

WHY NOT STYLE ?

LITTLE people get pleasure and also pain from quite little things, and I have not any respect for supermen who pretend that small things do not count. Yet one has to suffer from a majority or a vogue in favour of sham greatness, from the never-decreasing number of those who muddle greatness into bigness, and at last are found practising grossness, carelessness, recklessness, on the plea that their lives at least are too precious to waste in minding minutiae. Professional writers are constantly saying 'not as big as,' instead of 'not so big as,' and the subjunctive is a thing of the past even when the meaning is in peril. For instance, on a screw-stoppered beer-bottle one sees the injunction: 'Observe that this label is unbroken.' To keep this grammatical, one should never break the label.¹ And *does* one really conjugate the past indicative of the verb To Be: I was, Thou *wert*? In France, imperfectly educated persons avoid like poison the past subjunctive, and even more commonly in Italy do the natives shirk the preterite, even in writing. I am always puzzled to know if Leo XIII wrote: 'He has given thee to us that we may hope still more,' or 'He gave thee to us that we *might*,' &c. The English version leaves us in doubt, for it says: 'He has given thee to us that we *might*,' &c., which is just wrong enough and careless enough to be the very opposite of style. In a recent addition to the Divine Praises, our English translator has given us: Blessed be St. Joseph, her most chaste spouse. Whose spouse? Mary's, of course. But why not 'her most chaste

¹ Insidious Pussyfoot!

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spouse, St. Joseph? Thus the pronoun would be nearer to its noun and the link would be between the names of the spouses, instead of coming after St. Joseph. Again, 'most chaste spouse' leaves an outsider the option of supposing she had other spouses more or less chaste. The Roman custom of making everything superlative in prayer may just avoid ambiguity by saying *castissimo sposo* or *sposo castissimo*, I know not which, but in translating into English, the letter without the spirit is killing, in the genial Scottish sense. We have plenty of excuse for going on like this in such unhappy precedents as the *Hail Mary*, where 'Jesus' is put after 'the fruit of thy womb,' and in the *Hail, Holy Queen*, which differs from the *Salve Regina* as much as a bad singer differs from a good one. But with a vengeance in this case, *qui s'excuse, s'accuse*. The excuser is not only self-accused; he has Newman, Caswall, Hedley, and the whole hieratic spirit witnessing against him. I need not draw down the stylistic array of Anglicanism, for it runs to smugness as the Authorised Version does, *passim*, and this is a decadence of the hieratic. With all my shout I should protest against reforming the Authorised Version of Scripture for our use, for the style is self-conscious and often rings false, as Professor Phillimore so abundantly shows in a recent number of the *Dublin*. Nay, no style at all is better than a wrong one, and our old *Mumpsimus*es are better than a much-engrafted word. No meekness for that!

These things being so, and inertia being the heaviest thing in the world to work upon, why not as a pastime, at least, observe some regard for style? It hath a certain virtue to preserve whatsoever things be of good report. *Lead Kindly Light* is nothing in particular, really, as Newman said, but how it endures and helps because of style and diction! Its appeal

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is as much to the sick heathen as to the true believer : in fact it is much more to the fog-ridden than to those who know the Orient from on high. Yet we sing it because it is so perfect in its own way, and a sort of recreation from the breathless terseness of John Henry Newman, priest of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri :

O generous love, that he who smote
In man for man the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo !

It takes all sorts to convert a world, and we know of the old Yorkshire lady who sent for the priest when she was dying, as the 'Roman Catholics were right.' When pressed for details, she said she once went into a Catholic church and 'they was all singin' as how they were sweethearts of Jesus.' But this was a happy accident of efficacious grace, and is no argument that bad hymns are better or more practical than good ones. The ignoring of style, the absence of style, leaves us open to every intruder, interloper, who thinks he can add to our store from the plentitude of his emptiness. He can, and he does, and a million million noughts are still nought. In the days before there was an octroi for hymns, I read of a new hymn-book which had eleven hymns for Easter, one for Whitsuntide, twenty-five for Our Lady's feasts and one for the Blessed Sacrament. You see, any old sob-stuff with flowers and sweets will do for Our Lady, but hymns on the Eucharist require theology, thinking, expression distinct from outpouring, and so we do not abound in them. The subject saves us, because it imperatively calls for circumspection, and this strikes dumb any tame singer with a wild voice.

I am not urging that liturgical style should invade and possess the domain of the popular hymn, nor yet

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the other way about. Note Newman again, how well he keeps the two apart, and how matchless he is in both :

Father of lights, by Whom each day
Is kindled out of night,
Who, when the heavens were made, didst lay
Their rudiments in light :

So he renders the *Lucis Creator*. Then take the Oratorian popular manner for girls on week-day evenings in May :

O Mother-maid be thou our aid
Now in the opening year,
Lest sights of earth to sin give birth
And bring the tempter near.

What is style, anyhow? I think style in writing may be defined as austerity in the use of adjectives, for as a good life means a mortified life, so good taste means mortified taste. There is only one adjective in those eight lines above quoted, and though two can sometimes be found in one line, Newman's average is about one in every two lines. He was fastidious in thought and feeling as well as in language, and his appeal is to others like himself, *cor ad cor loquitur*. Those who found him formidable were not the little ones, but that class whom one may call outsiders, inasmuch as they have no inwardness, but deal in the outsides of things. Hence the subtlety of the definition of style—merchants of the outsides of things have no style because they have no edge, no penetration; and adjectives cannot abound with those who tend below the surface, just as superlatives are more freely used by those who do not compare carefully or who compare not at all. A generation of University education has made some difference to our sense of style, but not so much as it ought, on account of the incalculable amount of rubbish that

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has to be done away. Modern efficiency is not efficiency really, because it hurries unduly, and what is built in a hurry does not well accord with the slow results of Time; in fact Time is its enemy, and will soon be rid of it. It is hard to cage a whole ethos inside a few general remarks, and it is perilous to examine other people's consciences; but we have now a growing and intelligent Catholic middle-class, and they need not a fatuous self-complacency, but teachers who are never done with learning.

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