SINCERITY
and
AUTHENTICITY

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TRILLING

I · SINCERITY: ITS ORIGIN AND RISE

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 Shake-
speare and they come so close to our hearts and minds that
they put to rout, or into abeyance, our instructed conscious-
ness 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 sug-
gested 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 congru-
ence 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 cul-
tural circumstances. For example, we cannot say of the
patriarch Abraham that he was a sincere man. That state-
ment 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 attribu' ting 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 un' attained 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 un-changing 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 a *persona*, 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 our
selves 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 Pre-
sentation 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

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[1] But see Eric Bentley's 'Theatre and Therapy', *New American Review*, viii
(1970), pp. 133-4. 'The idea that "all the world's a stage/And all the men and
women merely players", is not a clever improvisation casually tossed off by
Shakespeare's cynic Jaques, it is a commonplace of Western civilization. It is
a truth and was written on the wall of Shakespeare's theatre, the Globe, in
a language older than English: "*Totus mundus facit histrionem.*" To speak of life,
as many psychiatrists do, as role-playing is only to make a new phrase, not to
advance a new idea.' That the idea is an old one must certainly be granted—
see, for example, on page 86 of the present volume, Hans Jonas's comment
on the histrionic element in the Stoic morality. Yet, as I have suggested earlier,
there have been cultural epochs in which men did not think of themselves as
having a variety of selves or roles. Mr. Bentley goes on to assert both the in-
evitability and the positive value of role-playing. 'It is curious', he says, 'how
the phrase "play-acting" has come to be a slur; it implies insincerity. Yet the
commonplaces I have cited imply that one has no alternative to play-acting.
The choice is only between one role and another. And this is precisely the
positive side of the idea: that we do have a choice, that life does offer us alterna-
tives. . . .' The point is persuasively made but it doesn't, I think, silence the
insistent claims of the own self.

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 roleplayer 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.[1] 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

[1] The *O.E.D.* gives 1549 as the date of the earliest French use, but this is contradicted by Paul Robert's *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française* (1960–4), which gives 1475 as the date for *sincère* and 1237 as the date for *sincérité*. The word does not appear in Frédéric Godefroy's *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du IXe au XVe siècles* (1892).

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 commit-ment 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 con-vention 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 dis-sembling 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 existence is underwritten by social fact.

It is a historical commonplace that, beginning in the sixteenth century, there was a decisive increase in the rate of social mobility, most especially in England but also in France. It became more and more possible for people to leave the class into which they were born. The middle class rose, not only in its old habitual way but unprecedentedly. Yet, striking as the new social mobility was compared with that of the past, from our present point of view it must seem to have been most inadequate to the social desires that had come into being. Tocqueville's principle of revolu-tions is here in point, that in the degree to which the gratification of social desires begins to be possible, im-patience at the hindrances to gratification increases. And how effectual these hindrances were may be learned from any good English or French novel of the nineteenth cen-tury. Tocqueville pressed it upon the attention of the French that England had gained much in the way of political stability from the licence given to upward mobility by the commodious English idea of the 'gentleman'; yet we can-not fail to be aware of how limited that mobility was, how quick was the class of gentlemen to remark the social stig-mata that made a man unfit for membership in it. A salient fact of French and English society up to a hundred years ago is the paucity of honourable professions which could

serve the ambitious as avenues of social advancement. To a society thus restricted, the scheme, the plot, do not seem alien; the forging or destroying of wills is a natural form of economic enterprise. The system of social deference was still of a kind to encourage flattery as a means of personal ingratiation and advancement. The original social meaning of the word 'villain' bears decisively upon its later moral meaning. The opprobrious term referred to the man who stood lowest in the scale of feudal society; the villain of plays and novels is characteristically a person who seeks to rise above the station to which he was born. He is not what he is: this can be said of him both because by his intention he denies and violates his social identity and because he can achieve his unnatural purpose only by covert acts, by guile. In the nature of his case, he is a hypocrite, which is to say one who plays a part. It is to the point that Iago's resent ment of his class situation and his wish to better it are conspicuous in his character.

The hypocrite-villain, the conscious dissembler, has be come marginal, even alien, to the modern imagination of the moral life. The situation in which a person systematic ally misrepresents himself in order to practise upon the good faith of another does not readily command our interest, scarcely our credence. The deception we best understand and most willingly give our attention to is that which a person works upon himself. Iago's avowed purpose of base duplicity does not hold for us the fascination that nine teenth-century audiences found in it; our liveliest curiosity is likely to be directed to the moral condition of Othello, to what lies hidden under his superbness, to what in him is masked by the heroic *persona*. Similarly Tartuffe, who consciously and avowedly dissembles, engages us less than the protagonist of *Le Misanthrope*, who, Molière suggests, despite the programmatic completeness of his sincerity is

not entirely what he is. 'My chief talent is to be frank and sincere', Alceste says. The whole energy of his being is directed towards perfecting the trait upon which he prides himself. '. . . *Dont son âme se pique*': it is the clue to the comic flaw. Every ridiculous person in the play has his point of pride; for Oronte it is his sonnets, for Clitandre his waist-coats, for Acaste his noble blood, his wealth, and his infallible charm. Alceste's point of pride is his sincerity, his remorseless outspokenness on behalf of truth. The obsessiveness and obduracy of his sincerity amount to *hubris*, that state of being in which truth is obscured through the ascendancy of self-regarding will over intelligence. It is to his will and not, as he persuades himself, to truth that Alceste gives his stern allegiance.

No laughter at human weakness was ever more charged with compunction and tenderness than that which Molière directs upon the self-deception of Alceste's sincerity. Of this Rousseau would seem to have had no awareness when, in the *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, he framed his famous denunciation of *Le Misanthrope*. Not that Rousseau was not himself moved to compunction and tenderness in his attack—he spoke more in sorrow than in anger and chastised where he loved, for he adored Molière and, for all the severity of his strictures on the play, he especially ad-mired *Le Misanthrope*. In it, we may suppose, he saw his own portrait drawn, and the root of his quarrel with Molière is that the radical moral absolutism of Alceste is not celebrated but questioned and teased. It was not the intention of Molière in his comedies, Rousseau says, to set up the model of a good man but rather that of a man of the world, a likeable man; he did not wish to correct vices but only what is ridiculous, 'and of all ridiculous characters the one which the world pardons least is the one who is ridicu-lous because he is virtuous'. *Le Misanthrope*, Rousseau goes

on, was written 'to please corrupt minds'; it represents a 'false good' which is more dangerous than actual evil, causing 'the practice and the principles of society to be preferred to exact probity' and making 'wisdom consist in a certain mean between vice and virtue'.

This is a reading of the play that everyone must make. It consorts with the common view of the moral principle of Molière's comedies, which is that right conduct is sensible conduct, involving a large element of pragmatic accom- modation to society's deficiencies and contradictions. But with this reading must go another, which takes account of the perception that Alceste's feelings and opinions are Molière's own, that the bland good sense of Alceste's loyal friend Philinte does not really have the last word, that Célimène is not only all that George Meredith says she is in the way of charm and vitality but also a whited sepulchre and as such an allegory of society itself.

For our present purpose of identifying a chief circum- stance with which the origin and rise of sincerity is bound up, it does not matter which of the two readings best re- commends itself, since one as decisively as the other places the concept of *society* at the centre of the play. What occu- pies and tortures the mind of Alceste is not that first one and then another of the members of his immediate circle, and then still another and at last almost all of them, out of vanity or for material advantage, make avowals which are not in accord with what they feel or believe, but rather that the life of man in a developed community must inevitably be a corruption of truth. When in the end Alceste vows himself to solitude, it is not out of mere personal dis- appointment in the entrancing Célimène but out of disgust with society, an entity whose nature is not to be exactly defined by the nature of the individuals who constitute it.

In his book *Culture and Society* Raymond Williams examines certain words, now of capital importance in our speech, which first came into use in their present meaning in the last decades of the eighteenth century and in the first half of the nineteenth: 'industry', 'democracy', 'class', 'art', and 'culture'. These words make our way of thinking about society. And although Mr. Williams does not say so, 'society' itself is another such word. The provenance of its present meaning is older than that of the others, but it too came into use at a particular time—in the sixteenth century —and we can observe not only its ever-increasing currency but also its ever-widening range of connotation. Society is a concept that is readily hypostatized—the things that are said about it suggest that it has a life of its own and its own laws. An aggregate of individual human beings, society is yet something other than this, something other than human, and its being conceived in this way, as having indeed a life of its own but not a human life, gives rise to the human desire to bring it into accord with humanity. Society is a kind of entity different from a kingdom or realm; and even 'commonwealth', as Hobbes uses that word, seems archaic to denote what he has in mind.

Historians of European culture are in substantial agreement that, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, something like a mutation in human nature took place. Frances Yates speaks of 'the inner deep-seated changes in the psyche during the early seventeenth century', which she calls 'the vital period for the emergence of modern European and American man'. The changes were most dramatically marked in England, and Zevedei Barbu describes what he calls 'the formation of a new type of personality, which embodies the main traits of English national character throughout the modern era'. Paul Delany in his study of the sudden efflorescence of autobiography in

the period remarks 'some deep change in the British habits of thought' that must account for the development of the new genre. The unfolding public events with which the psychological changes are connected—equally, we note, as cause and as effect—are the dissolution of the feudal order and the diminished authority of the Church. One way of giving a synopsis of the whole complex psycho-historical occurrence is to say that the idea of society, much as we now conceive it, had come into being.

The decline of feudalism issued in the unprecedented social mobility I have touched on, with, expectably enough, an ever-increasing urbanization of the population. In 1550 London was a city of some 60,000 souls; within a hundred years the number had increased nearly six times to about 350,000. This is a condition of life that literature has chiefly deplored and for many generations the educated bour-geoisie has characteristically shuddered away from the moral and spiritual effects of the circumstance from which it derives its being and its name. Its vision of the good life, so far as it has been enlightened and polemical, has been largely shaped by the imagination of the old rural existence. For Karl Marx, however, the city was to be praised for at least one thing, the escape it offers from what he called 'the idiocy of village life'. He no doubt had in mind the primi-tive meaning of the word 'idiot', which is not a mentally deficient person, nor yet an uncouth and ignorant person, but a private person, one 'who does not hold public office': a person who is not a participant in society as Marx under-stood it. For Marx the working out of the historical process, and therefore the essential life of man, could take place only in cities, where the classes confront each other, where men in the mass demonstrate the nature and destiny of mankind. In the swarming of men in cities—in *Schwärmerei*, as Carlyle called it, meaning contemptuously to invoke both

the physical and the emotional meaning of the German word—society forced itself upon the very senses: before it was ever an idea to be thought about, it was a thing to be seen and heard.[1]

Society was seen and heard, and thought about, by men who had liberated themselves from the sanctions of the corporate Church. To the Calvinist divines of England, predications about society and the ways in which it was to be shaped and controlled came as readily as predications about divinity and the divine governance of the world. Michael Walzer makes the suggestion that these Calvinist leaders are 'the first instance of "advanced" intellectuals in a traditional society' and gives to his book about them, *The Revolution of the Saints*, the descriptive subtitle, *A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics*—which is to say, a politics in which partisanship is based not upon discrete practical issues but upon a formulated conception of what society is and a prophecy of what it is to be. The divines were intellectuals in their reliance upon the Word and in their resolution to speak it out plain for all to hear. Like Molière's Alceste, they regarded society as fallen into corruption

[1] Peter Laslett emphasizes 'the minute scale of life, the small size of human groups before the coming of industry'. See *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age* (Scribner's, New York; Methuen, London, 1965), p. 51; also pp. 9–11 and 74. The church service, Mr. Laslett says, was the occasion most likely to bring people together in groups larger than a household. He mentions also the assizes of the county towns, the quarter sessions of the county justices, meetings of craft associations, assemblies of the clergy and of Nonconformist ministers, market days, the universities, the army, and Parliament. His point is that all these groups were small by comparison with the groups that are characteristic of modern mass society, which did not begin to come into being until the middle and late eighteenth century when factories were established. But it should be remarked that by the end of the sixteenth century the theatres were bringing people together in quite considerable numbers —the spectators at a performance at the Globe (1598) and at the Fortune (1600) commonly numbered a thousand, and both theatres are thought to have had capacities of more than two thousand.

through false avowal; like him, the talent on which they most prided themselves was that of being sincere, telling the offensive truth to those who had no wish to hear it.

Plain speaking became the order of the day. How new a thing this was and how worthy to be remarked in its heady novelty is suggested by an episode in the fourth book of Castiglione's *Courtier*. By this point in the dialogues the character of the ideal courtier, the perfect man, has been fully drawn. Everything that he should be by reason of his noble birth and his study and labour to be beautiful has been stipulated. And now, after so much has been agreed upon, one of the company, Signor Ottaviano, raises the disquieting question of whether the whole enterprise of making the perfect self, as one might make a work of art, can after all be taken seriously. Does the achieved grace and charm, Ottaviano asks, constitute anything but a frivolity and a vanity, even an unmanliness? The effort to achieve this grace and charm is to be praised, he says, only if it serves some good and serious purpose. But then Ottaviano himself discovers that there is indeed such a purpose. The perfect courtier will be so attractive to his Prince that he can depend on not falling out of favour when he speaks plain, or nearly plain, telling the Prince—'in a gentle manner'— in what respects his conduct of affairs is not what it should be. In Italy in 1518 one could speak plain to sovereign power only if one possessed a trained perfection of grace and charm. In England a century later the only requirement for speaking plain was a man's conviction that he had the Word to speak. I would not press the point, but it does seem to be of significance in the developing political cul‑ ture of the time that Shakespeare, in what nowadays is often said to be his greatest play, should set so much store by plain speaking and ring so many changes on the theme,

what with Cordelia, who by nature is the perfection of courtesy, and Kent, whose style is the negation of Castiglione's discipline of courtliness, and the Fool, and Cornwall's astonishing peasant: a blessed hierarchy of English plain speakers.

In England the nature of the sovereign had, of course, changed. The Calvinist divines, when they spoke the plain word to the sovereign prince, derived their moral and intellectual authority from their relation to the divine Word, but also from their awareness of the sovereign many, the people, to whom their discourses on society were addressed, who were ready to receive the Word plainspoken. There was an external as well as an internal sanction for their reliance on the Word.

The internal sanction could never, it is true, be proved, but its probability might be enforced. If one spoke publicly on great matters as an individual, one's only authority was the truth of one's experience and the intensity of one's conviction of enlightenment—these, and the accent of sincerity, clearly identifiable as such. It therefore cannot surprise us that at this point in time autobiography should have taken its rise in England. The genre, as Delany observes, is by no means exclusively Protestant, but it is predominantly so. Its earliest examples are not elaborate; chiefly they are sparse records of the events of religious experience. But the form continues to press towards a more searching scrutiny of the inner life, its purpose being to enforce upon the reader the conclusion that the writer cannot in any respect be false to any man because he has been true to himself, as he was and is. Rousseau's *Confessions* exists, of course, in a different dimension of achievement from these first English autobiographies, but it is continuous with them. The *Confessions* was not a gratuitous undertaking. It was the painstaking demonstration of the author's authority to speak

plain, to bring into question every aspect of society. Any-
one who responds to Rousseau's ideas in a positive way
must wonder whether they would have made an equal
effect upon him if they had not been backed by the *Con-
fessions*. The person who is depicted in that great work may
repel us; but the author of the *Discourses* has the more
power over us because he is the subject of the *Confessions*.
He is the man; he suffered; he was there.

The impulse to write autobiography may be taken as
virtually definitive of the psychological changes to which
the historians point. Which is to say—although one rather
dreads saying it, so often has it been said before, so firmly
is it established in our minds as the first psycho-historical
concept we ever learned—that the new kind of personality
which emerges (the verb is tediously constant in the con-
text) is what we call an 'individual': at a certain point in
history men became individuals.

Taken in isolation, the statement is absurd. How was a
man different from an individual? A person born before
a certain date, a man—had he not eyes? had he not hands,
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? If you
pricked him, he bled and if you tickled him, he laughed.
But certain things he did not have or do until he became
an individual. He did not have an awareness of what one
historian, Georges Gusdorf, calls internal space. He did
not, as Delany puts it, imagine himself in more than one
role, standing outside or above his own personality; he did
not suppose that he might be an object of interest to his
fellow man not for the reason that he had achieved some-
thing notable or been witness to great events but simply
because as an individual he was of consequence. It is when
he becomes an individual that a man lives more and more in
private rooms; whether the privacy makes the individuality
or the individuality requires the privacy the historians do

not say.[1] The individual looks into mirrors, larger and much brighter than those that were formerly held up to magistrates. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan be/ lieves that the development of the '*Je*' was advanced by the manufacture of mirrors: again it cannot be decided whether man's belief that he is a '*Je*' is the result of the Venetian craftsmen's having learned how to make plate/glass or whether the demand for looking/glasses stimulated this technological success. If he is an artist the individual is likely to paint self/portraits; if he is Rembrandt, he paints some threescore of them. And he begins to use the word 'self' not as a mere reflexive or intensive, but as an autono/ mous noun referring, the *O.E.D.* tells us, to 'that . . . in a person [which] is really and intrinsically *he* (in contra/ distinction to what is adventitious)', as that which he must cherish for its own sake and show to the world for the sake of good faith. The subject of an autobiography is just such a self, bent on revealing himself in all his truth, bent, that is to say, on demonstrating his sincerity. His conception of his private and uniquely interesting individuality, together with his impulse to reveal his self, to demonstrate that in it which is to be admired and trusted, are, we may believe, his response to the newly available sense of an audience, of that public which society created.

[1] See Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution: 1603–1741* (Nelson, London; Norton, New York, 1961), p. 253: 'All roads in our period have led to individualism. More rooms in better/off peasant houses, use of glass in windows (common for copyholders and ordinary poor people only since the Civil War, Aubrey says); use of coal in grates, replacement of benches by chairs—all this made possible greater comfort and privacy for at least the upper half of the population. Privacy contributed to the introspection and soul/ searching of radical Puritanism, to the keeping of diaries and spiritual journals. . . .' Mr. Hill is referring to the period 1660-80, after the defeat of Puritanism.