

THE LAST PURITAN'S TRAGEDY

ARTHUR McINERNEY, O.P.



PROFOUNDLY does Mr. George Santayana diagnose the complicated character of Oliver Alden, "The Last Puritan."¹ "He was the child of an elderly and weary man, and of a thin-spun race; from his mother he got only his bigness and athleticism, which notoriously don't wear well. A moral nature burdened and over-strung, and a critical faculty fearless but helplessly subjective—isn't that the true tragedy of your ultimate puritan?"² His puritanism had never been mere timidity or fanaticism or calculated hardness: It was a deep and speculative thing: hatred of all shams, scorn of all mummeries, a bitter merciless pleasure in hard facts."³

Mr. Santayana vividly, philosophically, artistically traces this tragedy, "a natural reaction against nature," if one may allow a wide meaning to *natural*. With the flaming torch of his prose he reveals hideous, nightmarish tunnels ending against grim walls, but he fails to lead upwards and out of that maze. Even so, what he has said is so important that it seems altogether worthwhile to touch that tragedy's depths and analyze it positively, though not in equally glowing diction.

This tragedy's nemesis, which today is stalking across world events and world policies as well as across this memoir, is strangely enough *the nature of man*, the violation of which inexorably works ruin. For many have forgotten, ignored, or denied that man is a rational animal and that consequently he must follow the laws of his nature or perish.

Would it be well to set forth those laws and their application, or to show their violations in this puritan youth and then explain what laws were violated? Seemingly, the starkness would be more apparent against a cold silvern background of reason.

Exactly defined, man is a rational animal. Since this definition

¹ Charles Scribner's Sons, New York. Quotations are used with their permission.

² *The Last Puritan*, page 602.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

does not include the supernatural possibilities of man, what is to be drawn out of it will pertain to man as he would have been had he not been raised to a supernatural state. Though such a natural man never existed and never will, his naturalness has a terrible aspect: even cut off from God's grace, man must seek a destiny conformable to his nature's potentialities. That destiny is his complete happiness, which is realizable only by a filling up, an actualizing of all his possible powers. He is as it were a dynamo that is completely accomplishing its purpose only when it is wholly in motion and when all points of contact are perfectly made. His divine spark of rational life must vibrantly be caught up into the highest heavens to glow eternally. This, however, demands the Divine Current of Love, which alone can fully charge man's powers.

With or without this special Divine aid, man's destined happiness rests on a fundamental law, decreed because of his nature and perceived by that same nature; for it has been framed and engraved on his consciousness by the Author of that nature. Unaided by revelation, man worded that law by reading his own heart: "*Good must be done and evil must be avoided.*" The good—that which satiates, fills up brimmingly the longings, the desires of any nature; that which totally perfects it. Evil—whatever destroys, takes away, harms or stunts that nature.

This fundamental law can be further drawn out: Implicitly it decrees that man as an animal must cling to life. He cannot naturally see his very substance destroyed, much less destroy it himself. "Self-preservation is the first law of nature." Implicitly the law decrees that as one of a species he must seek to preserve his kind; he must propagate and educate children. Lastly it decrees that as a *rational* animal he seek to know the truth. For man's highest faculty, his reason, is his to know things as they are, and to know that he knows the true conformity between things and his intellect. All of these obligations entail the reasonable and compelling need of living in common with his fellowmen.

Is it difficult to grasp which of these laws is of supreme moment? Do men sin by dying? By not having children? By not living in community? God forbid. Rather they sin against these laws by ill-regulated and willfully perverted desires and acts concerning these things. But willfully to ignore truth, to blind oneself or others to it, to destroy it maliciously—this is the unnatural crime. For on man's ability to know truth depends his knowledge of his ultimate destiny and the means thereto.

Yet Oliver Alden, "the last puritan," before he is twenty philos-

ophizes: "Your hard boiled moralists were idolaters, worshipping their own fancies and hypnotized by their own words. They had perched at a certain height on the tree of knowledge, had stuck fast at a certain point up the greased pole of virtue. They would climb no farther; and from there they had turned and pecked ferociously at everybody above, invoking their hard, dry reason to discredit all that was beyond their own meagre and cruel morality. But this reason of theirs was just *their* reason, their effort to entrench themselves in their limitations. Not only was such a thing useless and in the end impossible, but perhaps in the moral world there was no single pole, no single tree on which height and depths could be measured like record tides.⁴ Perhaps the ways of knowledge were incommensurable. . . . Perhaps the kinds of virtue were divergent too, and incomparable. . . . Who should say which was better? Better in what sense, according to what standard? . . . It was a foolish debate: free and infinite spirit, in a free and infinite world could never stop short at any point and say: This is truly right, this is perfect, this supreme. Perhaps the whole pilgrimage of spirit was the only goal of spirit, the only home of truth.

"But what was he saying? a goal? a home of truth? Was there anything here but chaos and a welter of impulses, a truth composed of illusions, a home of perpetual unrest? If the spirit of life was really free and infinite, what difference could there be between freedom and madness? The whole adventure of existence became no less horrible than enticing; you had to close your eyes, to stifle your reason, in order to take sides somehow and continue to live. But the one thing Oliver could not do was to stifle his reason and close his eyes. How, then, should he go on living?"⁵

A life time and generations of life times are revealed in this moral tempest. This child, begotten of a degenerate father (later a suicide) and of a mother of selfish ice, both of decadent Puritan stock, was given over entirely to the care of a German governess imbued with German naturalistic philosophy. She was kind and affectionate in her way and according to her station, but hopelessly confused and confusing with regard to life. It was she who nurtured him during his tenderest years, was his source of information during his formative years, years without love or understanding. Father and mother were centered in self. After his unloved and unlovely childhood Oliver was free as a young man to travel, to choose com-

⁴ Poor lad! He could not see the Tree of Golgatha.

⁵ Santayana, *op. cit.*, pp. 318-320.

panions, his schools and subjects, without parental or friendly guidance. Naturally he followed his bent for modern "enlightened" philosophers. Withal he remained naturally good, ever groping for the moral solution to life, "burdened but strong, groping but faithful, desolate but proud."⁶

To the girl who might possibly have saved him he wrote: "Of course I have no authority, but I have sincerity, and what is authority but the sincerity of someone else who lived long ago? There's no real authority except the authority of *things*. We run up against things, we must work with things, we must study things if ever we hope to change them; but apart from the authority of things we are free, and there is no authority but our own reason."

Storm-tossed, neglected lad! who could sing only when inspired; who could not love with your whole being, soul and body! Your life would have been very different had you known the truth of things; had you grasped what your friend, the vicar, meant when he said that you were a "spiritual man." You had the stuff of which saints are made: the heroic will to do good. But you did not know why you should do so. Consuming love never warmed your chilled heart. Poetry never burst from your lips. The truth had not set you free.

Too bad you could not have appreciated one of your father's hints, that poetry has a deeper sense in which it merges with religion. For one great poet must have been thinking of your kind when he wrote: "Many think in the head; but it is thinking in the heart that is most wanted. Theology and philosophy are the soul of truth; but they must be clothed with flesh, to create an organism which can come down and live among men. Therefore Christ became incarnate, to create Christianity. Be it spoken with reverence, a great poet, for example, who is likewise a great thinker, does for truth what Christ did for God, the supreme Truth. And though the world may be loath to admit it, the saint does for truth even more; he gives to truth his own flesh."⁷

Oliver Alden had the soul of a poet and the possibilities of a saint, if he had not been cruelly cut off from the truth. With that intellect of his he too should have been able to take *things*, and truly with that same poet sing *To a Snowflake*:

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

⁸ Thompson, Francis, "Form and Formalism," *The Works of Francis Thompson*, III., p. 71 (London).

What heart could have thought you?—
 Past our devisal
 (O filigree petal!)
 Fashioned so purely,
 Fragilely, surely.

And he could have as truly heard it reply:

God was my shaper
 He hammered, He wrought me
 From curled silver vapour
 Thou couldst not have thought me!

Lest he think this unreasonable, because he had not argued back to God, the Uncaused Cause, he could have sought farther, passing from one finite cause to another until he reached the Infinite Cause of all *things*!

I do not need the skies'
 Pomp when I would be wise
 One grass blade in its veins
 Wisdom's whole flood contains
 O little blade, now vaunt
 Thee and be arrogant!
 Tell the proud sun that he
 Sweated in shaping thee;
 Night, that she did unvest
 Her mooned and argent breast
 To suckle thee. Heaven fain
 Yearned over thee in vain,
 And with wide parent wing
 Shadowed thee, nested thing,
 Fed thee and slaved for thy
 Impotent tyranny.
 Nature's broad thews bent
 Meek for thy content
 Epitomized in thee
 Was the mystery
 Which shakes the spheres conjoint—
 God focussed to a point.
 All thy fine mouths shout
 Scorn upon dull-eyed doubt.⁹

Even if he sang such thoughts only naturally, he would barely be escaping the censure of St. Paul, who could upbraid absolute pagans: "For the invisible *things* of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the *things* that are made; His eternal power also, and divinity; so that they are inexcusable."¹⁰

Better, under competent guidance, he would have recognized that Fashioner Infinite as a law-giver, Whose sway all nature proclaims. To his inquiring search, that freedom he called madness would yield its law, the moral law: the measure of the goodness of

⁹ Thompson, Francis, *All Flesh*.

¹⁰ *Rom.*, i, 20.

each human act. For such an act is one produced by the co-operation of the *intellect* and the *free will*. He would know that the norm or standard of that act's goodness is, as far as he was concerned, his own conscience; and that this is such a standard because it is a God-given participation of knowledge of the eternal law, in the light of which knowledge all men know what is right and what is wrong—subjectively. He would know that objectively a human act is good or bad because its goodness depends ultimately on its true conformity to the standard set by God Himself. His decree says, "this will bring you to your eternal destiny, this will not." "*Good must be done; evil must be avoided.*" What is good and what is evil He revealed positively that there might be no mistake in a matter so vital as happiness.

A man and a woman lost for us the keen perception of this law. They sinned against it knowingly and freely, involving all of their descendants. As a consequence man's intellect was blinded. (Tragically does Oliver Alden's illustrate how far wrong it can go.) Groping blindly, man went from error to error until God saw fit to restore him to his former estate. To accomplish this more adequately, God became man, became He Whom Oliver did not know: the Christ. While on earth He elaborated His divine law, revealed more fully man's supernatural destiny, and gave him the means to keep that law and to attain his end: God Himself, all-Truth, All-Love.

But all this phase is in the realm of the supernatural, which involves the merciful dispensation of God's generosity, the gifts of Faith, Hope, and Charity. A supernatural structure built on the natural! Nor is this a "double or ambiguous philosophy," for Truth Incarnate confirmed it during His life, in His death, and after His ascension into heaven.

Did you but know Him, Oliver, your query, "But if man's moral nature contradicts the world and runs counter to it ought not that moral nature to be transformed and made harmonious with reality?"¹¹ would not have been unanswerable. Perhaps then another *thing* would recall that answer:

. . . The red sun,
A bubble of fire, drops slowly toward the hill
While a bird prattles that day is done.
O setting sun! . . .
Thy straight
Long geam lies steady on the Cross. Ah me!
What secret would thy radiant finger show?
Of thy bright mastership is this the key?
Is this thy secret, then? And is it woe?

¹¹ *The Last Puritan*, p. 520.

Resignedly could you re-echo:

Thou art of Him a type memorial.
Like Him thou hangest in dreadful pomp of blood
Upon thy western rood.¹²

For Faith (withheld, who knows why?) and things (for you but harsh and merciless "facts") would have brought you unerringly to Him crucified, Who conquered the world by His death. Your tragic death in war-torn France would have been recorded differently. Possibly you too would have cried out:

Even so, O Cross! Thine is the Victory . . .
While soul, sky and music bleed together
Let me give thanks even for those griefs in me,
The restless windward stirrings of whose feathers
Prove them the brood of immortality.

¹² Thompson, Francis, *Ode to the Setting Sun*.