because this faculty of the mind is useless, or because it admits not of being strengthened and improved by exercise. The impression is, that there is no method which can be adopted for the attainment of this end. Now I would ask, if, by the course here recommended, the imagination will not be called into exercise, and strengthened? These attempts to excite emotions of taste are addressed to the imagination; they are understood by the imagination, and it is a just inference, that the plan of study I have now recommended, will furnish a salutary discipline to the imagination.

Of the favourable tendency of the method of instruction, I can from my own experience, as an instructor, speak with some confidence. I have ever found, that my pupils engage in this part of their rhetorical course with interest. They get new views of the nature of style, are led to notice their susceptibilities of emotions, of which before they have been unmindful. They also become conscious of their own powers of imagination, and learn something of the nature and offices of this faculty; and with these views and this consciousness, they find that a new source of pleasure is opened to them. Thus they both derive important aid in becoming writers themselves, and are prepared to read with increased interest the writings of others.

Before concluding my remarks on this head, let me say, that what is here recommended, is perfectly practicable. It is an employment, which any student with common powers of mind may pursue; and it requires, on the part of the instructor, only that degree of literary taste, which every one professing to teach rhetoric should possess.

The third object proposed to be obtained by the study of rhetoric, is skill in the use of language. Here I refer both to the choice of words, so far as purity and propriety are concerned, and to the construction of sentences.

Instruction in this part of rhetoric should be conducted with reference to two points,—to acquaint the student with the nature and principles of verbal criticism, and further to lead him to beware of those faults in construction, to which he is most liable.

The former of these appertains to the philosophy of rhetoric, and is included under my first head: but I here offer an additional remark. It was stated, when speaking of giving instruction on the philosophy of rhetoric, that difficulties attend this part of the course. These difficulties exist but in a slight degree, when exhibiting what is connected with the philosophy of language. Here is such abundant opportunity for illustration, and examples are so easily adduced, that every principle may without difficulty be made perfectly intelligible. Neither is this part of the study uninteresting to students. Curiosity is fully awake to whatever pertains to the nature of language, and to the rules that govern its use. And here I may be permitted to mention a work, which, in what pertains to this part of rhetoric, I regard as of the highest authority. I refer to Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric*,—the ingenious, elaborate production of the Quintilian of English literature.

To lead the student to beware of those faults in construction which are of most common occurrence,—the other object in view in this part of the course,—must evidently be effected by adducing examples of these faults. From the nature of the case, the endless forms of correct construction cannot be stated. On the obvious principle, then, that where one has erred, another will be liable to leave the right way, we direct the attention to these wanderings, and connect with such instances the cautions they naturally suggest. The object here in view may be accomplished for the most part by the textbook. All that is incumbent on the instructor, is to lead the pupil fully to see what, in every example adduced, the failure is, and how it is to be remedied. This part of a text-book does not require to be dwelt upon in the recitation room. It is rather a part to be

referred to by the student, when, hesitating as to the construction of sentences, he needs guidance and assistance.

I mention in the fourth place, as an object to be obtained by the study of rhetoric, skill in literary criticism.

Under this head, I include whatever pertains more particularly to style, its nature and diversities, as seen in the writings of different individuals, and in different classes of literary productions. Our inquiry is, What can be done by the instructor, most efficiently to aid the pupil in acquiring skill in literary criticism, as thus explained?

Style has been happily defined by Buffon as 'the man himself.' If I wished to become acquainted with any individual, I seek an introduction to him; I endeavour to learn from personal observation the peculiar traits in his character. I may, indeed, from the description of a third person receive some general and perhaps just impression respecting this individual; but all this, though it might prepare the way for my better understanding his peculiarities when in his presence, would alone make me but imperfectly acquainted with him.

The same holds true, if I wish to become acquainted with the peculiarities of those of different nations. You might describe to me the national traits of the French and of the Spanish; but a visit to those countries, and familiarity with their inhabitants, would be of far more avail in learning their national traits of character.

This illustration suggests the best practical method of giving instruction in what relates to literary criticism. A text-book, or an instructor may describe with accuracy and fullness the peculiarities of style, as they are seen in the writings of different individuals, or found in different classes of literary productions. But this is not enough. That the student may clearly discern these characteristic traits, and understand their nature, and the causes on which they depend, his attention must be directed to these writings. He must in some good degree become familiar with them, and thus learn wherein they differ, and what there is in each to approve or condemn.

It may be thought, that to bring to the view of the student in this manner the peculiarities of different styles, may require too much time and labour. But with the aid of the text-book, much of the work may be performed by the student himself. What is most necessary on the part of the instructor is, to direct the attention to specimens of different styles, and in some few instances to point out characteristic traits. The student, with this aid, will soon acquire sufficient knowledge and skill to apply the remarks found in the textbook himself.

This leads me to remark generally on the importance of reading good authors in connexion with rhetorical studies. This part of education is, I fear, in most of our schools and colleges too much neglected. From his inability to judge of the merits of writers, the student needs guidance in selecting those which may be most useful to him, and this guidance the instructor should feel it is incumbent on him to supply. To read over occasionally with the pupil some choice specimens of style, may also be of essential advantage. To learn how to read, is no easy acquisition. Of course, I refer, not to the pronunciation of the words, or the inflections of the voice, but to the quick and true apprehension of the meaning, and a susceptibility to the beauties of style.

In this connexion, too, the student may be taught the true nature of literary criticism. It looks not for faults. It cherishes not a censorious, captious spirit. Its eye is directed after what is excellent and praiseworthy; after what may inform the mind, give grateful exercise to the imagination and refinement to the taste. And when it discerns excellences of a high order, as if dazzled with what is bright and imposing, it sees not minute and unimportant defects. It is indeed nearly allied to that charity which is kind, and which, where she discovers what is truly worthy of her regard, throws

her mantle of forgiveness over a multitude of sins.

I proceed now to notice the last-mentioned advantage proposed to be obtained by the study of rhetoric. I refer to the formation of style.

This part of a rhetorical course of instruction is not particularly connected with the use of a text-book, further than that it furnishes opportunities for the application of principles and rules, which are there found. The aid furnished by an instructor, is principally in the correction of attempts in composition, with such general guidance and advice, as the intellectual habits and peculiarities of the individual may require. I offer, therefore, on this head, merely a few practical suggestions.

1. It is highly important, that the attention of the student, in his first attempts, should be directed to the management of his subject. I would require of him to exhibit a plan, or skeleton, stating the precise object he has in view, the divisions he proposes to make with reference to this point, and the manner in which he designs to enlarge on each head. In this way, he will not only be aided in forming habits of methodically arranging his thoughts, but will be led to adopt the easiest and most direct method of proceeding, in writing on any subject.

2. I have ever found, that, so far as the construction of sentences is concerned, and here I refer both to the division of a paragraph into sentences and to the phrases and forms of expression,—I remark, that, in relation to this part of the work of composition, I have ever found, that students derive important aid from translating select passages from the writings of good authors in other languages. Every one knows, that in this way a command of language is acquired. And I would extend the meaning of the phrase, so as to include, not only that copra and that power of nice discrimination in the use of words, which are generally understood to be implied by it, but also the right arrangement of words, and the correct construction of sentences. Other things being equal, he who, during the first six months in which the attention is directed to composition, should devote half of his efforts to the writing of translations would, I doubt not, be in advance of him, whose exertions had been wholly employed in the work of composition.

3. I would further recommend a familiar mode of correcting the first attempts of the student. If practicable, the instructor may with advantage read over with the pupil his production, and alone with him freely comment upon its defects and excellences. While in this way proper encouragement is given, the attention of the student is directed to that point where there is most need of improvement. Besides, it not infrequently happens, that the efforts of the student have taken some wrong direction. He has some erroneous impressions as to the nature of style, or as to the manner in which a good style may be formed. It may be that he is labouring too much in the choice and arrangement of his words, or the construction of his sentences; or, assigning undue importance to the ornaments of style, he may be seeking principally after what is figurative, and the elegances of expression; or, again, with false notions of what is original and forcible, he may be striving after what is sententious and striking. Sometimes, too, there exists a fastidiousness of taste, which is detrimental. The student is kept from doing any thing, because he is unable to do better than he can do. In other instances, there is an injurious propensity to imitation. The student has fixed upon some writer as his model, and, servilely copying his master, his own native powers are neglected. Now, in all these instances, the advice of the instructor may be of essential benefit.

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