

ON THE ABUSE OF DIALECT.

WHAT is the function in literature of dialect, or of what King James the First, writing of his own tongue, calls Upland Speech? Accepting, provisionally, the theory of language which says that we think in words, all dialects may be regarded as expressions of distinct types of character; and as they are less remote from the lowest stratum of speech, so they reflect more vividly than the literary language can do, certain phases of human experience.

The history of all dialects is similar, but for the purposes of illustration we may take the Scottish as typical. Mr. Freeman says:—

The Scottish, that is the northern form of English is, in the strictest sense, a dialect. That is to say, it is an independent form of the language which might have come to set the standard, and become the polite and literary speech, instead of that form of the language to which that calling actually fell. Or rather as long as Scotland was politically distinct from the Southern England, the Northern form of English actually did set the standard within its own range. It was the polite and literary speech within the English-speaking lands of the Scottish kings.

Even then, however, a distinction was made between literary Scotch and vernacular Scotch. Nor was this all. It has been pointed out by trustworthy authorities, that in the sixteenth century written Scotch began to differentiate itself markedly from the common English (Inglis), which was employed at an earlier period throughout the old kingdom of Northumbria. The change is traceable to political causes. An intense feeling of hostility to everything

English set in after the great national disaster at Flodden. The nation was driven in upon itself. A spirit of literary separatism came into play, and patriotic writers made it a boast that they did not write in English but in Scottish, that they had discarded the southern in favour of their own language. This spirit, which has survived to our own time, and obtrudes itself too often in Scottish dialect literature, is a very different thing from the patriotism which inspired Burns to sing a song for Scotland's sake.

What is and what is not classical Scottish, it may be left to students of the dialect to determine. It is sufficient to recognise the fact that there was once a Scottish language which was the literary speech within the English-speaking lands of the Scottish kings. The old conditions cannot be revived. The Reformation and the union of the Crowns made it inevitable that the northern should succumb to the southern form of the common English speech; and Scotch, as it is now spoken and written, cannot be treated as differing from other English dialects in kind. The question whether and to what extent it is admissible in contemporary literature to employ Scotch is to be tested by the same canons as are applied to any similar departure from the literary language.

Long ago (in 1584-5), King James wrote his *ESSAYES OF A PRENTISE IN THE DIVINE ART OF POESIE*, and attempted to lay down rules and cautions (*cautelis*) for the literary use of his mother-tongue. Of these rules there are two which particularly de-

serve attention. The royal critic advises poetic aspirants that if their purpose be of love, they are "to use common language with some passionate words," while, if their purpose be to write of "landward affairs," they ought "to use corruptit and uplandis words."

The first of these rules is sound in principle, and justified by practice. A Scot, when under the influence of strong emotion, resorts instinctively to a purer form of speech than he is in the habit of employing. In his finest songs, and when the element of humour does not enter, Burns approaches pure English in form and phrase. There is, for instance, little or nothing in the diction of *MARY MORISON* or *Æ FOND KISS*, two of the best love-songs ever written, which an Englishman can find difficulty in understanding. Passion dictates pure speech, and tact should tell a lover that it is no compliment to his mistress to court her in the rudest and broadest form of the vernacular. Of the other rule, that, in speaking of landward or rustic affairs, the poet should use corrupt and upland words, the validity is not so apparent. If we take it as meaning that a writer is deliberately to adopt a corrupt form of the language, it is obviously vicious. But that is not the only meaning that can be taken out of it; and if we revert to the doctrine that we think in words, we may discover a sound principle underlying the advice that in writing of rural affairs we should make use of rural speech. The dialect which lives in the mouths of the rural population, whether it be the dialect of Scotland or Cumberland, of Lancashire or Lincoln, of Somersetshire or Devon, reflects a different world from that which is imaged in the standard language.

Landward affairs may be taken as

including not only external nature and man's relation to it, but also rural character and manners. The use of dialect for the description of external nature, is necessarily confined to those who speak it as their native language. The most gifted writer, if his mother-tongue be a dialect which does not embody the best thought of the time, works under limitations. Although within the limits imposed upon him he may approach perfection, he can never attain his fullest development. His spirit is cabined by the speech in which it seeks to image itself. But confined though he be to a dialect of which the growth has been checked, there are some things he may do as well as a writer who uses the standard literary speech. Dialect must inevitably connote less than the standard language; as an expression of all that is meant by mind, it must be less intense. Yet if we recall the fact that the lowest stratum of speech reflects the external universe as primitive man saw it, we shall see how it is possible that a dialect may express more clearly than the standard language the phenomena of nature. A Wordsworth does not see less in nature than a Burns; he sees more; he finds thoughts that lie too deep for tears in the meanest flower that blows. Burns does not; but what he does see is perfectly vivid to him, and has all the qualities of an immediate sensation. And his dialect, like the language of earlier Scottish and English writers, suffices to reflect this direct vision of nature. The mirror is not too small for the object. It is for this reason, perhaps, that critics are so unanimous in acknowledging the adequacy of the Scottish vernacular, in the hands of Burns, as the image of the vivid perception of the objective world. And sometimes they are apt to put extravagantly high the claims of the dialect in this respect.

The late Principal Shairp, in his monograph on Burns, has an interesting passage which may serve as an illustration. "What pure English words," he asks, "could so completely and graphically, describe a sturdy old mare in the plough, setting her face to the furzy braes, as the following :—

Thou never braing't, an' fetch't, an'
fliskit,
But thy auld tail thou wad hae whiskit,
An' spread abreed thy weel-fill'd brisket
Wi' pith an' pow'r,
Till spritty knowes wad rair't an' riskit,
An' slypet owre" ?

Paraphrasing the verse, the Principal makes it read: "Thou didst never fret, or plunge and kick, but thou wouldest have whisked thy old tail, and spread abroad thy large chest, with pith and power, till hillocks, where the earth was filled with tough-rooted plants, would have given forth a cracking sound, and the clods fallen gently over." The paraphrase is purposely bald and cumbrous, and the Principal, who was an accomplished Latin scholar, would have given a much terser version, had he been translating Burns into Latin verse. Bald as it is, it gives a better idea of the sense of the original than many modern Scottish readers themselves can gather even with the assistance of a glossary. What strikes one in Principal Shairp's commentary, however, is the implied theory that the standard English is inadequate to the description of an old mare facing a particularly tough bit of ploughland, and that the dialect best describes the sympathy of the farmer with his faithful, inarticulate friend and fellow-labourer. Without going the length of saying that the idea could not be expressed in good English, the fact that a critic like Shairp thinks so may be accepted as a proof of the power the vernacular exercises over those who are familiar with it. One can

quite appreciate the force of the contention that to Burns the toiling life of the ploughman and his horse was a most vivid experience, and that he has made it live for ever in his vernacular verse as he could not have done had he written in the standard English. Only let us remember that the secret of the power of Burns lies in clear vision and genial sympathy, not in the use of a particular vocabulary. The fact that his genius has made the Scottish dialect immortal is no proof that in other writers the excessive use of upland words is not a blemish.

A lavish use of dialect in narrative and dialogue is a vice akin to the free introduction of technical phrases in a work which is intended to be purely literary. We have a remarkable example of this blemish in Falconer's *SHIPWRECK*; and as Falconer was a Scot, one is tempted to ask whether an excessive love of detail may not be a Scottish failing of which the too liberal employment of the vernacular is only a symptom. Charles Lamb says of the Caledonian: "He brings his total wealth into company and gravely unpacks it. His riches are always about him. His conversation is as a book." In the opening of *THE TEMPEST*, Shakespeare, by a few vivid strokes, paints a ship driving before the wind on a lee-shore.

Heigh, my hearts! cheerly, cheerly,
my hearts! yare, yare! Take in the top-
sail. Tend to the master's whistle. Blow,
till thou burst thy wind, if room enough.
. . . . Down with the topmast! yare!
lower, lower! Bring her to try with
main course. . . . Lay her a-hold, a-hold!
set her to courses off to sea again; lay
her off.

There is the scene, and it could not be described without all this sailors' talk of sails and courses. At the same time there is no display of minute knowledge of navigation. Shakespeare says enough to bring

before the mind's eye of seaman and landsman alike the peril of the ship and the efforts of the crew to bring her off; and he succeeds perfectly. Now contrast Shakespeare's brief and graphic sketch with Falconer's elaborate scene. Unlike Shakespeare Falconer makes a most copious use of marine phraseology. In the space of some hundred lines he introduces to our notice, among other items of the fitting of the ship, top-gallant yards, travellers, back-stays, top-ropes, parrels, lifts, booms, reef-lines, halyards, bow-lines, clue-garnets, reef-tackles, brails, head-ropes, and robands. There have been critics who have gone into ecstasies over the most highly nautical passages of this poem, but theirs is an enthusiasm which it is difficult to share. One can understand a seaman, or a seasoned yachtsman, becoming enraptured over Falconer's clue-garnets; and among a people whose love of salt water and tarry ropes is proverbial, there are possibly many to whose ears the jargon of the fore-castle and the marine dictionary is music. That these sea-phrases can be used effectively Shakespeare has shown; but Falconer demonstrated that enough is far better than a feast. Falconer's mistake is excessive circumstantiality, and this is just the error into which vernacular writers, who prize the vernacular for its own sake, are apt to fall. With them the use of dialect tends to become an affectation, a sort of inverted pedantry, an occasion for displaying a knowledge of uninteresting minutiae.

When applied to the description of rustic character and manners, King James's advice is of wider interest than when restricted to the description of external nature, for the use of dialect to portray manners is not confined to those who speak the vernacular. Extending the rule to this usage, we may accept the general

principle that when a thought has been born in dialect, so to speak, dialect is appropriate for its expression. But as no true artist paints everything he sees, no discriminating writer repeats literally everything he hears. Modern writers of Scottish dialect have sinned against this principle, and have neglected to observe that there is a distinction between literary Scotch and vernacular Scotch. The distinction is important. Sir Walter Scott, who may be taken as a model in the use of dialect, is careful to insist upon it, and we imagine the words he puts in the mouth of the Duke of Argyle in *THE HEART OF MIDLOTHIAN* express his own view. It may be remembered that the Duke eulogising Effie Deans (now become Lady Staunton) says, "She speaks with a Scotch accent, and now and then a provincial word drops out so prettily that it is quite Doric;" and when Butler interposes with the remark that he should have thought that would have sounded vulgar, the Duke replies, "Not at all, you must suppose that it is not the broad coarse Scotch that is spoken in the Canongate of Edinburgh or in the Gorbals." In practice Scott himself observes this difference. He never sinks into Gorbals Scotch. As Mr. Ruskin has pointed out with fine discrimination, he does not, like some modern writers, consider it amusing to indulge in "ugly spellings." He "makes no attempt whatever to indicate accents or modes of pronunciation by changed spelling, unless the word becomes a quite definitely new and scarcely writeable one." He only uses the Scots form of a word when there is a difference between it and English. "There is no lispings, drawling, slobbering, or snuffling; the speech is as clear as a bell and as keen as an arrow; and its elisions and contractions are either melodious (*na*

for *not*, and *pu'd* for *pulled*) or as normal as in Latin verse."

But every Scottish writer is not so skilful as Scott, and the excessive use some of them make of the vernacular in describing rustic manners is apt to repel. The explanation is obvious if we call to mind the dictum, *we think in words*. An excessive use of dialect in this connection involves a minute account of the meaner and more trivial details of common life which are not necessarily worth photographing. A conspicuous example of the jarring effect of a too free use of the vernacular in this way is to be found in a very interesting narrative poem entitled HELENORE, written in the latter half of last century by Alexander Ross of Lochlee. As a pastoral tale HELENORE is admirable: the plot is original and well worked out; and it gives us a valuable insight into the life and customs of a crofter commune, situated on the debatable ground between Highland and Lowland where the conflict between two opposing systems of social ethics was still in the balance; the Highlanders maintaining, in anticipation of Wordsworth's *Rob Roy*, that right goes with might, and that the booty belongs to the victor, while the Lowlanders take their stand on the principle that the law is protector of the weak. With all his merits Ross is now almost unknown, and the main reason is that his vernacular is unpleasant. Scott, when he quotes him, amends him, and speaks of him as being forgotten even in his day. Had he written in a language less uncouth, his poem might have lived. He wished, as he tells us, to give expression to the sentiments of plain people living in a remote part of the country. The object is laudable enough; but Wordsworth did something of the same kind without finding it necessary to speak the language of

Cumbrian folk, and Ross might have fulfilled his purpose without adopting the coarsest Scottish *patois*. He appears to have erred against his better instinct, for he altered his style upon the advice of a mentor to whom he showed his manuscript. The judgment which this gentleman pronounced might serve as the creed of the Kailyard School. "Your poem, Mr. Ross," the critic is reported to have said, "is beautiful, and you are nearly as good at the English as you are at the Latin. You are trying, I see, to imitate some of those great English poets, but it will not go down just yet to speak of Scotch fashions to Scotch people in the English tongue. Gae awa hame, mon, and turn it into braid Scotch verse; and, gin ye print it, not a jot will my lassies do at their wheel, and some thousands mair like them, till they have read it five or six times over."

Judged by the result, the advice was wrong. The flame of Ross's genius was smothered under the speech he used, whereas had it been fed with the oil of a less outlandish dialect, it might have continued to shed a mild but benignant light over a little known phase of Scottish rural life. It was Ross's misfortune that he had no one to give him an advice similar to that which Charles Lamb gave John Clare. "In some of your story-telling Ballads, the provincial phrases sometimes startle me. I think you are too profuse with them. In poetry *slang* of every kind is to be avoided. There is a rustic Cockneyism, as little pleasing as ours of London. . . . Now and then a home rusticism is fresh and startling; but, when nothing is gained in expression, it is out of tenor. It may make folks smile and stare; but the ungenial coalition of barbarous with refined phrases will prevent you in the end from being so generally tasted as you desire to be." Lamb

was "a scorner of the fields," but, as Wordsworth adds, he was more so in show than truth. He was certainly a more discreet critic than Ross's friend.

Upon the principle that we can look out on infinitude through any loophole, it may be said that one can find an epitome of all humanity in the life of his village. That is the idea, so far as they act by rule, of the extreme school of local and dialect literature. There is undoubtedly some force in it. On the other hand, it is almost certain, that if a man's ears are continually filled with the cackle of his bourg, he will in time become deaf to everything else. A dialect-literature cultivated for its own sake inevitably tends downward to the utterly provincial and parochial.

Shakespeare, in a well-known passage in KING LEAR, makes Edgar speak in dialect.

Good gentleman, go your gait, and let poor volk pass. And chud ha' been zwaggered out of my life, 'twould not ha' been zo long as 'tis by a vortnight. Nay, come not near th' old man; keep out, che vor ye, or ise try whether your costard or my ballow be the harder: chill be plain with you. . . . Chill pick your teeth, zir: Come, no matter vor your foins."

The dialect is in this case of course adopted in order to support the peasant's disguise. On the same principle, that amusing rogue, Captain John Creighton, in relating how he ran to earth the hillside men of the West Country, adopts the West Country tongue on occasion. "While the soldiers stayed to refresh their horses in the churchyard," he tells us, "I spied a country fellow going by, and asked him in his own dialect, 'Whither gang ye, this time of night?' He answered, 'Wha are ye that speers?' I replied, 'We are your anc foke.'" This had the desired effect. While Captain John's dialect is not perfect, the idea of it, like Edgar's, is correct. *Friends* from

a stranger lurking about a churchyard at night would have sounded *Enemies*, even to a Westland Whig so guileless as to accept as genuine so poor an imitation of his own tongue. The employment of dialect by Edgar and of West Country Scots by Captain John Creighton is clearly consistent with dramatic fitness. Edgar deceived Oswald by his dress and speech, and there is no other way of indicating the deception than by using the dialect.

It is sometimes charged against modern vernacular writers that they do not distinguish between dialect and corruptions. But the sin is not new. Fluellen wears the leek "upon St. Tavy's day," and tells Henry that all the water in the Wye cannot wash "the Welsh plood out of his pody." "It sall be very gud, gud feith, gud Captains bath," observes Captain Jamy; while Captain Macmorris, in the same play, speaks of the town being "beseched," and asks, "what ish my nation?" It is but a step from corruptions such as these to the misspelling of Tabitha Bramble, the extraordinary idioms of Mrs. Gamp and Betsy Prig, and the philological vagaries of the American humorists. Mrs. Gamp offends some fastidious tastes; but where are we to draw the line? "Comparisons are odorous," says Dogberry. "No caparisons, miss, if you please," is Mrs. Malaprop's version of the axiom. "Caparisons don't become a young woman." If we think in words, there is no better way of reproducing the muddle-headedness of a Dogberry or the vacuous conceit of a Malaprop than in words that are no words; but the usage marks the borderland between what is legitimate and what is illegitimate.

In the main, the practice of the best writers confirms the rule that dialect should only be used to convey ideas for the expression of which the standard language is inadequate, and

should be used only to an extent sufficient to mark the individuality of the speaker. Where the use of dialect is really vitalising, where it emphasises a character really worth knowing, it is permissible, but not otherwise. And after all, the experience for which the literary language does not provide sufficient expression is comparatively unimportant. It is a sign of degeneracy in our literature when writers deliberately resort to the grotesque, the archaic, or the vernacular. It is the duty of his countrymen to maintain the credit of the tongue that Shakespeare wrote. We owe far more to it than to any dialect.

It is astonishing that Scotsmen of all people in the world should fail to realise the significance of the fact that the Scottish people, like the English, have done their thinking, not in dialect, but in English, on the most solemn occasions in their lives. For more than two centuries the thoughts which have made Englishmen and Englishwomen what they are, which have made Scotsmen and Scotswomen what they are, have been presented to them in English pure and undefiled. The literary value of the Church-service to the English people has been incalculable; and this is true also of Scotland. In town and country, for generations, Scotch people have heard the Bible read in the church every Sabbath, and many of them used to hear it read twice a day at family exercise. As children they learned by heart the metrical versions of the Psalms and the clean-cut, logical, dogmatic statements of the Shorter Catechism. Their religion, in short, came to them in an English garb. It would be difficult to overestimate the literary importance of this fact. It has had a much profounder influence upon their literature, if they would only think of it, than their songs and ballads, or the story of Wallace, of

which Burns said that it poured a tide of Scottish prejudice into his veins which would continue to boil along there until the floodgates shut in eternal rest. No one can take a just view of the comparative value of the vernacular literature of Scotland who leaves out of sight the important fact, which Scotsmen presumably overlook only because it is so familiar, that the standard English has been to them of far greater value than their own form of speech. It only needs a moment's reflection to prove that there are some things which their dialect cannot accomplish. To an ordinary sober-minded Scotsman it would appear partly grotesque, and partly profane, to state the great verities of his religion in anything but the purest speech. With true insight Sir Walter Scott does not make Mause Headrigg, pronouncedly vernacular though she naturally is, give paraphrases of Scripture in her own dialect. She quotes correctly the Orientalisms of the Old Testament; she gives the very words of the authorised translation, as knowing them familiarly and believing in plenary inspiration.

The ideas capable of being expressed even in the purest dialect which has fallen behind in the race for supremacy, are and must be at best only of second-rate or third-rate value. The Scotsman, equally with the Englishman, is interested in maintaining the dignity of English speech. "The language of world-wide literature," said Dean Stanley, "is the only fitting garb for those eternal and primary principles of which the Grecian poet has said that they have their foundation on high, all-embracing like their parent Heaven, neither did mortal infirmity preside over their birth, nor shall forgetfulness lay them to sleep. There is in them a great divinity that grows not old."