





*The Nature and Characteristics of Literature.*

A

## LECTURE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE FACULTY  
OF PHILOSOPHY AND LETTERS,

IN THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY.

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## A LECTURE,

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WISHING to address you, Gentlemen, at the commencement of a new Session, I tried to find a subject for discussion, which might be at once suitable to the occasion, yet neither too large for your time, nor too minute or abstruse for your attention. I think I see one for my purpose in the very title of your Faculty. It is the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters. Now the question may arise as to what is meant by "Philosophy", and what is meant by "Letters". As to the other Faculties, the subject-matter which they profess is intelligible, as soon as named, and beyond all dispute. We know what Science is, what Medicine, what Law, and what Theology; but we have not so much ease in determining what is meant by Philosophy and Letters. Each department of that twofold province needs explanation: it will be sufficient, on an occasion like this, to investigate one of them. Accordingly I shall select for remark the latter of the two, and at-

tempt to determine what we are to understand by Letters or Literature, in what Literature consists, and how it stands relatively to Science. We speak, for instance, of ancient and modern literature, the literature of the day, sacred literature, light literature; and our lectures in this place are devoted to classical literature and English literature. Are Letters then synonymous with books? This cannot be, or they would include in their range Philosophy, Law, and in short, the teaching of all the other Faculties. Far from confusing these various studies, we view the works of Plato or Cicero sometimes as philosophy, sometimes as literature; on the other hand, no one would ever be tempted to speak of Euclid as literature, or of Matthiæ's Greek Grammar. Is then literature synonymous with composition? with books written with an attention to style? is literature fine writing? again, is it studied and artificial writing?

There are excellent persons who seem to adopt this last account of Literature, as their own idea of it. They depreciate it, as if it were the result of a mere art or trick of words. Professedly indeed, they are aiming at the Greek and Roman classics, but their argument has quite as great

force against all literature as against any. I think I shall be best able to bring out what I have to say on the subject, by examining the statements which they make in defence of their own view of it. They contend then, 1. that fine writing, as exemplified in the Classics, is mainly a matter of conceits, fancies, and prettinesses, decked out in fine words; 2. that this is the proof of it, that the classics will not bear translating;—and this is why I have said that the real attack is upon literature altogether, not the classical only; for, to speak generally, all literature, modern as well as ancient, lies under this disadvantage. This, however, they will not allow; for they maintain, 3. that Holy Scripture presents a remarkable contrast to secular on this very point, in that Scripture does easily admit of translation, though it is the most sublime and beautiful of all writings.

Now I will begin by stating these three positions in the words of a writer, who is cited by the estimable Catholics in question, as a witness, or rather as an advocate, in their behalf, though he is far from being able to challenge the respect which is inspired by themselves.

“There are two sorts of eloquence”, says this

writer, “the one indeed scarce deserves the name of it, which consists chiefly in laboured and polished periods, an over-curious and artificial arrangement of figures, tinselled over with a gaudy embellishment of words, which glitter, but convey little or no light to the understanding. This kind of writing is for the most part much affected and admired by the people of weak judgment and vicious taste; but it is a piece of affectation and formality the sacred writers are utter strangers to. It is a vain and boyish eloquence; and, as it has always been esteemed below the great geniuses of all ages, so much more so, with respect to those writers who were actuated by the spirit of Infinite Wisdom, and therefore wrote with that force and majesty with which never man writ. The other sort of eloquence is quite the reverse to this, and which may be said to be the true characteristic of the Holy Scriptures; where the excellence does not arise from a laboured and far-fetched elocution, but from a surprising mixture of simplicity and majesty, which is a double character, so difficult to be united, that it is seldom to be met with in compositions merely human. We see nothing in Holy Writ of affectation and superfluous



ornament . . . Now, it is observable that the most excellent profane authors, whether Greek or Latin, lose most of their graces whenever we find them literally translated. Homer's famed representation of Jupiter—his cried-up description of a tempest, his relation of Neptune's shaking the earth and opening it to its centre, his description of Pallas's horses, with numbers of other long-since admired passages, flag, and almost vanish away, in the vulgar Latin translation.

“Let any one but take the pains to read the common Latin interpretations of Virgil, Theocritus, or even of Pindar, and one may venture to affirm, he will be able to trace out but few remains of the graces which charmed him so much in the original. The natural conclusion from hence is, that in the classical authors, the expression, the sweetness of the numbers, occasioned by a musical placing of words, constitute a great part of their beauties; whereas in the sacred writings, they consist more in the greatness of the things themselves, than in the words and expressions. The ideas and conceptions are so great and lofty in their own nature, that they necessarily appear magnificent in the most artless dress. Look but into the Bible, and we see them shine

through the most simple and literal translations. That glorious description which Moses gives of the creation of the heavens and the earth, which Longinus . . . was so greatly taken with, has not lost the least whit of its intrinsic worth, and though it has undergone so many translations, yet triumphs over all, and breaks forth with as much force and vehemence as in the original. . . . In the history of Joseph, where Joseph makes himself known, and weeps aloud upon the neck of his dear brother Benjamin, that all the house of Pharaoh heard him, at that instant none of his brethren are introduced as uttering aught, either to express their present joy or palliate their former injuries to him. On all sides, there immediately ensues a deep and solemn silence; a silence infinitely more eloquent and expressive than anything else could have been substituted in its place. Had Thucydides, Herodotus, Livy, or any of the celebrated classical historians, been employed in writing this history, when they came to this point, they would doubtless have exhausted all their fund of eloquence in furnishing Joseph's brethren with laboured and studied harangues, which, however fine they might have been in themselves, would nevertheless have

been unnatural, and altogether improper on the occasion".\*

This is eloquently written, but it contains, I consider, a mixture of truth and falsehood, which it will be my business to discriminate from each other. Far be it from me to deny the unapproachable grandeur and simplicity of Holy Scripture; but I shall maintain that the classics are, as human compositions, simple and majestic and natural too. I grant that Scripture is concerned in things, but I will not grant that classical literature is simply concerned with words. I grant that human literature is often elaborate, but I will maintain that elaborate composition is not unknown to the writers of Scripture. I grant that human literature cannot easily be translated out of the particular language to which it belongs; but it is not at all the rule that Scripture can easily be translated either;—and now I address myself to my task:—

Here then, in the first place, I observe, Gentlemen, that, Literature, from the derivation of the word, implies writing, not speaking; this, how-

\* Sterne, Sermon xlii.

ever, arises from the circumstance of the copiousness, variety, and public circulation of the matters of which it consists. What is spoken cannot outrun the range of the speaker's voice, and perishes in the uttering. When words are in demand to express a long course of thought,—when they have to be conveyed to the ends of the earth, or perpetuated for the benefit of posterity, they must be written down, that is, reduced to the shape of literature; still, properly speaking, the terms, by which we denote this characteristic faculty of man, belong to its exhibition by means of the voice, not of handwriting. It addresses itself, in its primary idea, to the ear, not to the eye. We call it the power of speech, we call it language, that is, the use of the tongue; and, even when we write, we still keep in mind what was its original instrument, for we use freely such terms in our books as saying, speaking, telling, talking, calling; we use the terms phraseology and diction; as if we were still addressing ourselves to the ear.

Now I insist on this, because it shows that speech, and therefore literature, which is its permanent record, is essentially a personal work. It is not some production or result, attained by

the partnership of several persons, or by machinery, or by any natural process, but in its very idea it proceeds, and must proceed, from some one given individual. Two persons cannot be the authors of the sounds which strike our ear; and, as they cannot be speaking one and the same speech, neither can they be writing one and the same lecture or discourse,—which must certainly belong to some one person or other, and is the expression of that one person's ideas and feelings,—ideas and feelings personal to himself, though others may have parallel and similar ones,—proper to himself, in the same sense as his voice, his air, his countenance, his carriage, and his action, are personal. In other words, Literature expresses, not objective truth, as it is called, but subjective; not things, but thoughts.

Now this doctrine will become clearer by considering another use of words, which does relate to objective truth, or to things; which relates to matters, not personal, not subjective to the individual, but, which even were there no individual man in the whole world to know them or to talk about them, would exist still. Such objects become the matter of Science, and words indeed are used to express them, but such words are rather

symbols than language; and, however many we use, and, however we may perpetuate them by writing, we never could make any kind of literature out of them, or call them by that name. Such, for instance, would be Euclid's Elements; they relate to truths universal and eternal; they are not mere thoughts, but things: they exist in themselves, not by virtue of our understanding them, not in dependence upon our will, but in what is called the *nature* of things, or at least on conditions external to us. The words then in which they are set forth are not language, speech, literature, but rather, as I have said, symbols. And, as a proof of it, you will recollect, that it is possible, nay usual, to set forth the propositions of Euclid in algebraical notation, which, as all would admit, has nothing to do with literature. What is true of mathematics, is true also of every study, so far forth as it is scientific; it makes use of words as the mere vehicle of things, and is thereby withdrawn from the province of literature. Thus metaphysics, ethics, law, political economy, chemistry, theology, cease to be literature in the same degree as they are capable of a severe scientific treatment. And hence it is that Aristotle's works on the one hand, though

at first sight literature, approach in character, at least a great number of them, to mere science; for even though the things which he treats of and exhibits may not always be real and true, yet he treats them as if they were, not as if they were the thoughts of his own mind; that is, he treats them scientifically. On the other hand Law or Natural History has before now been treated by an author with so much of colouring derived from his own mind, as to become a sort of literature; this is especially seen in the instance of Theology, when it takes the shape of Pulpit Eloquence. It is seen too in historical composition, which becomes a mere specimen of chronology or a chronicle, when divested of the philosophy, the skill, or the party and personal feelings of the particular writer. Science then has to do with things, literature with thoughts; science is universal, literature is personal; science uses words merely as symbols, but literature uses language in its full compass, as including phraseology, idiom, style, composition, rhythm, eloquence, and whatever other properties are included in it.

Let us then put aside the scientific use of words, when we are to speak of language and literature. Literature is the personal use or exercise

of language. That this is so, is further proved from the fact that one author uses it so differently from another. Language itself in its very origination would seem to be traceable to individuals. Their peculiarities have given it its character. We are often able in fact to trace particular phrases or idioms to individuals; we know the history of their rise. Slang surely, as it is called, comes of, and breathes of the personal. The connection between the force of words in particular languages and the habits and sentiments of the nations speaking them, has often been pointed out. And, while the many use language, as they find it, the man of genius uses it indeed, but subjects it withal to his own purposes, and moulds it according to his own peculiarities. The throng and succession of ideas, thoughts, feelings, imaginations, aspirations, which pass within him, the abstractions, the juxtapositions, the comparisons, the discriminations, the conceptions, which are so original in him, his views of external things, his judgments upon life, manners, and history, the exercises of his wit, of his humour, of his depth, of his sagacity,—he images forth all these innumerable and incessant creations, the very pulsation and throbbing of his intellect,—he gives utterance to



them all,—in a corresponding language, which is as multiform as this inward mental action itself, and analogous to it; the faithful expression of his intense personality, attending on his own inward world of thought as its very shadow: so that we might as well say that one man's shadow is another's, as that the style of a really gifted mind can belong to any but himself. It follows him about *as* a shadow. His *thought* and *feeling* are personal, and so his *language* is personal.

Thought and speech are inseparable from each other. Matter and expression are parts of one: style is a thinking out into language. This is what I have been laying down, and this is literature; not *things*, not the verbal symbols of things; not on the other hand mere *words*; but thoughts expressed in language. Call to mind, Gentlemen, the meaning of the Greek word, which expresses this special prerogative of man over the feeble intelligence of the inferior animals. It is called λόγος: what does λόγος mean? it stands both for *reason* and for *speech*, and it is difficult to say which it means more properly. It means both at once: why? because really they cannot be divided,—because they are in a true

sense one. When we can separate light and illumination, life and motion, the convex and the concave of a curve, then will it be possible for thought to tread speech under foot, and to hope to do without it—then will it be conceivable that the vigorous and fertile intellect should renounce its own double, its instrument of expression, and the channel of its speculations and emotions.

Critics should consider this view of the subject before they lay down such canons of taste as the writer whose pages I have quoted. Such men as he consider fine writing to be an *addition from without* to the matter treated of,—a sort of ornament superinduced, or a luxury indulged in, by those who have time and inclination for such vanities. They speak as if *one* man could do the thought, and *another* the style. We read in Persian travels of the way in which young gentlemen go to work in the East, when they would engage in correspondence with those who inspire them with hope or fear. They cannot write one sentence themselves; so they betake themselves to the professional letter-writer. They confide to him the object they have in view. They have a point to gain from a superior, a favour to ask, an evil to deprecate; they have to approach a man

in power, or to make court to some beautiful lady. The professional man manufactures words for them, as they are wanted, as a stationer sells them paper, or a schoolmaster might cut their pens. Thought and word are, in their conception, two things, and thus there is a division of labour. The man of thought comes to the man of words; and the man of words, duly instructed in the thought, dips the pen of desire into the ink of devotedness, and proceeds to spread it over the page of desolation. Then the nightingale of affection is heard to warble to the rose of loveliness, while the breeze of anxiety plays around the brow of expectation. This is what the Easterns are said to consider fine writing; and it seems pretty much the idea of the school of critics, to whom I have been referring.

We have an instance in literary history of this very proceeding nearer home, in a great University, in the latter years of the last century. I have referred to it before now in a public lecture elsewhere; but it is too much in point here to be omitted. A learned Arabic scholar had to deliver a set of lectures before its doctors and professors on an historical subject in which his reading had lain. A linguist is conversant with science rather

than with literature; but this gentleman felt that his lectures must not be without a style. Being of the opinion of the Orientals, with whose writings he was familiar, he determined to buy a style. He took the step of engaging a person, at a price, to turn the matter which he had got together, into rhetorical English. Observe, he did not wish for mere grammatical English, but for an ambitious, pretentious style. An artist was found in the person of a country curate, and the job was carried out. His lectures remain to this day, in their own place in the protracted series of annual Discourses to which they belong, distinguished amid a number of heavyish compositions by the rhetorical and ambitious diction for which he went into the market. This learned divine, indeed, and the author I have quoted, differ from each other in the estimate they respectively form of literary composition; but they agree together in this,—in considering such composition a trick and a trade; they put it on a par with the gold plate and the flowers and the music of a banquet, which do not make the viands better, but the entertainment more pleasurable; as if language were the hired servant, the mere mistress of the reason, and not the lawful wife in her own house.

But can they really think that Homer, or Pindar, or Shakespeare, or Dryden, or Walter Scott, were accustomed to aim at diction for its own sake, instead of being inspired with their subject, and pouring forth beautiful words because they had beautiful thoughts? this is surely too great a paradox to be borne. Rather, it is the fire within the author's breast which overflows in the torrent of his burning, irresistible eloquence; it is the poetry of his inner soul, which relieves itself in the Ode or the Elegy; and his mental attitude and bearing, the beauty of his moral countenance, the force and keenness of his logic, are imaged in the tenderness, or energy, or richness of his language. Nay, according to the well-known line, "*facit indignatio versus*"; not the words alone, but even the rhythm, the metre, the verse, will be the contemporaneous offspring of the emotion or imagination which possesses him. "*Poeta nascitur, non fit*", says the proverb; and this is in numerous instances true of his poems, as well as of himself. They are born, not framed; they are a strain rather than a composition; and their perfection is the monument, not so much of his skill as of his power. And this is true of prose as well as of verse in its degree: who will

not recognize in the vision of Mirza a delicacy and beauty of style which is very difficult to describe, but which is felt to be in exact correspondence to the ideas of which it is the expression?

And, since the thoughts and reasonings of an author have, as we have said, a personal character, no wonder that his style is not only the image of his subject, but of his mind. That pomp of language, that full and tuneful diction, that felicitousness in the choice and exquisiteness in the collocation of words, which to prosaic writers seem artificial, is nothing else but the mere habit and way of a lofty intellect. Aristotle, in his sketch of the magnanimous man, tells us that his voice is deep, his motions slow, and his stature commanding. In like manner, the elocution of a great intellect is great. His language expresses, not only his great thoughts, but his great self. Certainly he might use fewer words than he uses; but he fertilizes his simplest ideas, and bursts out into a multitude of details, and prolongs the march of his sentences, and sweeps round to the full diapason of his harmony, as if *κύδει γάίῳ*, rejoicing in his own vigour and richness of resource. I say, a narrow critic will call it verbiage, when really it is a sort of ful-

ness of heart, parallel to that which makes the merry boy whistle as he walks, or the strong man, like the smith in the novel, flourish his club when there is no one to fight with.

Shakespeare furnishes us with frequent instances of this peculiarity, and all so beautiful, that it is difficult to select for quotation. For instance, in *Macbeth*:—

“ Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,  
And, with some sweet oblivious antidote,  
Cleanse the foul bosom of that perilous stuff,  
Which weighs upon the heart ? ”

Here a simple idea, by a process which is that of the orator rather than of the poet, but still from the native vigour of genius, is expanded into a many-membered period.

The following from *Hamlet* is of the same kind:—

“ ’Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river of the eye,  
Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,  
Together with all forms, modes, shows of grief,  
That can denote me truly”.

Now, if such declamation, for declamation it is, however noble, be allowable in a poet, whose genius is so far removed from pompousness or pretence, much more is it allowable in an orator, whose very province it is to put forth words to the best advantage he can. Cicero has nothing more redundant in any part of his writings than these passages from Shakespeare. No lover then at least of Shakespeare may fairly accuse Cicero of gorgeousness of phraseology or diffuseness of style. Nor will any sound critic be tempted to do so. As a certain unstudied neatness and propriety and grace of diction may be required of any author who lays claim to be a classic, for the same reason that a certain attention to dress is expected of every gentleman; so to Cicero may be allowed the privilege of the “*os magna sonaturum*”, of which the ancient critic speaks. His copious, majestic, musical flow of language, even if sometimes beyond what the subject-matter demands, is never out of keeping with the occasion or with the speaker. It is the expression of lofty sentiments in lofty sentences, the “*mens magna in corpore magno*”. It is the development of the inner man. Cicero vividly realised the *status* of a Roman senator and statesman, and the pride of



place of Rome, in all the grace and grandeur which attached to her; and he imbibed and became what he admired. As the exploits of Scipio or Pompey are the expression of this greatness in deed, so the language of Cicero is the expression of it in word. And, as the acts of the Roman ruler or soldier represent to us, in a manner special to themselves, the characteristic magnanimity of the lords of the earth, so do the speeches or treatises of her accomplished orator bring it home to our imaginations as no other writing could do. Neither Livy, nor Tacitus, nor Terence, nor Seneca, nor Pliny, nor Quintilian, is an adequate spokesman for the Imperial City. They write Latin; Cicero writes Roman.

You will say that Cicero's language is undeniably studied, but that Shakespeare's is as undeniably natural and spontaneous; and that this is what is meant, when the classics are accused of being mere artists of words. Here we are introduced to a further large question, which gives me the opportunity of anticipating a misapprehension of my meaning. I observe then, that, not only is that lavish richness of style, which I have noticed in Shakespeare, justifiable on the

principles which I have been laying down, but, what is less easy to receive, even elaborateness in composition is no mark of trick or artifice in an author. Undoubtedly the works of the classics, particularly the Latin, *are* elaborate; they have cost a great deal of time, care, and trouble. They have had many rough copies; I grant it. I grant also that there are writers of name, ancient and modern, who really are guilty of the absurdity of making sentences, as the end of their employment. Such was Isocrates; such were some of the sophists; they were set on words, to the neglect of thoughts or things; I cannot defend them. If I must give an English instance of this fault, much as I love and revere the personal character and intellectual vigour of Dr. Johnson, I cannot deny that his style often outruns the sense and the occasion, and is wanting in that simplicity which is the attribute of genius. Still, granting all this, I cannot grant, notwithstanding, that genius never need take pains,—that genius may not improve by practice,—that it never commits failures, and succeeds the second time,—that it never finishes off at leisure what it has thrown off in the outline at a stroke.

Take the instance of the painter or the sculptor;

he has a conception in his mind which he wishes to represent in the medium of his art;—the Madonna and Child, or Innocence, or Fortitude, or some historical character or event. Do you mean to say he does not study his subject? does he not make sketches? does he not even call them “studies”? does he not call his workroom a *studio*? is he not ever designing, rejecting, adopting, correcting, perfecting? Are not the first attempts of Michael Angelo and Raffaele extant, in the case of some of their most celebrated compositions? Will any one say that the Apollo Belvidere is not a conception patiently elaborated into its proper perfection? These departments of taste are, according to the received notions of the world, the very province of genius, and yet we call them *arts*; they are the “Fine Arts”. Why may not that be true of literary composition, which is true of painting, sculpture, architecture, and music? Why may not language be wrought as well as the clay of the modeller? why may not words be worked up as well as colours? why should not skill in diction be simply subservient and instrumental to the great prototypal ideas which are the contemplation of a Plato or a Virgil? Our greatest poet tells us,

" The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,  
 And, as imagination bodies forth  
 The form of things unknown, the poet's pen  
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing  
 A local habitation and a name".

Now, is it wonderful, that that pen of his  
 should sometimes be at fault for a while,—that it  
 should pause, write, erase, re-write, amend, com-  
 plete, before he satisfied himself that his language  
 had done justice to the conceptions which his  
 mind's eye contemplated?

In this point of view, doubtless, many or most  
 writers are elaborate; and those certainly not the  
 least, whose style is furthest removed from orna-  
 ment, being simple and natural, or vehement, or  
 severely business-like and practical. Who so ener-  
 getic and manly as Demosthenes? Yet he is  
 said to have transcribed Thucydides nine times  
 over in the formation of his style. Who so grace-  
 fully natural as Herodotus? yet his very dialect  
 is not his own, but chosen for the sake of the  
 perfection of his narrative. Who exhibits such  
 happy negligence as our own Addison? yet  
 artistic fastidiousness was so notorious in his in-  
 stance, that the report has got abroad, truly or

not, that he was too late in his issue of an important state paper, from his habit of revision and re-composition. Such great authors were working by a model which was before the eyes of their intellect, and they were labouring to say what they had to say, in such a way as would most exactly and suitably express it. It is not wonderful that other authors, whose style is not simple, should be instances of a similar literary diligence. Virgil wished his *Æneid* to be burned, elaborate as is its composition, because he felt it needed more labour still, in order to make it perfect. The historian Gibbon in the last century is another instance in point. You must not suppose I am going to recommend his style for imitation, any more than his infidelity; but I refer to him as the example of a writer feeling the task which lay before him, feeling that he had to bring out into words for the comprehension of his readers a great and complicated scene, and wishing that his words should be adequate to his undertaking. I think he wrote the first chapter of his *History* three times over; it was not that he corrected or improved the first copy; but he put his first essay, and then his second, aside—he recast his matter, till he had hit the

precise exhibition of it which he thought demanded by his subject.

Now in all these instances, I wish you to observe, what I have admitted about literary workmanship, differs from the doctrine which I am opposing in this,—that the mere dealer in words cares little or nothing for the subject which he is embellishing, but can paint and gild anything whatever to order; whereas the artist, whom I am acknowledging, has his great or rich visions before him, and his only aim is to bring out what he thinks or what he feels, in a way adequate to the thing spoken of, and appropriate to the speaker.

The illustration which I have been borrowing from the Fine Arts will enable me to go a step further. I have been showing the connection of the thought with the language in literary composition; and in doing so, I have exposed the unphilosophical notion, that the language was an extra which could be dispensed with, and provided to order according to the demand. But I have not yet brought out, what immediately follows from this, and which was the second point which I had to show, viz., that to be capable

of easy translation is no test of the excellence of a composition. If I must say what I think, I should lay down with little hesitation, that the truth was almost the reverse of this doctrine. Nor are many words required to show it. Such a doctrine as is contained in the passage of the Anglo-Irish author I quoted, goes upon the assumption that one language is just like another language,—that every language has all the ideas, turns of thought, delicacies of expression, figures, associations, abstractions, points of view, which every other language has. Now, as far as regards Science, it is true that all languages are pretty much alike for the purposes of Science; but even in this respect some are more suitable than others, which have to coin words, or to borrow them, in order to express scientific ideas. But if languages are not all equally adapted even to furnish symbols for those universal and eternal truths in which Science consists, how can they reasonably be expected to be all equally rich, equally forcible, equally musical, equally exact, equally happy in expressing the idiosyncratic peculiarities of thought of some original and rich mind, who has availed himself of one of them?

• A great author takes his native language, masters

it, partly throws himself into it, partly moulds and adapts it, and pours out his multitude of ideas through the variously ramified and delicately minute channels of expression which he has found or framed; does it follow that this his personal presence (as it may be called) can forthwith be transferred to every other language under the sun? Then may we reasonably maintain that Beethoven's *piano* music is not really beautiful, because it cannot be played on the hurdy-gurdy. Were not this astonishing doctrine maintained by persons far superior to the writer whom I have selected for animadversion, I should find it difficult to be patient under a gratuitous extravagance. It seems that a really great author must admit of translation, and that it is a test of his excellence when he reads to advantage in a foreign language as well as in his own. Then Shakespeare *is* a genius because he can be translated into German, and *not* a genius because he cannot be translated into French. Then the pence-table is the most gifted of all conceivable compositions, because it loses nothing by translation, and can hardly be said to belong to any one language whatever. Whereas I should rather have conceived, that, in proportion as ideas are,



novel and recondite, they would be difficult to put into words, and that the very fact of their having insinuated themselves into one language, would diminish the chance of the happy accident being repeated in another. In the language of savages you can hardly express any idea or act of the intellect at all: is the tongue of the Hottentot or Esquimaux to be made the measure of the genius of Plato, Pindar, Tacitus, St. Jerome, Dante, or Cervantes?

Let us recur, I say, to the illustration of the Fine Arts. I suppose you can express ideas in painting which you cannot express in sculpture; and the more an artist is of a painter, the less he is likely to be of a sculptor. The more he commits his genius to the methods and conditions of his own art, the less he will be able to throw himself into the circumstances of another. Is the genius of Fra Angelico, of Francia, or of Raffaele disparaged by the fact, that he was able to do that in colours which no man that ever lived, which no angel, could achieve in wood? Each of the Fine Arts has its own subject-matter; from the nature of the case you can do in one what you cannot do in another; you can do in painting what you cannot do in carving;

you can do in oils what you cannot do in fresco; you can do in marble what you cannot do in ivory; you can do in wax what you cannot do in bronze. Then, I repeat, applying this to the case of languages, why should not genius be able to do in Greek what it cannot do in Latin? and why are its Greek and Latin works defective, because they will not turn into English? That genius of which we are speaking did not make English; it did not make all languages, present, past, and future; it did not make *any* language: why is it to be judged of by that in which it had no part, over which it has no control?

And now we are naturally brought on to our third point, which is on the characteristics of Holy Scripture as compared with profane literature. Hitherto we have been concerned with the *doctrine* of these writers, viz., that style is an *extra*, that it is a mere artifice, and that hence it cannot be translated; now we come to their fact, viz., that Scripture has no such artificial style, and that Scripture can easily be translated. Surely their fact is as untenable as their doctrine.

Scripture easy of translation! then why have there been so few good translators? why is it that

there has been such great difficulty to combine the two necessary qualities, fidelity to the original and purity in the adopted vernacular? why is it that the authorized versions of the Church are often so inferior to the original as compositions, except that the Church is bound above all things to see that the version is doctrinally correct, and in a difficult problem is obliged to put up with defects in what is of secondary importance, provided she secure what is of first? If it were so easy to transfer the beauty of the original to the copy, she would not have been content with her received version in various languages which could be named.

And then in the next place, Scripture not elaborate! Scripture not ornamented in diction, and musical in cadence! Why, consider the Epistle to the Hebrews—where is there in the classics any composition more carefully, more artificially written? Consider the book of Job—is it not a sacred drama, as artistic, as perfect, as any Greek tragedy of Sophocles or Euripides? Consider the Psalter—are there no ornaments, no rhythm, no studied cadences, no responsive members, in that divinely beautiful book? And is it not hard to understand? are not the Prophets

hard to understand? is not St. Paul hard to understand? Who can say that these are popular compositions? who can say that they are level at first reading with the understandings of the multitude?

That there are portions indeed of the inspired volume more simple both in style and in meaning, and that these are the more sacred and sublime passages, as, for instance, parts of the Gospels, I grant at once; but this does not militate against the doctrine I have been laying down. Recollect, Gentlemen, my distinction when I began. I have said Literature is one thing, and that Science is another; that Literature has to do with ideas, and Science with realities; that Literature is of a personal character, that Science treats of what is universal and eternal. In proportion, then, as Scripture excludes the personal colouring of its writers, and rises into the region of pure and mere inspiration, when it ceases in any sense to be the writing of man, of St. Paul or St. John, of Moses or Isaias, then it comes to belong to Science, not Literature. Then it conveys the things of heaven, unseen verities, divine manifestations, and them alone—not the ideas, the feelings, the aspirations, of its human instruments, who, for all that they

are inspired and infallible, did not cease to be men. St. Paul's epistles, then, I consider to be literature in a real and true sense, *as personal, as rich in reflection and emotion, as Demosthenes or Euripides*; and, without ceasing to be revelations of objective truth, they are expressions of the subjective notwithstanding. On the other hand, portions of the Gospels, of the book of Genesis, and other passages of the Sacred Volume, are of the nature of Science. Such is the beginning of St. John's Gospel, which we read at the end of Mass. Such is the Creed. I mean, passages such as these are the mere enunciation of eternal things, without (so to say) the medium of any human mind transmitting them to us. The words used have the grandeur, the majesty, the calm, unimpassioned beauty of Science; they are in no sense Literature, they are in no sense personal; and therefore they are easy to apprehend, and easy to translate.

Did time admit, I could show you parallel instances of what I am speaking of in the Classics, inferior to the inspired word, in proportion as the subject-matter of the classical authors is immensely inferior to the subjects treated of in Scripture—but parallel, inasmuch as the classical author or

speaker ceases for the moment to have to do with Literature, as speaking objectively of things, and rises to the serene sublimity of Science. But I should be carried too far if I began.

I shall then merely sum up what I have said, and come to a conclusion. Reverting then to my original question, what is the meaning of Letters, as contained, Gentlemen, in the designation of your Faculty, I have answered, that by Letters or Literature is meant the expression of thought in language, where by "thought" I mean the ideas, feelings, views, reasonings, and other operations of the human mind. And the Art of Letters is the method by which a speaker or writer brings out in words, worthy of his subject, and sufficient for his audience or readers, the thoughts which impress him. Literature, then, is of a personal character; it consists in the enunciations and teachings of those who have a right to speak as representatives of their kind, and in whose words their brethren find an interpretation of their own sentiments, a record of their own experience, and a suggestion for their own judgments. A great author, Gentlemen, is not one who merely has a *copia verborum*, whether in

prose or verse, and can, as it were, turn on any number of splendid phrases and swelling sentences at his will; but he is one who has something to say and knows how to say it. I do not claim for him, as such, any great depth of thought, or breadth of view, or philosophy, or sagacity, or knowledge of human nature, or experience of human life, though these additional gifts he may have, and the more he has of them the greater he is; but I ascribe to him, as his characteristic gift, in a large sense the faculty of Expression. He is master of the two-fold *λόγος*, the thought and the word, distinct, but inseparable from each other. He may, if so be, elaborate his compositions, or he may pour out his improvisations, but in either case he has but one aim, and is conscientious and single-minded in fulfilling it. That aim is to give forth what he has within him; and from his very earnestness it comes to pass, that, whatever be the splendour of his diction or the harmony of his periods, he has with him the charm of an incommunicable simplicity. Whatever be his subject, high or low, he treats it suitably and for its own sake. If he is a poet, “*nil molitur ineptè*”. If he is an orator, then too he speaks, not only “distinctè” and

splendidè", but also "*aptè*". His page is the clear mirror of his mind and life—

" Quo fit, ut omnis  
Votivâ pateat veluti descripta tabellâ  
Vita senis".

He writes passionately, because he feels keenly ; forcibly, because he conceives vividly ; he sees too clearly to be vague ; he is too serious to be otiose ; he can analyze his subject, and therefore he is rich ; he embraces it as a whole and in its parts, and therefore he is consistent ; he has a firm hold of it, and therefore he is luminous. When his imagination wells up, it overflows in ornament ; when his heart is touched, it thrills along his verse. He always has the right word for the right idea, and never a word too much. If he is brief, it is because few words suffice ; if he is lavish of them, still each word has its mark, and aids, not embarrasses, the vigorous march of his elocution. He expresses what all feel, but all cannot say ; and his sayings pass into proverbs among his people, and his phrases become household words and idioms of their daily speech, which is tessellated with the rich fragments of his language, as we see in foreign lands the marbles of Roman gran-



deur worked into the walls and pavements of modern palaces.

Such preëminently is Shakespeare among ourselves ; such preëminently Virgil among the Latins ; such in their degree are all those writers, who in every nation go by the name of Classics. To particular nations they are necessarily attached from the circumstance of the variety of tongues, and the peculiarities of each ; but so far they have a catholic and ecumenical character, that what they express is common to the whole race of man, and they alone are able to express it.

If then the power of speech is a gift as great as any that can be named,—if the origin of language is by many philosophers even considered to be nothing short of divine,—if by means of words the secrets of the heart are brought to light, pain of soul is relieved, hidden grief is carried off, sympathy conveyed, counsel imparted, experience recorded, and wisdom perpetuated,—if by great authors the many are drawn up into unity, national character is fixed, a people speaks, the past and the future, the East and the West brought into communication with each other,—if such men are, in a word, the spokesmen and pro-

phets of the human family,—it will not answer to make light of Literature or to neglect its study; rather we may be sure that, in proportion as we master it, in whatever language, and imbibe its spirit, we shall ourselves become in our own measure the ministers of like benefits to those,—though they may be few, though they may be in the obscurer walks of life,—who are united to us by social ties and are within the sphere of our personal influence.



