
“A GRACE BEYOND THE REACH OF ART”

LONGINUS: [Genius and the Rules]

Come, now, let us take some writer who is really immaculate and beyond reproach. Is it not worthwhile, on this very point, to raise the general question whether we ought to give the preference in poems and prose writings to grandeur with some attendant faults or to success which is moderate but altogether sound and free from error? Aye, and further, whether a greater number of excellences, or excellences higher in quality, would in literature rightly bear away the palm? *** For my part, I am well aware that lofty genius is far removed from flawlessness; for invariable accuracy incurs the risk of pettiness, and in the sublime, as in great fortunes, there must be something which is overlooked. It may be necessarily the case that low and average natures remain as a rule free from failing and in greater safety because they never run a risk or seek to scale the heights, while great endowments prove insecure because of their very greatness. In the second place, I am not ignorant that it naturally happens that the worse side of human character is always the more easily recognized, and that the memory of errors remains indelible, while that of excellence quickly dies away. I have myself noted not a few errors on the part of Homer and other writers of the greatest distinction, and the slips they have made afford me anything but pleasure. Still I do not term them willful errors, but rather oversights of a random and casual kind, due to neglect and introduced with all the heedlessness of genius. Consequently I do not waver in my view that excellences higher in quality, even if not sustained throughout, should always on a comparison be voted the first place, because of their sheer elevation of spirit, if for no other reason. ***

[From *On the Sublime* XXXIII (1st century A.D.),
tr. W. Rhys Roberts]

QUINTILIAN: [When to Break the Rules]

Let no one, however, demand from me a rigid code of rules such as most authors of textbooks have laid down, or ask me to impose on students of rhetoric a system of laws immutable as fate. * * * most rules are liable to be altered by the nature of the case, circumstances of time and place, and by hard necessity itself. * * * For these rules have not the formal authority of laws or decrees of the plebs, but are with all they contain, the children of expediency. I will not deny that it is generally expedient to conform to such rules, otherwise I should not be writing now; but if our friend expediency suggests some other course to us, why, we shall disregard the authority of the professors and follow her.

For my part above all things

This I enjoin and urge and urge anew¹

1. *Aeneid* III.436.

that in all his pleadings the orator should keep two things constantly in view, what is becoming and what is expedient. But it is often expedient and occasionally becoming to make some modification in the time-honored order. We see the same thing in pictures and in statues. Dress, expression, and attitude are frequently varied. The body, when held bolt upright, has but little grace, for the face looks straight forward, the arms hang by the side, the feet are joined, and the whole figure is stiff from top to toe. But that curve (I might almost have called it motion) with which we are so familiar, gives an impression of action and animation. So, too, the hand will not always be represented in the same position, and the variety given to the expression will be infinite. * * * It has always, therefore, been my custom not to tie myself down to universal or general rules. * * * For rules are rarely of such a kind that their validity cannot be shaken and overthrown in some particular or other. * * * But rules are helpful all the same so long as they indicate the direct road and do not restrict us absolutely to the ruts made by others. For he who thinks it an unpardonable sin to leave the old, old track, must be content to move at much the same speed as a tightrope walker. Thus, for example, we often leave a paved military road to take a short cut or, finding that the direct route is impossible owing to floods having broken down the bridges, are forced to make a circuit, while if our house is on fire and flames bar the way to the front door, we make our escape by breaking through a party wall.

[From *Institutio Oratoria* II.xiii (1st century A.D.), tr. H. E. Butler]

RENÉ RAPIN: [Grace Beyond the Rules]

Yet is there in poetry, as in other arts, certain things that cannot be expressed, which are (as it were) mysteries. There are no precepts to teach the hidden graces, the insensible charms, and all that secret power of poetry which passes to the heart, as there is no method to teach to please. 'Tis a pure effect of Nature. However, Nature alone can never please regularly, unless in the small compositions: there must be the assistance of art to succeed well in the great poems. 'Tis by this help that a genius a little cultivated shall range his thoughts in that admirable order which makes the greatest beauty in the productions of wit: by this order everything becomes delightful, because, as Horace saith, "'Tis in its place";² but this is the work of judgment, as invention is the work of imagination; and this order that keeps all right, and without which, the most beautiful becomes deformed, is a mystery but little known to modern poets.

[From *Réflexions sur la Poétique d'Aristote*, 1674]

SIR WILLIAM TEMPLE: [The Inadequacy of the Rules]

The modern French wits (or pretenders) have been very severe in their censures and exact in their rules, I think to very little purpose; for I know not why they might not have contented themselves with those given by Aristotle and

2. For the context of this phrase see *Ars Poetica*, lines 42–45.

Horace, and have translated them rather than commented upon them, for all they have done has been no more, so as they seem by their writings of this kind rather to have valued themselves than improved anybody else. The truth is, there is something in the genius of poetry too libertine to be confined to so many rules; and whoever goes about to subject it to such constraints loses both its spirit and grace, which are ever native, and never learned, even of the best masters. 'Tis as if, to make excellent honey, you should cut off the wings of your bees, confine them to their hives or their stands, and lay flowers before them, such as you think the sweetest and like to yield the finest extraction; you had as good pull out their stings, and make arrant drones of them. They must range through fields as well as gardens, choose such flowers as they please, and by proprieties³ and scents they only know and distinguish. They must work up their cells with admirable art, extract their honey with infinite labor, and sever it from the wax with such distinction and choice as belongs to none but themselves to perform or judge. * * *

After all, the utmost that can be achieved or, I think, pretended by any rules in this art is but to hinder some men from being very ill poets, but not to make any man a very good one.

[From *Of Poetry*, 1690]

JOHN HUGHES: ["Curiosa Felicitas"]

Elegance of thought is what we commonly call wit, which adds to propriety,⁴ beauty, and pleases our fancy, while propriety entertains our judgment. This depends so much on genius that 'tis impossible to teach it by rules. To the elegance of words, or style, belong all the figures of rhetoric, and to use these to advantage requires a judgment well formed by observation. In this, therefore, as in learning the graces upon an instrument of music, good examples are the best instruction. Thus a man may write metaphors, tropes, hyperboles, and all other figures, without the trouble of studying a system of rhetoric; and I believe better, too; for to attend to a great many rules whilst you are writing is the way to make your style stiff and constrained, whereas elegance consists very much in a genteel ease and freedom of expression; it is like a coy mistress, of so nice a humor that to court her too much is the surest way to lose her; and as success in love is owing to good fortune and the natural happiness of pleasing, rather than to fidelity and attendance, so the art of choosing out of several expressions equally proper that which is most graceful is best called a *curiosa felicitas*,⁵ which two words seem to comprehend all that can be said upon this head.

[From *Of Style*, 1698]

3. Properties, attributes.

4. The fitting, the appropriate.

5. In his *Satyricon*, Chapter XIV, Petronius (d. A.D. 65) used this phrase to describe the ultimate quality of Horace's poetry. It refers to the impres-

sion of ease and rightness (*felicitas*, "happiness") that is the final result of technical mastery and painstaking care (implied in the paradoxical adjective *curiosa*, "careful," "diligent").

ROGER DE PILES: [Grace Gains the Heart]

* * * A painter possesses [grace] only as a gift of Nature; he himself does not know whether he possesses it, or in what degree, or how he communicates it to his works. It surprises the spectator, who feels its effect without penetrating to its true cause * * * It can be defined as that which pleases and gains the heart without passing through the judgment.

Grace and beauty are two different things; beauty pleases only by rules, and grace pleases without rules. The beautiful is not always graceful, and the graceful is not always beautiful. But grace joined to beauty is the height of perfection.

[From *L'Idée de Peintre Parfait*, 1699]

LEONARD WELSTED: [No Precepts Can Teach Grace]

* * * The secret and soul of good writing is not to be come at through * * * mechanic laws; the main graces and the cardinal beauties of this charming art lie too retired within the bosom of nature and are too fine and subtle an essence to fall under the discussion of pedants, commentators, or trading critics, whether they be heavy prose-drudges or more sprightly essayers in rhyme. These beauties, in a word, are rather to be felt than described. By what precepts shall a writer be taught only to think poetically, or to trace out among the various powers of thought, that particular vein or feature of it which poetry loves, and to distinguish between the good sense which may have its weight and justness in the prose and that which is of the nature of verse? What instruction shall convey to him that flame which can alone animate a work and give it the glow of poetry? * * * Could certain methods be laid down for attaining these excellencies, everyone that pleased might be a poet, as everyone that pleases may be a geometrician, if he will but have due patience and attention.
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[From *Dissertation Concerning * * *
the State of Poetry*, 1724]