## XXV. The Grand Style

W. Somerset Maugham

He was a very old man. It was fifty-seven years since he came to China as a ship’s doctor and took the place in one of the Southern ports of a medical officer whose health had obliged him to go home. He could not then have been less than twenty-five so that now he must have been well over eighty. He was a tall man, very thin, and his skin hung on his bones like a suit of clothes much too large for him: under his chin was a great sack like the wattle of an old turkey-cock; but his blue eyes, large and bright, had kept their colour, and his voice was strong and deep. In these seven and fifty years he had bought and sold three or four practices along the coast and now he was back once more within a few miles of the port in which he had first lived. It was an anchorage at the mouth of the river where the steamers, unable owing to their draught to reach the city, discharged and loaded their cargo. There were only seven white men’s houses, a small hospital, and a handful of Chinese, so that it would not have been worth a doctor’s while to settle there; but he was vice-consul as well, and the easy life at his  great age just suited him. There was enough to do to prevent him from feeling idle, but not enough to tire him. His spirit was still hale.

“I’m thinking of retiring,” he said, “it’s about time I gave the youngsters a chance.”

He amused himself with plans for the future: all his life he had wanted to visit the West Indies and upon his soul he meant to now. By George, Sir, he couldn’t afford to leave it much longer. England? Well, from all he heard England was no place for a gentleman nowadays. He was last there thirty years ago. Besides he wasn’t English. He was born in Ireland. Yes, Sir, he took his degree at Trinity College, Dublin; but what with the priests on one side and the Sinn Feiners on the other he could not believe there was much left of the Ireland he knew as a boy. A fine country to hunt in, he said, with a gleam in his open blue eyes.

He had better manners than are usually found in the medical profession which, though blest with many virtues, neglects somewhat the amenities of polite behaviour. I do not know whether it is commerce with the sick which gives the doctor an unfortunate sense of superiority; the example of his teachers some of whom have still a bad tradition of rudeness which certain eminent practitioners of the past cultivated as a professional asset; or his early training among the poor patients of a hospital whom he is apt to look upon as of a lower class than himself; but it is certain  that no body of men is on the whole so wanting in civility.

He was very different from the men of my generation; but whether the difference lay in his voice and gesture, in the ease of his manner, or in the elaborateness of his antique courtesy, it was not easy to discover. I think he was more definitely a gentleman than people are nowadays when a man is a gentleman with deprecation. The word is in bad odour and the qualities it denotes have come in for a deal of ridicule. Persons who by no stretch of the fancy could be so described have made a great stir in the world during the last thirty years and they have used all the resources of their sarcasm to render odious a title which they are perhaps all too conscious of never deserving. Perhaps also the difference in him was due to a difference of education. In his youth he had been taught much useless learning, the classics of Greece and Rome, and they had given a foundation to his character which in the present is somewhat rare. He was young in an age which did not know the weekly press and when the monthly magazine was a staid affair. Reading was more solid. Perhaps men drank more than was good for them, but they read Horace for pleasure and they knew by heart the novels of Sir Walter Scott. He remembered reading The Newcomes when it came out. I think the men of that time were, if not more adventurous than the men of ours, more adventurous in the grand manner: now a man will  risk his life with a joke from Comic Cuts on his lips, then it was with a Latin quotation.

But how can I analyse the subtle quality which distinguished this old man? Read a page of Swift: the words are the same as those we use to-day and there is hardly a sentence in which they are not placed in the simplest order; and yet there is a dignity, a spaciousness, an aroma, which all our modern effort fails to attain: in short there is style. And so with him; there was style, and there is no more to be said.