

Martinus Scriblerus's

Peri Bathous

or

The Art of Sinking in Poetry

Alexander Pope



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ONEWORLD CLASSICS LTD
London House
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.oneworldclassics.com

The Art of Sinking in Poetry first published in 1727
This edition first published by Oneworld Classics Limited in 2009
Edited text and notes © Oneworld Classics Limited, 2009

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe

ISBN: 978-1-84749-105-3

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Contents

The Art of Sinking in Poetry	1
Appendix	71
<i>Note on the Text</i>	93
<i>Notes</i>	93

The Art of Sinking in Poetry

1

IT HATH BEEN LONG – my dear countrymen* – the subject of my concern and surprise that whereas numberless poets, critics and orators have compiled and digested the art of ancient poesy, there hath not arisen among us one person so public-spirited as to perform the like for the modern. Although it is universally known that our every-way industrious moderns, both in the weight of their writings and in the velocity of their judgements, do so infinitely excel the said ancients.

Nevertheless, too true it is that while a plain and direct road is paved to their *ὑψος*,* or “sublime”, no track has been yet chalked out to arrive at our *βάθος*, or “profound”. The Latins, as they came between the Greeks and us, make use of the word *altitudo*, which implies equally height and depth. Wherefore considering with no small grief how many promising geniuses of this age are wandering – as I may say – in the dark without a guide, I have undertaken this arduous but necessary task to lead them as it were by the hand and, step by step, the gentle downhill way to the *bathos*

– the bottom, the end, the central point, the *non plus ultra* of true modern poesy.

When I consider – my dear countrymen – the extent, fertility and populousness of our lowlands of Parnassus, the flourishing state of our trade and the plenty of our manufacture, there are two reflections which administer great occasion of surprise: the one, that all dignities and honours should be bestowed upon the exceeding few meagre inhabitants of the top of the mountain; the other, that our own nation should have arrived to that pitch of greatness it now possesses without any regular system of laws. As to the first, it is with great pleasure I have observed of late the gradual decay of delicacy and refinement among mankind, who are become too reasonable to require that we should labour with infinite pains to come up to the taste of those mountaineers, when they without any may condescend to ours. But as we have now an unquestionable majority on our side, I doubt not that we shall shortly be able to level the highlanders, and procure a further vent for our own product, which is already so much relished, encouraged and rewarded by the nobility and gentry of Great Britain.

Therefore, to supply our former defect, I propose to collect the scattered rules of our art into regular institutes, from the example and practice of the deep geniuses of our nation – imitating herein my predecessors, the master of Alexander

and the secretary of the renowned Zenobia.* And in this my undertaking I am the more animated as I expect more success than has attended even those great critics, since their laws – though they might be good – have ever been slackly executed, and their precepts, however strict, obeyed only by fits, and by a very small number.

At the same time I intend to do justice upon our neighbours, inhabitants of the upper Parnassus, who taking advantage of the rising ground are perpetually throwing down rubbish, dirt and stones upon us, never suffering us to live in peace. These men, while they enjoy the crystal stream of Helicon, envy us our common water, which – thank our stars – though it is somewhat muddy, flows in much greater abundance. Nor is this the greatest injustice we have to complain of, for though it is evident that we never made the least attempt or inroad into their territories, but lived contented in our native fens, they have often not only committed petty larcenies on our borders, but driven the country and carried off at once whole cartloads of our manufacture; to reclaim some of which stolen goods is part of the design of this treatise.

For we shall see in the course of this work that our greatest adversaries have sometimes descended towards us, and doubtless might now and then have arrived at the *bathos* itself, had it not been for that mistaken opinion they all entertained that the rules of the ancients were equally necessary to the

moderns – than which there cannot be a more grievous error, as will be amply proved in the following discourse.

And indeed when any of these have gone so far as by the light of their own genius to attempt upon new models, it is wonderful to observe how nearly they have approached us in those particular pieces, though in all their others they differed *toto cælo** from us.

*That the bathos, or profound, is the natural taste
of man and, in particular, of the present age.*

THE TASTE OF THE BATHOS is implanted by nature itself in the soul of man, till perverted by custom or example he is taught, or rather compelled, to relish the sublime. Accordingly we see the unprejudiced minds of children delight only in such productions and in such images as our true modern writers set before them. I have observed how fast the general taste is returning to this first simplicity and innocence, and if the intent of all poetry be to divert and instruct, certainly that kind which diverts and instructs the greatest number is to be preferred. Let us look round among the admirers of poetry: we shall find those who have a taste of the sublime to be very few, but the profound strikes universally and is adapted to every capacity. 'Tis a fruitless undertaking to write for men of a nice and foppish gusto – whom, after all, it is almost impossible to please – and it is still more chimerical to write for posterity, of whose taste we cannot make any judgement and

whose applause we can never enjoy. It must be confessed: our wiser authors have a present end:

*Et prodesse volunt, et delectare Poetae.**

Their true design is profit or gain, in order to acquire which 'tis necessary to procure applause by administering pleasure to the reader. From whence it follows demonstrably that their productions must be suited to the present taste, and I cannot but congratulate our age on this peculiar felicity: that though we have made indeed great progress in all other branches of luxury, we are not yet debauched with any high relish in poetry, but are in this one taste less nice than our ancestors. If an art is to be estimated by its success, I appeal to experience whether there have not been, in proportion to their number, as many starving good poets as bad ones?

Nevertheless, in making gain the principal end of our art, far be it from me to exclude any great geniuses of rank or fortune from diverting themselves this way. They ought to be praised no less than those princes who pass their vacant hours in some ingenious mechanical or manual art, and to such as these it would be ingratitude not to own that our art has been often infinitely indebted.

The necessity of the bathos, physically considered.

FURTHERMORE, it were great cruelty and injustice if all such authors as cannot write in the other way were prohibited from writing at all. Against this I draw an argument from what seems to me an undoubted physical maxim: that poetry is a natural or morbid secretion from the brain. As I would not suddenly stop a cold in the head, or dry up my neighbour's issue, I would as little hinder him from necessary writing. It may be affirmed with great truth that there is hardly any human creature past childhood but at one time or other has had some poetical evacuation, and no question was much the better for it in his health – so true is the saying: “*Nascimur poetæ*”.* Therefore is the desire of writing properly termed *pruritus* – the titillation of the generative faculty of the brain – and the person is said to “conceive”. Now, such as conceive must bring forth. I have known a man thoughtful, melancholy and raving for divers days, but forthwith grow wonderfully easy, lightsome and cheerful upon a discharge of

the peccant humour in exceeding purulent metre. Nor can I question but an abundance of untimely deaths are occasioned by want of this laudable vent of unruly passions – yea, perhaps in poor wretches, which is very lamentable – for mere want of pen, ink and paper. From hence it follows that a suppression of the very worst poetry is of dangerous consequence to the State. We find by experience that the same humours which vent themselves in summer in ballads and sonnets are condensed by the winter’s cold into pamphlets and speeches for and against the ministry. Nay, I know not but many times a piece of poetry may be the most innocent composition of a minister himself.

It is therefore manifest that mediocrity ought to be allowed, yea, indulged, to the good subjects of England. Nor can I conceive how the world has swallowed the contrary as a maxim upon the single authority of that Horace.* Why should the golden mean and quintessence of all virtues be deemed so offensive only in this art? Or coolness or mediocrity be so amiable a quality in a man and so detestable in a poet?

However, far be it from me to compare these writers with those great spirits who are born with a *vivacité de pesanteur* – or, as an English author calls it, an “alacrity of sinking”* – and who, by strength of nature alone, can excel. All I mean is to evince the necessity of rules to these lesser geniuses, as well as the usefulness of them to the greater.

That there is an art of the bathos, or profound.

WE COME NOW TO PROVE that there is an art of sinking in poetry. Is there not an architecture of vaults and cellars as well as of lofty domes and pyramids? Is there not as much skill and labour in making of dykes as in raising of mounts? Is there not an art of diving as well as of flying? And will any sober practitioner affirm that a diving engine is not of singular use in making him long-winded, assisting his sight and furnishing him with other ingenious means of keeping underwater?

If we search the authors of antiquity, we shall find as few to have been distinguished in the true profound as in the true sublime. And the very same thing – as it appears from Longinus – had been imagined of that, as now of this: namely that it was entirely the gift of nature. I grant that to excel in the *bathos* a genius is requisite, yet the rules of art must be allowed so far useful as to add weight or, as I may say, hang on lead, to facilitate and enforce our descent, to guide us to the

most advantageous declivities and habituate our imagination to a depth of thinking. Many there are that can fall, but few can arrive at the felicity of falling gracefully. Much more, for a man who is amongst the lowest of the creation at the very bottom of the atmosphere, to descend beneath himself is not so easy a task unless he calls in art to his assistance. It is with the *bathos* as with small beer, which is indeed vapid and insipid if left at large and let abroad, but being by our rules confined and well stopped, nothing grows so frothy, pert and bouncing.

The sublime of nature is the sky, the sun, moon, stars, etc. The profound of nature is gold, pearls, precious stones and the treasures of the deep, which are inestimable as unknown. But all that lies between these, as corn, flowers, fruits, animals and things for the mere use of man are of mean price, and so common as not to be greatly esteemed by the curious, it being certain that anything of which we know the true use cannot be invaluable – which affords a solution why common sense hath either been totally despised or held in small repute by the greatest modern critics and authors.

5

*Of the true genius for the profound,
and by what it is constituted.*

AND I WILL VENTURE to lay it down as the first maxim and cornerstone of this our art that whoever would excel therein must studiously avoid, detest and turn his head from all the ideas, ways and workings of that pestilent foe to wit and destroyer of fine figures, which is known by the name of common sense. His business must be to contract the true *goût de travers** and to acquire a most happy, uncommon, unaccountable way of thinking.

He is to consider himself as a grotesque painter whose works would be spoilt by an imitation of nature or uniformity of design. He is to mingle bits of the most various or discordant kinds – landscape, history, portraits, animals – and connect them with a great deal of flourishing, by heads or tails, as it shall please his imagination, and contribute to his principal end, which is to glare by strong oppositions of colours and surprise by contrariety of images.

*Serpentes avibus gementur, tigribus agni.**

His design ought to be like a labyrinth, out of which nobody can get you clear but himself. And since the great art of all poetry is to mix truth and fiction, in order to join the credible with the surprising our author shall produce the credible by painting nature in her lowest simplicity, and the surprising by contradicting common opinion. In the very manners he will affect the marvellous: he will draw Achilles with the patience of Job, a prince talking like a jack pudding, a maid of honour selling bargains, a footman speaking like a philosopher and a fine gentleman like a scholar. Whoever is conversant in modern plays may make a most noble collection of this kind and, at the same time, form a complete body of modern ethics and morality.

Nothing seemed more plain to our great authors than that the world had long been weary of natural things. How much the contrary is formed to please is evident from the universal applause daily given to the admirable entertainments of harlequins and magicians on our stage.* When an audience behold a coach turned into a wheelbarrow, a conjuror into an old woman, or a man's head where his heels should be, how are they struck with transport and delight! Which can only be imputed to this cause: that each object is changed into that which hath been suggested to them by their own low ideas before.

He ought therefore to render himself master of this happy and antinatural way of thinking to such a degree as to be able, on the appearance of any object, to furnish his imagination with ideas infinitely below it. And his eyes should be like unto the wrong end of a perspective glass, by which all the objects of nature are lessened.

For example, when a true genius looks upon the sky, he immediately catches the idea of a piece of blue lustring or a child's mantle.

The skies, whose spreading volumes scarce have room,
Spun thin, and wove in Nature's finest loom,
The newborn world in their soft lap embraced,
And all around their starry mantle cast.

If he looks upon a tempest, he shall have the image of a tumbled bed, and describe a succeeding calm in this manner:

The ocean joyed to see the tempest fled,
New lays his waves and smoothes his ruffled bed.

The triumphs and acclamations of the angels at the creation of the universe present to his imagination the rejoicings of the Lord Mayor's Day, and he beholds those glorious beings celebrating the creator by huzzahing, making illuminations and flinging squibs, crackers and sky rockets.

Glorious illuminations, made on high
By all the stars and planets of the sky,
In just degrees and shining order placed,
Spectators charmed, and the blessed dwelling graced.
Thro' all th'enlightened air swift fireworks flew,
Which with repeated shouts glad cherubs threw,
Comets ascended with their sweeping train,
Then fell in starry showers and glittering rain.
In air ten thousand meteors blazing hung,
Which from th'eternal battlements were flung.*

If a man who is violently fond of wit will sacrifice to that passion his friend or his God, would it not be a shame if he who is smit with the love of the *bathos* should not sacrifice to it all other transitory regards? You shall hear a zealous Protestant deacon invoke a saint, and modestly beseech her only to change the course of providence and destiny for the sake of three or four weighty lines:

Look down, blessed saint, with pity then look down,
Shed on this land thy kinder influence,
And guide us through the mists of providence,
In which we stray...*

Neither will he, if a goodly simile come in his way, scruple to affirm himself an eyewitness of things never yet beheld by man, or never in existence, as thus:

Thus have I seen, in Araby the blessed,
A Phoenix couched upon her fun'ral nest.*

But to convince you that nothing is so great which a marvellous genius, prompted by this laudable zeal, is not able to lessen, hear how the most sublime of all beings is represented in the following images.

First he is a painter:

Sometimes the Lord of Nature in the air
Spreads forth his clouds, his sable canvas, where
His pencil, dipped in heavenly colour bright
Paints his fair rainbow, charming to the sight.

Now he is a chemist:

Th'almighty chemist does his work prepare,
Pours down his waters on the thirsty plain,
Digests his lightning, and distils his rain.

Now he is a wrestler:

Me in his griping arms th'eternal took,
And with such mighty force my body shook
That the strong grasp my members sorely bruised,
Broke all my bones, and all my sinews loosed.

Now a recruiting officer:

For clouds the sunbeams levy fresh supplies,
And raise recruits of vapours – which arise,
Drawn from the seas, to muster in the skies.

Now a peaceable guarantee:

In leagues of peace the neighbours did agree
And, to maintain them, God was guarantee.

Then he is an attorney:

Job, as a vile offender, God indites,
And terrible decrees against me writes.
God will not be my advocate,
My cause to manage or debate.

In the following lines he is a gold-beater:

Who the rich metal beats and then, with care,
Unfolds the golden leaves to gild the fields of air.

Then a fuller:

...th'exhaling reeks that secret rise,
Born on rebounding sunbeams thro' the skies,
Are thickened, wrought and whitened till they grow
A heavenly fleece...

A mercer, or packer:

Didst thou one end of air's wide curtain hold,
And help the bales of aether to unfold?
Say, which cerulean pile was by thy hand unrolled?

A butler:

He measures all the drops with wondrous skill,
Which the black clouds, his floating bottles, fill.

And a baker:

God in the wilderness his table spread,
And in his airy ovens baked their bread.*

6

*Of the several kinds of geniuses in the profound,
and the marks and characters of each.*

I DOUBT NOT BUT THE READER, by this cloud of examples, begins to be convinced of the truth of our assertion that the *bathos* is an art, and that the genius of no mortal whatever, following the mere ideas of nature and unassisted with a habitual – nay, laborious – peculiarity of thinking, could arrive at images so wonderfully low and unaccountable. The great author from whose treasury we have drawn all these instances – the father of the *bathos* and indeed the Homer of it – has like that immortal Greek confined his labours to the greater poetry, and thereby left room for others to acquire a due share of praise in inferior kinds. Many painters who could never hit a nose or an eye have with felicity copied a smallpox, or been admirable at a toad or a red herring. And seldom are we without geniuses for still life, which they can work up and stiffen with incredible accuracy.

A universal genius rises not in an age – but when he rises, armies rise in him! He pours forth five or six epic poems with greater facility than five or six pages can be produced by an elaborate and servile copier after nature or the ancients. It is affirmed by Quintilian that the same genius which made Germanicus so great a general would with equal application have made him an excellent heroic poet. In like manner, reasoning from the affinity there appears between arts and sciences, I doubt not but an active catcher of butterflies, a careful and fanciful pattern-drawer, an industrious collector of shells, a laborious and tuneful bagpiper or a diligent breeder of tame rabbits might severally excel in their respective parts of the *bathos*.

I shall range these confined and less copious geniuses under proper classes and – the better to give their pictures to the reader – under the names of animals of some sort or other; whereby he will be enabled, at the first sight of such as shall daily come forth, to know to what kind to refer, and with what authors to compare them.*

1. The flying fishes – these are writers who now and then rise upon their fins and fly out of the profound, but their wings are soon dry and they drop down to the bottom. G.S., A.H., C.G.*

2. The swallows are authors that are eternally skimming and fluttering up and down, but all their agility is employed to catch flies. L.T., W.P., Lord R.*

3. The ostriches are such whose heaviness rarely permits them to raise themselves from the ground. Their wings are of no use to lift them up, and their motion is between flying and walking, but then they run very fast. D.F., L.E., the Hon. E.H.*

4. The parrots are they that repeat another's words, in such a hoarse, odd voice that makes them seem their own. W.B., W.H., C.C., the Reverend D.D.*

5. The didappers are authors that keep themselves long out of sight, underwater, and come up now and then where you least expected them. L.W. — D. Esq., the Hon. Sir W.Y.*

6. The porpoises are unwieldy and big. They put all their numbers into a great turmoil and tempest, but whenever they appear in plain light – which is seldom – they are only shapeless and ugly monsters. J.D., C.G., J.O.*

7. The frogs are such as can neither walk nor fly, but can leap and bound to admiration. They live generally in the bottom of a ditch, and make a great noise whenever they thrust their heads above water. E.W., J.M. Esq., T.D. Gent.*

8. The eels are obscure authors that wrap themselves up in their own mud, but are mighty nimble and pert. L.W., L.T., P.M., General C.*

9. The tortoises are slow and chill and, like pastoral writers, delight much in gardens. They have for the most part a fine embroidered shell and, underneath it, a heavy lump. A.P., W.B., L.E., the Rt. Hon. E. of S.*