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ARTICLE XI.

THE MAKING OF A GREAT PREACHER: BOSSUET.

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ADORNING the four sides of the imposing fountain in the public square before the Church of St. Sulpice, Paris, are four sitting statues of heroic size. They represent four great French preachers, Bossuet, Fléchier, Fénelon, and Massillon, the fame of whose eloquence, as it was most signally displayed in Paris, the city now cherishes as an important part of her civic glory. Of these interesting figures with their noble faces, that of Bossuet is fittingly reckoned the most striking, as he was the most distinguished of the four in life for his pulpit eloquence. He was the greatest, indeed, of all the illustrious preachers that adorned the reign of Louis XIV. and made it the Golden Age of the French pulpit. A study of his life is interesting and instructive as revealing the method by which a great preacher may be said to have made himself. We have found a delightful guide to such study in M. Eug. Gandar, the author of an elaborate French work entitled "Bossuet Orateur; Études Critiques sur les Sermons,"[1] a work crowned with honor by the French Academy.

As shown by this interesting work, Bossuet became the great preacher he was, not by any easy development of his powers, but by a course of strenuous toil, and studious, intelligent self-discipline. Endowed by nature with a remarkable genius, *born* an orator if any man ever was, he combined with this native genius and its rare capabilities

[1] Paris, Errin et Cie, 1888.

an industry quite as remarkable, so that he illustrated in his person the saying, "Great genius is an infinite capacity for hard work." He early revealed his extraordinary gifts. In the Jesuit school of Dijon, his native city, he showed especial aptitude for the ancient classics, the translation of which into modern speech has always proved an excellent discipline for the development of the power of ready, precise, and copious expression of thought. He was dedicated by his parents to the ministry. St. Bernard of Clairvaux was born in the same province, in the neighborhood of Dijon, and was constantly held up to him, in the conversations about the home fireside, as a model of piety and eloquence. To complete his preparatory course for the ministry, Bossuet was sent to Paris, at the age of fifteen, to the famous College of Navarre. Its head-master at that time was Nicolas Cornet, whose virtues and skill as a teacher were thus gratefully acknowledged by Bossuet in the funeral oration he pronounced in his honor: "I, who found in this man, with many other rare qualities, an inexhaustible treasure of sage counsel, faithfulness, sincerity, and constant, unfailing friendship, cannot refuse to him here some tribute of a mind which in its early youth he cultivated with a fatherly kindness." Under the stimulating influence of this wise teacher he achieved distinction in every line of study except mathematics, for which he thought he had no faculty.

His brilliant achievements in the College soon became noised through the city, especially his eloquent religious addresses in the College Chapel, and he was invited to give proof of his eloquence for the edification of the select company that assembled in the *salon bleu* of the Marquise de Rambouillet. He was brought into their presence and given a subject, having only a few minutes for its consideration, but no book. Thus tested, this youth of sixteen extemporized an eloquent sermon, which was prolonged

until after midnight; at which one of the wits present said, he "never heard one preach *so early and so late.*"

For a wonder these attentions and flatteries did not turn his head. He remained unspoiled. M. Gandar says, "The progress of years and sober reflection put Bossuet on his guard against the illusions of youth, even when these seemed justified by the flattering *éclat* of the plaudits given him." The admiration he received assured him that he possessed the natural gifts of an orator; they did not delude him into thinking that he was already a consummate orator. So he labored to make himself such with unwearied assiduity.

Of what M. Gandar calls "*les illusions de la jeunesse*," by which he meant the *conceits* common to bright young men, and from which Bossuet was preserved by his sober judgment, or which he soon outgrew with the progress of years, two may well be mentioned. They are, first, that mere fluency, or readiness of speech, such as Bossuet had exhibited at the Hotel de Rambouillet, is enough to make one a successful and effective preacher; and, second, that the resources of an active, inventive mind, independent of any help derivable from diligent and fruitful studies, are adequate to make one a successful preacher. In the progress of years, both of these *conceits* are likely to be taken out of a man: they must be, indeed, if he achieves any success. In the case of some, however, the correction comes late,—too late to retrieve the mischief of their early foolishness.

Of the first of these mistakes—the overvaluation of fluency, it is so common and disastrous that fluency has come to be regarded by intelligent people as a "fatal gift." It is "fatal," because apt to incline its possessor to trust unduly to it, to the neglect of the careful thought and thorough study indispensable to successful public speaking. It is fatal to the lawyer and legislator as well as the preacher.

Lord Chief Justice Russell, of England, in a recent address to a society of law-students in London, is reported to have spoken of this faculty of ready speech somewhat as follows: "It was his opinion that facility of speech is liable to degenerate into glibness of speech, and, judging from his own experience, the man who speaks glibly does not, as a rule, speak impressively or instructively. In the flood of his eloquence there is usually a dearth of ideas. What is wanted is not words, words, but thoughts, thoughts, thoughts." Bossuet had the good sense early to perceive this danger and to labor diligently to improve his preaching in the essentials of thoughtfulness and adaptation to the spiritual needs of men. Four things were paramount in his conception of what is demanded of the good preacher, which things were more and more marked in his preaching. They were right thoughts, right words, right feelings,—feelings in entire sympathy with the truth uttered,—and untrammeled freedom in the delivery of this truth. The thoughts which he deemed most "right" or appropriate for the preacher's sermons, were the great, *necessary* truths of religion. "Speak to me of necessary truths," he said on his deathbed. These truths he loved with increasing ardor, and labored to make attractive. "He is under the charm of the truth he declares," says M. Gandar, "and he thinks it so beautiful that none can tire of hearing it, as he could not tire of speaking of it." This feeling sometimes, in the early years of his preaching, betrayed him into prolixity.

With these ideas and sentiments, more or less clearly defined, Bossuet entered upon his work. At Metz he began, spending six years in that provincial city,—years of hard study and the diligent performance of the various duties of his sacred calling. He spoke of them afterward as the years of his apprenticeship, in which he laid the foundations of his ministerial success. There he found that

"season of truce" between the educating discipline of school and the exacting business of the world, in which the power of thought freely develops and ripens.

It is by a curious incident in French history that the knowledge of those studies and ideas, by which he fashioned himself, is furnished us by Bossuet. When at the height of his fame, the Abbé d'Albret, the nephew of Marshall Turenne, the great French general, was created Cardinal de Bouillon at the early age of twenty-six. The event provoked considerable criticism, about the French court and in the church, so that the young Cardinal felt it important, if possible, to show the world that the victories of his great uncle and his public profession of the Catholic faith were not the nephew's only titles to his promotion. The pulpit offered him an obvious but perilous means of vindication. Diffident, however, of his ability to shine in the pulpit, he sought instruction from Bossuet as to "the studies indispensable" for making a great preacher. Bossuet, a devoted friend of the young Cardinal's family, wrote out the instruction desired. It covers but a few pages, "written without a pause of his pen," and "with no time to revise them"; but these pages are justly esteemed "precious" by M. Gandar. Their interest is chiefly autobiographic. The directions they contain are *recollections* of the method Bossuet himself had used. The essential things, he says in substance, are "ample knowledge, such as comes from the thoroughgoing habit of exploring subjects to the bottom, that one may have plenty to say; and piety." "Fullness of mind gives fertility of mind, and fertility of mind insures a pleasing variety."

First in importance for the replenishment of the mind is the knowledge of the Scriptures. In studying these, he should not spend much time over obscure passages and difficult texts, nor in turning the pages of commentaries to find out their explanation. He must not expect to know

everything in the Bible, for this is a book of which one could never know everything. He should ascertain what is clear and most certain, and *fill his mind* with the substance of the sacred books, *with the primary purpose of nourishing his own piety.*

For the further replenishment of his mind the Cardinal should study the Church Fathers. Not content with giving a general direction, Bossuet speaks of the Fathers individually, and of the particular benefits to be gained from each. St. Cyprian would teach him the art of handling the Scriptures so as to clothe himself with their divine authority. Tertullian, in whom he himself had found a congenial spirit, "would give him many striking sentences." Augustine would explain the doctrine of Christianity: "*Sa theologie est admirable; il élève l'esprit aux grandes et subtiles considerations.*" Chrysostom would afford him "excellent models of simple eloquence adapted to the common people and well fitted to instruct and move them." Lest the amount of reading thus marked out for the indolent young Cardinal should appal him, Bossuet tells him it is not so long and difficult a task as might appear. "It is incredible," he said, "how much may be accomplished, *prqvided one is willing to give some time to the effort, and to follow it up a little.*"

In this brief outline of study "*pour former un orateur*," Bossuet gave a transcript from his own experience during those years of his early manhood at Metz. He was a constant, diligent student of the Bible, so that Lamartine says, "in Bossuet the Bible was transfused into a man." Thence he derived that "*accent* of authority" which characterized his preaching. "We must not seek the explanation of this," says M. Gandar, "in the imperious bent of his mind." If he sometimes has an oracular tone, it is because he presents to his hearers, as he says and believes, "*une doctrine toute Chrétienne, toute prise des Livres Saints et des Écri-*

tures apostolique," "*simple et naïve exposition des maximes de l'Évangile.*" It is not himself whom he calls upon them to believe. "Listen," he says, "it is the Saviour who speaks; it is a question of heeding His word."

In regard to his diligent study of the Fathers of the Church, evidence of it is found in his sermons and funeral orations as well as in his explicit declaration, that at Metz he read the most of the Fathers. The fabric of his discourses is *shot through*, as with threads of silver and gold, with the thoughts and sayings of the Fathers. He relies upon their support, he breathes their spirit, he uses their expressions: he imitates them, cites them, paraphrases them.

The Bible and the Church Fathers thus formed, so to speak, his solid diet. He had also for a lighter diet the writings of Corneille, whom he admired "for his force and vehemence"; the Letters of Jean Balzac, who had "enriched" the French tongue with "beautiful sayings and noble phrases," and from whom he "obtained some idea of a fine and delicately turned style"; and the works of Tacitus in the French version of d'Ablancourt, which he liked because he found there "examples of the sublime and the grand," which "ought to be," he thought, "the style of the pulpit." To this style, it may be said, his natural bent inclined him as well as his studies and the fashion of the time. Indeed, his early pulpit style exhibits the faults of occasional grandiloquence and pompous amplitude. He had not learned, as he came to learn later, the value of self-restraint, the force of condensed expression, the merit of not saying too much; in short, that, *in writing and speaking, half oftentimes is more than the whole.*

But with these faults there were associated extraordinary gifts and abilities. He had a pleasing and sonorous voice that easily filled the largest cathedral. He had a heart responsive to the truth he uttered, and *vitalizing* it with

genuine emotion. He thus had the ability of investing the trite themes of religion with fresh interest, "infusing," as Dean Church says, "a sense of serious reality into the commonplaces of the pulpit." Lastly, he had the power of unfettered freedom in the pulpit. Though he wrote out his sermons at the first and continued to do this for nearly twenty years, until he reached the meridian of his fame as a preacher, he did not attempt to commit to memory what he had written, and require of himself verbal exactness in its delivery. Such bondage would have hampered him, he said, and quenched the fire and force and freedom of his utterance. He wrote beforehand for the same reasons that Alexander Hamilton and Daniel Webster wrote their famous pleas, to sift and clarify his thoughts, to determine their arrangement for the best effect, and to shape their expression with sufficient definiteness to save him from uncertainty and hesitation in speaking. Having done this, he trusted himself to his powers of utterance under the impulse of his heart, as inspired and quickened at the moment by the truth. He thus secured in preaching choiceness and strength of thought, felicity of language, and the power of easy, sustained flight which caused him later to be called "the Eagle."

With such qualifications, natural and acquired, Bossuet soon gained at Metz a great reputation. The people of the city thronged to hear him; strangers passing through were told about him, and attended upon his preaching as the chief attraction of the town.

One of the remarkable things about the sermons of those early years is that they contained striking thoughts and passages like those found in the best sermons of his later days. The same fact has been noted in the lives of other great preachers. Dr. Brown, in his recently published Yale Lectures upon "Puritan Preaching in England," says of Dr. Alexander Maclaren, of Manchester, that "the sur-

vivors of his Southampton congregation [to which he ministered in his young manhood], while willing to admit that he is more forceful and more cultured in the 'nineties than in the 'fifties, still contend that he has never reached higher levels than he frequently did in the days when he was their minister." A similar declaration is made by M. Gandar concerning Bossuet's early preaching at Metz. "Bossuet," he says, "will be, some day, more self-contained, more even and chastened in his style, but he will never speak in a more elevated and impressive fashion. There is in the best parts of the Panegyric of St. Bernard [one of his discourses at Metz], the same indescribable charm which we shall find later in the sermons preached at the Louvre and in the 'Funeral Orations.'"

Such examples suggest that a young preacher of promise is somewhat like a young song-bird,—a wood thrush, for instance,—which, though its song has not the full strength, sustained power, and superb quality of the song of the mature bird, sings nevertheless the same song essentially, though in a feebler key, and affords a similar delight to those that hear it.

Perhaps all preachers of promise manifest these tokens of excellence in the early years of their ministry. In the first five or six years of their preaching, generally, you will find clear intimations of their best thought and pulpit power. But many lack what Dr. Bushnell calls "the talent of growth"; or, having it, they do not stimulate it. They do not grow in pulpit power; they do not possess an insatiable desire to do so, or put forth unwearied efforts to realize this desire; they quickly reach their limit of improvement, and after a short period of moderate success exhibit a gradual declension of preaching power.

Bossuet had "the talent of growth" to a remarkable degree. He was also both ambitious of excellence and willing to pay the full price for it. His was a good example

of what an eminent public man of to-day calls "the strenuous life." He left little to chance; he was resolute of purpose to improve himself to the utmost; he sets before us the example of a man who could easily win admiration by the mere exercise of his natural gifts, but who for forty years never ceased toiling to satisfy his high ideal of excellence and make himself more perfect.

Two means of self-improvement employed by him at this stage, and which had a marked influence upon him, here demand our attention. They were: (1) the study of the best living models of pulpit eloquence, and (2) the writings of Pascal.

After four or five years of uninterrupted labor in Metz, he made a visit to Paris, and remained there about a year and a half, excepting the time required for a short visit to Dijon, his native city, and two or three flying visits to Metz, demanded by the duties of his position there. His purpose in going to Paris was to hear and to be heard: to hear the renowned preachers of the metropolis, that "his eyes might be opened to his own defects"; that he might learn to speak both "to the level of his audience, and to the height of his subject," and that he might clear his pulpit style of dryness, tautology, and all antiquated phrases and provincialisms: and to be heard by "audiences accustomed to hear the best preachers," that he might encounter the criticism of their standard of judgment.

Among the distinguished preachers whom he heard, four are specially mentioned by M. Gandar: Senault, Superior of the Oratory of the Faubourg St. Jacques; Leboux, who had the honor of being selected by the Queen Mother to preach two successive series of sermons at the palace of the Louvre before the young king and the court; Godeau, whose preaching is described as marked by "seriousness," "unction," and "an indescribable charm" which reminded his hearers of the graces of St. Francis de Sales,

or gave them a foretaste of the "sweetness of Fénelon"; and Claude de Lingendes, the Jesuit, "an almost perfect orator, condensed, earnest, sometimes pathetic and even terrible, whose hearers were seen to rise from their seats with a pale face and downcast eyes and depart from the church without speaking a word, greatly moved and thoughtful."

The hearing of these preachers produced a salutary change in Bossuet's preaching. His style became more studied and even, his periods more symmetrical and marked by sustained dignity of language. His models were not less anxious to speak properly than to think truly, and they did not separate from a scrupulous attachment to the truth the fear of wounding the tongue, the ear,—the proprieties. In imitating these models, however, he encountered the same danger that his studies of Corneille and Balzac and Tacitus had before exposed him to,—the danger of being stilted, of losing his simplicity and naturalness, of becoming unreal, of filling with clouds and emptiness those heights where he affected to move.

From this danger he was saved by the influence of Pascal, whose "Provincial Letters" opportunely appeared, and became the talk of the town at the very time of Bossuet's visit to Paris. This famous work, which marks an epoch in French literature, gave a new and better model of prose to the French language, as well as a new and purer standard of morals to the Catholic Church. Pascal corrected the false taste of the time by commending to general acceptance the following sound principles of rhetoric: that the repetition of a word or phrase, if necessary to the clear meaning or force of a sentence, is not to be condemned; that useless antitheses for the sake of symmetry are, like "false windows," absurd; that euphemisms, "to mask nature," or "to make great what is little or little what is great," are to be avoided; that a *conventional*

eloquence is not true eloquence; that a *continuous eloquence* soon becomes wearisome; that he who expresses himself naturally is likely to be listened to with less effort and more pleasure; that one *should do honor to the word; but only that the word may do honor to the thought.*"

Bossuet, then thirty years of age, readily came under the influence of this "peerless writer," as Mme. Sévigne calls him. This influence is shown, not in any sudden and entire alteration of his natural tendency to majesty (*majesté romaine*, as M. Gandar calls it), but in the fact that he afterwards exhibited a more chastened taste, and had "*the grand art of not saying too much*," combined with the power of coining felicitous words and phrases that stuck in the memory. The influence of Pascal is visible in the manuscripts of Bossuet, as seen in the way he worked over and reshaped the thoughts and passages found in the sermons of his early years which he thought worthy of being used again in his later sermons. While he preserves the ideas and much of the old language, he prunes it without mercy, "bringing," as one describes, "what was a diffuse and florid piece of amplification into the compass of a few, nervous, compact sentences, where every word tells."

Were these ceaseless efforts to perfect his pulpit-style commendable? We think so. A good style is like the feather that wings the archer's shaft. The better the style that conveys the truth, the more surely it is carried home to the mark. The aim of the preacher is to arrest attention, to impress the mind, to lodge the truth in the memory and heart, so that it may, by its natural operation, purify the heart and change the life. A good pulpit style, including action as well as words, assists this aim. To the degree that it sends the truth home, so that it possesses the mind with haunting and inspiring power through the action and words that drive it in, will be the preacher's

power. The whole past history of the pulpit proves this. The examples of the great preachers illustrate the fact. This consummate finish imparted by a rare style to the preacher's eloquence, and derived by Bossuet from his study of Pascal, was revealed after his return from Paris.

His return was hastened by the arrival in Metz, a fortnight before, of the Queen Mother, Anne of Austria, with the young king and court. The Queen Mother, who is represented in the annals of the time as occupied with acts of charity and devotion, and as eager to hear all preachers of renown, desired to hear the young preacher whose eloquence was the pride of the city, and had recently won applause even in the capital where he had preached. At any rate, a few days after his return he preached (at her request), before herself and the royal court, a panegyric of St. Theresa. It marks an epoch in his pulpit career because of its surpassing merits, and indicates the "beginning of his maturity." "There were sagacious people in the brilliant assembly that heard it, who confidently predicted that such eloquence would some day produce a great noise in the church."

The fame, thus foretold, came two years later, when Bossuet was called to Paris to preach the Lenten Sermons at the Louvre. For the following ten years, from 1660 to 1670, he was in constant request in Paris for Lenten Sermons, Advent Sermons and French Orations. The audiences that gathered to hear him were composed of all classes and conditions of men. "Court and city flocked to listen; the queens went from the palace, and the nuns of Port Royal from their seclusion; Condé, Turenne, Madame de Sevigné, and other famous contemporaries." Scholars, nobles, sages—the *élite* of society—mingled with the crowd. Never was the fascination which eloquence has for all classes of mankind more signally displayed; never was the indescribable witchery of eloquent speech more truly exer-

cised by human lips. For the hour, while sitting before him, those hearers sat entranced; they were almost literally spellbound.

Those were the years of his meridian splendor as a preacher; the years when his sermons were richest in thought, in wealth of knowledge and sentiment, in suggestive and picturesque language. At the close of the *Carême* (Lenten Sermons) given at the Louvre in 1662, the King himself expressed his enthusiasm by sending a personal message to Bossuet's father, to felicitate him for having such a son.

But in the Funeral Orations over Henrietta Maria, Queen of England, her daughter, the Duchess of Orleans, and the great Condé, Bossuet displayed the most remarkable powers,—powers of thought and spiritual discernment, and powers of a varied, exquisite style: the power of swift, condensed narrative, which places before us the substance of a long chapter or volume in a few sentences, as in the description of Condé's victorious leadership at the battle of Rocroi; and the power of epigrammatic as well as pathetic expression, which enabled him, by the use of a few simple words, to thrill and lift his hearers to sublimest heights of feeling, or to move them to irrepressible tears, as they hung upon his lips.

Take, for example, his account of the birth, childhood, and development to a beautiful womanhood, and of the sudden death of Henrietta, the Duchess of Orleans, daughter of Charles I., King of England.

"This princess, born near a throne, had a mind and heart superior to her birth. The misfortunes of her family could not crush her in her early youth, and from that time on she exhibited a grandeur which owed nothing to fortune. We say with joy that heaven plucked her from the hands of the enemies of her royal father, to give her to France. Precious, inestimable gift—if only it had been made more lasting! . . . Alas! we cannot dwell a moment upon the glory of this princess without having death come straightway to darken everything with his shadow! O death, withdraw from our thought, and suffer us to be beguiled, for a

little while, of our grief by the remembrance of our joy! Recall now, sirs, the admiration this English princess inspired in all the court. Your memory will portray her better, with all her traits and incomparable loveliness, than my words could ever do. She grew up amid the benedictions of all classes, and the years ceased not to bring to her new graces. . . .

"Nevertheless, neither the esteem she inspired nor all her great advantages affected her modesty. . . . Men spoke with rapture of the goodness of this princess who, in spite of the cliques and parties common to courts, won all hearts. She exhibited incredible tact in treating the most delicate matters, in removing hidden suspicions, in terminating all difficulties in such a manner as to conciliate the most opposite interests."

"Irremediable sorrow! that the subject of such just admiration should become the subject of boundless regret! . . . O woeful night, in which, on a sudden, resounded, like a clap of thunder, that astonishing news, Madame is dying! Madame is dead! . . . And there, in spite of that great heart, is this princess, so admired and so beloved,—there as death has made her for us!"

It is only a faint conception of the beauty and pathos of the original that our poor translation can give. Of the original only is the remark of Guizot true, "Bossuet alone could speak like that." If we have conveyed, however, a hint of the style of this matchless orator, or, by what we have said of it, may lead some of our readers to seek out the original, and peruse it for themselves, it will be enough. This masterpiece of commemorative eloquence, given in August, 1670, marks the culminating point in Bossuet's career as a preacher. For more than thirty years subsequently he continued to exercise his great gifts and attainments in the pulpit. He was the leader of the Church of France in his time—more potent in its affairs than the Pope himself. To the end of his life he continued to be a student and a learner, taking up the study of Hebrew in his later years, and achieving a laudable scholarship in it, that he might be a better interpreter of the Bible. His vigor and vitality seemed to be unfailing; so that when, at length, he died, men were astonished, it is said, at "this mortal's mortality."

Our purpose has been, not to give a *panégyrique* upon

Bossuet, but an *étude*—a study of him as a pulpit orator, and of the methods by which he made himself such. His character was by no means faultless, nor his life blameless. His treatment of Mme. Guyon was harsh; of Fénelon, ungenerous. In his discussions with Protestants he was not quite fair, and so his polemic triumphs were delusive. The truth cannot be determined by fallacious arguments nor settled by the plaudits of admirers. Nothing is settled until it is settled aright. The questions in controversy will recur until the demands of truth and justice are met. Bossuet also rests under the stigma of having approved the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and for that cruel act, by which Louis XIV. dispeopled his kingdom of his choicest subjects, and drove fifteen hundred thousand of them into exile, despair, or falsehood, Bossuet lauded him for "piety," and placed Louis "among the peers of Constantine and Theodosius." These are great blemishes upon Bossuet's good name; but they are faults to which good men are liable in an intolerant age. Luther, whom Bossuet resembled in several respects, was dishonored by them. Guizot, a staunch Protestant, characterizes Bossuet, however, as, for his time, "moderate and prudent in conduct as well as opinions," though his moderation "did not keep out injustice." On the whole our study of Bossuet has led us to accept as just the estimate of M. Gandar. He says: "In trying to account for the admiration of his genius, I have learned to honor Bossuet's character. While not daring to say that Fénelon thought of him, when he defined an orator as one '*qui ne se sert de la parole que pour la pensée et de la pensée que pour la vérité et la vertu*,' assuredly Bossuet fulfilled this idea in his best preaching, as in his Carême du Louvre."