

Conception and Expression

THERE are men who have just thoughts on every subject; but it is not perceived, because their expressions are feeble. They conceive well, but they produce badly.

Erasmus acutely observed—alluding to what then much occupied his mind—that one might be apt to swear that they had been taught, in the confessional cell, all they had learnt; so scrupulous are they of disclosing what they know. Others, again, conceive ill, and produce well; for they express with elegance, frequently, what they do not know.

It was observed of one pleader, that he *knew* more than he *said*; and of another, that he *said* more than he *knew*.

The judicious Quintilian observes, that we ought at first to be more anxious in regard to our conceptions than our expressions—we may attend to the latter afterwards. While Horace thought that expressions will never fail us if we have luminous conceptions. Yet they seem to be different things, for a man may have the clearest conceptions, and at the same time be no pleasing writer; while conceptions of no eminent merit may be very agreeably set off by a warm and colouring diction.

Lucian happily describes the works of those who abound with the most luxuriant language, void of ideas. He calls their unmeaning verbosity anemone-words (*anemonæ verborum*); for anemones are flowers, which, however brilliant, can only please the eye, leaving no fragrance. Pratt, who was a writer of flowing, but nugatory verses, was compared to the *daisy*; a flower indeed, but without the fragrance.