

LECTURE XX.

ASSOCIATION OF STUDY WITH COMPOSITION. — ITS NECESSITY. — ITS METHODS.

7. A PRINCIPLE fundamental to a preacher's study of literature is that it should be accompanied with habitual practice in composition.

If rightly conducted, a pastor's compulsory habits of production are rather a help than a hinderance to the scholarly character of his reading. Criticism and production re-act favorably upon each other. Nothing else is so powerful a tonic to the mind as composing: in certain conditions of the cerebral system it is a direct tonic to the brain, if conducted on the principle of alternation. Composition is creation. It is athletic exercise. The weakest minds are the most active absorbents, with the least capacity of production. The working of a healthy mind in study is like respiration: inhalation and exhalation are reciprocal. Without such reciprocity, a very large portion of our reading must be useless. It passes through the mind, but does not remain there. The power of retention needs the stimulus of production.

What knowledge is that which is most indelibly fixed in your memory, — that which you have learned only, or that which you have taught? What accumulations are most perfectly at your command, — those which are

stored by the dead-lift of memory, or those which you have used by reproduction? The discovery is often disheartening, but it is healthful, that one is making a mere valve of one's mind, opening it for a stream of reading to run through, and shutting it upon nothing.

Again: study, without mental production, creates in the mind itself inferior habits of thinking. We think very differently in the two cases, of thinking for the purpose of expression, and thinking passively. We think more clearly and less discursively when we think for the purpose of communication; we analyze more accurately; we individualize more sharply; we picture thought more vividly; we are more apt to think in words.

Test this view by your own experience. Why is it that reverie has such a debilitating effect upon your mental energy? Why is it that nothing else so surely unfits you for a morning's work in composing as to begin it with a waking dream? And why is it that nothing else breaks up the dream so sternly as the act of thinking with the pen? Some of the most accomplished writers have formed the habit of taking the pen in hand as the most efficient aid to quick, consecutive, clear, profound, and vivid thinking. Robert Southey says, "It is the very nose in the face of my intellect that I never enter into any regular train of thought unless the pen be in hand."

Professor Stuart, who was one of the most fluent composers of his time, once told me, that, when he was a young man, he was often compelled to quit his sermon, and walk in his garden, in sheer vacuity of thought, not knowing what to say next. "But now," said he, "my mental working is all instantaneous and

incessant. Results flash upon me. I draft a plan of a sermon as rapidly as I can move a pen. I could keep a dozen pens in motion, if I had as many right hands." He attributed that state of mental productiveness to his lifelong habit of associating study with composing.

Mental production, when reduced to a habit, promotes originality of thinking. In a perfectly healthy mind the act of composing is a stimulus to invention. The mental state in composing is an elevated state; the mind then has a masterly sweep of vision. Sir Walter Scott says, "My imagination is never so full of a new work as when I approach the end of one in hand." Clergymen often say that they are never so ready for their week's work in sermonizing as on Sunday evening. Dr. Thomas Brown, the celebrated professor of mental science at Edinburgh, was so confident, from his experience, of the power of composing to stimulate his invention, that he at last trusted to it for the suggestion of his most original thoughts. His lectures were written chiefly in the evening before their delivery. Many of his most brilliant trains of reasoning never came to him in his calmer hours. They were originated by the extemporaneous tug of composition, and he lost them if he did not use them then. President Edwards somewhere laments the loss of a thought which came to him while composing a sermon, but which he did not pause to note down, and which he mourns over as so much mental treasure lost for ever.

This is the secret of the most brilliant extemporaneous eloquence. When Henry Ward Beecher's "Life-Thoughts" were first presented to him in manuscript, he said he was not ashamed of them: he would

“father them, if he had ever had them.” But many of them he did not recognize. They had come to him in moments of extemporaneous exhilaration, and had gone from him. All such phenomena of literary experience illustrate the secret and unconscious spur which composing gives to invention.

Further: study without composition destroys the natural proportion of executive power to critical taste. True, in a scholarly mind critical taste will always be in advance of executive power. Every studious man knows better than he can do. Still there is a certain proportion between these two things, which can not be impaired with impunity to executive genius. Destroy that proportion, and you create a morbid taste respecting every thing which you do yourself. Thus fettered, a man becomes a fastidious and discouraged critic of his own productions. The excellences of authors do not inspire, they only intimidate him. His own failure is always a foregone conclusion. They affect him as the first study of Alexander's campaigns affected Cæsar. His sensibility becomes diseased; and his own efforts of executive skill cease to be elastic, because they cease to be hopeful. There is in all intellectual experience a principle corresponding to that moral principle which gives efficacy to prayer. The mind must have faith in order to achieve any thing.

With such disproportion between taste and executive power comes the temptation, almost irresistibly, to relapse into the habits of an amateur, and abandon original composition altogether. A similar weakness has infected other departments of labor. It was such an excess of critical taste which led Leonardo Da Vinci and Washington Allston to leave so many unfinished

paintings. It is notorious that the majority of American artists who go to the galleries of Italy become only copyists: they cease to attempt original production. Said one of the most eminent portrait-painters in this country, after a year's residence in Florence, "I can paint no more. These fellows are painters; not I." Even of Michael Angelo it is said that he worked in a frenzy while the fever of his first conceptions was at its height, but that, when a work was finished, he relapsed into a chill, and his work disgusted him. His ideals and his works were thus in incessant conflict in his mind.

I suspect that the secret of the unwieldy style of Dr. Chalmers is discovered in the fact, which he confesses, that the difference between his ideal and his execution "produced a constant strain." His style is just that,—the straining of a mind in painful labor. It is not the bounding of a mind at ease, drinking in the exhilaration of its work. He never writes as if he loved to write. Robert Southey speaks of his own good fortune in not discovering certain faults in his own work too soon. He says, "I might have been spoiled, like a good horse, by being broken in too early." Tasso came near refusing to publish his "Jerusalem Delivered," because of the painful sense he had of its failure to equal his own critical standard. Dr. Arnold speaks of a certain subject on which he must write; and he says, "I groan beforehand when I think how certainly I shall fail to do it justice." Such a state of mind is debilitating, like a south wind. No man can do his best on a theme which he approaches, "groaning beforehand." When such debility becomes chronic, a man is in peril of a permanent prostration of

the executive forces, so that composition shall never be to him other than a drudgery and a sorrow. The evil is never outgrown by neglect of composition ; and culture by other means than composition only aggravates it.

Let us now observe some of the methods by which the study of books may be associated with practice in composition most successfully. Of these, certain methods of imitation of authors deserve mention. These are of long standing, and of high repute among rhetorical writers. One is that of translation from a standard author to one's own language. The method is to take a page from Macaulay, for example, and by a few readings familiarize your mind with the materials, and then reproduce them in your own words. Another of these ancient methods is that of translation from one standard author to another. The idea is to take a passage, as before, and, instead of reproducing it in your own language, to reproduce it in a style imitative of another distinguished author. Transfer thus a page from Milton into a page from Hume. A third of these ancient methods is that of originating your own materials, but, in the expression of them, imitating one or more authors of good repute.

These methods agree in the principle of imitation. They have been practiced from time immemorial by masters of composition. In ancient times, when the literature of the world was less abundant than now, it would have been deemed folly to dispense with such elaborate methods of self-discipline in the education of a public speaker. You will recall the example of Demosthenes in the study of Thucydides, and of Cicero in the study of several Greek authors. On the revival of the ancient literatures in the middle ages, this imita-

tive study of the Greek and Latin classics was carried to an almost fabulous extent.

In our own times, Daniel Webster, Rufus Choate, Edward Everett, and John C. Calhoun all submitted to this kind of drill. They owed to it, in part, their marvelous command of English style. Webster acquired such skill in imitation, that his reproduction of John Adams in one of his orations has been supposed by many well-informed critics to be a quotation. Indeed, some fragments of it were quotations from the letters of Mr. Adams to his wife; but they were not so extensive or important as to affect Mr. Webster's title to the authorship of the passage in question. Edmund Burke's imitation of Lord Bolingbroke, in his "Vindication of Natural Society," Bolingbroke's editors thought it necessary to disown by a card to the public.

It will not do to ignore, still less to sneer at, these methods, which are supported by such names and such success. Yet I do not recommend them to preachers, and this for the reason that they are impracticable to preachers. They presuppose leisure. But the early years of a pastor give no such leisure as that which commonly attends the early years of a young man in any other profession. I have never known these methods of discipline to be adopted by a young pastor. I doubt whether a preacher has ever given them a fair trial. I pass them, therefore, to notice a more practicable method.

It is the habit of preparing the mind for daily composing by the daily reading of a favorite author. In the suggestion of this method I have specially in view the necessary habits of preachers. Preachers must

be prolific writers: they can not depend on favorable moods for composing. They have before them, not a life of literary leisure, but a life of professional toil, the chief burden of which is mental production. Said one of the most eminent pastors of Massachusetts in a recent lecture to candidates for the ministry, "I have been twenty years in the pastoral office; and in all that time I have done but one thing, — to get ready for next Sunday." So the work appears to successful preachers. They can not afford to spend much time as if in a Friends' meeting, waiting for impulses of speech. They must live in a *state* of mental production; and, for this, daily composing is the most natural and the most successful expedient. It has been adopted by the most prolific authors and the most laborious preachers. Luther's rule was "*nulla dies sine linea.*"

Assuming, then, daily composing as the usual habit of a preacher, the plan here recommended is to commence each day with an hour or more of studious reading, and then to pass, without interval, from that reading to the work of composing. The advantages of this method are numerous. One is, that it is practicable, and is therefore more likely to be adopted than the more laborious methods which imply ample leisure. Another is, that it is an agreeable method, and therefore easily becomes habitual. A third is, that it can be made to fall in with other objects of study. It can be made both critical and accumulative in its character. In the act of quickening the mind for its own productive labor, you can multiply your resources of thought.

A fourth and the chief advantage is the direct stimulus which the mind may thus obtain for its own work. A wise selection of authors may render this stimulus

almost invariable. Do not the majority of young writers spend an hour before composing in the mental toil of uplifting the mind to the level of its work, and concentrating its attention? That hour given to a suggestive author will commonly achieve the object much more easily, with less wear of the nervous system, and with less of spasmodic action in the work of composing.

Let it be added, in leaving this topic, that the method in question is supported by the practice of many eminent authors. Voltaire used to read Massillon as a stimulus to production. Bossuet read Homer for the same purpose. Gray read Spenser's "Faerie Queene" as the preliminary to the use of his pen. The favorites of Milton were Homer and Euripides. Fénelon resorted to the ancient classics promiscuously. Pope read Dryden as his habitual aid to composing. Corneille read Tacitus and Livy. Clarendon did the same. Sir William Jones, on his passage to India, planned five different volumes, and assigned to each the author he resolved to read as a guide and an awakener to his own mind for its work. Buffon made the same use of the works of Sir Isaac Newton. With great variety of tastes, successful authors have generally agreed in availing themselves of this natural and facile method of educating their minds to the work of original creation.

8. One principle remains to be noticed, by which other principles should be affected in our methods of study, which relates to the spirit of criticism. It is that in our studies a generous appreciation of the genius of others should be balanced by a just estimate of our own.

Two opposite errors are suggested here, against which we need to be fore-armed. The first is that of censorious and illiberal criticism. Gibbon classifies bad critics in three divisions,—those who see nothing but beauties, those who see nothing but faults, and those who see nothing at all. If you see nothing but faults in a great writer, you are in no mood to receive scholarly culture from him. De Quincey says that a surly reader is inevitably a bad critic. A sarcastic spirit in study is its own punishment. The truth is not in such a spirit. That spirit is receptive only of what is mean and degrading. “One can never know how small a small man can look till he has seen him trying to look down upon a great one.”

Dr. Arnold says of historians, “If a historian be an unbeliever in all heroism, if he be a man who brings every thing down to the level of a common mediocrity, depend upon it, the truth is not found in him.” The seat of the scoffer is not the seat of wisdom. The late Professor Reed of Philadelphia illustrates the spirit with which a young man, or any man, should read the great lights of literary history. In a letter to a friend he says, “I have just finished a lecture on Hamlet. My reverent admiration for the myriad-minded man has deepened by this study of his dramas: in the lowest deep a lower deep. John Milton is before me in awful grandeur for Monday next.” Carlyle says that “great souls are always reverent to that which is over them: only small, mean souls are otherwise.” Prescott the historian, by years of genial study, acquired such an affectionate reverence for the great minds in the history of literature, that he requested, that, when he came to die, his remains might be arrayed for the grave, and left

for a while alone in his library, in the midst of the volumes in which he had found the scholarly companionship of his life. By that loving fiction he would pay his last tribute to the friends who had cheered him in his blindness. Such is the spirit of a genuine scholar.

But an error opposite to that of illiberal and sarcastic reading is that of self-depreciation in the contrast with illustrious men. I have already spoken of this as the result of a want of exercise of one's own powers. Sometimes the cause of it lies deeper than that: it is innate. A young writer does not trust his own pen, because he does not trust himself in any thing. The very thought of literary greatness oppresses him: therefore he does not let himself loose in composing. He is an ascetic, practicing upon himself a severity of criticism under which no abilities can expand freely.

Walter Scott, speaking of Campbell the poet, said, "What a pity it is that Campbell does not give full sweep to his genius! He has wings that would bear him to the skies. He does now and then spread them grandly; but he folds them up again, and resumes his perch, as if afraid to launch away. The fact is, he is a bugbear to himself." Often is it true that discerning critics see in a young man powers which success has not yet brought out into the light of his own consciousness.

These two elements — reverence for greatness in others, and respect for one's own powers — are correlative parts of one virtue: neither is healthy without the other. I have observed so many instances of the latter of these two evils, that I venture to give you in a brief *excursus* two or three suggestions for its correction. You will anticipate me in the thought that

liberty in original production is not to be gained by a permanent sacrifice of your own ideals. Cling to your best ideal of any thing. Fail with it, if need be, rather than sacrifice it to success. "Be true to the dreams of your youth."

A second thought is, that, in a state of mental dejection through self-depreciation, you should write with temporary recklessness. The chief thing needed in such a state of servitude is to *write*. Do something: create something. The servitude must be broken through at all costs. Try your own abilities: give them a chance to prove themselves. Create, somehow, a little independent history of effort to stand upon. Till you can obtain that, you have no "*πov στω*" for the fulcrum of your self-respect. If you can not obtain it under law, seize it without law. *Be* an outlaw in the world of letters. Violate the rules; defy principles; get loose from shackles; clear your mind of the gear of the critics; write defiantly. Give the rein to your powers of utterance: let them career with you where they will. Criticise their wild work in your after-thoughts, but try them again. Apply the curb as they will bear it, but put the coursers to their speed.

By such a passionate practice you may develop the germs of your natural forces in composing, be they what they may. You will discover them; not much, probably, to speak of, and less to boast of, but something worth having and trusting. One Being has thought them worth an act of creation. You will know that you have them. The training of them will come in due time. Robert Southey says, "Write rapidly; correct at leisure." Of one of his own poems he says, "'Madoc' would be a better poem if written in

six months than if six years were given to it." If he had said six weeks, instead of six months, he would have been nearer the truth.

A third suggestion is, that, in a state of mental despondency, you should write with dogged resolution. Dr. Johnson says that any man can write who will keep doggedly at it. Never yield the point that you can write, and write well. Be indebted to obstinacy, if need be. Pluck is a splendid virtue. Not only strike when the iron is hot, but make it hot by striking. Mind, like iron, is full of latent heat. It is more malleable in some cases than in others; but in all it is susceptible of white-heat. Therefore make it an invariable rule not to give up a subject of a sermon on which you have begun to write. A vast amount of waste of clerical effort is caused by succumbing to discouraged effort. The wasted introductions of sermons are "an exceeding great multitude." When indicative of a habit, they signify mental debility. Finish, therefore, every thing you undertake, for the sake of the mental discipline of success. Make something of the refractory theme and the barren text. The process will not intoxicate you by its results. You will often flounder through the sermon, not much wiser at the end than at the beginning, and hardly knowing how you got through. You will be sometimes reminded of Aaron's luckless attempt at statuary. You need not dance around it; perhaps you will dash it in pieces; but go through the process of making of it a likeness to some living thing in the heavens, or in the earth, or under the earth. You will be the stronger in will-power over difficult themes, if in nothing else.

Take encouragement from the example of Sir William Hamilton:—

“There is scarcely a case on record where there existed a greater antagonism between an author and his pen than in the case of Sir William Hamilton. In reading his pure and limpid language, it is hard to realize that he was not a ready writer. But even while occupying the chair of logic and metaphysics in the University of Edinburgh, and every day delivering from it those lectures on metaphysical science which have made him famous throughout the world, he could never take his pen at any time, and write a certain required amount. Indeed, he always took up his pen with extreme reluctance. Owing to this aversion to composition, he was often compelled to sit up all night in order to prepare the lecture which was to be the wonder and admiration of every person who heard it the next day. This lecture he wrote roughly and rapidly, and it was copied and corrected by his wife in the next room. Sometimes it was not finished by nine o'clock in the morning, and the weary wife had fallen asleep, only to be wakeful and ready, however, when he appeared with fresh copy.”

One other suggestion is, that you should trust the predisposition of the world to receive favorably the work of a young man. You have nothing to fear from the world's criticism, unless you invite it by self-conceit. The severity of criticism falls on middle-aged and old men. A young man, and specially if he is a clergyman, has every facility he can reasonably ask for for a successful beginning of his life's work. Wait ten years, and you will yourself marvel at the patience of your first parish. The “dead line” of “fifty years” is a long way off. If you live to reach it, you may have achieved a success which will make you indifferent to it. If you have not, it will not be owing to any want of generosity in the verdict of your contemporaries upon you as a youthful preacher.