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THE GRAND MANNER

C. DAY LEWIS

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THE GRAND MANNER

By

C. Day Lewis

What is the grand manner in poetry? Something as easy to recognise as it is hard to define. Large, luminous phrases come flocking from the empyrean to help us out. Alas, they dazzle more than they illuminate. 'A poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him'—that is Milton, of course; and Milton we take to be a master of the grand manner. Shall we try Keats as a corrective—Keats, another grand-mannerist, but, writing a little sourly to Shelley, recommending him to stop soaring, to be less wild and windy, to come off it? 'You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity, and be more of an artist, and load every rift of your subject with ore.' That offers a definition of the grand manner apparently very different from Milton's. There is the idea of soaring, of the high, inspired utterance, on the one hand; and on the other the ideas of artistry and of concentration. Not that they need be contradictory. Pope saw both qualities in Homer: 'let it be remembered that the same Genius that soared the highest, and from whom the greatest models of the *Sublime* are derived, was also he who stooped the lowest, and gave to the simple Narrative its utmost perfection.' Let us also remember, lest we tend to identify the grand manner with the ornate, what Matthew Arnold said of Homer :—'And yet, in spite of this perfect plainness and directness of Homer's style, in spite of this perfect plainness and directness of his ideas, he is eminently *noble;* he works as entirely in the grand style .. . as Phidias, or Dante, or Michael Angelo.'

I shall be concerned today with poetry *en grande tenue.* This does not necessarily mean poetry at its most poetic, as we shall see. Many minor poets have, like the humble Marty South, 'touched sublimity at points'; but I should not associate their achievement with the grand manner, which for

me implies first and foremost the consistent sustaining of a lofty, ceremonious language—a diction far removed from that of workaday prose or popular speech. I had not intended, however, to launch out on definitions. When I first began to contemplate the subject of this lecture, I tried to make my mind as blank of preconceptions as that of the most upright judge before the case opens. Into this vacuum the evidence started to flow :—

> 'The multitudinous seas incarnadine'
>
> 'Where the great vision of the guarded Mount
> Looks towards *Namancos* and *Bayona's* hold'
>
> 'Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall,
> And universal Darkness buries All'
>
> 'His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
> And be among her cloudy trophies hung'
>
> 'The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,
> The wind of Death's imperishable wing'
>
> 'Around the ancient track marched, rank on rank,
> The army of unalterable law'
>
> 'Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified
> Nor my titanic tears the seas be dried'

These were the lines that first came into my head when I said to myself, 'grand manner': I have merely put them in chronological order—Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Keats, D. G. Rossetti, Meredith, Wilfred Owen. I fancy that, if each of you tried this test on himself, though together you would produce a small dictionary of quotations, they would all be lines of the same timbre. Let us look at my own selection—I can assure you it was an unpremeditated one—and see what those lines have in common (what they have *not* in common is worth noticing too; they are spread over three and a half centuries, and they are derived from many different kinds or movements of poetry). Well, first we observe the frequency

of rolling polysyllabic words—'multitudinous' and 'incarnadine', 'universal', 'imperishable', 'unalterable', 'titanic'; they are there to strike a note of solemnity in keeping with the grandeur of the themes at work here. Nor is it coincidence that each of my extracts is in a regular iambic pentameter; for this metre, though of course it *can* be made to move fast, especially in the heroic couplet, and can be used colloquially if you roughen the surface and create irregularities, does have a natural bias away from the rhythms of ordinary speech—does tend, when strictly regular, to slow down the tempo and make for a measured, formal dance of words. Secondly, you notice that every one of these extracts embodies either an image or a powerful metaphor; several of them are deliberately hyperbolical: they are all visionary—yes, even the image from Pope—in the sense that they are reaching after some meaning almost too large or too profound for the human mind to grasp. I do not say they are all equally successful in conveying it to us; only that each of these extracts is a culminating point in a passage of verse, and that each is aiming very high, aiming to say something about the soul, about death, about the laws of God or Nature, about eternity, in terms commensurate with the grandeur of its theme.

These specifications may seem to suggest the Romantic view, the Romantic agony straining towards the ineffable:

> That something still which prompts the eternal sigh,
> For which we bear to live or dare to die,
> Which still so near us, yet beyond us lies.

Surely those lines sum up once and for all the Romantic attitude. Well, perhaps they do; but they were written by Alexander Pope; which should be a lesson to everyone who sticks labels on literature. 'The Grand Manner', I am well aware, is just another of these labels, so we must be careful where we apply it. You may be surprised (I was, for a moment, myself) to find lines from the *Dunciad* appearing amongst my

specimens of the grand manner: but listen to them again—the label is surely not misapplied here :

> Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restored;
> Light dies before thy uncreating word;
> Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall,
> And universal Darkness buries All.

The *Dunciad,* Pope's greatest offensive against his inveterate enemy, Dullness, is a satire in the mock-heroic style. But this style derives from the heroic, which is a form of the grand manner, and thus can at any moment modulate back into it, from the minor to the major. W. P. Ker has spoken admirably to this point:—'The beauty of Pope's verse is its living variety; the wave changes its colour, you might say, as the sun or the cloud takes it, as it runs green over the sands, or blue over the deep water. You never can be certain from the subject what the language and the tune will be like; and the advantage of Satire ... is that it can at any moment take the reflection of epic or tragedy.' This is what has happened in the concluding passage of the *Dunciad,* though I should prefer to say, not that it *reflects* the epic, but that it *is* epic. Pope here has lifted his denunciations of Grub Street hacks into a universal denunciation which will have meaning as long as stupidity and mediocrity remain among us. I have called the lines 'visionary' ; and so they are—a vision, none the less serious for being humorous, of the judgment we must fear if we let Dullness enthrone itself, of the judgment-day when 'Art after Art goes out, and all is Night'.*

Did Pope have in mind Milton's line, 'I sung of Chaos and Eternal Night'? The line occurs in Milton's invocation to light, from Book III of *Paradise Lost;* this is as good a passage

* After writing this, I found support for the idea in the introduction to Vol. 3 of *Poets of the English Language,* ed. W. H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson :—"To have seen Dullness ... as a really formidable and eternal threat to the City of Man was a vision in its own way as original and of as permanent value to the City as Dante's of Paradise or Wordsworth's of Nature."

as any to represent our chief master of the grand manner. But, before we look at it, let me quote to you a piece from Addison's *Criticisms on Paradise Lost,* which states the classical argument for this high kind of poetic language:

'If clearness and perspicuity were only to be consulted, the poet would have nothing else to do but to clothe his thoughts in the most plain and natural expressions. But, since it often happens that the most obvious phrases, and those which are used in ordinary conversation, become too familiar to the ear, and contract a kind of meanness by passing through the mouths of the vulgar, a poet should take particular care to guard himself against idiomatic ways of speaking .. . It is not therefore sufficient that the language of an epic poem be perspicuous, unless it be also sublime. To this end it ought to deviate from the common forms and ordinary phrases of speech. The judgment of a poet very much discovers itself in shunning the common roads of expression without falling into such ways of speech as may seem stiff and unnatural; he must not swell into a false sublime by endeavouring to avoid the other extreme'.

The language of epic should be lofty, formal, non-colloquial; it must not be obscure, but it must be sublime to match the nature of epic: (let us defer a little longer the discussion of the meaning of the word 'sublime', which keeps cropping up). Now there are two problems confronting a poet who would write an epic, or indeed any long poem in the grand manner. One of them, Addison has stated : he must discover a style which is lofty but not stiff, artificial but not unnatural; and he must avoid the 'false sublime'—that is to say, bombast. The second problem is how to sustain this style over a long poem, and particularly how to shape it to the contours of mood and subject: clearly, large parts of such a poem are bound to fall below the level of its highest points—of its dramatic crises or its spiritual peaks. We may, of course, shrug off this

whole problem, as Edgar Allan Poe did, by declaring that every long poem is in effect a series of short poems held together by versified prose. A. C. Bradley's answer to that, you may remember, was 'Naturally, in any poem not quite short, there must be many variations and grades of poetic intensity; but to represent the differences of these numerous grades as a simple antithesis between pure poetry and prose is like saying that, because the eyes are the most expressive part of the face, the rest of the face expresses nothing (or) that a face would be more beautiful if it were all eyes'. I am with Bradley over this. I prefer to consider a long poem, not in terms of black and white—versified prose and pure poetry, but in terms of a spectrum, of different shades of poetic intensity merging into one another.

Now, just as in the closing lines of the *Dunciad* we find Pope modulating from the mock-heroic to the heroic, so in the opening passage of *Paradise Lost,* Book III, we get Milton modulating from the sublime to a different, a wholly personal kind of statement—major to minor this time, if you like. There are two things he wanted to say:—something about God, the Creator, the Source of light; and something about his own blindness. One can hardly imagine a transition more difficult to make. How is he to avoid on the fine hand an abrupt change of tone, on the other a treatment of the personal subject, his blindness, which would 'swell into a false sublime' through using the same elevation of language as he must use for the invoking of the Source of all light ?

> Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,
> Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam
> May I express, thee unblam'd ? since God is light,
> And never but in unapproached light
> Dwelt from Eternitie, dwelt then in thee,
> Bright effluence of bright essence increate.

So he begins, in the full panoply of his grand manner. There are twelve lines of this magniloquence before the personal note is struck.

> Thee I revisit now with bolder wing,
> Escap't the *kygian Pool,* though long detain'd
> In that obscure sojourn, while in my flight
> Through utter and through middle darkness borne
> With other notes than to th' Orphean Lyre
> I sung of *Chaos* and *Eternal Night,*
> Taught by the heav'nly Muse to venture down
> The dark descent, and up to reascend,
> Though hard and rare :

The style is unaltered; the syntax is even more elaborate than in the initial twelve lines. There is just a hint of what is to come, in the repeated 'darkness', 'dark' and 'eternal night', whose ostensible reference is solely to the poet's exploration of Hell, the locale of the two previous books. Then he goes on:—

> thee I revisit safe,
> And feel thy sovran vital Lamp; but thou
> Revisit'st not these eyes, that rowle in vain
> To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;
> So thick a drop serene hath quencht their Orbs,
> Or dim suffusion veil'd.

The second theme has emerged. But notice how warily Milton has introduced it. The passage is as much about light as about blindness :—the stress on *'thee I* revisit safe'; 'thy sovran vital Lamp', 'thy piercing ray', 'dawn'. And until the fifth line of the passage the blindness itself might be felt as some spiritual contagion from Hell, or as a temporary lack of sight after being 'long detain'd / In that obscure sojourn'. Yet, as if there were still a danger of lowering too suddenly the tone of the invocation, Milton now veers away from blindness to Sion and the haunts of the Muses, and next brings in 'Thamyris and

blind Maeonides, / And Tiresias and Phineus Prophets old' to exalt the idea of blindness, and then introduces a nightingale simile—'as the wakeful bird / Sings darkling': and only *then,* after all these hints and evasions, does he modulate into a different key and come out with the poignant, personal lines to which they have been leading up :

> Thus with the Year
> Seasons return, but not to me returns
> Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,
> Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summer's Rose,
> Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
> But cloud in stead, and ever-during dark
> Surrounds me, from the chearful wayes of men
> Cut off, and for the Book of Knowledge fair
> Presented with a Universal blanc
> Of Natures works to me expung'd and ras'd,
> And wisdome at one entrance quite shut out.

The style remains formal—formal enough to sterilise any germ of self-pity, but it is not grand; not until the last three lines, where Milton is beginning to elevate it again, to prepare us for a return to the principal theme and the language of invocation :

> So much the rather thou Celestial light
> Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers
> Irradiate .. .

I have dwelt some time upon this passage as an example of the grand manner, and of the way a poet can move from one level to another without any harsh, obtrusive change of style. I am not now concerned with the relative poetic merit of this part of it or that, though to our modern taste the personal lines about his blindness may appeal more than the invocation itself. Nor do I insist that Milton faced or solved the problem of modulation here as consciously as my comments have suggested. Even in a poem one has written oneself, it is

difficult to assess how much of the technical work has been done consciously and how much by the instinctive tact which shapes a poet's ends, rough hew them how he will. A poet is a man intoxicated with words; and, like other drunks, has a marvellous knack of self-preservation. The critic, at any rate, can only guess at the poetic process through the poetic result.

Let us now turn back to that word which has cropped up so often. 'Sublime' has been taken out of the critical currency today; but, in discussing the grand manner, it is difficult to find a substitute for it. Pope said of Milton that he 'is not lavish of his exotic words and phrases everywhere alike, but employs them much more where the subject is marvellous, vast and strange'. We saw this in the passage I have just analysed, where the more 'exotic' diction is confined to the theme of Light and the primal Source of Light—a subject 'marvellous, vast and strange' indeed. A. C. Bradley, in his lecture on the Sublime, defined it as a blend of magnitude and uniformity—something which produces at first a slight recoiling, then a compulsive attraction of our minds towards it, a bursting out of our own limitations, and an identification with it. Signor Vivante, in his difficult but rewarding book, *English Poetry,* speaks of the poet's 'endeavour to look, not for life, but for the very principle of life; to go deep into the quality as possessing in itself its principle; to seize in it an ultimate substance and power'; and again, 'Truth is not conceived, by Shakespeare, as if its substance lay in its practical confirmation, or in a kind of correspondence between things and our representations of them. It is rather understood as a value of supreme identity with one's deepest self and with reality, a value of directness and simplicity'. This, in turn, may remind us of Longfellow's lines, '... sublimity always is simple, / Both in sermon and song, a child can seize on its meaning'.

Now those seven extracts with which I began my lecture certainly have something to do with the 'vast and strange';

they suggest efforts by the human mind at once to burst out of its own limitations, and to achieve a 'supreme identity with one's deepest self - and with reality'. But we have to admit that the grand manner which they represent is not the only way of approaching such truth, whether we call it the Sublime or 'the very principle of life'. On the contrary, though I think Longfellow has overstated it, we know perfectly well that poetry's supreme intimations come more often in the still small voice than in any storm of grandeur. Let us remember, nevertheless, that the still small voice did come out of the thunder, and that many of those simple, supreme intimations — Milton's 'And calm of mind all passion spent', for example, or Shakespeare's 'Finish, good lady; the bright day is done! And we are for the dark' — shine out as they do partly because of the grandeur or elaboration of their setting.

The grand manner, then, in the sense according to which we have so far been discussing it, is a way of writing adapted to the loftiest themes, an attempt to find an 'objective correlative' for the spiritual sublime. We might also be tempted to say that it is a style which requires the heroic proportions of a long poem if it is to be fully exercised, to develop its natural stride. But then, glancing back at the seven examples I gave at the start of this lecture, we notice that three of them are taken from sonnets and another from the short *Ode on Melancholy*. We should associate the ode with solemnity and formality. But the sonnet—how can so miniature a form take such weight of diction? Unquestionably it does : not only are the sonnets of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats as elevated in style as their longer works; but the sonnet form has enabled many minor poets Thomas Hood, for instance, or even at times Elizabeth Barrett Browning—to attain an eloquence and solidity of diction which elsewhere they fall short of or do not aim at. How is this possible? The answer is surely to be found in the nature of the sonnet form itself. Its iambic pentameter line requires a measured, serious development of the theme. It has an austerity

which discourages bombast and looseness, and at the same time a complexity which allows for the utmost concentration of thought and image. The stricter the form, the greater is the tension; and the greater the tension, the more, so to speak, you can put into the form. Or look at it this way: the sonnet form, through its intrinsic limitation of rhyme-schemes and its traditional balance of sextet against octet, offers a framework whose strength is out of all proportion to its size, making for a perfect distribution of stresses and thus capable of sustaining a massive weight of material.

The sonnet, then, because of its felicitous proportions, has the potential to look like a structure on an altogether bigger scale than its physical measurements warrant. Now the grand manner. implies both the sustaining of a certain tone of utterance and the presence of a theme commensurate with it. When Blake writes, 'To see a world in a grain of sand, / And a heaven in a wild flower', or when Emily Dickinson writes, 'Creation seemed a mighty crack / To make me visible', there is no doubt that they are writing on themes of great moment, and no doubt that they have risen to them. But this sort of language, with all its paradox and gnomic hyperbole, is something very different from the grand manner as I understand it. For one thing, the line employed in these poems is too short for the maintaining of that legato, which we associate with the grand manner : secondly, the language Blake or Emily Dickinson relies on here has a quality of tone inappropriate to the style *we* have been trying to analyse; there is no level, sustained high-flying about it; its graph-line is a zig-zag, all steep soarings and abrupt swoopings between the general and the particular, the immense and the tiny, the homely and the exotic, such as are familiar to us in the poetry of the Metaphysicals. Conversely, of course, there is the writing which keeps up a hyperbolical tone about some footling subject, or about nothing at all — the stuffed-owl, grandiose, bombinating-in-a-void poetry, which

Henry Carey guyed in his parody of the Jacobean dramatist at his worst.

Captain To arms! to arms! great Chrononhotonthologos!
Th' Antipodean powers, from realms below,
Have burst the solid entrails of the earth;
Gushing such cataracts of forces forth,
This world is too incopious to contain 'em.
Armies on armies march, in form stupendous;
Not like our earthly regions, rank by rank,
But tier o'r tier, high piled from earth to heaven;
A blazing bullet, bigger than the sun,
Shot from a huge and monstrous culverin,
Has laid your royal citadel in ashes.

King Peace, coward! were they wedged like golden ingots,
Or pent so close as to admit no vacuum,
One look from Chrononhotonthologos
Shall sear them into nothing. Rigdum-Funnidos,
Bid Bombardinian draw his legions forth,
And meet us in the plains of Queerummania.
This very now ourselves shall there conjoin him.
Meantime, bid all the priests prepare their temples
For rites of triumph. Let the singing singers,
With vocal voices, most vociferous,
In sweet vociferation, out-vociferize
Even sound itself! So be it as we have ordered.

That is a sufficient exposure of the poetasters, common enough in every age, who will make their poetry sound poetical, or burst. But this whipping-up of words into a frenzy is, let us not forget, only a misapplication of the poet's instinct to employ language in a way different from the common, everyday use. Language for him is fundamentally an instrument for exploring the nature of reality and for composing the material discovered into forms which are delightful in themselves because they reveal some of the multifarious aspects of reality. The poet's

instrument, language, is for ever being modified, both by his response to the literary and the popular idioms of his day, and by the particular fields of experience which he is called on to explore. The grand manner, as we have seen it so far, is an instrument for discovering the highest or profoundest truths; not the only poetic instrument which may do this, but the one best adapted for doing it on a large scale, for taking and giving the impression of the sublime.

But there is another variant of the grand manner—one nearer to Keats' 'loading every rift with ore' than to Milton's 'garland and singing robes'. Keats is asking for poetry which is poetry through and through, not prose with an overlay of verse; poetry with the highest possible concentration of *poetic* meaning in it. Now this is more than halfway towards what we call nowadays pure poetry. But our concept of pure poetry involves aesthetic theories wider than I wish to tackle at present, for I am trying to confine myself to problems of diction, difficult though it is to discuss the way a thing is said apart from the thing which is being said. Let us instead look at the kind of verse which, by its choice and arrangement of words, presents the sort of surface immediately felt as 'poetic'.

Spenser's poetry is, I suppose, a stock example of this. Earlier Tudor poets had distinguished between court language and rural language as instruments for different kinds of poetry. Spenser carried court language—and of course courtly ideas—to its highest perfection. I do not mean that he always kept it there. But Spenser aimed at a ceremonious, formal, smooth, highly 'poetic' style : even his contemporaries felt it as an artificial one; and his faults are perhaps faults inherent in the style itself, there being certain kinds of matter which such a style cannot digest. Ben Jonson summarily dismissed it in these terms :—'Spenser, in affecting the ancients, writ no language'. Thomas Warton complained that the elaborate, difficult stanza form of the *Faerie Queen* obliged Spenser 'to dilate the thing to be

expressed, however unimportant, with trifling and tedious circumlocutions . . . to run into a ridiculous redundancy and repetition of words'. Now there are two answers to Warton's criticism. First, good poets do not arbitrarily or irresponsibly choose difficult forms to work in : they know intuitively that the discipline of an elaborate form may be fruitful—may enable them to comprehend more deeply and compose more effectively the truths with which they are concerned. Second, the repetitiveness Warton complains of is often part of Spenser's charm ('carmina' in Latin means both poetry and incantations); it helps to give his work its singular poetic and spell-binding quality.

Jonson's criticism is another matter. It is one that is often directed against that kind of grand manner, those highly artificial styles, which depend to some degree on the use of archaisms. In the postscript to his *Odyssey* translation, Pope said, 'Some use has been made to this end, of the style of Milton. A just and moderate mixture of old words may have an effect like the working of old Abbey stones into a building, which I have sometimes seen to give a kind of venerable air, and yet not destroy the neatness, elegance and equality requisite to a new work'. The metaphor reminds us of Dryden's words, in the preface to his translation of the *Aeneid* :—'There is nothing to be left void in a firm building; even the cavities ought not to be filled with rubbish . .. but with brick or stone, though of less pieces, yet of the same nature, and fitted to the crannies'. And this metaphor, in turn, leads us back to the loading of every rift with ore. Pope advocates, under certain circumstances, a judicious use of archaism. But why archaism at all, you may ask; why these throw-backs to the literary manners of one's ancestors?

The answer lies in the perpetual need of poetry to recreate its medium. No poet can ever evolve a completely new style; every individual style is composite, containing certain elements from past uses of language; and thus every style is to some

extent archaistic. But whereas false archaism means stagnation or pastiche, true archaism, as Mr. Owen Barfield has said, 'does imply, not a standing still, but a *return* to something older . . . a movement towards language at an earlier stage of its development', and therefore an accession of freshness. In our own time we have seen, for example, Robert Graves returning to Skelton, Auden returning to the idiom of the Icelandic saga and to the metric of Langland, Martyn Skinner returning to Augustan diction, and Ezra Pound taking lucky dips here, there and everywhere. In some cases the result has been pastiche, in others a genuine revitalization of language. Whether the archaism consists mainly in the reviving of obsolete words, or the use of some earlier metric or idiom, the danger to the poet is not that his style should be too much influenced by his model but that his thought and sensibility should be infected: for stylistic influence can sooner or later be digested into an individual, living style, but only if the poet retains his autonomy of imagination, and remains faithful to the climate and experience of his own time. When we invoke dead poets to mediate between us and some new complex of experience, to help us create a form out of its chaos, we always take the risk of falling under the spell of the very spirits we have invoked, so that, aiming to reforge their language into an instrument for our own use, we may become mere echoes of their thought, obsequious ghosts, anachronisms.

Whether or not we agree with Ben Jonson's judgment on Spenser, we must agree that poets do often, in affecting the ancients, write no language. The poetry becomes 'icily regular, faultlessly null'; or it suffocates beneath an excess of period ornament; or it suffers the mythical fate of the chameleon placed on a tartan plaid : anyway, it is dead. Misguided archaism may be recognised by the impression it produces of affectation. The work of the Pre-Raphaelite poets offers many glaring examples: their language so often seems to be striking postures which, like those of the Revived Greek Dance, may

accurately reproduce certain modes of expression, but bear, no relation to the living present around them, and tempt one to inquire vulgarly, 'What's all this in aid of?'. Where their poems succeed, it is not in the Pre-Raphaelites' self-conscious revival of an obsolete idiom, but because, as Mr. F. W. Bateson has pointed out, they exploited artistically the vagueness and diffuseness of Victorian language.

As the failing of the sublime grand manner is bombast, so is affectation of a highly-wrought 'artificial' manner—an affectation which it is often difficult not to feel as a kind of insincerity. But, having said this, I must remind myself that such judgments are partial. The taste of one age—the cultivated taste, I mean—will allow much more in the way of rhetoric than another's; and what strikes us as affectation may seem to a different age both elegant and genuine. Objectively, the test of a style is that it should be all of a piece. I am not sure this is not the only objective test in poetic criticism; for, once we begin to judge the poem as a whole—the thing said together with the way of saying it—our personal interests and those of our particular age become involved; we cease to be impartial. But we can, I think, suspend our response to the poem as a whole effectively enough to judge the coherence and congruity of its language.

Let me take an example. I find myself immediately responsive to these two lines by Francis Thompson :

> The grasses, like an anchored smoke,
> Ride in the bending gale

They present an image which is complete in itself, visually accurate, fresh, and full of imaginative vibrations. At the same time, I can switch off my positive response to these lines for long enough to judge the stanza in which they occur from a stylistic point of view. It is the first of a poem 'To the Sinking Sun'.

How graciously thou wear'st the yoke
Of use that does not fail !
The grasses, like an anchored smoke,
Ride in the bending gale;
This knoll is snowed with blosmy manna,
And fire-drops as a seraph's mail.

Now this stanza seems to me a classical example of an artificial style which is impure, all bits and pieces. Some verbal effort has gone to holding it together; the idea of willing submission to the natural order, first suggested by the word 'yoke', is echoed by the word 'anchored'; the idea behind 'manna' is sustained in 'fire-drops'. But these tenuous connections are disrupted by the violent conflict of styles within the stanza. It opens rather like a late 18th century hymn; the third and fourth lines are a simile in the Wordsworthian manner: 'blosmy manna' is Keats; and the last line, whatever it may mean, sounds Pre-Raphaelite. The next stanza carries on this Pre-Raphaelite manner:

Here every eve thou stretchest out
Untarnishable wing,
And marvellously bring'st about
Newly an olden thing ...

The third stanza begins with an almost deafening echo of 'The Ancient Mariner' :—

Here every eve thou goest down
Behind the self-same hill,
Nor ever twice alike go'st down
Behind the self-same hill ...

The highly-wrought, decorative style, of which we get more consistent examples in other poems by Francis Thompson, is one of the ways by which poets distance their language from everyday speech. It includes a high proportion of 'consecrated words', 'poetic properties', and in this sense it always tends

to be a conservative style with strong elements of archaism; it gives an impression of conscious artistry. Now these are also, to a certain extent, qualities of the sublime grand manner. But the latter, as I tried to illustrate by the passage from Milton, is more flexible; you can bring it down from the heights and make it say simple, even intimate things, yet keep the style all of a piece. Homer constantly did so. What I have called 'the decorative style' is much stiffer to handle. It is pitched high, and very easily goes out of tune. We need only compare Tennyson's *Tithonus,* a thoroughly successful venture in this style, with the Milton passage, to see the difference—and the similarity—between those two kinds of grand manner.

> Thus with the Year
> Seasons return, but not to me returns
> Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn,
> Or sight of vernal bloom, or Summer's Rose,
> Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine . . .
>
> The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
> The vapours weep their burthens to the ground,
> Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
> And after many a summer dies the swan.
> Me only cruel immortality
> Consumes . . .

Unquestionably, they have much in common: a certain plangency of tone, a legato and mellifluousness of diction; and in each there is one strong, pointed inversion—'not to me returns Day', and 'Me only cruel immortality Consumes'. But there the resemblance ends.

The Milton lines, as I said, are sterilized of self-pity; the Tennyson lines are dripping with it. I am not issuing a moral judgment; I see no reason why Tennyson should not make Tithonus sound self-pitying. But beneath the grandeur and elaboration of the true grand manner there is always a certain

austerity. Matthew Arnold said, 'I think it will be found that the grand style arises in poetry, *when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject.*' I cannot entirely accept this definition myself; but it enables me to stress the distinction between *Tithonus* and the Milton passage. The lines I have quoted from the former are its opening lines; they are not low-pitched; but, as the poem goes on, the style steadily pitches itself higher; this kind of style cannot relax, without disintegrating, because it does not possess the core of simplicity we find in the epic grand manner. At the same time, the severity of which Arnold speaks is equally foreign to a highly-wrought, 'poetic' style. Finally, there is the question of subject. Arnold speaks of treating in this way or that 'a serious subject'; nowadays we are inclined to think in terms, not of serious subjects, but of serious treatment. Milton's two subjects, Light and Blindness, are not intrinsically more serious than that of *Tithonus,* which is a mortal man's attitude towards immortality. Tennyson, however, though he develops his subject with great beauty and eloquence, is giving it a fanciful treatment, embroidering on it rather than deepening its significance. Whether he failed to deepen it because of the limitations of this style, or whether he wrote in this style because his moral and imaginative powers were inadequate to a deeper exploration of the subject, is a question outside the scope of my present inquiry.

Before leaving Matthew Arnold on the grand manner, I should refer to what he calls 'the lyrical cry'. The simplicity and directness which he puts forward as qualities of Homer's grand manner, he also finds here and there in lyrical ballad poetry. 'When there comes in poetry what I may call the *lyrical cry,* this transfigures everything, makes everything grand; the simplest form may be here even an advantage, because the flame of the emotion glows through and through it more easily. In this way, by the occurrence of this lyrical

cry, the ballad-poets themselves rise sometimes, though not so often as one might perhaps have hoped, to the grand style.' He gives, as examples, stanzas from *Sir Patrick Spens* and Wordsworth's *To the Cuckoo*. It is, of course, only a matter of terms; but I should be, unwilling myself to enlarge the category of the grand manner so as to include those innumerable passages where lyrical poetry breaks into grandeur. 'The lyrical cry', as Arnold called it, can be heard all down the line of English poetry, from poems written in the pure Augustan style and from poems in which the colloquial element is strong, no less than from ballads and the simpler kind of lyric. We hear it, for example, at its most poignant in the last line of this stanza by Surrey—a sailor's wife is thinking of her absent husband:—

> When other lovers, in arms
> across, Rejoice their chief delight,
> Drowned in tears, to mourn my loss
> I stand the bitter night
> In my window, where I may see
> Before the winds how the clouds flee.
> Lo, what a mariner love hath made me.

That moment when good verse suddenly, momentarily, is transfigured into a thing that takes the breath away—it is a sort of visitation which transcends critical categories; and it may come to anyone; listen to these two lines:—

> And like the unspun humming-top
> I hold my breath.

What a shock that simile gives one! What freshness of poetic sensibility it suggests! Any poet today might be glad to have written those two lines. They were written, in fact, towards the end of the 19th century, by a preparatory schoolboy.

Greatness of this kind—the lyrical cry which 'makes everything grand'—whether it comes to us as naked emotion glowing through a simple form of words ('Lo, what a mariner love hath

made me') or rises out of some more elaborate or artificial style, must always be a momentary, accidental thing; poetry at such high pressure cannot be sustained; poetry of such pure quality cannot be summoned at will; the poet may find it, but he cannot seek for it. Let us call it intuition—the intuition Wordsworth described in the sixth book of *The Prelude* :—

> 'I recognise thy glory': in such strength
> Of usurpation, when the light of sense
> Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed
> The invisible world, doth greatness make abode.

The grand manner, on the other hand, as I have tried to define it, is a way of putting words together which can be deliberately chosen by the writer, and which demands a certain consistency of tone. It may appear in an elevated language such as Milton's or Wordsworth's, or a highly-wrought language like Spenser's and Tennyson's; in either case, we get an utterance whose value depends upon the ability of the poet to sustain it, and one which is sustained, technically, by an unremitting effort for congruity of diction and image. It is a style to which, nowadays, the last word we would apply is 'natural'.

'Natural', however, is a word literary critics use at their peril. Compare these two statements, the first by Hazlitt, the second by Mr. T. S. Eliot:—

'Dryden and Pope are the great masters of the artificial style of poetry in our language, as ... Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, were of the natural.'

'But in truth Dryden and Donne are both highly natural; and the merit of both is to have established a natural conversational diction instead of a conventional one.'

Hazlitt and Mr. Eliot seem to be flatly contradicting each other about Dryden. Mr. Eliot may be justified, though I doubt it, in classing Dryden with Donne as 'highly natural'. But what are

we to make of Hazlitt's linking of Spenser and Milton with Chaucer, as great masters of the natural style? The fact is that a poetic language which appears natural to one age will appear unnatural or artificial to another. Consider how Augustan literary criticism constantly stressed the importance of 'nature' for poetic composition, meaning—amongst other things—what is natural, normal, humane; yet Augustan poetry is regarded by many people today as the last word in artificiality. The thing to remember is that every poetic style is artificial; it uses words in a way different from the way we use them in ordinary speech, because it uses them for a different purpose. This remains true even of poetry with a strong colloquial element; neither Shakespeare nor Donne writes in the 'ordinary language of men', any more than Wordsworth does. Poems of conversational or colloquial tone are as artificial as the poetry of the grand manner, though in a different way; you could almost say they are more artificial, because they employ the idiom of contemporary speech or prose to produce something which is not prose or ordinary speech—a proceeding surely the very reverse of 'natural'. Gray was right when he said 'the language of the age is never the language of poetry'.

When we consider the language of our own age, we begin to see why the grand manner is out of use, surviving only, where poetry is concerned, in passages of deliberate pastiche, such as Ransome's speech in *The Ascent of F.6,* beginning '0 senseless hurricanes, That waste yourselves upon the unvexed rock', or in the work of poetasters. Although a poetic diction is always a distancing of words from their everyday functions, 'distancing' implies relationship, and a *living* grand manner must be partly derived from contemporary modes of speech or thought, other than poetic, which can give it body. Milton's, for example, is greatly affected by the idioms and sentence-construction of Latin, which was a second language for the cultivated reader of his time; and for more than a century after it, the Latin tradition was strong enough to support other varieties of the grand

Manner; when Cowper wrote 'Obscurest night involved the sky', even those who did not at once recognise this as a straight translation of a Virgilian phrase, could accept it as something expressed in a *lingua franca* which was still the heritage of the educated man. But today this classical tradition has ceased to be the common property of cultivated people. Lost, too, are the rhetoric of pulpit and parliament, the ceremonious style of letter-writing, the high-flown leading article—all that *grande tenue* in everyday communication which, though not directly the source of a poetic grand manner, seems so often to be its concomitant. If we look for a stylised or a rhetorical use of the English tongue today, we can find them only in the precise, fossilized language of the Law, in the gruesome jargon of bureaucracy, and the flowery but servile phrasing of the business man and the advertising expert. How can the poet soar, how can he even take off from such bases as these ?

But, going deeper, we see that poetic diction, in common with the kinds of language men use for everyday communication, is limited by the thought and climate of the times. If the poetic grand manner is obsolete or impracticable now, it is because people do not think or experience with the simplicity and confidence which are at the roots of all great epic and tragedy. We have too many reservations. Can we expect a heroic poem to be written at a time when modern psychological theories have muddied the springs of action for us? Or the soaring poetic generalisation when scepticism is the mode, not only for the intellectual, but for the man in the street? Or a *Dover Beach,* let alone a *Prelude,* in a society which cannot even take its doubts seriously? The one poet of this century, writing in English, to whom the grand manner came naturally and from whom we can accept it without uneasiness or disgust, is W. B. Yeats; and he was writing in a country relatively untouched by the vulgarity of Western civilisation, amongst a people who retained their faith and a certain primitive simplicity, at a time moreover when a sense of political and artistic

renaissance was mounting towards great events. The Ireland which produced Yeats' middle-period poetry was, though he did not at first recognise it, a heroic country—heroic in the sense that a few individuals, a few fighters and martyrs, making history, could remake the soul of a people. In England today we accept it, too readily perhaps, that events are quite out of our control as individuals, that history is made (or marred) only by the professional politicians; and as for remaking the soul of our country, it's a long time since we looked to any professional politician for that.

Yeats, of course, resented the effects of political passion upon individuals, particularly upon his women friends, and wrote bitterly against it. Nevertheless, he was brushed by it himself; the poems in which he condemned this passion are touched by the same exaltation of manner as a surrender to it would have produced; willy-nilly, a terrible beauty was born. The aristocratic tradition to which he was bred, and his boyhood steeped in a milieu where legends throve like brambles and where a man could become a legendary figure in his own lifetime—these also played their part in forming Yeats' grand manner. But, vigorous and singular though this is, it has the touch of decadence upon it as unmistakably as does his early style. Consider this stanza, from *Among School Children*:—

> Her present image floats in to the mind—
> Did quattrocento finger fashion it
> Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
> And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
> And I though never of Ledaean kind
> Had pretty plumage once—enough of that,
> Better to smile on all that smile, and show
> There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

What could be more imaginative, more eloquent, more exalted in diction than the first four lines? Yeats had ample technical skill to have continued in that vein. But he did not. He

had to be true to his own mind—a mind modified by the climate of his times. So, without losing the ceremonious tone, he turns in upon himself, modulating through the fancy of the next three lines into the self-mockery of the last one. It is a performance of magnificent virtuosity. But that turning in, that modulation from the imaginative to the fanciful, and that final self-mockery to which they are leading—these are marks of decadence.

The grand manner of 'the poet soaring in the high region of his fancies' has grown alien to the English writer of our day. He could not be at home in it, alive in it; like fancy dress, or a suit of clothes far too big for him, it would, he fears, make him feel unreal, or look just silly. Yet, although the old, simple appeal of the heroic is not for him, and although he may have no lucid philosophy or paternal religion to guide his steps, his exploration is still a spiritual one; he is concerned with the essence of things, not with the trivial. So, one avenue of approach—the sublime grand manner—being closed to him, he may instinctively resort, for dealing with his deeper intimations, his most serious experience, to that other kind of grand manner, or substitute for it—the highly-wrought, intense, richly poetic. One reason for Gerard Manley Hopkins' great appeal to recent generations is that he heightened the artifice of this style—its inversions, its verbal encrustation, its complexity of syntax, yet combined it with the natural speech rhythms and homely idioms we approve into a manner at once flexible and intense. He solved the problem of how to say the simplest, most vital things in the most elaborate poetic manner. How well he solved it, one glance at *Carrion Comfort* will show; and one glance at the mass of poetry influenced by Hopkins will show that the secret died with him. He was a genius, but also a dead end; he carried a new style as far as it can be carried.

For poets today, the problem of style is bound up with the problem of personal attitude. We lack, or seem to lack, a

prevalent poetic language which could help each poet to find his own voice. Just as, during the last two decades, the dial has swung wildly between the poetry of social engagement and its opposite, so we have had a disorderly, indecisive conflict within the stylistic field between a highly 'poetic' and a colloquial diction. In so far as any poet can *choose* how he shall write, each has had to choose, unaided, for himself; and it is a grave over-simplification to say that the highly-wrought style is a sign of 'escapism', or 'art-for-art's-sake'; it may well indicate an effort to break away from personal attitudes towards an impersonality transcending them—an effort, even, to find community. The colloquial idiom may become just as self-conscious in the bad sense, just as affected, or just as much a private language as may the elaborate, formal manner. Nor should we beat our breasts too lamentably about the 'contemporary predicament'. There has always been one; for style, the language of poetry, will always be, like any other marriage, a compromise; it arises from the conflict between two loyalties. The poet must be true and alive to his material—to a whole complex of reality, past and present, outside himself; but equally he must be alive and true to the thing he is creating, the poem itself, which is a different mode of reality altogether.