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I

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- 1 THE treatise of Caecilius on the Sublime, when, as you remember, my dear Terentian, we examined it together, seemed to us to be beneath the dignity of the whole subject, to fail entirely in seizing the salient points, and to offer little profit (which should be the principal aim of every writer) for the trouble of its perusal. There are two things essential to a technical treatise: the first is to define the subject; the second (I mean second in order, as it is by much the first in importance) to point out how and by what methods we may become masters of it ourselves. And yet Caecilius, while wasting his efforts in a thousand illustrations of the nature of the Sublime, as though here we were quite in the dark, somehow passes by as immaterial the question how we might be able to exalt our own genius to a certain degree of progress in sublimity.
- 2 However, perhaps it would be fairer to commend this writer's intelligence and zeal in themselves, instead of blaming him for his omissions. And since you have bidden me also to put together, if only for your entertainment, a few notes on the subject of the Sublime, let me see if there is anything in my speculations which promises advantage to men of affairs. In you, dear friend—such is my confidence in your abilities, and such the part which becomes you—I look for a sympathising and discerning¹ critic of the several parts of my treatise. For that was a just remark of his who pronounced that the points in which we resemble the divine nature are benevolence and love of truth.
- 3 As I am addressing a person so accomplished in literature, I need only state, without enlarging further on the matter, that the Sublime, wherever it occurs, consists in a certain loftiness and excellence of language, and that it is by this, and this only, that the greatest poets and prose-writers have gained eminence, and won themselves a
- 4 lasting place in the Temple of Fame. A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. To believe or not is usually in our own power; but the Sublime, acting with an imperious and irresistible force, sways every reader whether he will or no. Skill in invention, lucid arrangement and disposition of facts, are appreciated not by one passage, or by two, but gradually manifest themselves in the general structure of a work; but a sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines² an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash, and exhibits the whole power of the orator in a moment of time. Your own experience, I am sure, my dearest Terentian, would enable you to illustrate these and similar points of doctrine.

Definition

Transport

gains upper hand over the reader

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II

The first question which presents itself for solution is whether there is any art which can teach sublimity or loftiness in writing. For some hold generally that there is mere delusion in attempting to reduce such subjects to technical rules. "The Sublime," they tell us, "is born in a man, and not to be acquired by instruction; genius is the only

master who can teach it. The vigorous products of nature” (such is their view) “are weakened and in every respect debased, when robbed of their flesh and blood by frigid technicalities.” But I maintain that the truth can be shown to stand otherwise in this matter. Let us look at the case in this way; Nature in her loftier and more passionate moods, while detesting all appearance of restraint, is not wont to show herself utterly wayward and reckless; and though in all cases the vital informing principle is derived from her, yet to determine the right degree and the right moment, and to contribute the precision of practice and experience, is the peculiar province of scientific method. The great passions, when left to their own blind and rash impulses without the control of reason, are in the same danger as a ship let drive at random without ballast. Often they need the spur, but sometimes also the curb. The remark of Demosthenes with regard to human life in general,—that the greatest of all blessings is to be fortunate, but next to that and equal in importance is to be well advised,—for good fortune is utterly ruined by the absence of good counsel,—may be applied to literature, if we substitute genius for fortune, and art for counsel. Then, again (and this is the most important point of all), a writer can only learn from art when he is to abandon himself to the direction of his genius.³

These are the considerations which I submit to the unfavourable critic of such useful studies. Perhaps they may induce him to alter his opinion as to the vanity and idleness of our present investigations.

III

... “And let them check the stove’s long tongues of fire:
For if I see one tenant of the hearth,
I’ll thrust within one curling torrent flame,
And bring that roof in ashes to the ground:
But now not yet is sung my noble lay.”⁴

Such phrases cease to be tragic, and become burlesque,—I mean phrases like “curling torrent flames” and “vomiting to heaven,” and representing Boreas as a piper, and so on. Such expressions, and such images, produce an effect of confusion and obscurity, not of energy; and if each separately be examined under the light of criticism, what seemed terrible gradually sinks into absurdity. Since then, even in tragedy, where the natural dignity of the subject makes a swelling diction allowable, we cannot pardon a tasteless grandiloquence, how much more incongruous must it seem in sober prose! Hence we laugh at those fine words of Gorgias of Leontini, such as “Xerxes the Persian Zeus” and “vultures, those living tombs,” and at certain conceits of Callisthenes which are high-flown rather than sublime, and at some in Cleitarchus more ludicrous still—a writer whose frothy style tempts us to travesty Sophocles and say, “He blows a little pipe, and blows it ill.” The same faults may be observed in Amphicrates and Hegesias and Matris, who in their frequent moments (as they think) of inspiration, instead of playing the genius are simply playing the fool.

Speaking generally, it would seem that bombast is one of the hardest things to avoid in writing. For all those writers who are ambitious of a lofty style, through dread of being convicted of feebleness and poverty of language, slide by a natural gradation into the opposite extreme. “Who fails in great endeavour, nobly fails,” is their creed. Now bulk, when hollow and affected, is always objectionable, whether in material bodies or in writings, and in danger of producing on us an impression of littleness: “nothing,” it is said, “is drier than a man with the dropsy.”

The characteristic, then, of bombast is that it transcends the Sublime: but there is another fault diametrically opposed to grandeur: this is called puerility, and it is the failing of feeble and narrow minds,—indeed, the most ignoble of all vices in writing. By puerility we mean a pedantic habit of mind, which by over-elaboration ends in frigidity. Slips of this sort are made by those who, aiming at brilliancy, polish, and especially attractiveness, are landed in paltriness and silly affectation. Closely associated with this is a third sort of vice, in dealing with the passions, which Theodorus used to call false sentiment, meaning by that an ill-timed and empty display of emotion, where no emotion is called for, or of greater emotion than the situation warrants. Thus we often see an author hurried by the tumult of his mind into tedious displays of mere personal feeling which has no connection with the subject. Yet how justly ridiculous must an author appear, whose most violent transports leave his readers quite cold! However, I will dismiss this subject, as I intend to devote a separate work to the treatment of the pathetic in writing.

IV

The last of the faults which I mentioned is frequently observed in Timaeus—I mean the fault of frigidity. In other respects he is an able writer, and sometimes not unsuccessful in the loftier style; a man of wide knowledge, and full of ingenuity; a most bitter critic of the failings of others—but unhappily blind to his own. In his eagerness to be always striking out new thoughts he frequently falls into the most childish absurdities. I will only instance one or two passages, as most of them have been pointed out by Caecilius. Wishing to say something very fine about Alexander the Great he speaks of him as a man “who annexed the whole of Asia in fewer years than Isocrates spent in writing his panegyric oration in which he urges the Greeks to make war on Persia.” How strange is the comparison of the “great Emathian conqueror” with an Athenian rhetorician! By this mode of reasoning it is plain that the Spartans were very inferior to Isocrates in courage, since it took them thirty years to conquer Messene, while he finished the composition of this harangue in ten. Observe, too, his language on the Athenians taken in Sicily. “They paid the penalty for their impious outrage on Hermes in mutilating his statues; and the chief agent in their destruction was one who was descended on his father’s side from the injured deity—Hermocrates, son of Hermon.” I wonder, my dearest Terentian, how he omitted to say of the tyrant Dionysius that for his impiety towards Zeus and Herakles he was deprived of his power by Dion and Herakleides. Yet why speak of Timaeus, when even men like Xenophon and Plato—the very demi-gods of literature—though

they had sat at the feet of Socrates, sometimes forgot themselves in the pursuit of such paltry conceits. The former, in his account of the Spartan Polity, has these words: "Their voice you would no more hear than if they were of marble, their gaze is as immovable as if they were cast in bronze; you would deem them more modest than the very maidens in their eyes."⁵ To speak of the pupils of the eye as "modest maidens" was a piece of absurdity becoming Amphicrates⁶ rather than Xenophon. And then what a strange delusion to suppose that modesty is always without exception expressed in the eye! whereas it is commonly said that there is nothing by which an impudent fellow betrays his character so much as by the expression of his eyes. Thus Achilles addresses Agamemnon in the *Iliad* as "drunkard, with eye of dog."⁷ Timaeus, however, with that want of judgment which characterises plagiarists, could not leave to Xenophon the possession of even this piece of frigidity. In relating how Agathocles carried off his cousin, who was wedded to another man, from the festival of the unveiling, he asks, "Who could have done such a deed, unless he had harlots instead of maidens in his eyes?" And Plato himself, elsewhere so supreme a master of style, meaning to describe certain recording tablets, says, "They shall write, and deposit in the temples memorials of cypress wood";⁸ and again, "Then concerning walls, Megillus, I give my vote with Sparta that we should let them lie asleep within the ground, and not awaken them."⁹ And Herodotus falls pretty much under the same censure, when he speaks of beautiful women as "tortures to the eye,"¹⁰ though here there is some excuse, as the speakers in this passage are drunken barbarians. Still, even from dramatic motives, such errors in taste should not be permitted to deface the pages of an immortal work.

V

Now all these glaring improprieties of language may be traced to one common root—the pursuit of novelty in thought. It is this that has turned the brain of nearly all the learned world of to-day. Human blessings and human ills commonly flow from the same source: and, to apply this principle to literature, those ornaments of style, those sublime and delightful images, which contribute to success, are the foundation and the origin, not only of excellence, but also of failure. It is thus with the figures called transitions, and hyperboles, and the use of plurals for singulars. I shall show presently the dangers which they seem to involve. Our next task, therefore, must be to propose and to settle the question how we may avoid the faults of style related to sublimity.

VI

Our best hope of doing this will be first of all to grasp some definite theory and criterion of the true Sublime. Nevertheless this is a hard matter; for a just judgment of style is the final fruit of long experience; still, I believe that the way I shall indicate will enable us to distinguish between the true and false Sublime, so far as it can be done by rule.

VII

It is proper to observe that in human life nothing is truly great which is despised by all elevated minds. For example, no man of sense can regard wealth, honour, glory, and power, or any of those things which are surrounded by a great external parade of pomp and circumstance, as the highest blessings, seeing that merely to despise such things is a blessing of no common order: certainly those who possess them are admired much less than those who, having the opportunity to acquire them, through greatness of soul neglect it. Now let us apply this principle to the Sublime in poetry or in prose; let us ask in all cases, is it merely a specious sublimity? is this gorgeous exterior a mere false and clumsy pageant, which if laid open will be found to conceal nothing but emptiness? for if so, a noble mind will scorn instead of admiring it. It is natural to us to feel our souls lifted up by the true Sublime, and conceiving a sort of generous exultation to be filled with joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read. If then any work, on being repeatedly submitted to the judgment of an acute and cultivated critic, fails to dispose his mind to lofty ideas; if the thoughts which it suggests do not extend beyond what is actually expressed; and if, the longer you read it, the less you think of it,—there can be here no true sublimity, when the effect is not sustained beyond the mere act of perusal. But when a passage is pregnant in suggestion, when it is hard, nay impossible, to distract the attention from it, and when it takes a strong and lasting hold on the memory, then we may be sure that we have lighted on the true Sublime. In general we may regard those words as truly noble and sublime which always please and please all readers. For when the same book always produces the same impression on all who read it, whatever be the difference in their pursuits, their manner of life, their aspirations, their ages, or their language, such a harmony of opposites gives irresistible authority to their favourable verdict.



Test of great literature

VIII

I shall now proceed to enumerate the five principal sources, as we may call them, from which almost all sublimity is derived, assuming, of course, the preliminary gift on which all these five sources depend, namely, command of language. The first and the most important is (1) grandeur of thought, as I have pointed out elsewhere in my work on Xenophon. The second is (2) a vigorous and spirited treatment of the passions. These two conditions of sublimity depend mainly on natural endowments, whereas those which follow derive assistance from Art. The third is (3) a certain artifice in the employment of figures, which are of two kinds, figures of thought and figures of speech. The fourth is (4) dignified expression, which is sub-divided into (a) the proper choice of words, and (b) the use of metaphors and other ornaments of diction. The fifth cause of sublimity, which embraces all those preceding, is (5) majesty and elevation of structure. Let us consider what is involved in each of these five forms separately.



Nature



Art

I must first, however, remark that some of these five divisions are omitted by

Caecilius; for instance, he says nothing about the passions. Now if he made this omission from a belief that the Sublime and the Pathetic are one and the same thing, holding them to be always coexistent and interdependent, he is in error. Some passions are found which, so far from being lofty, are actually low, such as pity, grief, fear; and conversely, sublimity is often not in the least affecting, as we may see (among innumerable other instances) in those bold expressions of our great poet on the sons of Aloëus—

“Highly they raged
To pile huge Ossa on the Olympian peak,
And Pelion with all his waving trees
On Ossa’s crest to raise, and climb the sky;”

and the yet more tremendous climax —

“And now had they accomplished it.”

And in orators, in all passages dealing with panegyric, and in all the more imposing and declamatory places, dignity and sublimity play an indispensable part; but pathos is mostly absent. Hence the most pathetic orators have usually but little skill in panegyric, and conversely those who are powerful in panegyric generally fail in pathos. If, on the other hand, Caecilius supposed that pathos never contributes to sublimity, and this is why he thought it alien to the subject, he is entirely deceived. For I would confidently pronounce that nothing is so conducive to sublimity as an appropriate display of genuine passion, which bursts out with a kind of “fine madness” and divine inspiration, and falls on our ears like the voice of a god.

IX

I have already said that of all these five conditions of the Sublime the most important is the first, that is, a certain lofty cast of mind. Therefore, although this is a faculty rather natural than acquired, nevertheless it will be well for us in this instance also to train up our souls to sublimity, and make them as it were ever big with noble thoughts. How, it may be asked, is this to be done? I have hinted elsewhere in my writings that sublimity is, so to say, the image of greatness of soul. Hence a thought in its naked simplicity, even though unuttered, is sometimes admirable by the sheer force of its sublimity; for instance, the silence of Ajax in the eleventh *Odyssey*¹¹ is great, and grander than anything he could have said. It is absolutely essential, then, first of all to settle the question whence this grandeur of conception arises; and the answer is that true eloquence can be found only in those whose spirit is generous and aspiring. For those whose whole lives are wasted in paltry and illiberal thoughts and habits cannot possibly produce any work worthy of the lasting reverence of mankind. It is only natural that their words should be full of sublimity whose thoughts are full of majesty. Hence sublime thoughts belong properly to the loftiest minds. Such was the reply of Alexander to his general Parmenio, when the latter had observed, “Were I Alexander, I should have been satisfied”; “And I, were I Parmenio”...

Platonian?

The distance between heaven and earth¹²—a measure, one might say, not less appropriate to Homer's genius than to the stature of his discord. How different is that touch of Hesiod's in his description of sorrow—if the *Shield* is really one of his works: “rheum from her nostrils flowed”¹³—an image not terrible, but disgusting. Now consider how Homer gives dignity to his divine persons—

“As far as lies his airy ken, who sits
On some tall crag, and scans the wine-dark sea:
So far extends the heavenly coursers' stride.”¹⁴

He measures their speed by the extent of the whole world—a grand comparison, which might reasonably lead us to remark that if the divine steeds were to take two such leaps in succession, they would find no room in the world for another. Sublime also are the images in the “Battle of the Gods”—

“A trumpet sound
Rang through the air, and shook the Olympian height;
Then terror seized the monarch of the dead,
And springing from his throne he cried aloud
With fearful voice, lest the earth, rent asunder
By Neptune's mighty arm, forthwith reveal
To mortal and immortal eyes those halls
So drear and dank, which e'en the gods abhor.”¹⁵

Earth rent from its foundations! Tartarus itself laid bare! The whole world torn asunder and turned upside down! Why, my dear friend, this is a perfect hurly-burly, in which the whole universe, heaven and hell, mortals and immortals, share the conflict and the peril. A terrible picture, certainly, but (unless perhaps it is to be taken allegorically) downright impious, and overstepping the bounds of decency. It seems to me that the strange medley of wounds, quarrels, revenges, tears, bonds, and other woes which makes up the Homeric tradition of the gods was designed by its author to degrade his deities, as far as possible, into men, and exalt his men into deities—or rather, his gods are worse off than his human characters, since we, when we are unhappy, have a haven from ills in death, while the gods, according to him, not only live for ever, but live for ever in misery. Far to be preferred to this description of the Battle of the Gods are those passages which exhibit the divine nature in its true light, as something spotless, great, and pure, as, for instance, a passage which has often been handled by my predecessors, the lines on Poseidon:—

“Mountain and wood and solitary peak,
The ships Achaian, and the towers of Troy,
Trembled beneath the god's immortal feet.
Over the waves he rode, and round him played,
Lured from the deeps, the ocean's monstrous brood,
With uncouth gambols welcoming their lord:
The charmed billows parted: on they flew.”¹⁶

And thus also the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man, having formed an adequate conception of the Supreme Being, gave it adequate expression in the opening words

of his “Laws”: “God said” — what? — “let there be light, and there was light: let there be land, and there was.”

I trust you will not think me tedious if I quote yet one more passage from our great poet (referring this time to human characters) in illustration of the manner in which he leads us with him to heroic heights. A sudden and baffling darkness as of night has overspread the ranks of his warring Greeks. Then Ajax in sore perplexity cries aloud —

“Almighty Sire,
Only from darkness save Achaia’s sons;
No more I ask, but give us back the day;
Grant but our sight, and slay us, if thou wilt.”¹⁷

The feelings are just what we should look for in Ajax. He does not, you observe, ask for his life — such a request would have been unworthy of his heroic soul — but finding himself paralysed by darkness, and prohibited from employing his valour in any noble action, he chafes because his arms are idle, and prays for a speedy return of light. “At least,” he thinks, “I shall find a warrior’s grave, even though Zeus himself should fight against me.” In such passages the mind of the poet is swept along in the whirlwind of the struggle, and, in his own words, he

“Like the fierce war-god, raves, or wasting fire
Through the deep thickets on a mountain-side;
His lips drop foam.”¹⁸

But there is another and a very interesting aspect of Homer’s mind. When we turn to the *Odyssey* we find occasion to observe that a great poetical genius in the decline of power which comes with old age naturally leans towards the fabulous. For it is evident that this work was composed after the *Iliad*, in proof of which we may mention, among many other indications, the introduction in the *Odyssey* of the sequel to the story of his heroes’ adventures at Troy, as so many additional episodes in the Trojan war, and especially the tribute of sorrow and mourning which is paid in that poem to departed heroes, as if in fulfilment of some previous design. The *Odyssey* is, in fact, a sort of epilogue to the *Iliad* —

“There warrior Ajax lies, Achilles there,
And there Patroclus, godlike counsellor;
There lies my own dear son.”¹⁹

And for the same reason, I imagine, whereas in the *Iliad*, which was written when his genius was in its prime, the whole structure of the poem is founded on action and struggle, in the *Odyssey* he generally prefers the narrative style, which is proper to old age. Hence Homer in his *Odyssey* may be compared to the setting sun: he is still as great as ever, but he has lost his fervent heat. The strain is now pitched to a lower key than in the “Tale of Troy divine”: we begin to miss that high and equable sublimity which never flags or sinks, that continuous current of moving incidents, those rapid transitions, that force of eloquence, that opulence of imagery which is ever true to Nature. Like the sea when it retires upon itself and leaves its shores waste

and bare, henceforth the tide of sublimity begins to ebb, and draws us away into the dim region of myth and legend. In saying this I am not forgetting the fine storm-pieces in the *Odyssey*, the story of the Cyclops,²⁰ and other striking passages. It is Homer grown old I am discussing, but still it is Homer. Yet in every one of these passages the mythical predominates over the real.

My purpose in making this digression was, as I said, to point out into what trifles the second childhood of genius is too apt to be betrayed; such, I mean, as the bag in which the winds are confined,²¹ the tale of Odysseus's comrades being changed by Circe into swine²² ("whimpering porkers" Zoilus called them), and how Zeus was fed like a nestling by the doves,²³ and how Odysseus passed ten nights on the shipwreck without food,²⁴ and the improbable incidents in the slaying of the suitors.²⁵ When Homer nods like this, we must be content to say that he dreams as Zeus might dream. Another reason for these remarks on the *Odyssey* is that I wished to make you understand that great poets and prose-writers, after they have lost their power of depicting the passions, turn naturally to the delineation of character. Such, for instance, is the lifelike and characteristic picture of the palace of Odysseus, which may be called a sort of comedy of manners.