

# THE HOMILETIC REVIEW.

VOL. XIX.—MARCH, 1890.—No. 3.

## REVIEW SECTION.

### I.—THE ILLUSTRATIVE ELEMENT IN PREACHING.

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WHAT differentiates one preacher from another in popular effect is largely illustrative power. There shall be two sermons on the same topic, equal in logical construction, equal in point of style, equal in manner of delivery. If one have any advantage over the other in point of illustrative fertility, that sermon is the one talked about most, because it took hold of most in the audience. Glancing at my library shelves as I wrote the above sentences, I saw there, side by side, the volumes of two great preachers—one of the seventeenth, the other of the nineteenth century; one a court preacher, the other a preacher to the people; one an Episcopalian, the other a stout Congregationalist, both, with a very striking gift for illustrating the truths they preached—Dr. Robert South of England and Henry Ward Beecher of America. It was, I think, a fortunate thing for homiletics when the sermons of Mr. Beecher were taken down by an expert phonographer and published. They, indeed, subserve far higher ends than that of a text-book for young preachers. What impresses one in reading them is the high spirituality of their teachings on Christian life. How large and noble, how rich and manifold, this becomes in his handling of it! I have never yet seen any adequate analysis of this element in his preaching. It is yet to be given, and can only be given by a thorough study of all his published volumes. Recent perusal of some of his sermons has suggested to me this article. In the field of illustration he is unique; unique in fertility, in aptness, in beauty, in pathos, in wit, in clinching effect. His illustrations are by turns the nail which fastens impressions, the light which suddenly transfigures a subject, the trumpet which rouses attention, or the stamp which makes truth the current coin in the realm of spiritual life. An entire article might be written on his wonderful gift in this line. About the first thing a writer would have to consider would be the fact that he has been a disciple in the school of the Great Teacher. We all know how his teachings are lighted up by illustrations from common life and common things. Mr. Beecher has learned of Him. He lays nature, art, history, all under

contribution, but most frequently chooses to illustrate his points from the human experiences which make the great sum of what we call human life.

Before saying anything on the importance of this element in preaching, it may be well to say that it is not true that all effective preaching depends on it. It would be easy to name preachers, living and dead, who used little of it in their sermons. They rely on clear-cut sentences which made their meaning always intelligible; on an "art of putting things," which needed no illustrative element added thereto; on a discussion of truths which went home to "men's business and bosoms," to borrow Lord Bacon's phrase. If a preacher have such powers, he need not trouble himself overmuch about illustrations. I suspect, however, that almost any preaching, no matter what other gifts of popular impression it may have, will always have a wider audience, if the power of illustration were combined with them. And for the average preacher, for the man of two or three talents in the pulpit, it certainly holds good that he must have some illustrative gift, or his preaching is—I will not say dull, but radically deficient. What, then, is the importance of this element? *How it fastens truth in the memory!* This is its most obvious, perhaps its greatest use. Abstract truth is easily forgotten. But the same, illustrated well, has some points for association to take hold of and recall. When you hear plain folk or children recalling sermons or points in sermons which impressed them, they do it most often by means of the illustration which riveted it on their attention. I heard Dr. Shedd once say in the pulpit of the Brick Church, while speaking of our very dim knowledge of the life to come, *the dead Hottentot knows more than the living Plato.* That sentence has been with me for years, recalled numberless times, and fastening the general doctrine he was setting forth with rivets. Dr. South's illustrations nearly all have this mission. His great discourse on "Concealment of Sin" is crowded with instances. "Justice, we know, used to be pictured blind, and therefore it finds out the sinner, not with its eyes, but with its hands; not by seeing, but by striking." "God sometimes makes one sin the means of discovering another; it often falling out with two vices as with two thieves or rogues, of whom it is hard to say which is worse, and yet one of them may serve well enough to betray and find out the other." These are samples of what will amply confirm the point made above. *Apt illustrations do a good service often in clarifying conceptions of the truth.* There is a good deal of fog in the brains of hearers as well as in the sermons of preachers. It is curious to see with what fatal facility many people miss the point of the preacher. A dear friend of mine, Professor Diman, told me that he preached once on the conversion of the jailor at Philippi, and was horrified next day on being called to account for

advocating *baptism at midnight*. There are, specially, truths touching on points in casuistry, where the misconception is easy and good illustration is all important. If any one will look through Mr. Beecher's sermons, he will be very much impressed with the way in which he uses them to clear up dark or doubtful points. An example is found in his sermon on "Evils of Anxious Forethought" (Sermons, Second Series, p. 139). The whole sermon is built on two parallel lines, "Forelooking is right; *anxious* forelooking is not." It is one of his simplest, in treatment. But to leave the hearers fully possessed of the clear distinction between the forelooking which is essential to our happiness, and that which cuts it up by the roots, demanded a fund of apt illustration as well as abstract definition. This is given, and it would have been a very foggy brain which could not have taken in and carried away a clear idea of Christ's meaning in that wonderful teaching which closes the sixth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel. In fact, I doubt whether any better service could be rendered human happiness than by curing the habit of "borrowing" trouble. Perhaps, however, the most important use of illustration in sermons is *interesting a class of minds not touched or not readily touched by abstract truth*. Children form a very considerable part of every congregation. If they are to be taken account of in preaching, it must be in this way. How natural it is to think of the children in Palestine in the days of Christ clinging to their mothers and looking up to the Great Teacher with their wistful eyes! Who does not imagine them telling the parables over again at home to other children who had not heard about the Good Samaritan, or the woman who lost her coins, or the story of the Prodigal Son.

But it is not only children who are most readily touched by illustration. Some of our best minds are, and then there is always the great middle class, who have had no very thorough mental training, and who are always most deeply affected by illustrated truth. The great merit of many of Mr. Moody's illustrations is that they stir the feelings so that the soul comes into contact with the truth, warmed as well as roused. We are doubly interested, first, on the side of our feelings, and then on that of our mental cognition. The truth is not only seen but felt in the very moment of seeing it. So, too, of Mr. Beecher's. Take his sermon on "Discouragements and Comforts in Christian Life" (Sermons, Second Series, p. 367), read the illustration in that wonderful family picture (pp. 373-4)—it is too long for me to quote—and you will see and feel the power of what I have been saying. Any one conversant with much of the preaching in vogue must be aware of the abuse connected with this element in preaching. One hears sermons every now and then where some very striking illustration, or what was meant to be such, was used as a *tour de force*. It was led up to very skillfully by the shaping of the discourse. Evidently the illustration,

not the truth behind it or within it, was foremost in the preacher's mind. This suggests one form of abuse of the illustrative element in sermons, *i. e.*, when they are *made the end and not the means to an end.*

This, of course, is a direct reversal of the object of illustration in discourse. No good lawyer would think of committing such a blunder in an argument before a jury. His first object is to convince the jury. He would quickly and resolutely abjure the use of any illustration which would be likely to make them forget the point he was driving at. Illustrations with the preacher must obey this law, and be simply means to an end, never an end in themselves. Greatly as we admire those elaborately fashioned illustrations in Jeremy Taylor, we cannot help thinking that he had his mind on them quite as much as on the truth they were supposed to enforce. Take that one on the progress of sin, beginning "I have seen the little purls of a spring sink through the bottom of a bank," etc., or that on the prayer of a just man, "For so have I seen a lark rising from his bed of grass," etc.; or that on death, "But so have I seen a rose newly springing from the clefts of its hood," etc. They all are perfect rhetorically, the wonder and the despair, too, of all imitators. But they are illustrations which do not illustrate, because they leave us admiring the exquisite skill of their construction, not in love with, or impressed by, or awed by, the truths they introduce or are supposed to commend. Dr. South, keen-eyed critic that he was and lover of downright plain-talking that he was, saw this in Jeremy Taylor, and did not hesitate to take him off in one of his sermons. It was not very courteous in Dr. South, but perhaps he kept some young preachers from attempting imitations of Taylor, which would have been sorry stuff indeed. Yet this abuse is not uncommon, and it has happened, I dare say, to many of us walking home from church to overhear many comments on the "beautiful illustrations in the sermon," when it was evident *they* had made the main impression—not the truth of God.

*Use of hackneyed illustrations is another abuse.* There are some anecdotes which have done good service in their day, but which have long since earned an honorable discharge. The subject of faith seems to have had some of them hung like a mill-stone round its neck. We can very well bear to have a standard truth set home to us in a plain, straightforward way with no originality of treatment. But if to that be added one of these hackneyed illustrations it becomes wearisome and we grow impatient. For one, I never want to hear again from the pulpit any allusion to Sir Isaac Newton's picking up shells on the sea shore. It is ancient history to us all. To this class largely belong the illustrations from Bible history. I heard lately of a sermon, fortunately for my soul I did not hear *it*, which from beginning to end was a series of illustrations with every one of which the audience was

familiar, for there were no heathen present. It was simply an array of Bible facts—which in the fine old English of King James' immortal version can never grow stale—but which put into modern phrase with much circumlocution are hard to bear up under.

*There are also illustrations which belittle the subject they are supposed to illuminate.* It seems to me there is no pardoning this homiletic sin. The one great idea before every preacher should be the majesty of truth. No matter how simple it be, no matter how minute in morals or how unessential in religion, if he is called upon to treat of it at all the preacher is bound to do it in a way which never belittles divine truth. As for the great, the awful themes, the sweet and sacred themes, with which he is called to deal, any belittling illustrations are worthy of all condemnation. I know truth itself cannot be made trivial. Fortunate for Christianity that it is so! If flippancy in the pulpit could have done it, not a few of these truths would have been soiled, dog's-eared in the handling. But while men cannot belittle the truth, they can belittle a hearer's *conception* of the truth.

*Illustrations which degrade the truth are certainly an abuse of this element in sermons.* But are there such? Is this not a railing accusation brought against the modern pulpit without grounds? I shall be quite unwilling to say that this is consciously done. But it seems to me that it is done unconsciously, or at least under cover of an intense purpose to be bold and even stern in preaching righteousness. Dr. South was bold and stern in his attacks on the sins of his day, but no illustration of his degraded the truth. Can the same be said of Sam Small? Let him have all honor for his courage and plain dealing, for his earnestness and sincerity, but I have read again and again illustrations used by him which were coarse, which grated on nerves not over-squeamish, which could have had no other effect than to coarsen the truth, or, more strictly speaking, to degrade the hearer's conception of the truth. Now, we may condone much to such a preacher, so fearless and so faithful as he means to be. The great trouble is with the imitators who come after him, and are coarse without being strong. There is always a brood of them. Mr. Moody has his imitators as Mr. Beecher has had them, by scores. Mr. Small has them, as any wide acquaintance with preaching and preachers will satisfy any inquirer. In the hands of such imitators, such illustrations are deplorable. For it must be considered, that even in the best and ablest hands, when a coarse, not to say a vulgar illustration, takes hold of one person, it repels and disgusts a score. It may raise a laugh. That is easily done. It is not so easy to overcome the hurt done when any hearer is repelled from the truth. In Christ's day, they said indeed, "This is a hard saying, who can hear it." But as one studies His handling of illustrations for the truth He preached, how lofty and reverent it all is! What a *great gulf fixed* is there between His il-

illustrations and some we might quote—on the question of fitness! And when the connection between an illustration and the truth it is meant to illustrate *is too remote, or not made clear, again there is abuse or misuse of the thing.* For it acts as a sort of puzzle or enigma to the mind. The hearer tries to make out the connection. This, not the truth, is what interests him. It would tax somewhat severely very good powers of discrimination to make clear the connection in some cases. The simple result in every such case is that the truth is obscured. "What is he driving at?" is the unspoken thought of many a hearer.

Illustrations which do not illustrate—yes, their name is legion. A few classes of them have been pointed out and it might seem at first sight as if the whole thing were better let alone. Far from it. See what a power it becomes in the hand of one who knows how to use it. Reflect how necessary it is sometimes to get a hearing for the truth. I have been much struck by an illustration used by Rev Phillips Brooks in one of his Christmas sermons, from the text Luke ii : 10. I give the whole of it—it is so apt and striking :

"Christmas Day on one side and Good Friday on the other limit and define the active working life of Jesus on the earth. Christmas marks its beginning and Good Friday marks its close. Standing on the height of either of those days, we see that life of Jesus as a whole. Its numerous details blend in one picture, and in the completeness of the work which Jesus did we see the wholeness of what Jesus was and is forever.

"The view is not the same from the two points. It is like a landscape seen first from the mountain of the sunrise, with all the glory and promise of the morning on it, and seen by and by from the hill of sunset, bathed in the tender and pathetic richness of the evening. And yet the landscape is the same, however the color and light on it may differ. The life of Jesus is the same, whether we anticipate it on the exultant morning of His birth or remember it on the calm evening of His crucifixion. It is not possible for us, with the four Gospels in our hands and hearts, to stand by the manger of Bethlehem and not see the cross hovering dimly in the distance of that opening life; impossible for us to forget that He who is just born is the same that will be crucified some day."

It begins his sermon. It fastens attention at once on what he has to say. The uses of illustration in sermons are so manifold and high that it is worth everything to know how to do it in the right way.

The question may be raised here as to which kind of illustration is most effective. Which best befits the ministry of the gospel? Not a very easy question to answer. But as one reads inspired truth, they seem to come from two great sources, nature

and common life. A potter's wheel, a basket of figs, a tile, a worn-out garment, or the sea, the cloud, the mountain—from either class they come. What a fund of illustration in the psalms drawn from nature! What a fund of illustration in the gospels drawn from common life! They may be taken anywhere—provided only they be apt and fresh.

Can this power of illustration be cultivated? This question will be asked by more than one young minister who wishes to make himself an effective preacher. In some cases the faculty seems inborn. Men of quick imagination, apt to see resemblances, are fertile in illustrations. But why cannot this power be cultivated as well as the reasoning power? Not every man can make of himself a *great* reasoner, but he can make himself a *good* one—if he tries. The difficulty is that preachers do not make it a definite aim, do not seek to cultivate the gift. The sermon is planned, thought out, written out, and the question is not asked, "Are there no parts of this sermon which need, which would gain in effectiveness by some illustrations? It does seem as if when this habit were cultivated, it would soon become second nature, and Whately says *second* nature is stronger than first. A man can do much in developing the faculty of tracing resemblances between moral ideas and moral relations with things in the world—in nature or in life. Having eyes we see not, much of the time. The analogies which Butler traced in his immortal work are all round us in lesser forms. Let a man begin by observing the natural world. How full Mr. Beecher's sermons are of illustrations from this source! They are among the most beautiful he uses. They come to us fresh as the dew on morning roses. What he did was to use his eyes on the lovely world God has made. Here is a great storehouse, inexhaustible and accessible to all. Then let him study the great masters of illustration. Study Mr. Beecher's sermons, Mr. Moody's, Dr. South's, John Bunyan's. Not to imitate them. But this can be learned from them, how to use illustrations and when, what kind to use, and he can get an inkling of the true method in this way. And he can read widely and variously, treasuring up if need be in a note-book facts or incidents which will serve as illustrations. Do not trust the collections of anecdotes—sometimes announced as helps in this line. Ten to one they will not be pertinent. The process of making them fit, will seem forced. But with your own reading of history, or science, or the newspaper, if you have seen the analogy for yourself, the illustration will be pertinent and telling.

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