

as good literature which has not satisfied men as tolerably tight and close-grained in these particulars, or become classic and permanent which has not, in respect of them, stood the test of the microscope. We distinguish, indeed, usefully enough, between matter and expression, between thought and style; but no one has ever attended to the subject analytically without becoming aware that the distinction is not ultimate—that what is called style resolves itself, after all, into manner of thinking; nay, perhaps (though to show this would take some time) into the successive particles of the matter thought. If a writer is said to be fond of epithets, it is because he has a habit of always thinking a quality very prominently along with an object; if his style is said to be figurative, it is because he thinks by means of comparisons; if his syntax abounds in inversions, it is because he thinks the cart before he thinks the horse.

And so, by extension, all the forms of slipshod in expression are, in reality, forms of slipshod in thought. If the syntax halts, it is because the thread of the thought has snapped or become entangled. If the phraseology of a writer is diffuse; if his language does not lie close round his real meaning, but widens out in flat expanses, with here and there a tremor as the meaning rises to take breath; if in every sentence we recognize shreds and tags of common social verbiage—in such a case it is because the mind of the writer is not doing its duty, is not consecutively active, maintains no continued hold of its object, hardly knows its own drift. In like manner, mixed or incoherent metaphor arises from incoherent conception, inability to see vividly what is professedly looked at. All forms of slipshod, in short, are to be referred to deficiency of precision in the conduct of thought. Of every writer it ought to be required at least that he pass every jot and tittle of what he sets down *through* his mind, to receive the guarantee of having been really there, and that he arrange and connect his thoughts in a workmanlike manner. Anything short of this is—allowance being made for circumstances which may prevent a conscientious man from always doing his best—an insult to the public. Accordingly, in all good literature, not excepting the subtlest and most exuberant poetry, one perceives a strict logic linking thought with thought. The velocity with which the mind can perform this service of giving adequate arrangement to its thoughts, differs much in different cases. With some writers it is done almost unconsciously—as if by the operation of a logical instinct so powerful that whatever teems up in their minds is marshalled and made exact as it comes, and there is perfection in the swiftest expression. So it was with the all-fluent Shakespeare, whose inventions, boundless and multitudinous, were yet ruled by a logic so resistless, that they came exquisite at once to the pen's point, and in studying whose intellectual gait we are reminded of the description of the Athenians in Euripides—"those sons of Erechtheus always moving with graceful step through a glittering violet ether, where the nine Pierian muses are said to have brought up yellow-haired Harmony as their common child." With others of our great writers, it has been notably different—rejection of first thoughts and expressions, the slow choice of a fit percentage, and the concatenation of these with labour and care.

Prevalent as slipshod is, it is not so prevalent as it was. There is more careful writing, in proportion, now than there was thirty, seventy, or a hundred years ago. This may be seen on comparing specimens of our present literature with corresponding specimens from the older newspapers and periodicals. The precept and the example of Wordsworth and those who helped him to initiate that era of our literature which dates from the French Revolution, have gradually introduced, among other things, habits of mechanical carefulness, both in prose and in verse. Among poets, Scott and Byron—safe in their greatness otherwise—were the most conspicuous sinners against the Wordsworthian ordinances in this respect after they had been promulgated. If one were willing to risk being stoned for speaking truth, one might call these two poets the last of the great slipshods. The *great* slipshods, be it observed; and, if there were the prospect that, by keeping silence about slipshod, we should see any other such massive figure heaving in among us in his slippers, who is there that would object to his company on account of them, or that would not gladly assist

to fell a score of the delicacies with polished boot-tips in order to make room for him? At the least, it may be said that there are many passages in the poems of Scott and Byron which fall far short of the standard of carefulness already fixed when they wrote. Subsequent writers, with nothing of their genius, have been much more careful. There is, however, one form of the slipshod in verse which, probably because it has not been recognized as slipshod, still holds ground among us. It consists in that particular relic of the "poetic diction" of the last century which allows merely mechanical inversions of syntax for the sake of metre and rhyme. For example, in a poem recently published, understood to be the work of a celebrated writer, and altogether as finished a specimen of metrical rhetoric and ringing epigram as has appeared for many a day, there occur such passages as these:—

"Harley's gilt coach the equal pair attends."

"What earlier school this grand comedian rear'd?"

*His first essays no crowds less courtly cheer'd.*

From learned closets came a sauntering sage,

Yawn'd, smiled, and spoke, and took by storm the age."

"All their love

Illumes one end, for which strives all their will;  
Before their age they march invincible."

"That talk which art as eloquence admits

Must be the talk of thinkers and of wits."

"Let Bright responsible for England be,

And straight in Bright a Chatham we should see."

"All most brave

In his mix'd nature seem'd to life to start,

When English honour roused his English heart."

That such instances of syntax inverted to the mechanical order of the verse should occur in such a quarter proves that they are still considered legitimate. But I believe—and this notwithstanding that ample precedent may be shown, not only from poets of the last century, but from all preceding poets—that they are *not* legitimate. Verse does not cancel any of the conditions of good prose, but only superadds new and more exquisite conditions; and that is the best verse where the words follow each other punctually in the most exact prose order, and yet the exquisite difference by which verse does distinguish itself from prose is fully felt. As, within prose itself, there are natural inversions according as the thought moves on from the calm and straightforward to the complex and impassioned—as what would be in one mood "Diana of the Ephesians is great," becomes in another, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians"—so, it may be, there is a *farther* amount of inversion proper within verse as such. Any such amount of inversion, however, must be able to plead itself natural—that is, belonging inevitably to what is new in the movement of the *thought* under the law of verse; which plea would not extend to cases like those specified, where versifiers, that they may keep their metre or hit a rhyme, tug words arbitrarily out of their prose connection. If it should be asked how, under so hard a restriction, a poet could write verse at all, the answer is, "That is *his* difficulty." But that this canon of taste in verse is not so oppressive as it looks, and that it will more and more come to be recognized and obeyed, seems augured in the fact that the greatest British poet of our time has himself intuitively attended to it, and furnished an almost continuous example of it in his poetry. Repeat any even of Tennyson's lyrics, where, from the nature of the case, obedience to the canon would seem most difficult—his "Tears, idle tears," or "The splendour falls,"—and see if, under all that peculiarity which makes the effect of these pieces, if of any in our language, something more than the effect of prose, every word does not fall into its place, like fitted jasper, exactly in the prose order. So! and what do you say to Mr. Tennyson's last volume, with its repetition of the phrase "The Table Round?" Why, I say that, when difficulty mounts to impossibility, then even the gods relent, even Rhadamanthus yields. Here it is as if the British nation had passed a special enactment to this effect:—"Whereas Mr. Tennyson has written a set of poems on the Round Table of Arthur and his Knights, and whereas he has represented to us that the phrase 'The Round Table,' specifying the central object about which these poems revolve, is a phrase which no force of art can work pleasingly into iambic verse, we, the British nation,