

The bitterest invective would not have half the force of this comparison. Surely a more stinging passage never was penned.

Everyone knows Macaulay's observation upon a certain simile in Robert Montgomery's poem.

The soul aspiring pants its source to mount,
As streams meander level with their fount.

"We take this [says Macaulay, with characteristic energy] to be on the whole the worst similitude in the world. In the first place, no stream meanders, or can possibly meander, level with its fount. In the next place, if streams did meander level with their founts, no two motions can be less like each other than that meandering level and that of mounting upwards."

But there are greater poets (thank Heavens!) than Robert Montgomery; and with poetic similes one might easily fill a bulky volume, and a very interesting and striking volume it would be. The first association of the words "poetic simile" is with those long-drawn chains of imageries introduced in succession, chiefly for the sake of their own beauty of detail, in which Homer and Virgil delighted, and which later poets have imitated from them. Quotation here is needless, and would be superfluous. But there is another class of poetic simile which ought not to be passed over in silence. It consists in the same seizure of a chance resemblance which is the essence of *burlesque* similitude; but which, when it occurs in serious poetry, becomes what it used to be the fashion among critics to call "conceit." The following from Alexander Smith's "Life Drama" is an example:—

His heart held a dead hope,
As holds the wretched west the sunset's corse.

This is a pure conceit. There is no fitness, nor resemblance, in the imageries. The west is not wretched; the setting sun bears no resemblance to a corpse. The simile has neither power of illustration nor beauty of

detail. In the same poem occurs another simile, which has also been criticised as a conceit:—

I saw the moon
Rise from dark waves that plucked at her.

But a little consideration will show that this is a piece of imagery of a nature and effect quite different from the first. It is a piece of *description*. It shows with one brief touch what a page of laborious word-painting could not render more vivid—the plunging of the dark and restless waters, and the circle of the slow, white, rising moon. And so in the case of the famous simile of Alfred de Musset, which excited such a storm among the critics at the time of its appearance—it may be defended on the same principle.

C'était, dans la nuit brune,
Sur le clocher jauni
La lune
Comme un point sur un i.

Now, to compare the moon over a church spire to a dot over an *i* may or may not be a conceit. If such a simile occurred in a poem of passion and deep feeling, it would undoubtedly seem cold, fantastic and out of place. But as part of a drawing of scenery, marking the position of the moon, it suggests, by a touch, a vast amount of detail which it would have taken long to describe; it indicates not only the lateral position of the moon, but also her height in the sky—as far in proportion over the spire as the dot is over the *i*. And yet perhaps the illustration is *too* ingenious; the mind of the reader is startled by a sense of incongruity. It is clever—but it is a trick.

Of all poets Moore is the most addicted to the use of simile. His pages absolutely swarm with specimens, generally good, never very bad, always more or less ingenious.

He knew no more of fear than one who
dwells
Beneath the tropics knows of icicles.