SINCERITY
and
AUTHENTICITY

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I · SINCERITY: ITS ORIGIN AND RISE

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NOW AND THEN IT IS POSSIBLE TO OBSERVE the moral life in process of revising itself, perhaps by reducing the emphasis it formerly placed upon one or another of its elements, perhaps by inventing and adding to itself a new element, some mode of conduct or of feeling which hitherto it had not regarded as essential to virtue.

The news of such an event is often received with a degree of irony or some other sign of resistance. Nowadays, of course, we are all of us trained to believe that the moral life is in ceaseless flux and that the values, as we call them, of one epoch are not those of another. We even find it easy to believe that the changes do not always come about gradually but are sometimes quite sudden. This ready recognition of change in the moral life is implicit in our modern way of thinking about literature. Yet sometimes it is just our experience of literature that leads us to resist the idea of moral mutation, to question whether the observed shifts in moral assumption deserve the credence we are impelled to give them. Generally our awareness of the differences between the moral assumptions of one culture and those of another is so developed and active that we find it hard to believe there is any such thing as an essential human nature; but we all know moments when these differences, as literature attests to them, seem to make no difference, seem scarcely to exist. We read the *Iliad* or the plays of Sophocles or Shakespeare and they come so close to our hearts and minds that they put to rout, or into abeyance, our instructed consciousness of the moral life as it is conditioned by a particular culture—they persuade us that human nature never varies, that the moral life is unitary and its terms perennial, and that only a busy intruding pedantry could ever have suggested otherwise.

And then yet again, on still another view of the case, this judgement reverses itself and we find ourselves noting with eager attention all the details of assumption, thought, and behaviour that distinguish the morality of one age from that of another, and it seems to us that a quick and informed awareness of the differences among moral idioms is of the very essence of a proper response to literature.

This ambivalence I describe is my own as I propose the idea that at a certain point in its history the moral life of Europe added to itself a new element, the state or quality of the self which we call sincerity.

The word as we now use it refers primarily to a congruence between avowal and actual feeling. Is it really possible, does it make sense, to say that the value put upon this congruence became, at a given moment in history, a new element of the moral life? Surely it is as old as speech and gesture?

But I subdue this scepticism by reflecting that the word cannot be applied to a person without regard to his cultural circumstances. For example, we cannot say of the patriarch Abraham that he was a sincere man. That statement must seem only comical. The sincerity of Achilles or Beowulf cannot be discussed: they neither have nor lack sincerity. But if we ask whether young Werther is really as sincere as he intends to be, or which of the two Dashwood sisters, Elinor or Marianne, is thought by Jane Austen to be the more truly sincere, we can confidently expect a serious response in the form of opinions on both sides of the question.

There is a moment in *Hamlet* which has a unique and touching charm. Polonius is speeding Laertes on his way to Paris with paternal advice that has scarcely the hope of being heard, let alone heeded. The old man's maxims compete with one another in prudence and dullness and we take them to be precisely characteristic of a spirit that is not only senile but small. But then we are startled to hear

> This above all: to thine own self be true
> And it doth follow, as the night the day,
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.

We naturally try to understand that concluding sentence of Polonius's speech in a way that will make it consort with our low opinion of the speaker—'If you always make your own interests paramount, if you look out for Number One, you will not mislead your associates to count on your attachment to their interests, and in this way you will avoid incurring their anger when, as is inevitable, you disappoint their expectations.' But the sentence will not submit to this reading. Our impulse to make its sense consistent with our general view of Polonius is defeated by the way the lines sound, by their lucid moral lyricism. This persuades us that Polonius has had a moment of self-transcendence, of grace and truth. He has conceived of sincerity as an essential condition of virtue and has discovered how it is to be attained.

The extent to which *Hamlet* is suffused by the theme of sincerity is part of everyone's understanding of the play. It is definitive of Hamlet himself that in his first full speech he affirms his sincerity, saying that he knows not 'seems': there is indeed a discrepancy between his avowal of feeling over his father's death and what he actually feels, but it is not the one which, as he chooses to think, his mother is attributing to him—he feels not less but more than he avows, he has that within which passeth show. The scene with the players is concerned with the artistic means by which the congruence between feeling and avowal can be effected, and this histrionic congruence is incongruously invoked by Hamlet as he stands in Ophelia's grave, outtopping Laertes in the expression of grief: 'Nay, an thou'lt mouth, / I'll rant as well as thou.' And then there is Horatio: Hamlet holds him in his heart's core because, as he says, this friend is not passion's slave; his Stoic *apatheia* makes Horatio what we feel him to be, a mind wholly at one with itself, an instance of sincerity unqualified.

But of all the elements of the play, so many more than I mention, which lead us to think about sincerity, Polonius's utterance of the famous three lines is the most engaging, perhaps because of its implicit pathos. 'To thine own self be true'—with what a promise the phrase sings in our ears! Each one of us is the subject of that imperative and we think of the many difficulties and doubts which would be settled if only we obeyed it. What a concord is proposed—between me and my own self: were ever two beings better suited to each other? Who would not wish to be true to his own self? True, which is to say loyal, never wavering in constancy. True, which is to say honest: there are to be no subterfuges in dealing with him. True, which is to say, as carpenters and bricklayers use the word, precisely aligned with him. But it is not easy. 'Why is it,' Charles Dickens wrote in a letter at the height of his career, 'that . . . a sense comes always crushing on me now, when I fall into low spirits, as of one happiness I have missed in life, and one friend and companion I have never made?' We know who that unattained friend and companion is. We understand with Matthew Arnold how hard it is to discern one's own self in order to reach it and be true to it.

> Below the surface-stream, shallow and light,
> Of what we *say* we feel—below the stream,
> As light, of what we *think* we feel—there flows
> With noiseless current strong, obscure and deep,
> The central stream of what we feel indeed.

It was some thirty years after Arnold's wistful statement of the difficulty, perhaps even the impossibility, of locating the own self that Sigmund Freud took the first steps towards devising a laborious discipline of research to discover where it might be

found. But we are still puzzled to know not only the locus of the self to which we are to be true, but even what it is that we look for. Schiller wrote: ‘Every individual human being, one may say, carries within him, potentially and prescriptively, an ideal man, the archetype of a human being, and it is his life’s task to be, through all his changing manifestations, in harmony with the unchanging unity of this ideal.’ The archetype of a human being: is this then the own self? No doubt it is what Matthew Arnold called the ‘best self’, but is it the own self? Is it not the best self of mankind in general, rather than of me in particular? And if it can be called mine in any sense, if, because it is mankind’s best self, it must therefore be my best self, surely its being that exactly means it isn’t (as Keats called it) my sole self: I know that it coexists with another self which is less good in the public moral way but which, by very reason of its culpability, might be regarded as more peculiarly mine. So Hawthorne thought: ‘Be true! Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait by which the worst may be inferred.’

If sincerity is the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one’s own self, we can see that this state of personal existence is not to be attained without the most arduous effort. And yet at a certain point in history certain men and classes of men conceived that the making of this effort was of supreme importance in the moral life, and the value they attached to the enterprise of sincerity became a salient, perhaps a definitive, characteristic of Western culture for some four hundred years.

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A historical account of sincerity must take into its purview not only the birth and ascendancy of the concept but also its eventual decline, the sharp diminution of the authority it once exercised. The word itself has lost most of its former high dignity. When we hear it, we are conscious of the anachronism which touches it with quaintness. If we speak it, we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony. In its commonest employment it has sunk to the level of a mere intensive, in which capacity it has an effect that negates its literal intention—‘I sincerely believe’ has less weight than ‘I believe’; in the subscription of a letter, ‘Yours sincerely’ means virtually the opposite of ‘Yours’. To praise a work of literature by calling it sincere is now at best a way of saying that although it need be given no aesthetic or intellectual admiration, it was at least conceived in innocence of heart. When F. R. Leavis in all seriousness distinguishes between those aspects of T. S. Eliot’s work which are sincere and those which are not, we are inclined to note the distinction as an example of the engagingly archaic quality of Dr. Leavis’s seriousness.

The devaluation of sincerity is bound up in an essential although paradoxical way with the mystique of the classic literature of our century, some of whose masters took the position that, in relation to their work and their audience, they were not persons or selves, they were artists, by which they meant that they were exactly not, in the phrase with which Wordsworth began his definition of the poet, men speaking to men. Their statements to this effect were famous in their time and are indelible in the memory of readers of a certain age. Eliot said that ‘The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality’. Joyce said that ‘The personality of the artist . . . finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak’. Gide —he of all people!—said that ‘The aesthetic point of view is the only sound one to take in discussing my work’. Their achieved existence as artists precluded their being men speaking to men, from which it follows that the criterion of sincerity, the calculation of the degree of congruence between feeling and avowal, is not pertinent to the judgement of their work. The paradox to be discerned in the position begins, of course, in the extent to which the work of the great modern masters is preoccupied with personal concerns, with the self and with the difficulties of being true to it. If I may quote a characterization of the classic literature of the early century that I once had occasion to make, ‘No literature has ever been so shockingly personal—it asks us if we are content with our marriages, with our professional lives, with our friends. . . .

It asks us if we are content with ourselves, if we are saved or damned—more than with anything else, it is concerned with salvation.' And the paradox continues with the awareness, which we gain without any special effort, that this literature takes its licence to ask impermissible personal questions from its authors' having put the same questions to themselves. For all their intention of impersonality, they figure in our minds exactly as persons, as personalities, of a large exemplary kind, asking, each one of them, what his own self is and whether or not he is being true to it, drawing us to the emulation of their self-scrutiny. Their statements about the necessity of transcending or extirpating the personal self we take to be an expression of the fatigues which that self is fated to endure; or perhaps we understand them as a claim to shamanistic power: not I but the wind, the spirit, uttered these words.

The doctrine of the impersonality of the artist was loyally seconded by the criticism that grew up with the classic modern literature. In its dealings with personality this criticism played an elaborate, ambiguous, and arbitrary game. While seeking to make us ever more sensitive to the implications of the poet's voice in its unique quality, including inevitably those implications that are personal before they are moral and social, it was at the same time very strict in its insistence that the poet is not a person at all, only *apersona*, and that to impute to him a personal existence is a breach of literary decorum.

This chaste view of literature doubtless had its corrective uses. But the day seems to have passed when the simple truth that criticism is not gossip requires to be enforced by precepts which forbid us to remark the resemblances between Stephen Dedalus and James Joyce or between Michel or Jérome and André Gide. We are no longer required to regard as wholly fortuitous the fact that the hero of Proust's novel is named Marcel. Within the last two decades English and American poets have programmatically scuttled the sacred doctrine of *the persona*, the belief that the poet does not, must not, present himself to us and figure in our consciousness as a person, as a man speaking to men, but must have an exclusively aesthetic existence. The abandonment of this once crucial article of faith has been commemorated by Donald Davie in an interesting essay. As Mr. Davie puts it, 'A poem in which the "I" stands immediately and unequivocally for the author' is at the present time held to be 'essentially and necessarily superior to a poem in which the "I" stands not for the author but for a *persona* of the author's'. This striking reversal of doctrine Mr. Davie speaks of as a return to the romanticist valuation of sincerity; the title he gives to his essay is: 'On Sincerity: From Wordsworth to Ginsberg.'

I do not wish to cut the matter too fine—the word 'sincerity' will serve well enough for what Mr. Davie has in mind. Yet I think we will come closer to comprehending the development he describes if we use some other word to denote it. The unmediated exhibition of the self, presumably with the intention of being true to it, which Mr. Davie remarks as characteristic of many contemporary poets, is not with final appropriateness to be called an effort of sincerity because it does not involve the reason that Polonius gives for being true to one's own self: that if one is, one cannot then be false to any man. This purpose no longer has its old urgency. Which is not to say that the moral temper of our time sets no store by the avoidance of falsehood to others, only that it does not figure as the defining purpose of being true to one's own self. If sincerity has lost its former status, if the word itself has for us a hollow sound and seems almost to negate its meaning, that is because it does not propose being true to one's own self as an end but only as a means. If one is true to one's own self for the purpose of avoiding falsehood to others, is one being truly true to one's own self? The moral end in view implies a public end in view, with all that this suggests of the esteem and fair repute that follow upon the correct fulfilment of a public role.

I did not deliberately choose that last word. It came readily—'naturally'—to hand. We nowadays say 'role' without taking thought of its original histrionic meaning: 'in my professional role', 'in my paternal, or maternal, role', even 'in my masculine. or feminine, role'. But the old histrionic meaning is present whether or not we let ourselves be aware of it, and it brings with it the idea that somewhere under all the roles there is Me, that poor old ultimate actuality, who, when all the roles have been

played, would like to murmur ‘Off, off, you lendings!’ and settle down with his own original actual self.

It is surely no accident that the idea of sincerity, of the own self and the difficulty of knowing and showing it, should have arisen to vex men’s minds in the epoch that saw the sudden efflorescence of the theatre.[1] A well-known contemporary work of sociology bears the title, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*—we can suppose that the Hamlet of our day says: ‘I have that within which passeth presentation.’ In this enterprise of presenting the self, of putting ourselves on the social stage, sincerity itself plays a curiously compromised part. Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic.

The word ‘authenticity’ comes so readily to the tongue these days and in so many connections that it may very well resist such efforts of definition as I shall later make, but I think that for the present I can rely on its suggesting a more strenuous moral experience than ‘sincerity’ does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man’s place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life. At the behest of the criterion of authenticity, much that was once thought to make up the very fabric of culture has come to seem of little account, mere fantasy or ritual, or downright falsification. Conversely, much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it, for example, disorder, violence, unreason. The concept of authenticity can deny art itself, yet at the same time it figures as the dark source of art: so it did for Yeats, himself no mean role-player and lover of *personae*, at a moment when all his performances seemed to him of no account and he had to discover how to devise new ones.

> Those masterful images because complete
> Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
> A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
> Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
> Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
> Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone,
> I must lie down where all the ladders start,
> In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

A very considerable originative power had once been claimed for sincerity, but nothing to match the marvellous generative force that our modern judgement assigns to authenticity, which implies the downward movement through all the cultural superstructures to some place where all movement ends, and begins. ‘Look in thy heart and write’, says Sir Philip Sidney’s Muse to the poet—how all too blithe that old injunction sounds to our modern ears! There is no foul rag-and-bone shop in *that* heart. It is not the heart of darkness.

Still, before authenticity had come along to suggest the deficiencies of sincerity and to usurp its place in our esteem, sincerity stood high in the cultural firmament and had dominion over men’s imagination of how they ought to be.

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The word itself enters the English language in the first third of the sixteenth century, considerably later than its appearance in French.[2] It derived from the Latin word *sincerus* and first meant exactly what the Latin word means in its literal use—clean, or sound, or pure. An old and merely fanciful etymology, *sine cera*, without wax, had in mind an object of virtu which was not patched up and passed off as sound,

and serves to remind us that the word in its early use referred primarily not to persons but to things, both material and immaterial. One spoke of sincere wine, not in a metaphorical sense, in the modern fashion of describing the taste of a wine by attributing some moral quality to it, but simply to mean that it had not been adulterated, or, as was once said, sophisticated. In the language of medicine urine might be sincere, and there was sincere fat and sincere gall. To speak of the sincere doctrine, or the sincere religion, or the sincere Gospel, was to say that it had not been tampered with, or falsified, or corrupted. Dr. Johnson in his Dictionary gives priority to the meaning of the word as applied to things rather than to persons. As used in the early sixteenth century in respect of persons, it is largely metaphorical—a man's life is sincere in the sense of being sound, or pure, or whole; or consistent in its virtuousness. But it soon came to mean the absence of dissimulation or feigning or pretence. Shakespeare uses the word only in this latter sense, with no apparent awareness of its ever having been used metaphorically.

The sixteenth century was preoccupied to an extreme degree with dissimulation, feigning, and pretence. Dante had assigned those whose 'deeds were not of the lion but of the fox' to the penultimate circle of the Inferno, but Machiavelli reversed the judgement, at least in public life, by urging upon the Prince the way of the fox. In doing so he captivated the literary mind of England in the Elizabethan age and became, as Wyndham Lewis put it, the master figure of its drama. But the fascination with the idea of the Machiavell cannot alone account for the extent to which that drama exploited the false presentation of the self. 'I am not what I am' could have been said not alone by Iago but by a multitude of Shakespeare's virtuous characters at some point in their careers. Hamlet has no sooner heard out the Ghost than he resolves to be what he is not, a madman. Rosalind is not a boy, Portia is not a doctor of law, Juliet is not a corpse, the Duke Vicentio is not a friar, Edgar is not Tom o' Bedlam, Hermione is neither dead nor a statue. Helena is not Diana, Mariana is not Isabella —the credence the Elizabethan audience gave to the ancient 'bed-trick', in which a woman passes herself off as another during a night of love, suggests the extent of its commitment to the idea of impersonation.

But although innocent feigning has its own very great interest, it is dissimulation in the service of evil that most commands the moral attention. The word 'villain' as used in drama carries no necessary meaning of dissembling—it is possible for a villain not to compound his wickedness with deceit, to be overt in his intention of doing harm. Yet the fact that in the lists of dramatis personae in the First Folio Iago alone is denominated 'a villain' suggests that, in his typical existence, a villain is a dissembler, his evil nature apparent to the audience but concealed from those with whom he treads the boards.

And it is thus that the conception of the villain survived well into the Victorian era. A characteristic of the literary culture of the post-Victorian age was the discovery that villains were not, as the phrase went, 'true to life', and that to believe in the possibility of their existence was naïve. It became established doctrine that people were 'a mixture of good and bad' and that much of the bad could be accounted for by 'circumstances'. The diminished credibility of the villain, the opinion that he was appropriate only to the fantasy of melodrama, not to the truth of serious novels or plays, may in part be explained by the modern tendency to locate evil in social systems rather than in persons. But it is worth considering whether it might not also have come about because the dissembling which defined the villain became less appropriate to new social circumstances than it had been to preceding ones. Perhaps it should not be taken for granted that the villain was nothing but a convention of the stage which for a time was also adopted by the novel. There is ground for believing that the villain was once truer to life than he later became. We cannot establish by actual count that there were more villains in real life at one time than at another, but we can say that there was at one time better reason, more practical use, for villainous dissembling than at another. Tartuffe, Blifil, *la cousine* Bette, Mme Marneffe, Uriah Heep, Blandois, Becky Sharp—these wolves in sheep's clothing are not free fantasies, and it is a misapprehension to think of them as such. The possibility of their actual