

## CHAPTER II.

### SUBLIMITY, WIT, AND HUMOR.

232. **Sublimity, Wit, and Humor** give pleasure to the mind by the very fact that they are perceived. They come, therefore, under the definition of beauty, of which they are species. Still, sometimes the term beauty is taken in a narrower meaning, as distinguished from them by certain peculiarities of these three species. We shall next consider those peculiarities.

#### ARTICLE I. SUBLIMITY.

233. **Sublimity** is that species of the beautiful which imparts pleasure of a peculiarly elevated nature. As beauty is *striking perfection*, so sublimity is *striking greatness*, which is a special kind of perfection. It produces in the beholder a sort of internal elevation and expansion, raises the mind above its ordinary state, and fills it with a degree of astonishment which it cannot well express. The emotion is delightful but serious; when greatest it awes the mind.

The **sources of the sublime** are various—some physical, others moral.

234. **1.** The **physical** are chiefly :

- (a) *Boundless views*, in the contemplation of which the mind is lost.
- (b) The exhibition of *vast power* or strength, not accompanied by any apprehension of danger to ourselves.

The ocean combines to a remarkable extent these two sources of the sublime :

“ Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean—roll !  
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain ;  
Man marks the earth with ruin—his control  
Stops with the shore ; upon the watery plain  
The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain  
A shadow of man’s ravage, save his own,  
When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,  
He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,  
Without a grave, unknelled, uncoffined, and unknown.”

—Byron.

(c) *Unusual magnificence*, as in Byron’s lines on St. Peter’s at Rome :

“ But lo ! the dome—the vast and wondrous dome,  
To which Diana’s marvel was a cell—  
Christ’s mighty shrine above his martyrs’ tomb !  
I have beheld the Ephesian miracle—  
Its columns strew the wilderness, and dwell  
The hyena and the jackal in their shade ;  
I have beheld Sophia’s bright roofs swell  
Their glittering mass i’ the sun, and have survey’d  
Its sanctuary the while th’ usurping Moslem pray’d ;

“ But thou, of temples old, or altars new,  
Standest alone, with nothing like to thee :  
Worthiest of God, the holy and the true,  
Since Sion’s desolation, when that He  
Forsook his former city, what could be  
Of earthly structures, in His honor piled,  
Of a sublimer aspect ? Majesty,  
Power, Glory, Strength, and Beauty, all are aisled  
In this eternal ark of worship undefiled.”—*Id.*

- (d) *Loud and deep sounds*, spreading far and wide, as that of the thunder.
- (e) *Solemn and awful objects*, bordering on the terrible, and whatever makes us sensible of our littleness



compared to the grandeur around us, as solitude, deep silence, obscurity, mystery.

We have said that *order* is an element of beauty in its usual acceptation; but *disorder* is not unfavorable to the sublime—not disorder in itself, but in connection with grandeur, which it makes incomprehensible to the human mind. The same holds of obscurity, mysteriousness, etc.

235. **2. Moral sublimity** arises from the exhibition of such power of the mind and will as produces astonishment in the beholder. When two of the Horatii were slain, and their father heard that his third son had fled, he was indignant; and when asked what the youth should have done, "He should have died," he said. The history of the Christian martyrs is full of such examples; but grander than all is the scene on Calvary, when nature trembled at the crimes of men, and the Victim of all this wickedness, the Son of God Himself, opened His lips, not to complain, but to beg pardon for the perpetrators of the deed: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

236. The **style** in which the sublime is to be expressed is either of the greatest simplicity or of the highest magnificence. We have seen specimens of magnificence in Byron; the style of Holy Writ, which contains the loftiest examples of the sublime, is usually of the simplest kind:

"In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Be light made. And light was made."—*Gen. i. 1-4.*

"The sublime," says Lacordaire, "is elevation, profundity, and simplicity, blended in a single trait." (See Lacordaire's *Jesus Christ*, p. 29.)

237. **Other examples from Holy Writ:**

"In the horror of A VISION by night, when deep sleep is wont to

hold men, fear seized upon me, and trembling, and all my bones were affrighted: and when a spirit passed before me, the hair of my flesh stood up. There stood one whose countenance I knew not, an image before my eyes, and I heard the voice as it were of a gentle wind: Shall man be justified in comparison of God, or shall a man be more pure than his maker? Behold, they that serve Him are not steadfast, and in His angels He found wickedness: how much more shall they that dwell in houses of clay, who have an earthly foundation, be consumed as with the moth?"—*Job iv. 13-19.*

"Wilt Thou give strength to THE HORSE or clothe his neck with neighing? Wilt Thou lift him up like the locusts: the glory of his nostrils is terror. He breaketh up the earth with his hoof, he pranceth boldly, he goeth forward to meet armed men. He despiseth fear, he turneth not his back to the sword. Above him shall the quiver rattle, the spear and shield shall glitter. Chafing and raging he swalloweth the ground: neither doth he make account when the noise of the trumpet soundeth. When he heareth the trumpet he saith: Ha, ha! he smelleth the battle afar off, the encouraging of the captains, and the shouting of the army."—*Job xxxix. 19-25.*

"God hath measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and weighed the heavens with His palm; He hath poised with three fingers the bulk of the earth, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance."—*Isaias xl. 12.*

The following **passages** are full of sublime thoughts and images: the fifteenth chapter of Exodus, which contains the Canticle of Moses, sung by the Jews after their miraculous crossing of the sea; Psalm ciii.; the forty-third chapter of Ecclesiasticus; the thirty-eighth of Job.

238. **Exercise.**—Point out the beautiful and the sublime images accumulated in the following poem, "The Fairest Fair":

"Mountains, that upwards to the clouds arise,  
Odorous with thyme, whereon the wild bees linger,  
Jewelled with flowers of a thousand dyes—  
Their petals tinted by no mortal finger;



How solemn in their gray-worn age they stand,  
Hills piled on hills in silent majesty !  
Lofty and strong, and beautiful, and grand :  
All this and more is my Belovèd to me.

“ Come forth into the woods—in yonder valley,  
Where rippling waters murmur through the glade ;  
There, 'neath the rustling boughs of some green alley,  
We'll watch the golden light and quivering shade :  
Or couched on mossy banks we'll lie and listen  
To song-birds pouring forth their vernal glee.  
Wave on, ye woods ; ye fairy fountains glisten :  
But more, far more, is my Belovèd to me.

“ Know ye the land where fragrant winds awaken  
In spicy forests hidden from the eye ;  
Where richest perfumes from the boughs are shaken,  
And flowers unnoticed bloom, and blush, and die ?  
Sweet is the eternal spring that there reposes  
On wondrous isles that gem the sunny sea,  
And sweet the gales that breathe o'er beds of roses :  
But sweeter far is my Belovèd to me.

“ The roaring torrents from the ice-cliffs leaping—  
I see them foaming down the mountain-side ;  
Through the green dells and valleys onward sweeping,  
They fill the hollows with their mighty tide :  
Their voice is as the voice of many waters ;  
Onward they rush, exulting to be free ;  
But ah ! their thunder fails, their music falters :  
Far more than this is my Belovèd to me.

“ A gentler sound wakes in the hush of even,  
The whisper of a light and cooling breeze ;  
It stirs when twilight shades are in the heaven,  
And bows the tufted foliage of the trees ;  
It fans my cheek ; its music softly stealing  
Speaks to my heart in loving mystery.  
Ah ! gentle breeze, full well thou art revealing  
The joy that my Belovèd is to me.

“ Night comes at last, in mystic shadows folding  
The nodding forest and the verdant lawn,  
Till the day breaks, and nature starts, beholding  
The golden chariot of the coming dawn :  
Then on each bough the feathered chanters, waking,  
Pour forth their music over bush and tree.  
Cease, cease your songs, ye birds ; my heart-strings  
breaking  
Lack words to say what JESUS is to me.

“ Yea, all the fairest forms that Nature scatters,  
And all melodious sounds that greet the ear ;  
The murmuring music of the running waters,  
The golden harvest-fields that crown the year,  
The crimson morn, the calm and dewy even,  
The tranquil moonlight on the slumbering sea—  
All are but shadows, forms of beauty given  
To tell what my Belovèd is to me.”

—*Augusta Theodosia Drane.*

## ARTICLE II. WIT.

239. **Wit** causes pleasure by a peculiar quickness in perceiving, and felicity in expressing, such hidden relations of things as amuse the hearers. Take this example : “ You must either be a knave or a fool,” said two lawyers to an Irishman sitting between them. “ No ; I am between both,” was the prompt reply. Here is a relation which would not have struck one person in a thousand. To be true wit, however, it is necessary that, as soon as the relation is pointed out, the hearers or readers understand it. Besides, the unexpected thought must come apparently unsought, else no peculiar quickness of conception is noticed. When a person evidently tries to be witty he disgusts instead of pleasing.

240. A **pun** is a witticism consisting in a play on words. Hancock, encouraging those who had signed the Declara-



tion of Independence to mutual fidelity, remarked: "We must all hang together." "Yes," said Franklin, "or we shall all hang separately." An occasional pun, when truly witty, undoubtedly gives pleasure. But an habitual punster, like every professed wit, is universally pronounced a bore. And with reason: first, such persons evidently try to be witty; secondly, they often fail; thirdly, they acquire a habit of trifling, and will often spoil a serious conversation for a wretched pun; fourthly, they are often sarcastic or otherwise offensive.

241. But wit, when united with common sense, kindness of heart, and beauty of thought, is, in its own place, not only an innocent charm of social intercourse, but also a **powerful weapon** in the arena of oratorical contests.

It appears to be a kind dispensation of Providence that the seasoning of wit and humor is often copiously granted to those whose homely fare stands most in need of such condiments to make life more supportable.

### ARTICLE III. HUMOR.

242. **Humor** is not an elevated species of beauty, but it is more valuable than wit; it fills many a bright page, especially in English literature. One great **advantage** of humor is that it is always good-natured, and thus contributes directly to diffuse happiness all around. Lamb, Hood, Thackeray, and Dickens, in England; Irving, Lowell, Holmes, and Saxe, in the United States, have deserved much credit for their genial productions.

243. Humor is that species of beauty which delights by a good-natured exhibition of **incongruities**; it addresses itself to our perception of the ludicrous. Some persons appear to be almost destitute of this perception; others are overpowered by it beyond the bounds of reason. The

incongruity itself is not beautiful, but the good-natured exposition of it by the common sense of the humorist.

#### 244. **Humor implies:**

1. In the object, *incongruity*—*i.e.*, want of proportion, as big words and bad grammar. A humorist has a peculiar talent for perceiving and expressing such ludicrous things.

2. In the effect, *surprise* at finding such incongruity where it was not expected: a thing is not ludicrous if it is just what could be expected.

3. In the humorist, strong common sense and *good nature*—*i.e.*, kindness, even towards the persons ridiculed.

245. In order to be truly pleasing, humor requires strict regard to the laws of **decorum**: it must never attempt to ridicule the unfortunate, the truly great and wise, nor be employed on subjects held sacred by the hearers.

"It is a beautiful thing to observe the BOUNDARIES which nature has affixed to the ridiculous, and to notice how soon it is swallowed up by the more illustrious feelings of our minds. Where is the heart so hard that could bear to see the awkward resources and contrivances of the poor turned into ridicule? Who could laugh at the fractured, ruined body of a soldier? Who is so wicked as to amuse himself with the infirmities of extreme old age? or to find subject for humor in the weakness of a perishing, dissolving body? Who is there that does not feel himself disposed to overlook the little peculiarities of the truly great and wise, and to throw a veil over that ridicule which they have redeemed by the magnitude of their talents and the splendor of their virtues? Who ever thinks of turning into ridicule our great and ardent hopes of a world to come? Whenever the man of humor meddles with these things, he is astonished to find that in all the great feelings of their nature the mass of mankind always act and think aright, that they are ready enough to laugh, but that they are quite as ready to drive away with indignation and contempt the light fool who comes, with the feather of wit, to crumble the bulwarks of truth and to beat down the Temples of God!"—*Sydney Smith.*



246. The description of a **humorous character** supposes in its subject a blending of strikingly incongruous traits, as shrewdness with apparent simplicity in Sam Weller. Every act and word must accord with the character, and frequently remind us of its incongruous elements, as in Shakspeare's Falstaff.

## CHAPTER III.

### TASTE

247. **Taste** is the power of perceiving and properly appreciating the beauties of nature and of art. Some call it the *Æsthetic faculty*; but it is no special faculty at all: it is an exercise of the intellect. As such it is common to all men, though in different degrees of perfection. This difference is due partly to variety of natural powers, and partly to difference of education and of early associations.

248. Good taste should be characterized by two qualities, **delicacy** and **correctness**. The former, when highly developed, enables it to distinguish the nicest shades and varieties of beauty, in the same manner as some persons have so delicate a palate as to distinguish readily the flavor of any viand. The latter quality—correctness—enables it to discern accurately what is true from what is false beauty.

249. Of the two characteristics, correctness ought to be chiefly taught, both because it is more capable of being developed and because the want of it is more offensive. If correctness be carefully taught by precepts and examples, delicacy will follow of itself. The direct object of rhetorical rules is to accustom the student to appreciate true and reject false beauty. The difference between these two is that **true beauty** pleases, not only at first sight, but also after the closest scrutiny, and receives the full approbation of man's highest faculty—the intellect; while **false beauty** cannot bear to be closely examined without displaying a