

RHETORIC AND ENGLISH COMPOSITION

BY
HERBERT J. C. GRIERSON

LL.D., LITT.D., LITT. ET PHIL.D.

PROFESSOR-EMERITUS OF RHETORIC AND ENGLISH
LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Ce n'est pas assez de savoir la Théologie pour
écrire de la Théologie : il faut encore savoir écrire,
qui est une seconde science.

JEAN-LOUIS GUEZ DE BALZAC (1597-1664)
"Grand Épistolier de France."

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PREFACE

IN the month of June 1893 the present writer was examined at Oxford in the school of *Litteræ Humaniores*, learning the result in the following August. On 30th September of the same year he was appointed to give a course of one hundred lectures to the class of English Literature in the University of Aberdeen. It was an interim appointment for the months in which an ordinance founding a new Chair was lying before Parliament. Five lectures were to be delivered every week, beginning on or about the 15th of October.

It was rather a staggering proposition, and I slept little for a week or more. Of University teaching in English I had enjoyed just fifty lectures at Aberdeen, of which twenty-five were devoted to Rhetoric or, as Rhetoric had come to mean under Dr Alexander Bain and his successor William Minto, English Composition. I had at school been drilled in Bain's *Higher English Grammar* (1863, 1879), and I had used his first *English Composition and Rhetoric: A Manual* (1866) while teaching in a school between my years at Aberdeen and Oxford. Moreover, I had just been studying the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle under the late John A. Stewart, then tutor at Christ Church, later White's Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University. It was thus a relief to know that I might begin my course by lecturing on Rhetoric for a few weeks, and so give myself more time to get ready for the formidable task of tracing the history of English Literature.

I have mentioned the *Ethics* of Aristotle because the benefit I had got from that work suggested to me to examine the *Rhetoric* which was no longer studied at Oxford, as I gather it had once been, having picked up a copy of Becker's text (1831) interleaved and fully, or almost fully, annotated from a tutor's lectures or lessons by a "H. Anstey e Coll. Univ. Oxon. A.D. 1848." I read accordingly the article by Jebb in the *Encyclopaedia*, the

Aristotle of Grote, and the translation by Welldon, not having time to wrestle with the Greek text. I was struck at once with two things, the exactness with which Aristotle defined and adhered to his purpose, and secondly, the wide significance of the sentence which I have placed at the head of my second chapter. The widening of the study of Rhetoric to include much more than the orator's aim of persuasion has led to some forgetfulness of what had been Aristotle's theme; and also to a tendency to forget the relative character of all our rules for composition—whether for the right choice of words, the correctness of our grammar, our use or disuse of figures, and everything else. One may hear Milton's style depreciated by comparison with Dryden's without any consideration whether in Dryden's style Milton could have given the tone he wished to his work or appealed to the readers he had in mind. Of Aristotle's work the late Professor Saintsbury spoke as though it were a kind of *Prosaics* meant to balance the *Poetics*, spoiled a little by the unfortunate preoccupation of the Greeks with the spoken word. But Aristotle's definition is quite clear and explicit. Rhetoric is the "faculty of discovering all the means of persuasion in any subject," and the various means, argumentative, emotional, moral, are just as applicable to poetry as to prose. Indeed, his examples are more often taken from poetry, dramatic and epic, than from prose, and in the *Poetics*, when he comes to the subject of *dianoia*, "thought," he refers the reader at once to the *Rhetoric*: "Under thought is included every effect which has to be produced by speech: in particular proof and refutation, the exciting of the feelings such as pity, fear, anger, and the like." (Think of the speech by Antony in *Julius Caesar*—its specious arguments, its suggestion of the trustworthiness of the speaker's character:

I am no orator, as Brutus is;

and the final rising appeal to the emotions of the mob. If then our aim is not persuasion our methods must vary. Cicero defines the perfect orator as "qui dicendo animos audientium et docet, et delectat, et permovet," and that will cover a great deal. Yet one must observe that each of these aims will be affected if the main aim is to persuade. The definition of Quintilian—"Dicere secundum virtutem orationis. Scientia bene dicendi"—is a

little vague but is accepted by Campbell in a work I will mention, and translated or paraphrased as "The art or talent by which the discourse is adapted to its end," which is sound, if it omits the subject and the audience.) I should prefer to define, if that is necessary, Rhetoric as the study of how to express oneself most correctly and effectively, bearing in mind the nature of the language we use, the subject we are speaking or writing about, the kind of audience (often only vaguely definable) we have in view, and the purpose, which last is the main determinant.

Aberdeen has a long tradition of teaching Rhetoric, or had, for I do not know how far it is still maintained. Professor Dover Wilson has declared recently that "our university departments of English are in the main departments for the training of literary critics, and pay far too little attention to the student's own power of expression." That was not the main theme of the English class taught by Professor Alexander Bain; and even under his successor the lectures till Christmas were confined to Grammar and Composition with a sprinkling of Philology. The Chair which both these occupied taught the three subjects that composed the mediæval *trivium*—Grammar, Rhetoric and Logic. The last had become the main theme, and was taught, with some psychology, in a full course of one hundred lectures. Rhetoric had been hived off to a class of fifty lectures and was beginning to include some study of English Literature. A separate Chair of English Literature, including Scottish, was founded by Mr John Gray Chalmers in 1893, and I was the first occupant. But I continued to lecture on Rhetoric; and in Edinburgh the Chair was entitled "of Rhetoric and English Literature." Nor, to tell the truth, did I regard my work on the latter subject as solely concerned to make literary critics, though of course we did deal critically with certain prescribed books. Rightly or wrongly, I myself thought of it as a chapter in the history of culture, supplying something which the class of History could not comprise, being so largely concerned with constitutional changes and foreign relations. It was in the English class that I myself first got some inkling of what was meant by the Middle Ages and the adjective "mediæval"; what was meant by the Renaissance, the *Aufklärung*, the Romantic Revival, etc. But that is another question. To

return to Rhetoric; as long ago as 1666 there appeared at Aberdeen :

Rudimentorum
RHETORICORUM
Libri quinque

Auctore
ROBERTO BRUNO
Presbytero Scoto.

Composed in Latin, it is dedicated : " Jacobo Bardaeo Equiti ab Auchmedden Ditionis Banfaeensis Praetori dignissimo Urbisque Banfae Praefecto clarissimo." The first book deals with the Matter of Rhetoric, the second with Invention, the third with Disposition, the fourth with Elocution (including tropes or figures of speech), the fifth with Pronunciation. The tropes in the fourth book are defined with Scholastic precision : " Tropus est igitur quadruplex, vel enim est inter res quarum altera est de alterius essentia, quae est Synecdoche : vel si altera non sit de alterius essentia, sed cum essentia jungitur, ibi est Metonymia : vel si altera sit alteri similis tantum, ex ea similitudine gignitur Metaphora : Quod si oppositae sint alterum pro altero ponit Ironia." The figures of speech have always, I fear, had too great an attraction for the teachers of Rhetoric.

How far this work was used in teaching I do not know. It belongs to a time when lecturing was done chiefly in Latin. Coming to a later period, in 1776 was published (in English now) *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, by George Campbell, a noted divine and theologian, Professor in and ultimately Principal of Marischal College, Aberdeen, a very interesting piece of work covering the whole field as embraced by the Ancients : the logic of proof, the appeal to the feelings, the characteristics of different audiences, and lastly elocution or style. Dr Bain covered the same ground except Grammar and Logic, as he had dealt with these in separate works, the latter in his two volumes on Deductive and Inductive Logic. In his final edition of *Rhetoric and Composition*, in two volumes, the first is on style—words, sentences, paragraphs, figures of speech ; the second on the " Emotional Qualities of Style," but studied not, as by Aristotle, as instruments

employed by the orator to persuade, but rather by the poet to give æsthetic pleasure. I have not attempted to follow him into this wide and complicated field, as my aim is practical rather than critical, to give some hints for composition, not to endeavour to give instruction in the appreciation of poetry. That, I think, is best done, so far as it can be, in the critical reading of definite texts. But Dr Bain was a very practical teacher himself, and it is of his class method I should like to say a word, so far as I can gather that from his book *On Teaching English* (1887) and from some examination of the papers which he set while Professor. He quite explicitly disapproved of essay-writing, at least for young students, on the ground that in general it meant asking the writers to make bricks without straw. What he substituted was the critical examination of passages in the light of the instruction given: "Criticise the placing of qualifying adjuncts in the following passage; and give the regulating principle in each case, mentioning improvements where necessary"; "Point out improvements as regards Exposition in the following"; "Examine for Narrative"; "Examine for Oratory," etc., etc. So they run, and they are not by any means easy questions, but Bain had, I gathered, very definite rules, and clearness was the quality to which he attached the greatest importance. I venture to think that if the passages were well chosen and carefully graded, such a practice might be combined with independent composition. Take an essay, not a too fanciful one as by Lamb, but a clear piece of writing, emphatic and interesting. Go over it sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, pointing out not only errors, if there are any, or passages that might be improved, but the merits also and how they have been achieved. Consider then with the class whether there are any other points which might have been treated under the same head. Then, a little later, set an essay to be written in class on the same theme, or one so closely akin that many of the same thoughts are available.

The subjects set for essays are too often so general that a student needs all his time to dig out something to say, instead of being able to give all his or her time to the saying of it in the best way. In a scholarship examination the theme set was one word—"Fanaticism." I was rather older than most of the candidates, and had been reading philosophy; and I found the

subject interesting. Years afterwards I met a distinguished man, head of a college, who said to me: "I remember you, for as we came out of the hall you said casually to me, 'That was an interesting subject'; and I had *not* thought so." On the other hand, a co-examiner and myself once set in a schools examination: "A Day in the Life of a Farmer or a Gamekeeper or some other calling"; and we got some admirable essays. It is often said that the writing of Latin prose was a good training for writing in English. A. E. Housman did not think so, and I do not feel sure. But if it was so, may it not have been just because the subject-matter was supplied and one could give all his time to the form? I do not care for the setting of bad sentences to correct. One should never dwell long on the bad. But the study of a whole passage, from every point of view, its excellences and its faults, followed by an attempt to go and do likewise, can be of use, and one has then a full right to criticise the result. Something of this kind was, if I remember aright, the method recommended by Ascham in his *Scholemaster* for teaching Latin prose composition. For a French master (he was actually a Pole) I used to write out a translation of one hundred lines from the French. When I gave it in he handed it back to me with the one word—"Retranslate." That was too difficult a task for a boy of eleven, but it was on the right lines. "He only," says Dr Johnson, "has a right to suppose that he can express his thoughts . . . with perspicacity or elegance, who has carefully perused the best authors, accurately noted their diversities of style, diligently selected the best modes of diction, and familiarised them by long habits of attentive practice." It is of course as an occasional lesson that I suggest this combination of criticism and composition. The student will be learning to think as well as to compose, and here the teacher of English must have the help of teachers of other subjects, especially the teachers of philosophy. I always encouraged honours students to attend at least one of the classes in Philosophy. Philosophy may solve no problems, but it does encourage the mind to examine its own activities, does help to awaken the student from his dogmatic slumbers.

The first four of these chapters were given their present form during the opening weeks of the last war. The remainder existed only in the form of notes for lectures, added to from time to time.

I have tried now to throw these chapters into consecutive order. My aim throughout has been rather to suggest a point of view than to dictate rigid rules.

I am indebted to Mr H. J. Laski and to Messrs Faber & Faber for permission to print the paragraph on pp. 119-20; and to Mr Cecil Day Lewis and Messrs Jonathan Cape for permission to print the poem on pp. 144-5.

H. J. C. G.

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. RHETORIC IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: ARISTOTLE	I
II. THE POINT OF VIEW	15
III. THE CHOICE OF WORDS	28
IV. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE	53
V. THE DICTION OF POETRY	80
VI. CONSTRUCTION—THE SENTENCE	93
VII. CONSTRUCTION—THE PARAGRAPH	115
VIII. THE WHOLE COMPOSITION	135
GENERAL INDEX TO TOPICS	158
SOURCES OF THE CHIEF PASSAGES QUOTED	159

CHAPTER I

RHETORIC IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: ARISTOTLE

It was among the Greek peoples of the Mediterranean that the kind of oratory took its rise which we think of when we speak of Demosthenes, Cicero, (Bossuet, Jeremy Taylor, Edmund Burke, William Ewart Gladstone,) oratory in which reasoning, argument, is combined with an appeal to the emotions, a certain elevation of style, and a construction, an ordering, which leads roughly from an exordium to a peroration. (When Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* had brought Eve to the fatal tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then, the poet tells us :

The Tempter, but with show of zeal and love
To Man, and indignation at his wrong,
New part puts on, and, as to passion mov'd,
Fluctuates disturb'd, yet comely, and in act
Rais'd, as of some great matter to begin.
As when of old some orator, renown'd
In Athens or free Rome, where eloquence
Flourish'd, since mute, to some great cause address,
Stood in himself collected, while each part,
Motion, each act, won audience ere the tongue,
Sometimes in highth began, as no delay
Of preface brooking, through his zeal of right:
So standing, moving, or to highth upgrown,
The Tempter, all impassion'd, thus began.

So Milton sees the first great orator, as too often in later days, bent on misleading poor humanity.) It was in Sicily apparently that the systematic study of the means of persuading a popular audience began, as a consequence of the frequency of lawsuits arising out of the political revolutions which accompanied the expulsion of the tyrants from the cities of Sicily. Suppose that you had been driven out of the city by a tyrant, you returned on the next political turn-over to find your house and property occupied by another, and it was necessary

for you to prove your right to that property before an Assembly of the Citizens. You might be able to produce documents, but you might not, and your business in any case would be to persuade a set of judges who were not as technically trained as the judges of to-day. Everything would depend on your power of persuading them, whether by an appeal to the judgement or an appeal to their prejudices and feelings. A certain Corax and another, Tisias, have got the credit of being the first to undertake to teach young men the art of persuasion. Their teaching was not systematic, but consisted apparently of useful wrinkles and some instruction in style and arrangement, for very early it was perceived how much influence mere beauty of language and utterance had upon a popular audience. (To this day negro audiences are enormously swayed by an eloquent flow of words.) It was a certain Gorgias, known to us mainly from Plato and Aristotle, who developed this stylistic side of rhetoric and cultivated an artificial highly rhythmical prose full of poetical phrases, metaphors, strange words and long sentences with elaborately balanced clauses, the balance emphasised by the use of alliteration. Gorgias may be called the fountainhead of artistic Greek, Latin, French and English prose. He was sent to Athens in 427 B.C. as an ambassador from the city of Leontini, and he swept his audiences off their feet by the novelty and artifice of his eloquence.

"Plausibility and not Truth, Brilliance of Diction and not soundness of Argument" were, Cope¹ says, the aim of these early teachers of rhetoric, and they naturally evoked the opposition of a great teacher of Truth like Socrates, whose own method of discourse was not by a sustained oratory but consisted in a skilful use of question and answer. But the fundamental opposition between the sophists or rhetoricians on the one hand and Socrates and Plato on the other was that the ends they had in view were different. The aim of the rhetoricians was to teach the young men how by eloquence they could attain to power; that of Socrates and Plato was to teach them the way to attain to Truth. This comes out clearly in Plato's dialogue, the *Gorgias*. "Rhetoric," Gorgias there declares, "is the art of persuasion in the Courts

¹ *The Rhetoric of Aristotle*. With a Commentary by E. M. Cope. Revised and edited by J. E. Sandys (Cambridge, 1877).

and other Assemblies, and about the just and unjust," and he goes on to show that in every art or profession the trained orator will have more power even than the specialist in that profession. He can persuade the patient to take physic when the doctor fails to do so, and he can persuade the jury to acquit a guilty man, although, to be fair to Gorgias, he does not approve of such a misuse of his art. Still, the fact remains that rhetoric is the art of persuasion and that the success of the orator does not depend entirely, or perhaps at all, on the truth of his argument but on the manner in which he is able to present what he wishes his audience to accept as true, and that his power is greatest with an ignorant or unprofessional audience. As Cicero says later: "We [that is orators] speak to those who do not know, not knowing ourselves." To Socrates it seemed that rhetoric was not really an art but a kind of trick, "the habit of a bold and ready wit which knows how to behave in this world," (a trick of flattery which stands to the true art of persuading and governing a people just as cookery does to the art of medicine. The doctor by his art is able to tell us what we ought to eat or what we ought not to eat. The cook by his craft persuades us to eat things which are *not* good for us to eat, or to eat more of them than is wise. In like manner) rhetoric in the mouth of the popular politician persuades a people to do what a ruler who is seeking only truth and justice would know to be unwise or wrong.

But Plato's quarrel is not so much with the art or craft of the rhetorician as with his end. He does not believe that the power of the rhetorician is nearly so great as he himself imagines. The true corrupter of the young politician, he tells us in the *Republic*, is not the rhetorician but the people themselves demanding that they shall get what they wish whether it be wise or not to grant it. This comes out clearly in the later part of the *Gorgias*, where a younger man, Polus, takes up the theme and pleads for the utility of oratory as an instrument of power. Socrates maintains that the power thus secured is not *real* power, that a wicked man who has secured power by his rhetoric, or other illegitimate means, has not gained *real* power because he has not attained the happiness which, consciously or unconsciously, he is in quest of; and Socrates goes on to maintain the paradox that "Rhetoric is of no use to us in helping a man to excuse his own injustice, or that

of his parents, or friends, or children or country ; but may be of use if we hold that, instead of excusing he ought to accuse, himself above all and in the next degree his family, or any of his friends who may be doing wrong, if he does not want to conceal but to bring to light the iniquity, that the wrongdoer may suffer and by suffering be healed."

Plato speaks as the great moral and religious prophet for whom the only true value in life is righteousness, to save one's soul. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Accordingly, like the Author of the Sermon on the Mount, Plato speaks in paradoxes because his values are not the world's values. Aristotle approaches the question of rhetoric in the spirit of a man of science, concerned not so much with what ought or ought not to be as with what is, which it is necessary to understand aright.⁷ Here is the fact of rhetoric, the fact that speakers can persuade by proofs of various kinds. Let us analyse it a little and find out by what means persuasion is affected. Aristotle is well aware of Plato's objections and knows that the art may be abused. A great deal of the oratory of the time is, he says, illegitimate. "Strict Justice if applicable to Rhetoric would confine itself to seeking such a delivery as would cause neither pain nor pleasure." The only thing which should be permitted to the orator in the law courts is to expound the arguments for or against the cause. He should not be allowed to make any appeal to the prejudices or emotions of his audience. But the orator *does* make such appeals, and it is necessary to examine his methods. Rhetoric may be a useful art (1) because, as Truth and Justice are naturally stronger than their opposites, if they are defeated it must be the fault of those who undertook to defend them ; (2) because there are audiences on whom strict reasoning is lost : they must be got at by easier, more popular methods, by an appeal to generally accepted notions ; (3) because if we cannot argue on both sides of a question we shall fail to recognise an unfair argument when it is used against us ; (4) because if it is honourable to be able to defend ourselves physically so also it is an accomplishment to be able to defend ourselves by speech, and (5) lastly, because it is no condemnation of any art that it may be abused. The truth is that the objection taken by Socrates and Plato to rhetoric is one of three instances in which

the moralist has taken exception at once to the abstract methods of the scientist. Science always deals with its appropriate subject in an abstract manner, it ignores factors which do not strictly concern the scientist's purpose. The chemist discovers explosives, but it is not *his* business to decide whether these explosives are to be used for quarrying stone or for blowing up our fellowmen. But in certain cases it has been felt at once that such abstraction, the ignoring of moral considerations, is dangerous. Rhetoric is one instance of this; Machiavelli's study of government in the fifteenth century was another; (and a third was the study of economics in the nineteenth century, the wealth of nations, which evoked the protest of Ruskin in *Unto this Last* and other works.)

Aristotle accordingly composed a philosophical treatise on Rhetoric of which it has been said that in it a science was at once begun and finished. Aristotle's statements have indeed been expanded and illustrated by later authors, and when real oratory came to an end with the disappearance of freedom in Greece and Rome, the study of the stylistic part of rhetoric was elaborated beyond all real necessity. Rhetoric began to be in later authors merely a study of elaborate artifices of prose style. No one has added anything essential to Aristotle's treatment of the whole subject.

Aristotle holds that oratory is the art of persuading by various means an audience consisting of persons who are unable to apprehend a number of arguments in a single view, that is to say, a popular audience. There are three main "proofs," or avenues of persuasion, Aristotle points out, which the speaker makes use of. One is by the way of the intellect—that is the proofs proper, the arguments which the speaker advances to establish the truth or untruth of what is asserted, the probability or improbability of success in the policy recommended to his audience. These are in most cases the only legitimate proofs. But as a fact they are with the popular audience generally the least important, for of average human nature, as Burke declares, the reason is only a part, and often a very small part. Accordingly there are two other lines of approach—the moral and the emotional. Much in a speech depends upon what the audience thinks of the speaker himself, the impression of his own character which he succeeds in conveying. There are three qualities which he must suggest

to his audience that he possesses—sagacity, honesty, and goodwill to his audience. (That is the note which Antony strikes when he declares :

I am no orator, as Brutus is ;
But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man,
That love my friend.)

The third of the orator's weapons is the appeal to the feelings, the disposition which he induces in the audience. This was, in ancient oratory at any rate, the greatest, the most effective weapon of the orator whether addressing a jury or a popular assembly. In our law courts the use of this weapon has been to some extent restrained by tradition and by the authority of the judge. (It is difficult to imagine any agent for the Crown making such an impassioned personal attack upon the unhappy accused as was made in America in the prosecution of the man accused of murdering the Lindbergh baby, or appealing to the jury by exhibiting the infant victim's sleeping-suit. But that was quite in the manner of Greek and Roman advocates. The accused and his family appeared in court clad in mourning with a view to appealing to the sympathies of the jury.)

These being, then, the three main means of persuasion at the disposal of the orator, Aristotle goes on to examine more closely the character of each. But first he distinguishes the three fields in which oratory is exercised, depending on the audience which the orator is addressing and the end which he has in view. For, he says, and this applies to other literature as well as oratory, a speech is composed of three elements—the speaker, the subject, and the persons addressed. The three kinds of oratory which Aristotle distinguishes are, then, (1) forensic oratory—that is the oratory of the law courts, concerned always with a *past* event (did this or that actually happen ?) and having as its end, its purpose, justice ; (2) the second is deliberative oratory, the oratory, say, of the Houses of Parliament, or of a town council, or of any committee concerned with legislation or administration of any kind. Oratory of this kind has in view the *future*, what law or regulation is to be established, and its determining end is expediency—what is the best thing to do, what is most likely to benefit ourselves, or, it may be, to injure our enemies. The third kind of oratory is eulogistic, the oratory to which we are accus-

tomed when a statesman has died or retired, or a clergyman is being given a presentation. (An excellent example is the eulogy of Fox by Burke at the end of his speech on the East India Bill ; and I myself heard Mr Gladstone deliver at Oxford a short but perfect panegyric on Sir Robert Peel, his earliest political leader.) ✓

It is with the second of these alone, deliberative oratory, that I wish to deal shortly, with a view to showing the scientific, Greek spirit in which Aristotle writes, concerning himself not with what ought or ought not to be, but simply with the right understanding of what is ; and with a view also of suggesting shortly the interest which this work has for us to-day, at least in those countries which are still free and democratic.

Taking up, then, the first kind of arguments, those which are addressed to the understanding, Aristotle points out that oratorical argument is always concerned with the probable or improbable. Where scientific proof can be obtained oratory is no longer required. The orator is discussing questions about which neither he nor his audience has certain knowledge, and what he wishes to do is to persuade this audience, starting from certain generally accepted statements or appealing to certain very striking concrete examples, to follow what he thinks is the best line to take, or at any rate that which for some reason he wishes them to take, whether it be to pass an act or a regulation, or to build a building, or to construct a road, or it may be to subscribe more generously to Foreign Missions.

To do this the orator of course needs to have knowledge of the themes in which he is going to deal. In the political orator's case these are, according to Aristotle, finance, war and peace, means of defence, supplies, and legislation. What the teacher of rhetoric has to teach is how to select from among the facts acquired in the study of these different branches, and also how to use a number of arguments that are applicable in a general way to various themes. For example, the political orator has always in view expediency, that is the happiness of the people, the good which he thinks the measure he is supporting will bring to them. What, then, is "happiness" ? what is "good" ? Well, if you wished to know scientifically or philosophically what happiness is or what is the good that we ought to aim at, Plato would send you to his *Republic*, where in ten books he has tried to convince