

THE SENSE OF SIN IN GREAT LITERATURE.

I. INTRODUCTORY.

MY object in these few addresses is to get down beneath the surface of our life. And the way I am going to take to do this is to follow in the track of some strenuous thinker who, it seems to us, as we consider everything, was fated, it may even have been from all eternity, to taste a certain moral loneliness, and to report.

Out of the heart of a people there is thrust forth from time to time one who by virtue of his sensitiveness and experience feels things which we who are of duller apprehension had not seen, or had forgotten. And yet we are so made that when a man of true insight, of an insight cleansed and certified by suffering, tells us what he saw and what he felt, there is something within us which acknowledges his story, and recognises that in some real way it is our story, and that we are no longer living honourably, if, having heard that story, it should be denied its proper influence with us.

I have entitled these studies : “ The Sense of Sin in great literature.”

Now, though I have no wish to dally over words, I should like to say what, from the standpoint of these studies, great literature shall be held to be. By great literature, I mean, now, literature which has dealt with the human soul at such a depth and with such purity and thoroughness of vision that what it has said is true, and will be recognised as true by serious souls in all times.

In my own view and belief, all great literature is confessional. Every really great work of art is the display of personality. This is not to say that in a great poem or drama, for example, the writer is giving us the facts of his own life ; but it is to say that in a great poem or drama the

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writer is isolating some mood or feeling or moral discovery of his own, and is there brooding over it, pursuing the implications of it, tracking the roots and principles of it, until his own heart and flesh cry out with a cry which means that in the last agony of his thinking the man has found nothing ; or that in the last agony of his thinking he has found God.

When the children of Israel were crossing the Jordan on their first entry into Canaan, Joshua summoned them one by one to take an oath of allegiance to the God who had so far prospered them. This they did. But before dismissing the assembled people, Joshua, we read, erected a stone in the presence of them all, and said, " This stone hath heard your vow. Therefore it shall stand there for ever as a witness against you, lest you deny your God."

The kind of literature I am thinking of is that kind of disclosure of the soul which, because it was given once upon a time, remains for ever as an afterthought, a plea, a standard to hold man to his destiny. For man will not consent for more than a time to be less than he has been ; and that is not enlightenment, it is not properly speaking progress, which proposes for us a poorer moral career. Great literature, then, I shall take to mean that literature which deals with the soul of man as the home of great issues, as the meeting place of the seen and the Unseen, of the occupations of time and the recurring preoccupation of eternity.

I know that in speaking so pointedly about the sense of sin, I may be thought to be dealing with matters which are really not present to people's minds in our day. We had recently the *obiter dictum* of one of our most versatile men, himself no enemy of faith, that " men are not worrying about their sins." But that might very well be reason enough for some things being said which should have the effect of reviving that noble disquietude. And besides,

we must not be guided by what men, who have their own interests and preoccupations, perceive or do not perceive. We must be guided by what we believe to be there, whether men are thinking about it or not thinking about it.

It is a very silly thing to say that "men in our day are not worrying about their sins," if you mean by that, that therefore they are not to be worried, or that they have somehow got beyond the need for worrying. On the contrary, it should be held to be a very alarming moral and social symptom that men are not now worrying over matters which have undoubtedly worried men in all times, as often as men have looked themselves in the soul. St. Paul in his day was aware that great masses of people were not worrying about their sins. He spoke of them as being "past feeling." But that is a condition which no true man will regard as a desirable one for himself. It is also a condition which no far-seeing man will welcome as a sound one for society. To say that men in our day are not worrying about their sins, is to say that men are satisfied with themselves and satisfied with things as they are. And that is simply to say that such men are no longer men, no longer the instruments of God for better things, which, if history in the long run means anything, means that the Mysterious Force whose very being and passion it is to heighten and intensify the Spirit in man, will one day take from these decadent souls their high responsibility.

I say, we are to be guided not by what seems the spirit of the time. We are to be guided by what is there all the time. To take an illustration from a disaster the terror of which time may have so softened as to make the allusion not too poignant. As the *Titanic* tore through the dark waters on that April night two years ago, the passengers and the crew were not worrying about ice. A thousand things contributed to their gaiety and absence of care. The bright

lights, the general opulence, the hearty faces, the music, the long tradition of safety ; or, if one bethought himself for a moment, there were the lifeboats and the life-belts. And besides the night was calm. Why then should any one worry ? And no one did worry. Yet the terrible thing was there : and all the time the ship was rushing to meet its unequal, inexorable foe. But consider this also : earlier in the day which led up to that disastrous night, a message had been borne to the vessel not yet doomed ; for ships and souls are not yet doomed so long as they have the faculty of hearing. That message, that report and rumour out of the vast sea, had reached the ship—had fallen indeed upon the ear of one whose very function it was to hear. We might without violence use words which St. Paul used of the souls of men and say that God did not leave that ship without witness.

Well, “ we mortals cross this ocean of a world each in the average cabin of a life.” As we voyage on,—and surely this which is the high interpretation of great literature is the true one,—from time to time, by the way of elected souls, voices are heard, the presence of threatening shapes is disclosed, and they, Captains of the soul, have it imposed upon them, so that it is a fire in their bones if they do not speak out, to declare what they have heard and to testify what they have seen.

But I do not believe that “ men to-day are not worrying about their sins.” I can well believe that an immense number of people are not thinking about their sins ; though even there I am probably quite at fault. But even were it true that an immense number of people were not thinking about their sins, it is equally true that there is an immense number of people, it may even be the same people, who are not thinking about anything, because they are not thinking at all. But this is nothing new or singular. *Every man*

who thinks finds that he has to think for others besides himself. Every man who is living a spiritual life at all is carrying in his soul the care of some others. And if there are immense numbers who are not thinking seriously about life and about how things are going, the responsibility is simply the greater that those who are morally sensitive shall in a day of unusual carelessness be the more faithful to their scruples.

But, I repeat, I do not believe that in our day men are not worrying about their sins. If the literature of our time is in any faithful way the mirror of men's souls, the one pre-occupation and concern to-day is just the ancient moral concern.

It is true that one may have to listen carefully, and to see the immediate aspect of things in the light of history, to perceive in the moral anarchy of our time anything with a high significance. Besides, there are times in which a mood of revolt descends upon a people and acquires such a head and volume that no good comes of mere argument. You might in literal truth as profitably argue with a bull which has begun to charge. We must wait and see, in the sense that we must simply wait until other people see what we for ourselves saw all the time.

The last generation has witnessed what seems to us an unusually strong and thorough-going criticism of the traditional morality. The nature of the soul has been put to the test. Experiments in living have been urged and followed which disputed the rulings and findings of the former time. We have been invited in the name of liberty and proper manhood to set out, to discover for ourselves the nature of this world and our own nature. To find out whether there is a limit in the nature of things, or, as we should say, in God, to the self-seeking and ruthlessness of the individual. But already, as I verily believe, signs are beginning to appear of the return upon the soul of those ancient misgivings which

may one day fling men, even in a kind of panic, upon the breast of the ancient faith.

For the fact is we men and women who are living in these days were in a sense not born in these days. The blood of our race is in us. The blood of humanity is in us. The reminiscence is there in our blood like a shadow, the reminiscence of great perils just escaped, of great disasters from which only with pain and the beating of the breast we have arisen. It was never for a moment to be believed that the race of man had learned nothing through all its long travail ; or that its wisdom, embodied in its laws and in its pieties, had no objective and reasonable reality. Therefore it is not to be wondered at that, when any experiment in living which repudiates that hard-won wisdom of the race has gone a certain length, something should re-awaken in the human soul which protests that it shall go no further, for at the point at which it has arrived it seems to be reminded by dim intangible portents that once, before, it occupied that perilous ground and came within sight of some huge terror.

In his great literature, the soul of man has gone out all alone to face, without the distractions which we average men allow to obscure our vision, the limits and barriers of the moral world. Certain elect and predestined men have stood upon lonely promontories of the Spirit looking across sad waters. They have seen what they have seen and they have reported it to us. And so far as their soul has been truly human, and so far as they have kept their eyes upon the facts and have not spared themselves, they have with varying degrees of clearness and authority corroborated the testimony of Him who, in full self-consciousness, tasted death and touched the bottom and last limit of human experience and personality.

These elect and priestly souls, who have spoken in great literature, have assured us that the deepest and last thing

about man is, that there is a way by which he must go, that he bears to a Holy God a relation which cannot be dissolved.

“THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER.”

If my purpose were purely literary, I should occupy myself with quotations and recollections from the wonders of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” My object rather is to allow the poem to speak for itself, to make its own proper impression upon our moral nature. I believe it is by some such form of words as that, that we may maintain the balance in the controversy between art and morals. It is probably true on the whole that art must not have a conscious moral motive. On the other hand the human soul is so subtle and swift-glancing that you must not put a limit to its resources. It would be easy to accept the saying “art for art’s sake,” if it were not so manifest that every supreme work of art—in sculpture, in painting, in music, in literature, has an effect upon us in addition to its effect of beauty. We understand and can sympathise with the feelings of impatience and proper pride which led to the protest underlying the phrase “art for art’s sake.” It must have seemed to sincere and eager spirits a sordid thing to see art hiring herself out to the support of conventional views of life, thereby depressing her own vitality because thereby allowing the world of interests to divert and make oblique what should have been her steadfast gaze. And so at the rallying cry of this phrase there was a movement on the other side which, because it was a movement and self-conscious, was sure to do equal violence to the truth of things. Men of fine sensibility, jealous for the independence and freedom of art, made their protest against the relation which they found existing in their day between art and morals. But in most cases the way they took to make their protest was by

devoting their art to the other side of the moral issue. This, of course, was really to be guilty of the very offence from which in their view art needed to be purged. The only difference was that from being the servant of moral convention, art became the servant of want of convention. Now, as St. Paul once said, "circumcision availeth nothing"; but he added, "neither doth uncircumcision."

It is an old controversy: and yet the truth of the matter is perhaps simple enough. Art should be sincere. Or better still, artists should be sincere men. If we must not look to them to support conventional morality, we ought to look to them not to support what Carlyle used to call Bedlam, either for the fun of the thing, or still less for the money there may be in the business.

A great man who is expressing himself in a picture or in a poem, or, if I may say so, in a sermon, is not thinking of anything except how he shall not pervert or qualify the flood of truth which somehow has been let loose within him. The moment he becomes self-conscious, the moment he permits other considerations even to whisper to him, in that moment he has, obscurely it may be, but quite patently in the judgment of his peers, cut himself off from the source and home of all truth and beauty and power.

That is what I meant when I said some time ago that all truly great literature is confessional. It is that quality in great literature—that it is confessional—and not that it supports or impugns the moral code of our time, which gives great literature an influence in the region of the Will. It is not that the writer, the poet or the dramatist, or the teller of a tale, sets out with the object of influencing us in any way. What happens is, that the poet, or the dramatist, or the teller of the tale, has himself been so moved, so unified in the depths of his life, by the intensity and logic of his own imagination, that his words reach down in us to that precise

depth from which they proceeded in him. And so great literature—and the same is true of every medium of spiritual expression—great literature cannot but have a moral influence upon us ; for it has borne witness to the depth and spirituality of our human nature. When we read or witness a great tragedy, it may very well be that no single moral scruple in our soul has been fortified, but our whole soul has been renewed, purified by pity or by terror. We close the book, or we come out into the night, with something of that double-assurance, whose presence indeed makes us truly human : we are sure of our own soul, and if we are not sure of God, we are sure at least that it is a very serious thing to live, that we live in a world of relationships.

Now, instead of working my way through these things, I might have been employed more wisely in expounding the wonderful poem which gives indeed such pointed illustration of what I have been saying.

You will read in any text-book that Coleridge and Wordsworth inaugurated the Romantic movement in English literature. You may learn there further that the “ Rime of the Ancient Mariner ” or something that was to be like it, was deliberately planned by those two great poets. As things turned out, the poem came to be written entirely by Coleridge, though Wordsworth supplied a fine couplet and suggested the Albatross. But when you have learned these odds and ends, you have learned nothing of real consequence. It is practically true, for example, of Coleridge and Wordsworth that, in the words of the Ancient Mariner himself, “ they were the first that ever burst into that silent sea.” But why did they set out ? Why did they break away from the recognised materials and methods of the eighteenth century ? Why, when they felt compelled to set out, did they take the line they took ? Why, confining ourselves to Coleridge and to this poem, could he not escape, he who was

so apt to refuse a task which was likely to make a demand upon him,—why could he not escape such a subject as this? And how did it come to pass that once launched upon this poem, his soul seems to us to be under a doom to penetrate to all the subtleties and horrors of such a thing of the spirit? The simple fact is, and we only deceive ourselves if we try to get behind it, about every great work of art, that is to say, of self-expression, there is something mysterious, inexplicable, fated, “and he who can explain it least is he by whose hand it was done.”

“A creative work stands apart and remains mute when we question its ancestry.” “It is a very suggestive fact that Goethe could never explain many things in ‘Faust.’ The origin of the work itself was as mysterious to him as to every one else. It is easy enough to indicate the sources of the legend and of many of the incidents woven into it; but what affinity lodged this seed in the soil of his nature, what were the stages by which it sank deep into his soul and became so thoroughly part of himself that it came forth from his brain not only refashioned, amplified, harmonised with itself in artistic consistency, but pervaded by a soul which made it significant of profound and universal truth? . . . ‘They come and ask,’ writes Goethe, ‘what idea I meant to embody in my “Faust,” as if I knew myself.’

“For more than sixty years the drama was on his mind; and yet he tells us that the whole poem rose before him at once when it first touched his imagination. He often spoke of the progress of the work: there are indeed few works of art concerning the shaping and evolution of which we possess such full and trustworthy information; and yet of the first contract between the idea and his own soul, all he can tell us is that it was suddenly and completely disclosed to his imagination.” (Mabie, *Essays on Literary Interpretation.*)

In all this, great literature approaches to the passivity

of nature. It offers to us levels and depths of interpretation equal to the level and depth of our own soul. You may take the poem as a temporary tract against cruelty to animals; and even from that point of view it will always deserve attention. But, if you are so minded, if life has laid your soul open to such a world of ideas, the poem may be to you and will be to you another of those utter and unflinching portrayals of what happens when a man has done something wrong, irreparable, and when the wrong he has done comes back upon him, so that he sees nothing else in all the world except that wrong thing. Of course, you may say, "But no man should take his sins so seriously as the Ancient Mariner took his shooting of the Albatross." And you and I may decide for ourselves that we shall not take ours so seriously. Still, as the Psalmist said, "we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and that my soul knoweth right well." We never know in what mysterious ways some little thing which we have been able to make light of, and almost forget, is going to start up like an armed man, and stand before us blocking our way, until we trample it down and deliberately choose Hell, or allow its accusation to compel us to our knees, where we must remain until we find, each one for himself, some reason for rising, in God and in a new depth and softness of our soul.

Emerson has a noble passage where, illustrating the indomitable perseverance of man, he describes a race who build and rebuild their homes on the slopes of a volcano. In the great poems of the soul, we may all learn on the surface of what unquiet moral elements we take our liberties.

I have been reading recently a volume entitled, *The Eighteen Nineties*, a book which describes with sympathy and justice the wonderful outburst of youth in literature some twenty years ago. I am not speaking of the excellence of the work done by the men of that movement. And

I am not doubting but that in the long run the change of air may prove to have been good even for our spiritual life. But as an experiment in living it was a movement which failed and will fail.

It was all true enough for those who said the things which they said at the stage at which they were when they said them. But it was no way of life for people who were going to get old, or were to have little children, or having little children, were to lose them. They wrote and advocated views, those young men, as though they had it in their own power to control the subtle and inevitable reactions of the soul within them. They did not lay their account with that traditional life—the sum, within the breast of every man, of all that the soul has seen and been—that traditional life which, like the turbulent element beneath volcanoes, was bearing them all the time that they were making their futile and provincial proposals. And yet already in that book the ground has begun to rock, and here and there the old terror has burst from the ancient depth of things, and men are on their knees who in the headlong days of their youth had despised themselves for having knees.

“I’ve taken my fun where I’ve found it,
And now I must pay for my fun.”

“And the end of it’s settin’ and thinkin’.” There was one of them—he has left behind him a mass of strange drawings like the work of Blake. He died at twenty-six. In his last days he became a Christian. Aye, there’s the rub! It is all very well if a man is never to know better. But if one day he comes to know better, why then a moral upheaval is as certain as the thing which happens when a mine is fired. Indeed that is the very formula for the coming of truth to a man or to an age: it is the firing of a mine. In his last days, this young man became a Christian, and

was received into the Church. Whereupon a terror took hold on him. Oh, unreasonable if you will, exaggerated, something that took advantage of his bodily weakness. Yes, that may all be true. But it was everything to him who endured it. Out there in the last lucidity of his soul it was the one thing. "I implore you," he wrote, "I implore you to destroy all copies of (naming a work of his) and all like drawings that are harmful. Shew this to (naming a friend), and conjure him to do the same. By all that is holy, all obscene drawings." Then he signed his name, adding the words, "In my death agony."

We none of us know how we are going to behave, what terrible misgivings are one day going to be let loose by some event. We know within limits what we are, surrounded by the interests, the faces, the habits which go some way towards the making up of our life. But we all know likewise that there is something wild and unpredictable within us. Concerning this thing it is a great part of my own personal religion that in every set of circumstances into which I may plunge or drift in this world or in any world, Christ, whom I invoke daily, may take hold of that interior life of mine and maintain for me my personal identity and chosen spiritual order. For no man can say how he will behave, were life to drive him into that lonely sea through which the Ancient Mariner voyaged. No one knows what visions will yet assail him, and what moral terrors, based it may be upon tiny scruples like inverted pyramids (what terrors) may one day shake his soul.

Here is the story as Coleridge himself repeated it on the margin of the poem.

PART I.

An ancient Mariner meeteth three Gallants bidden to
a wedding-feast, and detaineth one.

The Wedding-Guest is spell-bound by the eye of the old sea-faring man, and constrained to hear his tale.

The Mariner tells how the ship sailed southward with a good wind and fair weather, till it reached the Line.

The Wedding-Guest heareth the bridal music ; but the Mariner continueth his tale.

The ship driven by a storm toward the south pole.

The land of ice and of fearful sounds where no living thing was to be seen. Till a great sea-bird, called the Albatross, came through the snow-fog, and was received with great joy and hospitality.

And lo ! the Albatross proveth a bird of good omen, and followeth the ship as it returned northward through fog and floating ice.

The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen.

PART II.

His shipmates cry out against the ancient Mariner for killing the bird of good luck.

But when the fog cleared off, they justify the same, and thus make themselves accomplices in the crime.

The fair breeze continues ; the ship enters the Pacific Ocean, and sails northward, even till it reaches the Line.

The ship hath been suddenly becalmed.

And the Albatross begins to be avenged.

A Spirit had followed them ; one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels ; concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted. They are very numerous, and there is no climate or element without one or more.

The shipmates, in their sore distress, would fain throw the whole guilt on the ancient Mariner :

In sign whereof they hang the dead sea-bird round his neck.

PART III.

The ancient Mariner beholdeth a sign in the element afar off.

At its nearer approach it seemeth him to be a ship ; and at a dear ransom he freeth his speech from the bonds of thirst.

A flash of joy.

And horror follows. For can it be a ship that comes onward without wind or tide ?

It seemeth him but the skeleton of a ship.

And its ribs are seen as bars on the face of the setting Sun.

The Spectre-Woman and her Death-mate, and no other on board the skeleton-ship.

Like vessel, like crew !

Death and Life-in-Death have diced for the ship's crew, and she (the latter) winneth the ancient Mariner.

No twilight within the courts of the Sun.

At the rising of the Moon,

One after another,

His shipmates drop down dead.

But Life-in-Death begins her work on the ancient Mariner.

PART IV.

The Wedding-Guest feareth that a Spirit is talking to him ;

But the ancient Mariner assureth him of his bodily life, and proceedeth to relate his horrible penance.

He despiseth the creatures of the calm.

And envieth that they should live, and so many lie dead.

But the curse liveth for him in the eye of the dead men.

In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward ; and everywhere the blue sky belongs to

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them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.

By the light of the Moon he beholdeth God's creatures of the great calm.

Their beauty and their happiness.

He blesseth them in his heart.

The spell begins to break.

PART V.

By grace of the holy Mother, the ancient Mariner is refreshed with rain.

He heareth sounds and seeth strange sights and commotions in the sky and the element.

The bodies of the ship's crew are inspired, and the ship moves on ;

But not by the souls of the men, nor by demons of earth or middle air, but by a blessed troop of angelic spirits, sent down by the invocation of the guardian saint.

The lonesome Spirit from the south-pole carries on the ship as far as the Line, in obedience to the angelic troop, but still requireth vengeance.

The Polar Spirit's fellow-dæmons, the invisible inhabitants of the element, take part in his wrong ; and two of them relate one to another that penance long and heavy for the ancient Mariner hath been accorded to the Polar Spirit, who returneth southward.

PART VI.

The Mariner hath been cast into a trance ; for the angelic power causeth the vessel to drive northward faster than human life could endure.

The supernatural motion is retarded ; the Mariner awakes,
and his penance begins anew.

The curse is finally expiated.

And the ancient Mariner beholdeth his native country

The angelic spirits leave the dead bodies,

And appear in their own forms of light.

PART VII.

The Hermit of the Wood

Approacheth the ship with wonder.

The ship suddenly sinketh.

The ancient Mariner is saved in the Pilot's boat.

The ancient Mariner earnestly entreateth the Hermit to
shrieve him ; and the penance of life falls on him.

And ever and anon throughout his future life an agony
constraineth him to travel from land to land.

And to teach, by his own example, love and reverence to
things that God made and loveth.

That is the story. The moral authority of it lies just here,
that we cannot read it or hear it read without the sense that
in some region remote indeed from our accustomed interests
but close to us and of the deepest consequence, it is all
true, nay that it is all the truth. There is a sense in which it
is what it is to us. If there is any one to whom it all means
nothing, then in that one's case nothing more is to be said.
That he feels nothing when other people feel something, is his
own personal problem.

For there are those for whom the story does mean some-
thing on the moral plane, and indeed means nothing else,
and must be permitted to mean nothing further until the
moral demand of it is confessed. Well, there it is. The
soul of a man once saw all that. And he has enabled us to

see it. Out upon that lonely, inalienable life of our own we have seen his signal and have signalled back to him.

. We have heard a story. And this is the immense responsibility of seeing truth : it is left to us one by one, who have heard such a story, to act and take up our life henceforward as people must who by the illumination of such a story have now become aware of certain things ; as people for whom it means what it means.

JOHN A. HUTTON.