

ARTICLE IV.

GNOMOLOGICAL VERSES.

BY REV. LEONARD WITHINGTON, D.D., NEWBURYPORT, MASS.

PREFACE.

EXAMPLES of gnomological of poetry have been handed down to us from antiquity. It is not more true that mankind have delighted to record their moral observations in proverbs than it is that they have endeavored to preserve those observations in verse. There is a collection of such *γνώμαι* from the Greek poets, called Gnomici, in which vitæ præcepta utilissima traduntur, which have a point and a pith to them always interesting. They are to be distinguished from the epigrams, though they often resemble them, the border being somewhat indistinct and varying. Indeed the ancient and modern epigram differs. In modern times it must have wit; it must convey a sarcasm; it must raise a smile; but among the ancients it was only a well-turned sentiment, concisely expressed. One of the most beautiful of the old epigrams is the following; it is what almost every worldling has experienced: "When I was young I was poor; when old I became rich; but in each condition I found disappointment. When the faculties of enjoyment were bright, I had not the means; but when the means came, the faculties were gone." Which may be thus versified:

O life, unfriendly still to human joy,
 How do thine arrows every stage annoy!
 In youth my passions were by want restrained,
 And passion died in age when wealth was gained:
 Through joys half finished all our days are run,
 And closed in disappointment, as begun.

The following may serve as an example of a modern epigram. A poor man had his Bible stolen from him. The following lines appeared, addressed to the thief:

“ You saint and scamp! In vain my fancy tries
 To find the true meridian of your zeal:
 How could you steal a book you did not prize?
 And if you prized the book, how could you steal?”

We have specimens of gnomological verses, modern as well as ancient. There used to be a book taught in the schools called Cato's Distichs, of which the following is a specimen:

“ Donec eris felix, multos numerabis amicos;
 Tempora si nubila, solus eris.”¹

Some of Dr. Franklin's versified proverbs in Poor Richard's Almanac are examples:

“ I never saw an oft removed tree,
 Nor yet an oft removed family,
 That throve so well as those who settled be.”

The homeliness of these lines is intended, and increases the beauty, for they have a true proverbial dress. Some of Trench's are exquisite, as the following:

“ When you have most explored your winding heart,
 Set down as unknown land the largest part.”²

Many of the poets whose intention has not been directly to produce gnomological verses or epigrams, have come very near this kind of writing. Thus Shakespeare:

“ To mourn a mischief that is past and gone,
 Is the next way to bring new mischief on.”

OTHELLO, Act i. Scene 3d.

So Bishop Hall in one of his satires:

“ Small honor can be got with gaudy grave,
 Nor it thy rotten name from death can save.
 The fairer tomb, the fouler is thy name;
 The greater pomp procuring greater shame.

¹ In a catalogue of books entitled, “Selections from the stock of John Pennington and Son,” is the following notice: Cato (Dionysius), Disticha, Graec-Lat. scholiis Erasmi, notis Scaligeri et aliorum, cura Arntzenis. Trag. ad Rhenum, 1735. The book has received the attention of great men; but of its character and history, I confess ignorance.

² The thought is in Rochefoucault No. III. Maxims: *Quelque découverte que l'on ait faite dans le pays de l'amour-propre, il y reste encore bien des terres inconnues.*

Thy monument make thou thy living deeds ;
No other tomb than that true virtue needs."

Satire 2, Book ii.

And again,

" Oh the fond boasting of vain-glorious man !
Does he the best that may the best be scene ?
Whoever gives a pair of velvet shoes
To th' Holy Rood, or liberally allowes
But a new rope to ring the curfew bell,
But he desires that his great deed may dwell,
Or graven in the chancel window-glasse,
Or in a lasting tomb of plated brasse ?" — Satire 4, Book ii.

Again,

" To know much, and to think we nothing know ;
Nothing to have, yet think we have enowe ;
In skill to want, and wanting seek for more ;
In weale nor want, nor wish for greater store.
Envy ye monarchs, with your proud excess,
At our low sayle and our high happiness. — Satire 6, Book iv.

Some of Dryden's lines are very forcible and condensed, as :

" Faith is not built on disquisitions vain ;
The things we must believe are few and plain."

Religio Laici.

" Thus man by his own strength to heaven would soar,
And would not be obliged to God for more." — Religio Laici.

THE INSPIRED WRITERS.

" Whence but from heaven could man unskilled in arts,
In several ages born, in several parts,
Weave such agreeing truths ? Or how or why
Should all conspire to cheat us with a lie ?
Unasked their pains, ungrateful their advice ;
Starving their gain, and martyrdom their price."

Religio Laici.

THE CROSS.

" See God descending in thy human frame ;
The offended suffering in the offender's name ;
All thy misdeeds to him imputed see,
And all his righteousness devolved on thee."

Pope was very fond of involving his meaning in couplets.
Whole poems are little else than a collection of couplets ;

hence he is often sententious, and sometimes epygrammatic without knowing it; as in the following, from the *Essay on Man* :

“Count all the advantage prosperous vice attains,
’Tis but what virtue flies from and disdains.”

Other examples from the same poem are too familiar to be repeated; but he often writes downright epigrams, as when he gives the reply of the profuse Duke of Buckingham to the frugal Sir John Cutler :

“His grace’s fate sage Cutler could foresee,
And well (he thought) advised him, ‘Live like me.’
As well his grace replied: ‘Like you, Sir John?
That I can do when all I have is gone.’”

MORAL ESSAYS, Epistle iii. lines 315–318.

Dr. Young, though he writes in blank verse, has much of the versified *gnome* in his poetry, as :

“God is a spirit; spirits cannot strike
Our gross material organs; God by man
As much is seen, as man a God can see.”

“Death’s terror is the mountain faith removes.”

“Like our shadows,
Our wishes lengthen as our sun declines.”

“Your learning, like the lunar beam, affords
Light, but not heat; it leaves you undevout,
Frozen at heart, while speculation shines.”

The following, from his *Satires*, is a beautiful epigram

“Pleasures are few, and fewer we enjoy;
Pleasure, like quicksilver, is bright and coy;
We strive to grasp it with our utmost skill,
Still it eludes us, and it glitters still.
If seized at last, compute your mighty gains,—
What is it but rank poison in your veins?”

LOVE OF FAME, *Satire 5*.

Another example :

“Phillis and her Damon met;
Eternal love exactly hits her taste;
Phillis demands eternal love at least.
Embracing Phillis, with soft, smiling eyes,
Eternal love I vow, the swain replies.

But say, my all, my mistress, and my friend,
What day next week the eternity shall end !”

LOVE OF FAME, Satire 5.

Another :

“ Can wealth give happiness ? Look round and see
What gay distress ! What splendid misery !
Whatever fortune lavishly can pour
The mind annihilates, and calls for more.
Wealth is a cheat, believe not what it says,
Like any lord it promises and — pays.” — Satire 5.

Cowper as a moralist, is of course sententious :

“ Search the least path creative power has trod,
How plain the footsteps of the apparent God.”

Again :

“ How hard a vicious habit to erase ;
Fond of the sin, and blind to the disgrace.”

Again :

“ But haughty still, and loath himself to blame,
He calls on Nature's self to share the shame ;
And charged all faults upon the fleshy form
She gave to clog the soul and feast the worm.”

This last sentiment was anticipated even by Homer in the
Odyssey, Lib. I., line 31-33.

“ Perverse mankind, whose wills created free,
Charge all their woes on absolute decree ;
All to the dooming gods their guilt translate,
And follies are miscalled the crimes of fate.”

The following lines from a poem entitled “*The Deity*,”
are eminently beautiful :

“ Nor yet thy power thy chosen train forsook,
When through Arabia's sand their way they took ;
By day thy cloud was present to the sight,
Thy fiery pillar led the march by night ;
Thy hand amid the waste their table spread,
With feathered viands and with heavenly bread ;
When the dry wilderness no stream supplied,
Gushed from the yielding rock the vital tide ;
What limits can Omnipotence confine ?
What obstacles oppose the arm divine ?
Since stones and waves their settled laws forego, —
Since seas can harden and since rocks can flow.”

Our own poet, Whittier, is far from aiming to write sentences. In him the didactic seems to be lost in the lyrical. He always addresses the heart, and assumes the plainest doctrines, and sings, not their proofs, but their impressions. He is not like the coach-light that flames on the street through which the vehicle rolls, but the red lamp that gleams behind the colored liquid in the apothecary's window. Yet always actuated by a deeply moral tone, he cannot help sometimes deviating into the sententious; as in the following, from the Chapel of the Hermits:

“Just men no longer pine
Behind their prison bars;
Through the rent dungeon shine
The free sun and the stars.

“Earth owns, at last untrod
By sect or caste or clan,
The fatherhood of God,
The brotherhood of man.” — p. 66.

“Let us behold
The stone from the mouth of the sepulchre rolled,
And Nature, like Lazarus, rise as of old.
Let our faith, which in darkness and coldness has lain,
Revive with the warmth and the brightness again,
And in blooming of flower and budding of tree,
The symbols and types of our destiny see.
The life of the spring-time, the life of the whole,
And as sun to the sleeping earth, love to the soul.” — p. 76.

Again, in the programme of the dedication of the High School, Newbury, Nov. 2, 1849:

“Nor heed¹ the sceptic's puny hand,
While near her school the church-spire stands;
Nor fear the blinded bigot's rule,
While near her church-spire stands the school.”

I should be very indiscreet to preface my verses with such fine specimens if I had the least intention of breaking a lance with such accomplished writers. Indeed it is a part of my design that the contrast should be noted. I say at

¹ i.e., our State, old Massachusetts, heed not, etc.

once, see how their gold shines over my dross. My aim is to be simple and plain, to present the beauty of naked truth, and to reach the memory through the heart. I allow that the following lines have none of the attention-distracting beauties of true poetry; but that, like an autumnal apple tree, they may be valued for their fruit, though all their blossoms may have fallen to the ground.

GNOMOLOGICAL VERSES.

No. I.

The will of God is secret and revealed,
The precept open and the plan concealed,
The last not contradicted by the first;
The one obedience asks, the other trust.

No. II.

The whole creation is a robe of praise,
In which the architect his skill displays;
The sun, the moon, the planets, and the sea,
In one evicition, one great truth, agree.
The rose a primal beauty may adorn,
Nor is its lesson cancelled by the thorn;
The very ills of life, though we repine,
Evince the fulness of the great design;
The very clouds, that join the throne to screen,
Augment the radiance at the basement seen.

No. III.

All things fulfil an absolute decree,
And yet in all, the will of man is free.

No. IV.

If scripture ever be with profit read,
You must discover first the golden thread, —
The line of purpose and perfection sweet,
Which makes two testaments in union meet.
A Christ forshadowed and a Christ revealed;
A growing kingdom, though at first concealed.
See how the emblems and the types are used;
See how at last the serpent's head is bruised.
The bold neologist the cord unbinds,
And only fragments in his Bible finds;
See the hid union — make its pages one,
The darkness scatters — 'tis a risen sun.

No. V.

A miracle when seen our faith may move,
 But what a not-seen miracle can prove ;
 What but the high design, well understood,
 And the united faith of all the good.

No. VI.

All men in Adam's guiltiness appear,
 However dark the *mode*, the *fact* is clear.

No. VII.

The triune God, to human faith displayed
 Upon the sacred page, has light and shade ;
 Dark is the draught of each interior line,
 Yet we can see each person is divine.
 The practical, the manifested light
 May strike the rudest shepherd's mental sight.

No. VIII.

Of all the sacred teachers which recall
 To mind the word of God, I honor Paul ;
 His zeal, his clearness, his consistent truth,
 Shall lead my age, as it impressed my youth.

No. IX.

Yes, all the real saints shall persevere,
 Because of falling they have constant fear.

No. X.

The power of meekness, who can ever show,
 And who, but he that deeply feels it, know ?

No. XI.

The humble mind, though smitten by the rod,
 Is the abode of a descending God.

No. XII.

Christ died for all — his righteousness is free ;
 He died for all, and if for all, for me.

No. XIII.

One sin alone can plunge in endless grief ;
 A comprehensive sin — 'tis unbelief.

No. XIV.

How will my reasoning to my heart apply,
 In that dread moment when I come to die ?

How will the products of my tongue, or pen,
My words, my purposes, impress me then ?

No. XV.

Whate'er by others done I should condemn,
Let me not think to do the same by them ;
Let me perform, with purpose large and free,
Whatever I approve when done to me.

No. XVI.

If duty you regard, the fountain free
From which it flows is God's first love to thee ;
And the same feeling in thy heart should spring
To thy Creator, Governor, and King.
Another precept must our minds imbue, —
That loving God, we love our neighbor too.

No. XVII.

Let not thy heart by anger e'er be riven ;
Forgive thy foe, and be by God forgiven.

No. XVIII.

A change of will our God can never know,
And yet he wills a change in things below.
His purposes as fixed as fate appear,
And yet for prayer he has an open ear.
Events he changes with a boundless range,
Because his inmost counsels never change.

No. XIX.

The Bible is the oldest book — 'tis true ;
And yet the oldest book is always new.

No. XX.

Repentance and remorse are not the same ;
That is a heavenly, this an earthly flame :
One springs from love, and is a welcome guest,
And one an iron tyrant o'er the breast.
Repentance weeps before the Crucified ;
Remorse is nothing more than wounded pride.
Remorse through horror into hell is driven,
While true repentance always goes to heaven.

No. XXI.

Prayer makes us leave off sin ; and sin, though fair
It seems to promise, makes us leave off prayer.

No. XXII.

The wisest sorrow our experience wins,
Is sorrowing for our trespasses and sins.

No. XXIII.

Meekness of wisdom !¹ What a phrase divine !
O God of meekness, make the blessing mine.

No. XXIV.

When o'er our faults and miseries we groan,
The present moment never acts alone.

No. XXV.

By the same effort are our faults revealed,
Which most men take to make them more concealed.

No. XXVI.

Our grossest deeds concealed from man may be,
But thought itself, O God, is known to thee.

No. XXVII.

When Peter from his master's presence stept,
Pondering his crimes as bitterly he wept,
Though gloom and sorrow all his soul enclosed,
Had he the wretchedness that he supposed ?
His lonely weeping seems, to me at least,
Above the laughter of Belshazzar's feast.

No. XXVIII.

When in obedience to your Saviour-king,
To the baptismal font your babe you bring ;
Who knows what benefits may there ensue ?
Each sprinkled drop may prove celestial dew ;
And the wet forehead to your prayers impart
A future saint — a pure and contrite heart.

No. XXIX.

When the swift day through swifter hours has run,
And the red cloud o'erhangs the setting sun,
Let not thy conscience be compelled to see
That beauteous nature blushes then for thee ;
Or, when the dews descend in drops divine,
That pitying planets weep o'er sins of thine ;
Or, when the morn exalts her saffron head,
She sheds her radiance round a sluggard's bed,
And bids the world this lesson from thee reap,
That all thy innocence is in thy sleep.

¹ James iii. 13.

No. XXX.

Sorrowing for sin my Christian course began,
 Sorrowing for sin through all the progress ran ;
 Sorrowing for sin I hailed the morning light,
 Sorrowing for sin I passed the wakeful night ;
 Sorrowing for sin restrained my youthful rage,
 Sorrow for sin is habit in old age ;
 And oh how sweetly do the moments move
 When all this sorrow is the fruit of love !

No. XXXI.

Gain is not godliness ; but it is plain
 That — be content — and godliness is gain.

No. XXXII.

GOSPEL PREACHING.

The sum of gospel teaching should be this :
 The woe of true repentance leads to bliss ; .
 That sin imparts its sickness to the soul,
 And Christ, our great physician, makes us whole.

No. XXXIII.

THE FREE CHRISTIAN.

In bondage ? Yes ; but then, I feel no pain,
 For I am fettered by a red-rose chain.

No. XXXIV.

Old age, advancing on through slow decay
 Is somewhat like the setting orb of day :
 It has, though losing its meridian height,
 A larger circle and a softer light.

No. XXXV.

Self-knowledge (by some lofty minds pursued),
 Without religion does them little good.
 Rousseau, to whom all winding hearts were known,
 And who so skilfully portrayed his own,
 In conduct and in life reversed each rule,
 And sunk from wisdom to be more a fool.
 The same conclusion every reader learns
 From Goldsmith, Cicero, and Robert Burns.
 Their knowledge was a light-house through the spray,
 It shed faint light and led not to the way.

No. XXXVI.

FOR THE GATE OF A GRAVE-YARD.

Remember, ye that hither come to weep,
The wicked die ; the pious only sleep.

No. XXXVII.

Why is a terror so peculiar shed
O'er human hearts conversing with the dead ?
How can these mouldered hands such tumults weave ?
Why do the disbelieving here believe ?
And why, as if by heaven's judicial doom,
Is no man atheist, leaning on a tomb ?

No. XXXVIII.

Life must present a most contrasted page,
Foreseen in youth and when reviewed in age.
As some bright window ere the day is done,
Shines deeply crimsoned in the setting sun ;
The mansion seems involved in streams of fire
All faces brighten and all eyes admire ;
But as the sun withdraws his final ray,
The visionary splendors fade away ;
And naught remains, these transient glories past,
But the cold night-fog or the whistling blast.

No. XXXIX.

In this condition where afflictions roll,
Religion is an impulse of the soul,
'Tis closely grafted on chastised desire ;
Our wants impress it, even our sins inspire,
And sceptic reasoning is a vain employ,
Like reasoning down our agony or joy.

No. XL.

The best impressions, since we know in part,
Are made by forms proceeding from the heart.
The brightest ray that is to man allowed,
Is but a pencil quivering through a cloud.
The light is partial, but enough to guide,
In spite of worldly prudence, pelf, or pride.
When guilt depresses, when with ills we cope,
Without supreme conviction man may hope.

No. XLI.

Religion then, that calmer of our woes,
On two eternal pillars must repose ;

Our guilt and misery ; when for these we grieve,
 Our fears, hopes, sorrows, force us to believe ;
 For who can question, when his sufferings cease,
 The voice that bids him sweetly, Go in peace ?

No. XLII.

O precious system ! antidote for pain !
 Let down from heaven, as by a golden chain,
 In mercy to a sin-polluted clod,
 God sinks to man, that man may soar to God.
 Guilt wears the robe of innocence ; the tear,
 Once wholly hopeless, turns to rapture here.
 The wretched share a part ; and round the bed
 Where life retires immortal hopes are shed.
 Life's disappointments, agonies, and stings,
 But add new feathers to Religion's wings.

So in the cell where, stern afflictions prey,
 The prisoner weeps his lingering nights away ;
 Through that dark grate whose iron chords so fast,
 Have been the lyre to many a midnight blast, —
 Through that dark grate the evening sun may shine,
 And gild his crimson walls with light divine.
 Some mournful melody may soothe his pain ;
 Some radiant beam may sparkle round his chain ;
 Some wandering wind in mercy may repair,
 And waft the burden of the blossoms there.

No. XLIII.

Meekness, not strife, should our protection be,
 For sands, as well as rocks, resist the sea.

No. XLIV.

That tree there standing, like a saint that's mute,
 Has borne last year no blossoms and no fruit ;
 What has it done ? What contribution made
 To cheer our earth ? A cool and pleasant shade.

No. XLV.

The surest way to stop Ambition's breath,
 Is starving — starve the frantic imp to death.

No. XLVI.

The surest way your purpose to refine,
 Is bathing — bathe your soul in love divine.

No. XLVII.

If to the cross you go and mean to stay,
 Be sure to take old Sinai in your way :
 Mercy becomes a source of sweeter trust
 When we already see the law is just.