

THE DIAMOND EDGE IN LITERATURE

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READING, for I suppose the twentieth time, Alice Meynell's essay on the spirit of place, I asked myself a question which had never occurred to me before in quite the same form: what is it that gives to this essay, to so much of the same author's work and to a large body of literature in all ages, but particularly to that portion of the writings of Greece and Rome that has survived the assaults of time and the barbarians, a quite definite hardness, not an ordinary hardness, like the hardness of common stone, but a hardness as of diamonds, like a diamond drill or the finest kind of sword? Now, this is one of the questions that are worth answering. Let us see if we can find the answer.

No doubt many people have read Mrs. Meynell's exquisite essays without feeling the quality I am speaking of. As a medium of communication among human beings, language leaves a great deal to chance and is in that respect unsatisfactory. It would be useless for a musician to attempt, by means of words, to make a person with no taste for music, no knowledge of it and no ear, understand the difference between a good performance and a bad, or why people should be affected by music at all. There is no channel along which the thought of one mind may flow into the other. The same thing applies to the subject that forms the caption of this essay. Those who have felt the diamond edge in writing will not need to be told that there is such a thing. Those who have not felt it can never be made to feel it. They are tone deaf. That is why what is called teaching literature is largely a waste of time that would be better given to something else.

Among contemporary writers on this continent there is one who frequently exhibits the diamond edge in his work; for which reason alone I feel certain it will enjoy what is known in literary circles as immortality, that is to say, it will continue to be reprinted and read with enjoyment, proportioned to the intelligence of the reader, for two or three, perhaps even eight or ten centuries. I refer to the naturalist, William Bebee. Those who have read that fine book, containing as much truth as beauty and plenty of both, *Jungle Peace*, will recall the description of the capture of the bushmaster. Now compare that bit of sound writing with what a journalist, even so good a journalist as Sir Philip Gibbs, would

have made of the scene. He would have begun by creating atmosphere. He would have given us the fetid odour, the gleaming coils, the awful flattened head, the glistening eyes. He would not have spared us a single scale. Then he would have described the tenseness of the men's nerves, their crouching approach and the lightning swiftness of their spring as they closed with the snake when the noose was drawn tight. Now this kind of writing may be good in its way; I have done it myself, and know all the tricks; I have enjoyed it in the work of others. But Bebee never descends to the level of journalism for a sentence, let alone a page or a chapter. One short passage will illustrate what I mean better than anything I could say. "Even with the scant inch of neck ahead of the noose, the head had such play that I had to pin it down with the gun-barrel before we dared to seize it." What effort of journalese, or even of what is known as fine writing, could make us feel more strongly the deadly quality of that swaying head, armed with death?

Now here we touch, I believe, one side, or aspect, of the diamond edge. It is intimately associated with, if not dependent on, a severe economy in the use of words, a determination to tell what has to be told in the fewest and simplest terms, foregoing the temptation to make a great deal of a small matter. I must believe that this rare quality of hardness has its roots in the moral quite as much as in the intellectual nature of the writers in whose work it is found. It suggests a certain austere honesty of purpose, not necessarily divorced from geniality or even gaiety. The person employing it may be very good-natured, but can when the occasion calls for ruthlessness be ruthless.

Leaving the literature of Grece and Rome to one side for the moment, the best periods in which to search for the diamond edge are the thirteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The sixteenth is almost too exuberant, though one can find plenty of examples of what I am speaking of in Shakespeare, Montaigne, Hooker, Rabelais, and even in such small fry as Marot and Wyatt. The nineteenth century was less purely creative than the sixteenth, but what it lacked in creative power it made up in fluency. It was surely the most articulate age in history. How intolerably wordy the Victorians were! Their rhetoric is often good, occasionally splendid, but how tired one grows of the din! It is like listening to Wagner rendered by a huge, brassy German orchestra. No Victorian ever said in ten words what he could find an excuse for saying in a hundred or a thousand. None, did I say? Pause there, as Bassanio would say, when about to examine the caskets. Amid that dreadful Victorian clamour, running through it like a

sad undertone, I hear a voice, a rather tired voice, never querulous, Oh dear me no, very patient, quite good-natured, always as deadly as a strong acid in its strange power of dissolving shams, of bringing one down to earth and deflating one's balloon so nicely filled with conceit. Do I need to name Matthew Arnold? He too suffered from the prevailing vice of wordiness. *Balder Dead* and many of his other poems are four times as long as they need be. But his essays are scarcely ever too long. They have the diamond edge bright, clear, cold. If you want to find it in his poetry, read the last twenty lines of *Sohrab and Rustum*, *Requiescat*, *The Strayed Reveller*; best of all, that lovely bit describing the children at play on the heath, among the hollies, in *Tristram and Iseult*. Without fear that time will give me the lie, I affirm that when almost every other Victorian writer is forgotten, Arnold will still be read with profit by a company, fit though few. And here we touch another aspect of the thing I am discussing. We find it in Arnold, and many others, associated with a sort of ironic humility, more dreadful in its power to take the conceit out of ordinary folk than any pride. Whether writing prose or poetry, and some of his best prose is of the essence of poetry, Arnold always seems to be murmuring: "You see how little I can do, how limited is my vision of truth; what do you expect to accomplish?" Of course he would never have put it that way, even to himself.

Another English writer of our day who shows the diamond edge frequently is Hilaire Belloc. I must have read *Hills and the Sea*, *The Path to Rome* and *Robespierre* a score of times, each time with as fresh a delight as one experiences upon coming suddenly into an orchard in full bloom, or meeting a pretty child. Belloc is never tired of crusading against the infidel. He is nothing if not faithful to his Church, which would be my Church, if I had any, for no other has even a ghost of a chance of claiming my allegiance. But it is not the matter of Belloc's writing that I am concerned with now; it is something that belongs to his work in a greater measure than to that of any other writer I know anything about. I refer to a certain finality in connection with everything that he has written, a definite end, foreseen and reached by a straightforward effort, as a man reaches a goal, a town we will say, knowing it lay within the compass of his power to attain it and how far he would have to travel. Some day I shall write a fascinating, rambling essay on endings in literature. Many books, even poems, don't end at all, they merely stop, for no better reason that anyone can discover than that the writer was tired of writing or had used up his allotted space. Would five additional stanzas have spoiled the *Scholar Gypsy*? Could Browning not have added

twenty lines to *Bishop Blougram's Apology*? Does *Main Street* really end? Or *Daniel Deronda*? All Belloc's books, essays, and poems that I have read end properly. They don't merely stop, break off, run into the bush, like a rabbit. I would no more dream of adding a line to *The Arena* or *The Path to Rome* than of laying sacrilegious hands on the *Book of Ruth* or the *Twenty-third Psalm*. Here we touch another phase of the diamond edge. I am convinced that it is connected with a definite philosophy of life, by which I mean the acceptance of certain facts as facts, of certain formulae as true for all time, done with, put away as tools to be used on proper occasions, but requiring no further testing. The possession of a philosophy of life enables a man to decide the limits of his work, to advance with a purpose towards a definite goal, to come to an end.

The best field in which to hunt for the diamond edge is, of course, poetry; which may come as a shock to those queer people who think poets must be soft, gentle, rather vague, overlooking the enormous fact that a majority of great poets have been formidable soldiers. All the major poets show the diamond edge at times, Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Vergil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton. One finds it more often in dramatic and epic poetry than in lyric, though it runs through the songs all the way from Catullus to Blake, from Sapho and Villon to Rouget de Lisle and Francis Thompson. Next to poetry, the most fruitful fields to hunt in are the higher ranges of philosophical, theological and scientific writing. One comes across it in the oddest places, in the Bible of course, in a passage of Hooker, in St. Augustine, in a remark by Thomas Aquinas, in a sermon by Donne or Massillon, a maxim of La Rochefoucauld, a lecture by Pasteur or Claude Bernard, a speech or letter of Lincoln's. Whenever one meets it, it strikes one at first as a little cold, perhaps even commonplace. Then suddenly a door swings open and one stands, as though on Tabor, in the transfiguring light of heaven. One realizes with a shock, not altogether pleasant but salutary to the last degree, that one is in the presence of truth absolute, so far as it is given to man to know truth.

The essay is good cover to beat for the rare quality I am writing of, though some of our most amiable essayists have not a trace of it. I cannot find it in my favourite Lamb, or in Chesterton, or any one of a score of others almost equally well known. It has nothing to do with cruelty or brutality. So admirably gentle a writer as Mary Webb shows the keen, bright edge in nearly every line of her poems and essays. I have not read her novels.

I would not waste much time searching for the diamond edge in fiction, though one may find it in Jane Austen and Hardy, in

Conrad and Reymont, in Anatole France and Willa Cather. There are gleams of it in Du Bose Heyward's *Porgy*. No one would call Aldous Huxley gentle, yet in his brittle brilliance there is none of the hardness I speak of, nor is there any in Sinclair Lewis who makes definite attempts to be hard. The thing glimmers like the play of a duellist's rapier through the quaint conceits and endless digressions of *Tristram Shandy*, and there are traces of it amid the uproarious fun of *Gil Blas*. One is more likely to find it in Latin than in Anglo-Saxon or American literature. I can find it but seldom in German writing, even in Goethe, who is disagreeably hard in a lower sense.

Fiction has been tied too long and too securely to the tail of commerce to show much of any of the higher literary qualities, least of all the diamond edge. An editor, who is himself a story writer, told me in a letter recently that stories are for entertainment. I suppose he is right, though the statement struck me as odd. Whenever I am writing fiction, I am not thinking of entertaining anyone. I am trying to create a group of people who will be as real to me as any of my acquaintances, to put them in situations revealing now this side of their character, then that, and to subordinate everything to that end. If the thing finds its way into print and entertains someone, I shall not complain; but, frankly, I do not care whether it does or not, as long as I feel sure I have reached the goal I set out to reach.

If I were rich, and God knows I would like to be, because it would not only give me leisure to do the things I want to do, but would also enable me to help others, I would devote the rest of my life to searching the great libraries for the diamond edge. I would not find it often, for even the great writers do not employ it habitually and one may write a shelf-full of readable, even excellent books without knowing that the thing exists, though one will use it on occasion if one knows how. I would not waste much time on this continent where literature has been too thoroughly commercialized. It is in the libraries of London, Paris, Rome, Madrid, and in private collections here and there in provincial towns, that I would search for the keen, bright thing. It is cold as ice, chaste as the winter moon, beautiful as blossoming hawthorn with the dew on it, terrible as an army with banners. No man or woman who has employed it once is to be called insignificant. No man or woman who has written or spoken much without ever using it is to be accounted great, no matter what fortune and the trumpet of fame may say to the contrary. It is at once the vision and the sword of the archangel, a gift from God, one of the rare and precious things of the world.