



The Greek Treatise on the Sublime: Its Modern Interest

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THE GREEK TREATISE ON THE SUBLIME.

ITS MODERN INTEREST.

A FEW months ago the authorities of the British Museum announced the discovery of some of the lost odes of Bacchylides, the contemporary of Pindar. Hitherto Bacchylides has been known only in fragments, none of them exceeding a dozen lines in length. Now we are promised over a thousand lines, of which as many as two hundred belong to a single ode. The discovery is, thus, one of considerable importance. Directly, it will reveal Bacchylides himself more fully; indirectly, it may be expected to throw light on many points of collateral interest. One such point is the relation of Pindar to the poetry of his time, another is the value of the literary judgments of some of the ancient critics. By both the links just mentioned the subject of this paper associates itself with the discovery.

The author of the Treatise on the Sublime frames an estimate of Bacchylides which seems likely to be confirmed by a fuller knowledge of his poems. He ranks him below Pindar for the same reason that he ranks Hyperides below Demosthenes. Correctness is not to be compared, says he, with genius; flawlessness is no match for inspiration. It is not a little remarkable that, in the case of Hyperides no less than in that of Bacchylides, the preservation of papyrus manuscripts in the sands of Egypt has enabled the modern world to test and verify this estimate. The result has been the enhancement of the already high reputation of the *De Sublimitate*. The treatise is, in point of fact, one of the best pieces of literary criticism bequeathed to us by classical antiquity, and any circumstance is welcome which helps to preserve it from the oblivion with which it has been often threatened.

The old saying that books have fortunes of their own is eminently true of the Treatise on the Sublime, with its many vicissitudes of neglect and celebrity. Of the early history of the work little is positively known. The tradition which ascribes it to Longinus, the celebrated minister of Queen Zenobia, has long been disputed; and in the unsettled state of critical opinion upon the subject it seems better to treat the author as anonymous. Written at a date which within the limits of the first three centuries of the Christian era has been most variously assigned, the treatise appears to have remained almost unknown until it was printed by Francis Robortello at Basle in 1554 A.D., and by Paulus Manutius at Venice in the following year. Since that time it has been edited again and again. Dutch and French, as well as

Italian, scholars have done much for it. In the eighteenth century it reached the climax of its authority, and was regarded by Boileau and Pope almost as a final court of appeal. In the earlier part of the present century its popularity declined owing to various causes. A wider outlook over the world of literature and man reduced to their right proportions the extravagant claims of some of its admirers. Less legitimately, the ultra-scientific tendency of classical scholarship in Germany led that country to devote more attention to the vexed question of the authorship of the treatise than to the elucidation of its contents. Latterly, however, there have been, in Germany as elsewhere, signs of a reaction. Critical texts have been attempted, and many translations have appeared. At one time or another the book has been rendered into almost every European language, and within the last few decades versions of it have appeared in Spain, where Castilian illustrations of its precepts are freely offered; in Italy, where the traditional interest in literary criticism and in this book in particular has produced excellent fruit; and in Sweden, where the vigorous modern school of Scandinavian literature thus connects itself with the past. In England, too, though no adequate edition exists, and no edition at all has been published within the last fifty years, signs of renewed interest may be found in the issue or reissue of several translations.

The treatise, of which about one-third has been lost, has probably often suffered misconception through its customary English title. It has been thought to be at once more ambitious in purpose, and more narrow in scope, than it really is. The Greek title *Περὶ ὕψους*, 'Concerning Height or Elevation,' does not convey that idea of abnormal altitude which is usually associated with the word *sublime*. The object of the writer rather is to indicate broadly the essentials of a noble and impressive style. In fact, if we were to describe the treatise as one on style, or even on literary criticism generally, we should be nearer the mark than if we connected it solely with the idea of 'sublimity' in the narrower sense. The author's own words make this plain, for early in his book he remarks that the friend whom he is addressing is too well versed in literary studies to need the reminder that sublimity is a certain distinction and excellence in expression, and that it is from no other source than this, that the greatest authors have derived their eminence and gained an immortality of renown.¹ The friend in question is Postumius Terentianus, a Roman, who though young has had some experience in public affairs, and who is, like the writer himself, much interested in Greek and Latin literature. A rapid glance at the actual contents of the book will show the width of its range and indicate its true character.

At the outset the author, after offering the definition of sublimity just given, proceeds to ask whether there is such a thing as an art of the sublime.

¹ i. 3: γράφων δὲ πρὸς σέ, φίλτατε, τὸν παι-
δεῖας ἐπιστήμονα, σχεδὸν ἀπῆλλαγμαὶ καὶ τοῦ διὰ
πλειόνων προὔποσίθεσθαι, ὥς ἀκρότης καὶ ἐξοχή
τις λόγων ἐστὶ τὰ ὕψη, καὶ ποιητῶν τε οἱ μέγιστοι

καὶ συγγραφέων οὐκ ἄλλοθεν ἢ ἐνθὲνδε ποθὲν
ἐπρώτευσαν καὶ ταῖς ἐαυτῶν περιέβαλον εὐκλείαις
τὸν αἰῶνα.

His answer is, that, though elevation of tone is innate, yet art can regulate the use of natural gifts. It is, he says, with diction as with life. A man favoured by fortune ought to know how to use his advantages; a writer of genius ought to profit by the help of art. In order to show that a systematic treatise can effect much in the way of warning as well as by means of precept, he gives a short account of defects of style which are opposed to sublimity. With this purpose he describes and illustrates the vices of tumidity, puerility, misplaced passion, and frigidity. This done, he further characterises the true sublime, and shows how it may be distinguished from false imitations. Next he enumerates five sources of the sublime. The first and most important of these is grandeur of thought—the power of forming great conceptions. This power is founded on nobility of character. Elevated thoughts are also, we are told, the result of the imitation of great models, of imaginative power, and of the choice and grouping of the most striking circumstances. The second source is vehement and inspired passion. While affirming that there is no tone so lofty as that of genuine passion, the author does not treat of this topic in detail, but reserves it for a separate work. Third in order come figures of speech, such as adjuration (in illustration of which is given the famous oath which Demosthenes swore ‘by those who at Marathon stood in the forefront of the danger’), rhetorical question, asyndeton, and lastly hyperbaton or inverted order. The writer makes the general remark that a figure is at its best when the very fact that it is a figure escapes attention. The fourth source of sublimity is noble phrasing or diction. The chief element in this is the choice of proper and striking words, a choice which, he says, wonderfully attracts and enthalls the hearer, and breathes into dead things a kind of living voice.¹ Other elements are metaphors, and similes, and hyperbole. Fifthly and finally comes elevation in the arrangement of words. Of this examples are given, and some remarks are added on such specific vices of style as arise from the use of too few words or too many, of too much rhythm or too little. The author concludes with a notable passage in which he endeavours to trace the causes of the dearth of great literature in his own day.

This short sketch of the contents of the treatise will indicate its relation to the general subject of style. When we come to particulars, this relation is seen to be still more intimate, and yet to imply no narrowness of view on the author's part. His hints with regard to thought and expression are shrewd and helpful, all the more so that he is too broad-minded to have any superstitious faith in such formal Rules of Style as used to be popular in England a generation or two ago under the shadow of his name. A few examples of his illuminative observations may be offered. Speaking of Demosthenes, he remarks how that orator shows us that even in the revels of the imagination sobriety is required.² His good sense is seen in his praise of familiar language when used in season. A homely expression, he says, is sometimes much more

¹ xxx. 1: ἡ τῶν κυρίων καὶ μεγαλοπρεπῶν
ὀνομάτων ἐκλογὴ θαυμαστῶς ἄγει καὶ κατακληί-
τους ἀκούοντας . . . οἶνει ψυχὴν τινα τοῖς

πράγμασι φωνητικὴν ἐντιθεῖσα.

² xvi. 4: διδάσκων ὅτι κὰν βακχεύμασι νῆφειν
ἀναγκαῖον.

telling than elegant diction, for it is understood at once since it is drawn from common life, and the fact that it is familiar makes it only the more convincing.¹ Of tumidity, or bombast, we are told that it seeks to transcend the sublime, and that it is a fault which seems particularly hard to avoid, but that if examined in the light of day, it fades away from the awe-inspiring into the contemptible.² An over-rhythmical style is condemned on the ground that it does not communicate to its hearers the emotion conveyed by the words but that conveyed by the rhythm. The author is the determined enemy of conceits and puerilities of all kinds, and he remarks that men fall into these errors because, while they aim at the uncommon and elaborate, and most of all at the attractive, they find that they have drifted into the tawdry and affected.³ He expressly denounces that 'pursuit of novelty in the expression of ideas which may be regarded as the fashionable craze of the day.'⁴ 'Art is perfect,' he says in one place, 'when it seems to be nature, and nature attains her end when she contains art hidden within her'; and again 'We should employ art as in every way an aid to nature, for the conjunction of the two may be held to constitute perfection.'⁵ In this spirit he makes the remark, with reference to Demosthenes, that the tricks of rhetoric are hidden away in the blaze of the noontide splendour of sublimity and passion. 'By what means,' he asks, 'has the orator here concealed the figure? Clearly, by the very excess of light. For just as all dim lights are extinguished in the glare of the sun, so do the artifices of rhetoric fade from view when bathed in the pervading splendour of sublimity.'⁶ Evidently with the critic who writes thus the judgment of style was, to quote his own words, 'the last and crowning fruit of long experience.'⁷ Everywhere the man's sincerity of purpose and clearness of vision are manifest, and a book written in this earnest and enlightened spirit does not soon fall out of date.

Furthermore, the treatise may be regarded as a disquisition not only on the formation of style, but on literary criticism generally. In proof of this, it is only necessary to add to the foregoing description of its contents the reminder that it is a perfect storehouse of quotations illustrating excellencies and defects both of manner and of matter, both of form and of spirit. Reference is made to as many as fifty Greek writers, whose dates range over something like a thousand years. Some of these are quoted repeatedly, Homer oftenest of all, and after him Herodotus, Plato, and Demosthenes. The author's quality as a critic is most decisively seen in his preference of the best. The second-rate writers of Alexandria, though nearer in time, are not suffered to eclipse the true classics of Greece; they are quoted rather in illustration of defects than of merits.

¹ xxxi. 1 : *ἔστιν ἄρ' ὁ ἰδιωτισμὸς ἐνίοτε τοῦ κόσμου παρὰ πολλὸν ἐμφανιστικώτερον· ἐπιγινώσκειται γὰρ αὐτόθεν ἐκ τοῦ κοινοῦ βίου, τὸ δὲ σύνηθες ἤδη πιστότερον.*

² iii. 1, 3, 4.

³ iii. 4 and iv.

⁴ v. : *τὸ περὶ τὰς νοήσεις καινόσπουδον, περὶ δὲ δὴ μάλιστα κορυβαντιῶσιν οἱ νῦν.*

⁵ xxii. 1, xxxvi. 4.

⁶ xvii. 2 : *τίνι γὰρ ἐνταῦθ' ὁ ῥήτωρ ἀπέκρυψε τὸ σχῆμα; δῆλον ὅτι τῷ φωτὶ αὐτῷ. σχεδὸν γὰρ ὥσπερ καὶ τὰ μυδρὰ φέγγη ἐναφανίζεται τῷ ἡλίῳ περιαιγούμενα, οὕτω τὰ τῆς ῥητορικῆς σοφίσματα ἐξαμαυροῖ περιχυθὲν πάντοθεν τὸ μέγεθος.*

⁷ vi. : *ἡ γὰρ τῶν λόγων κρίσις πολλῆς ἐστι πείρας τελευταίων ἐπιγέννημα.*

But in Homer we are bidden to admire such passages as speak of Ossa and Pelion; of Strife, 'with her head in the skies and her feet on the earth'; of the Battle of the Gods; of the earth-shaking Posidon; of the cry of Ajax to Father Zeus 'to slay, if slay he must, *in the light*,' and of the yet more impressive silence of the same hero in the shades.¹ Nowhere is the critic's skilful touch better seen than where he treats of Homer. In drawing, for instance, a comparison between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he assigns the former poem to the poet's vigorous manhood when he was at the height of his inspiration, the latter to his mellow age. 'In the *Odyssey* Homer may be likened to a sinking sun, whose grandeur remains without its intensity.' But he is careful to add, 'If I speak of old age, it is nevertheless the old age of Homer.'² Again, he has the rather happy remark that Homer 'has made, as far as lay within his power, gods of the men concerned in the Siege of Troy, and men of the gods.'³ Altogether, it is refreshing to see how often and with what sympathy the latest of critics reverts to the earliest of poets. His admiration for noble literature has incidentally accomplished even more for Sappho than for Homer, though the former is but once mentioned by him. In his tenth chapter, as an example of the proper choice and grouping of the most striking circumstances, he adduces, and in so doing has preserved for posterity, a fragment of Sappho's poetry. The gist of his comment on the wonderful love-ode in question is that we see depicted in it not one passion only but a concourse of the passions. His critical acumen is, moreover, seen in the illustrations given, up and down his work, not only of sublimity but of its opposite. One specific instance, in which the offender is Aratus, the Alexandrian poet, is worth a moment's notice, as it seems to show that the writer of the treatise had at least a spark of humour in his composition. Aratus is contrasted, to his disadvantage, with the great exemplar Homer. When portraying a storm and threatened shipwreck, Homer speaks thus:—

On some tall vessel, from beneath the clouds
A giant billow, tempest-nursed, descends :
The deck is drenched in foam ; the stormy wind
Howls in the shrouds ; the affrighted seamen quail
In fear, but little way from death removed.⁴

Aratus, the author continues, tried to produce the same effect in the following line:—

But one small plank their doom doth keep away.

He has thus described (so runs the criticism) the scene in terms that are neat and trivial rather than terrible. 'Further, he has put bounds to the danger by saying *A plank wards off doom*. After all, it *does* ward it off.'⁵

¹ viii., ix.

² ix. 13 : ὅθεν ἐν τῇ Ὀδυσσεύᾳ παρεικάσαι τις ἂν καταδυομένην τὸν Ὀμηρον ἡλίω, οὐ δίχα τῆς σφοδρότητος παραμένει τὸ μέγεθος. ix. 14 : γῆρας διηγούμεναι, γῆρας δ' ὅμως Ὀμήρου.

³ ix. 7.

⁴ *Iliad* xv. 624–8, Lord Derby's translation.

⁵ x. 5, 6 : πλὴν μικρὸν αὐτὸ καὶ γλαφυρὸν ἐποίησεν ἀντὶ φοβεροῦ· ἔτι δὲ παρῴρισε τὸν κίνδυνον εἰπὼν 'ξύλον αἰδ' ἀπείργει'. οὐκοῦν ἀπείργει.

Besides Aratus, other minor writers, such as Timaeus and Theopompus, are made to furnish examples of faults which should be shunned by those who wish to write in the elevated manner. But the author is of too fearless a nature to strike only at the lesser men. He assails the great writers, such as Herodotus and Aeschylus, where they seem to him to offend against the canons of good taste. He has the courage to say that Demosthenes is too austere to be graceful and witty, and that when he forces himself into jocularity, he does not excite laughter, but rather becomes the subject of it.¹ And he makes bold to affirm with regard to Euripides, the idol of the rhetorician, that he is by nature anything but elevated, and that it is only by force put upon his natural disposition that he appears to rise to tragic heights.² In such comments as these, whether we agree with them or not, we recognise pieces of genuine literary criticism, and the literary critic stands revealed no less in the note of pleasant egotism which makes itself heard now and again in the course of the treatise, and in such general maxims as that the poet must himself see what he would have others see,—must, in fact, have his ‘eye upon the object.’

Nor are such well-known topics of criticism as *correctness*, the *standard of taste*, and the *comparative method*, neglected by the author. Upon the question of correctness he shows a breadth of view which is in marked contrast with the opinions commonly held (and by his admirers, strange to say) in England for a century or more from the time of the Restoration. He is no believer in what is faultily faultless; he is a supreme believer in fervour and inspiration. Elevation with some flaws is, he cannot doubt, to be preferred to uniform correctness without elevation. The passage is a characteristic one and may be quoted at some little length :

‘I am well aware that lofty genius is far removed from flawlessness; for invariable accuracy incurs the risk of pettiness, and in the sublime, as in great fortunes, there must be something which is overlooked. It may be necessarily the case that low and average natures do remain as a rule free from failing and in greater safety because they never run a risk nor aim at the sublime, while great endowments prove insecure because of their very greatness. Further, I am not ignorant that it naturally happens that all human things are always better known by their worse traits, and that the memory of errors remains indelible, while that of excellencies quickly dies away. I have myself noted not a few errors on the part of Homer and other writers of the greatest distinction, and I am anything but pleased with the slips they have made. But still I do not term them wilful errors, but rather oversights of a random and casual kind, due to neglect and introduced with all the heedlessness of genius. Consequently I do not waver in my view that excellencies higher in quality, even if not sustained throughout, should always on a comparison be voted the first place, because of their sheer elevation of spirit if for no other reason. Granted that Apollonius in his *Argonautica* shows himself a poet who does not trip, and that Theocritus in his pastorals is most happy, would you not, for all that, choose to be Homer rather than Apollonius?.....Again, in lyric poetry would you prefer to be Bacchylides rather than Pindar? And in tragedy to be Ion of Chios rather than Sophocles?.....What need to add that each one of the great authors often redeems all his errors by a single sublime and

¹ xxxiv. 3: ξῖθα μὲν γελοῖος εἶναι βιάζεται καὶ τὴν αὐτὸς αὐτοῦ φύσιν ἐν πολλοῖς γενέσθαι ἀστείος, οὐ γέλῳτα κινεῖ μάλλον ἢ καταγελάται. τραγικὴν προσηγάκασεν.

² xv. 3: ἡκιστὰ γέ τοι μεγαλοφύης ὦν ὅμως

happy touch, and (most important of all) that if one were to pick out and mass together the blunders of Homer, Demosthenes, Plato, and all the rest of the greatest writers, they would be found to be a very small part, nay an infinitesimal fraction, of the triumphs which those heroes can point to on every hand?¹

Again, our author's answer to the often-asked question whether there is any trustworthy test of the sublime—any sure standard of taste in literature—seems surprisingly modern because it is so permanently true:

‘When a thing is heard repeatedly by a man of intelligence, who is well versed in literature, and its effect is not to dispose the soul to high thoughts, and it does not leave in the mind more food for reflection than the words seem to convey, but falls, if examined carefully through and through, into disesteem, it cannot rank as true sublimity because it does not outlive a first hearing. For that is really great which bears a repeated examination, and which it is difficult or rather impossible to withstand, and the memory of which is strong and hard to efface. In general, consider those examples of sublimity to be fine and genuine which please all and always. For when men of different pursuits, lives, ambitions, ages, languages, hold identical views on one and the same subject, then that consensus of judgment, so to say, which results from discordant elements makes our faith in the object of admiration strong and unassailable.’²

No modern critic could formulate more precisely, in relation to literature, the *quod semper, quod ubique* principle.

Modern in many ways, the author is in nothing more modern than in foreshadowing the application of the comparative method to the study of literature. It is easy to scoff at literary comparisons, and no doubt there is often much that is puerile and inept about them. But, as M. Brunetière has pointed out, the ridicule comes with ill grace from those who celebrate so loudly the triumphs in our own day of comparative anatomy, comparative physiology, and comparative philology. In a sense science may be said to begin in comparison, in the effort to distinguish things that differ and thereby to bring out the true nature of each and all. At the same time it is well to remember the necessary limitations of the comparative method where literature is concerned. It is utterly out of place and futile, if its object is to place the great writers in an order of merit, and to establish a sort of literary hierarchy. And even where the aim is simply to bring out the distinctive points of contrasted authors, it should not be forgotten that the methods of the laboratory can never fully be applied to the analysis of the finest products of the human mind. In this matter it may not unfairly be claimed that the author assumes a judicious attitude. The comparison, already quoted, of a passage in Homer with a passage in Aratus is distinctly happy. And so, in its way, is the comparison between Homer in the *Iliad* and Homer in the *Odyssey*. And so, again, is the passage in which he compares, not the same poet in different works, but two orators of different countries, Demosthenes and Cicero. Speaking with due diffidence as a Greek addressing a Roman, he ventures the opinion that it is in profusion that Cicero chiefly differs from Demosthenes. The latter is like a thunderbolt or flash of lightning; the former resembles a widespread conflagration which rolls on with all-devouring flames.³

¹ xxxiii. 2, 3, 4. xxxvi. 2.

² vii. 3, 4.

³ xii. 4.

In his use, however limited it may be, of the comparative method the author has the advantage over his great predecessors Plato and Aristotle, neither of whom knew any literature except his own. It is interesting to observe in what general features he agrees with, or differs from, these masters of literary criticism. With both he has this in common that he may often seem unduly verbal and philological,—may often seem to attach excessive importance to rhythm, to figures, and to questions of form generally. Not that it is so in reality. Rather, attention to such matters must be the backbone of criticism, and especially of early criticism. In other points the author resembles Plato much more nearly than he resembles Aristotle. He breathes the spirit of the *Ion* rather than of the *Poetics*. He is subjective rather than objective. He is an enthusiast rather than an analyst. He is better fitted to fire the young than to convince the maturely sceptical. He speaks rather of ‘transport’ or ‘inspiration’ than of ‘purgation’ or ‘the universal.’ He was not, to tell the truth, a man of deep and penetrating intellect like Aristotle, but he was nevertheless a critic of keen artistic sensibilities. His book does not offer the great luminous definitions contained in the *Poetics*, nor is it marked by the cool and searching scientific analysis by which that work is distinguished. Yet it may be that it supplies something of its own. Aristotle but seldom makes us feel that there sometimes dwells in words a beauty which defies analysis because it is the direct expression of a human spirit and is charged with emotion as well as controlled by reason. Our author’s chief aim is, on the other hand, aesthetic rather than purely scientific. This difference in standpoint has had at least one noteworthy indirect effect. Let us suppose for a moment that every particle of ancient Greek literature had perished with the exception of the *Poetics* which is a fragment, or with the exception of the *Treatise on the Sublime* which is also incomplete. In the latter case we should at least possess the better anthology; we should be in a better position to form some conception of the supreme excellence of Homer, and Sappho, and other Greek poets. And this result would be due to the fact that the author’s method is much less rigorous than that of Aristotle in the *Poetics*. He allows himself great liberty of quotation because he believes, like Mr. Matthew Arnold in our own age, that it is best to make free use of illustrations in order that the critic may help others, no less than himself, to feel their way in matters in which dogmatism is dangerous and advance must be tentative.

His catholicity has led him still further. Aristotle, notwithstanding his encyclopaedic learning, knew, as has been already said, no literature beyond his own. Our author refers not only to Latin literature but to Hebrew; and not the least interesting feature in his treatise is that we see in it the confluence of three literatures. Among the many literary critics from Aristophanes to the Alexandrians and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and from Cicero to Quintilian and the author of the *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, he is distinguished by the account he takes of three several literatures. It is not impossible that he had been anticipated in this respect by the Caecilius to whom he so often refers, the Caecilius who is elsewhere described as ‘in faith a Jew.’

But we cannot tell. All we know is that, when discoursing on noble thought as inspired by nobility of soul, our author writes: 'The legislator of the Jews, no ordinary man, having formed and expressed a worthy conception of the might of the Godhead, writes at the very beginning of his Book of Laws, "And God said—what? Let light be, and it was; let earth be, and it was."'¹

And here a word may fitly be said as to the connexion of sublimity, in the more restricted and more usual sense of the English term, with Hebrew influences. It has sometimes been maintained that sublimity, in this sense, is the peculiar possession of the Hebrew race and is unknown to the Greek classic writers. The contention is suggestive, but too absolute. The highest possible examples of sublimity, it may be urged, are to be found in such Hebrew writers as Ezekiel. Moderns like Milton, it may be further advanced, owe much of their sublimity, directly or indirectly, to Hebrew sources. But on the other hand we can hardly deny the quality, however rigorous may be our definition of it, to early Greek writers such as Homer and Aeschylus, and to the early phases of some of the more modern literatures. Are we, then, to look everywhere for Oriental influences, and not rather to seek the clue in the brooding wonder of primitive man wherever found? The whole question is too large and vague for summary treatment. In France, for instance, an eminent critic has suggested that the reason why the literature of his country is deficient in sublimity is that the French translation of the Bible is a poor one and has never taken possession of the popular mind, while the English version is magnificent and has influenced English literary style for centuries. But surely the cause lies deeper than this. We must not forget that in French there is no essential difference between the vocabulary of prose and that of poetry. We cannot forget, either, Voltaire's comment on the 'darkness visible' of Milton and on a similar expression in Spanish: 'Ce n'est pas assez que l'on puisse excuser la licence de ces expressions, l'exactitude française n'admet rien qui ait besoin d'excuse.'² That is quite an intelligible attitude to assume, but it is one which at once puts sublimity out of the question. We can imagine that Aristotle might have assumed it; so completely does he sometimes seem to regard poetry from the logician's point of view. But such an attitude we should feel to be quite alien to the author of the Greek Treatise on the Sublime, and equally alien, we may add, to the author of the English treatise on the Sublime and Beautiful. Burke's admirable work is notable, among many other things, for its striking quotations from the Old Testament and from Milton, and for its insistence upon the truth that sublimity is closely connected with a sense of uncertainty, obscurity, infinity. 'A clear idea,' he says, 'is another name for a little idea,' and then proceeds to quote from the Book of Job a passage whose amazing sublimity he considers to be principally due to the terrible uncertainty of the things described. Sublimity belongs, in fact, to the region of vastness and mystery. In a pregnant sentence Aristotle declares that a good style must be clear without being mean; lucidity is, from this point of view, the first essential. But when

¹ ix. 9.

² Voltaire, *Oeuvres*, xiii. 441.

sublimity is in question, the order is reversed. First and foremost stands grandeur of conception, even if a certain obscurity of expression should follow in its train.

It has been seen that the word *sublimity* is, in its modern acceptation, too limited in scope to cover our author's meaning. Shall we, then, do better to think of him as an exponent of what is sometimes called the *grand style*? This term has the advantage of possessing a wider range than the other. But it has also disadvantages of its own. It is not free from the suggestion of bombast and excessive elaboration. Against such vices our author strongly protests, and he would have been the last to eulogise a style whose brilliance may seem dazzling to one generation, but whose disappearance awakens satisfaction rather than regret in the mind of the next. His admiration is reserved for something much more permanent, a classic excellence. His attitude is that of one who cares little whether or no the grand style disappears if only the great style remains. And his view of the elements of a great style is at once a discriminating and a lofty one. He is too sound a verbal critic to overlook the importance of the more technical or scholastic side. But he is also too broad-minded to forget that greatness of style must ultimately repose on a much wider basis than that afforded by technical rules. His double standpoint is worthy of attention because it must have been rare in his own time and it cannot be said to be common in ours.

As a critic he sees that care and study are needed in the formation of a great style. And if proof of this fact were required, it would be necessary only to point to specific instances in ancient and in modern times. Writers like Virgil and Tennyson perhaps bear the marks of elaboration upon them, and it would therefore be superfluous to refer to their known habits of work. But such carefulness has often characterised those authors whose seeming naturalness and spontaneity afford but little trace of it. Recent inquiries have shown what pains Burns and Keats lavished on their work. In antiquity there was a well-known story of the immense trouble taken by Plato in writing the exordium, so simple in appearance, of his *Republic*. In our own day the scholar who has endeavoured to make Plato an English classic is known to have given the greatest possible attention to the art of expression. The same thing might be shown to be true of writers like Cardinal Newman, and of more obviously self-conscious authors such as Mr. Matthew Arnold. Even where there is simplicity, it is usually a studied simplicity; where there is ease, it is elaborate ease.

As to our author's own style we sometimes feel, as perhaps might be expected from his theme, that he neither possesses, nor simulates the possession of, that business-like directness of exposition which is so effective when information or instruction is to be imparted, and which is so foreign to the atmosphere of a leisurely seclusion. Of succinct expression he has little to say in this treatise; it does not belong directly to his present subject, and possibly he had already dealt with it elsewhere. But whether he had done so or not, we feel that he would not have desired to conceal any limitations or shortcomings which could fairly be alleged against himself. His book leaves

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upon the mind the agreeable impression that he would have been quite ready to allow that there might well be defects in his own style and in his treatment of his subject. In his style he sometimes shows the faults of the late period at which he wrote, faults such as diffuseness and poetical phraseology. Similarly, in his treatment of his subject, he is apt to be too minute and to lose himself occasionally in technicalities. In fact, he does not escape the characteristic failing of the teacher who has to deal with pupils of all grades of intellectual apprehension; now and then he appears to be unduly didactic and to verge upon tediousness.

But these are trifling blemishes, and we scarcely heed them in the presence of his deeply earnest purpose and his breadth of view. As his fourth chapter shows, no one could entertain less respect than he for mere bookishness. Nor could any one discern more clearly how mistaken is the view of those who regard style as an end in itself or talk glibly of 'art for art's sake.' Like the author of the *Dialogue on Oratory*, he sees in literature not a convention, not a matter of form, but the reflexion of a national life; a great style is evoked by great surroundings and great events. A few extracts will serve to illustrate his lofty conception of individual and of national morality, and his view of the relation of both to literature. 'It is not possible,' he says in a noble outburst, 'it is not possible that men with mean and servile ideas and habits prevailing throughout their life should produce anything that is admirable and worthy of immortality.'¹ Again he remarks, 'I wonder, as no doubt do many others, how it happens that in our time there are men who have the gift of persuasion to the utmost extent and are well fitted for public life, and are keen and ready, and particularly rich in all the charms of language, yet there no longer arise really lofty and transcendent natures unless quite exceptionally. So great and worldwide a dearth of high utterance attends our age.' The explanation he finds when he glances at the characteristic vices of the time: 'The love of money (a disease from which we all now suffer sorely) and the love of pleasure carry us away into bondage, or rather, as one may say, drown us body and soul in the depths, the love of riches being a malady which makes men petty and the love of pleasure one which makes them most ignoble.' Vast wealth leads to such vices as extravagance, insolence, shamelessness. The final result is that 'men no longer lift up their eyes and there is no further regard for fame, but the ruin of all such lives is gradually consummated, and sublimities of soul fade and wither away and become contemptible when men are lost in admiration of their own mortal parts and omit to exalt that which is immortal.'² His own conception of man's place in the universe is a lofty one: 'Nature has

¹ ix. 3. Probably no modern language can better reproduce the fine Miltonic roll of the author's style, with its long ear-satisfying words, than the Italian. Canna's version of this passage, together with the sentence which immediately follows it in the original, runs thus: *Perocchè non è possibile, che uomini, i quali per*

tutta la vita si danno pensiero e sollecitudine di cose piccole e servili, profferiscano alcuna sentenza mirabile e degna dell' immortalità; ma grandi sono, com' è naturale, le parole di coloro di cui siano serie le cogitazioni.

² xliv. 1, 6, 8.

appointed us men to be no base nor ignoble animals ; but since she ushers us into life and into the vast universe as into some great assembly, to be as it were spectators of her triumphs and the keenest aspirants for honour, straightway she implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated and more divine than we. Wherefore not even the entire universe suffices for the thought and contemplation within the reach of the human mind, but our imaginations often pass beyond the utmost bounds of space, and if we survey our life on every side and observe how surely the victory rests at every point with that which is striking, and great, and beautiful, we shall soon discern the purpose of our birth.’¹ About a man who can write thus there is the profound moral gravity and the lofty eloquence which mark a Demosthenes or a Burke. The ethical fervour of the author’s style calls to mind his own saying that ‘sublimity is the echo of a great soul.’² He is himself a man of great moral endowments ; the misfortune was that he had fallen upon evil days. The heroic age was in the far past, and the present was, to him, a time of spiritual destitution, when men loved show and comfort, and were no longer earnest in the pursuit of perfection.

Beyond and above all other motives for high effort our author places the hope of literary immortality. It is strange to reflect that this motive should have counted for so much with him and should count for so little comparatively with the moderns. No doubt he remembered that the spell of Homer had been felt for a thousand years. But to us as we look back the precariousness of such immortality on the merely material side seems appalling. The preservation of a few manuscripts appears almost an accident when we think of such permanence as our author himself has attained. With the moderns, on the other hand, there is the security of the printing-press, and there is the wide diffusion rendered possible not only by this but by the spread of the English language, by the practice of translation into various tongues, and by improved means of communication generally. And yet the ideal is apt to be not higher but lower. Immediate popularity with its rewards is sought rather than the approval of the best judges in all ages. As a consequence, we find many passable imitations of elevated style, but few sustained efforts, few real works of art. The very language in which our author sets forth the other view strikes a modern ear as somewhat exaggerated and high-flown. Aim high, says he in effect ; match yourself with the great ; imagine that you are appearing before a tribunal of the finest writers of the past ; take heed that you do not act an unseemly part before the bar of the future. ‘For if a man fears at the time that he will not utter anything to outlast his own life and age, the conceptions of his mind must be incomplete, blind, and as it were untimely born.’³ When we remember his longing, so often expressed, for immortality, there is satisfaction in the thought that his book is still read, though probably by but few. Much of the literary criticism and the art criticism of his time has been lost or is ignored, but a niche is still, we may hope, reserved for the writer of the *Treatise on the Sublime*. No one would have recognised more readily than

¹ xxxv. 2, 3.

² ix. 2 : ὕψος μεγαλοφροσύνης ἀπήχημα.

³ xiv. 3.

he that the author of a treatise on poetry or on rhetoric is not to be compared with a true poet or a true orator. But it is no mean thing to have upheld lofty ideals of artistic excellence, such ideals as need not shrink from the scrutiny of posterity. It is rather as the embodiment of a spirit, than as a formal system of rhetoric, that the treatise has continued to hold its own. It is not merely a code of laws ; it is an attempt to indicate and illustrate the noble temper of mind in which those who aim high should write. It is because of the spirit in which it is conceived that the book will not readily become obsolete ; its rules are transient and will pass, its purpose is permanent and abides.

W. RHYS ROBERTS.