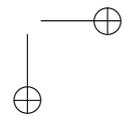
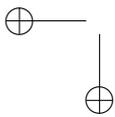
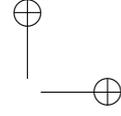


**Essays on Montaigne,
Pascal, Voltaire**



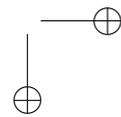
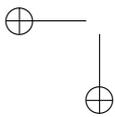




**Essays on Montaigne,
Pascal, Voltaire**

John Cowper Powys

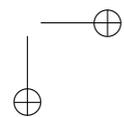
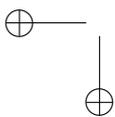
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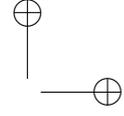
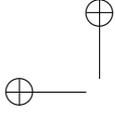




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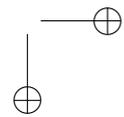
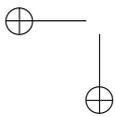
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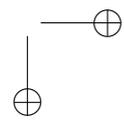
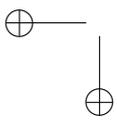
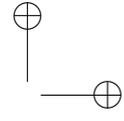
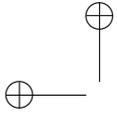


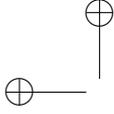


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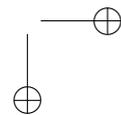
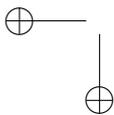


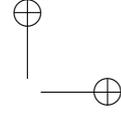
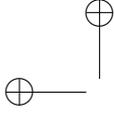
MONTAIGNE

We, who are interested rather in literature than in the history of literature, and rather in the reaction produced upon ourselves by great original geniuses than in any judicial estimate of their actual achievements, can afford to regard with serene indifference the charges of arbitrariness and caprice brought against us by professional students.

Let these professional students prove to us that, in addition to their learning, they have receptive senses and quickly stimulated imagination, and we will accept them willingly as our guides.

We have already accepted Pater, Brandes, de Gourmont, critics who have the secret of combining immense erudition with creative intelligence, and it is under the power and the spell of these authoritative and indisputable names that we claim our right to the most personal and subjective en-





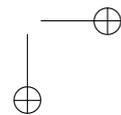
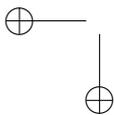
joyment, precisely as the occasion and hour calls, of the greatest figures in art and letters.

Most of all we have a right to treat Montaigne as we please, even though that right includes the privilege of not reading every word of the famous Essays, and of only reverting – in our light return to them – to those aspects and qualities which strike an answering chord in ourselves.

This was, after all, what he – the great humanist – was always doing; he the unscrupulous, indiscriminate and casual reader; and if we treat him in the same spirit as that in which he treated the classical authors he loved most, we shall at least be acting under the cloak of his approval, however much we annoy the Calvins and Scaligers of our age.

The man must have been a colossal genius. No human writer has done quite what he did, anticipating the methods and spiritual secrets of posterity, and creating for himself, with sublime indifference to contemporary usage and taste, the sort of intellectual atmosphere that suited him.

When one thinks how sensitive we all are to the intellectual environments in which we move – how we submit for instance, at this very moment, without being able to help ourselves, to the ideas set in motion by Nietzsche, say, or Walt Whitman – it seems impossible to overrate as a sheer triumph of personal force, the thing that Montaigne



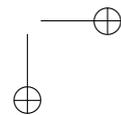
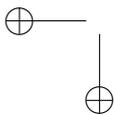


did in disentangling himself from the tendencies of his age, and creating almost “in vacuo,” with nothing to help him but his own temperament and the ancient classics, a new emotional attitude toward life, something that might without the least exaggeration be called “a new soul.”

The magnitude of his spiritual undertaking can best be estimated if we conceive ourselves freeing our minds, at this moment, from the influences of Nietzsche and Dostoievsky and Whitman and Pater and Wilde, and launching out into some completely original attitude toward existence, fortified it may be by the reading of Sophocles or of Lucretius, but with so original a mental vista that we leave every contemporary writer hopelessly behind.

Suppose we looked about us with a view to the undertaking of so huge an intellectual venture, where should we go to discover the original impetus, the first embryonic germ, of the new way?

In ourselves? In our own temperament? Ah! that is the crux of the whole matter. It was in his temperament that he found the force and inexhaustible riches to carry the matter through – but have we got such power at our disposal? It is doubtful. It is hard to even dream that we have. And yet – consider the simplicity of what he did!

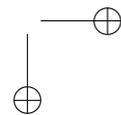
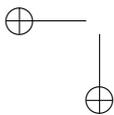




He just took himself, Michael de Montaigne, as he was, in the plain unvarnished totality of his vigorous self-conscious temperament, and jotted down, more for his own amusement than for that of posterity, carelessly, frankly, nonchalantly, his tastes, his vices, his apathies, his antipathies, his prejudices and his pleasures.

In doing this – though there is a certain self-revelation in Augustine’s confessions and a certain autobiographical frankness in the writings of many of the classical authors – he did what had never been done by any one before his time, and what, not forgetting Rousseau and Heine and Casanova and Charles Lamb, has never been so well done since. But whether, in these latter days, we can achieve this thing as Montaigne achieved it, the fact remains that this is what we are all at the present time trying hard to do.

The “new soul,” which he was permitted by the gods to evoke out of the very abyss, has become, in the passionate subjectivity of our age, the very life-blood of our intellect. Not one among our most interesting artists and writers but does his utmost to reveal to the world every phase and aspect of his personal identity. What was but a human necessity, rather concealed and discouraged than revealed in and exploited before Montaigne, has, after Montaigne, become the obsession and



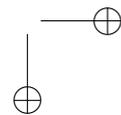
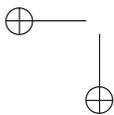


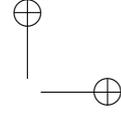
preoccupation of us all. We have got the secret, the great idea, the “new soul.” It only remains for us to incarnate it in beautiful and convincing form.

Ah! it is just there where we find the thing so hard. It is easy to say – “Find yourself, know yourself, express yourself!” It is extremely difficult to do any of these things.

No one who has not attempted to set down in words the palpable image and body of what he is, or of what he seems to himself, can possibly conceive the difficulty of the task.

More – oh, so much more – is needed than the mere saying, “I like honey and milk better than meat and wine” or “I like girls who are plump and fair better than those who are slim and dark.” That is why so much of modern autobiographical and confessional writing is dull beyond words. Even impertinence will not save our essays upon ourselves from being tedious – nor will shamelessness in the flaunting of our vices. Something else is required than a mere wish to strip ourselves bare; something else than a mere desire to call attention to ourselves. And this “something else” is genius, and genius of a very rare and peculiar kind. It is not enough to say, “I am this or that or the other.” The writer who desires to give a convincing picture of what he is must diffuse the essence of his soul





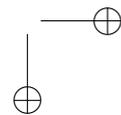
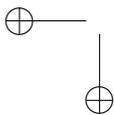
not merely into his statements about himself but into the style in which these statements are made.

Two men may start together to write confessions, and one of the two may dissect every nerve and fibre of his inmost soul, while the other may ramble carelessly on about the places he has seen, and the people he has met; yet in the ultimate result it may turn out that it is the latter rather than the former who has revealed his identity.

Human personalities – the strange and subtle differences which separate us from one another – refuse to give up the secrets of their quality save at the magical summons of what we call “style.” Mr. Pepys was a quaint fellow and no Goethean egotist; but he managed to put a peculiar flavour of style – with a rhythm and a colour all its own – into his meticulous gossip.

Montaigne’s essays are not by any means of equal value. The more intimately they deal with his own ways and habits, the more physiological they become in their shameless candour, the better do they please us. They grow less interesting to my thinking where they debouch into quotations, some of them whole pages in length, from his favourite Roman writers.

He seems to have kept voluminous scrap-books of such quotations, and, like many less famous people, to have savoured a peculiar satisfaction



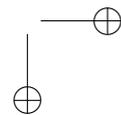
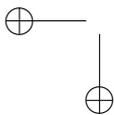


from transcribing them. One can imagine the deliberate and epicurean way he would go about this task, deriving from the mere bodily effort of “copying out” these long and carefully chosen excerpts, an almost sensual pleasure; the sort of pleasure which the self-imposed observance of some mechanical routine in a leisured person’s life is able to produce, not unaccompanied by agreeable sensations of physical well-being.

But what, after all, is this “new soul” which Montaigne succeeded in putting into our western civilisation at the very moment when Catholic and Protestant were so furiously striving for the mastery? What is this new tone, this new temper, this new temperamental atmosphere which, in the intervals of his cautious public work and his lazy compiling of scrap-books from the classics, he managed to fling abroad upon the air?

It is a spiritual ingredient, composed, when one comes to analyse it, of two chemical elements; of what might be called aesthetic egoism and of what we know as philosophic scepticism. Let us deal with the former of these two elements first.

Egoism, in the new psychological sense of the word, may be regarded as the deliberate attempt in an individual’s life to throw the chief interest and emphasis of his days upon the inward, personal, subjective impressions produced by the



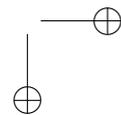
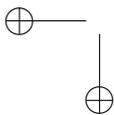


world, rather than upon outward action or social progress. Egoism does not necessarily imply the invidious stigma of selfishness. Goethe, the greatest of all egoists, was notoriously free from such a vice. "Who," cried Wieland, when they first met at Weimar, "who can resist the unselfishness of this man?"

Egoism does not necessarily imply "egotism," though it must be confessed that in Montaigne's case, though not in Goethe's, there may have been a touch of that less generous attribute.

Egoism is an intellectual gesture, a spiritual attitude, a temperamental atmosphere. It is a thing which implies a certain definite philosophical mood in regard to the riddle of existence; though, of course, between individual egoists there may be wide gulfs of personal divergence.

Between Montaigne and Goethe, for instance, there is an immense difference. Goethe's egoism was creative; Montaigne's receptive. Goethe's was many-sided; driven forward by a tremendous demonic urge toward the satisfaction of a curiosity which was cosmic and universal. Montaigne's was in a certain sense narrow, limited, cautious, earth-bound. It had nothing of the large poetic sweep, nothing of the vast mystical horizons and huge imaginative vistas of the great German. But on the other hand, it was closer to the soil, homelier,





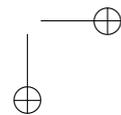
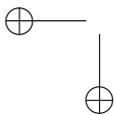
more humorous, in a certain measure more natural, normal and human.

This “cult of egoism” is obviously not entirely modern. Traces of it, aspects of it, fragments and morsels of it, have existed from all time. It was the latent presence of this quality in his great Romans, much more than their mere “outward triumphs,” which led him to brood so incessantly upon their memories.

But Montaigne himself was the first of all writers to give palpable intellectual shape to this diffused spiritual temper.

In recent times, some of the most fascinating of our literary guides have been philosophical egoists. Whitman, Matthew Arnold, Emerson, Pater, Stendhal, Maurice Barrès (in his earlier work), de Gourmont, D’Annunzio, Oscar Wilde – are all, in their widely different ways, masters of the same cult.

The out-looking activities and the out-looking social interests of Voltaire or Renan, or Anatole France, give to these great writers quite a different psychological tone. The three I have just mentioned are all too inveterately spirits of mockery even to take seriously their own “sensations and ideas”; and however ironical and humorous an egoist may be with regard to other people’s





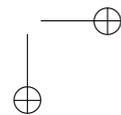
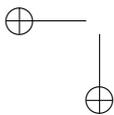
impressions, with regard to his own he is grave, intent, preoccupied, almost solemn.

When one thinks of it, there is a curious solemnity of preoccupation with themselves and their own sensations about Wilde, Pater, Whitman, Stendhal, D'Annunzio and Barrès. And this "gravity of egoism" is precisely the thing which, for all his humorous humanity, distinguished the great Montaigne and which his early critics found so irritating.

"What do I care – what does any one care," grumbled the learned Scaliger, "whether he prefers white wine to red wine?"

The second element in the compound chemistry of the "modern temper" introduced into the world by Montaigne may be found in his famous scepticism. The formidable levity of that notorious "que sais-je?" "What do I know?" writes itself nowadays across our whole sky. This also – "this film of white light," as some one has called it, floating waveringly beneath each one of our most cherished convictions was, not unknown before his time.

All the great sophists – Protagoras especially, with his "man the measure of all things" – were, in a sense, professional teachers of a refined scepticism.





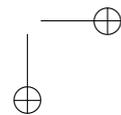
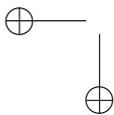
Plato himself, with his wavering and gracious hesitations, was more than touched by the same spirit.

Scepticism as a natural human philosophy – perhaps as the only natural human philosophy – underlies all the beautiful soft-coloured panorama of pagan poetry and pagan thought. It must have been the habitual temper of mind in any Periclean symposium or Caesarean salon. It is, pre-eminently and especially, the civilised attitude of mind; the attitude of mind most dominant and universal in the great races, the great epochs, the great societies.

It is for this reason that France, among all modern nations, is the most sceptical.

Barbarian peoples are rarely endowed with this quality. The crude animal energy, which makes them successful! in business, and even sometimes in war, is an energy which, for all its primitive force, is destructive of civilisation. Civilisation, the rarest work of art of our race's evolution, is essentially a thing created in restraint of such crude energies; as it is created in restraint of the still cruder energies of nature itself.

The Protestant Reformation springing out of the soul of the countries “beyond the Alps” is, of course, the supreme example of this uncivilised force. One frequently encounters sceptical-minded





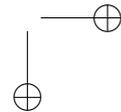
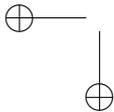
Catholics, full of the very spirit of Montaigne – who died in the Catholic faith – but it is rare to meet a Protestant who is not, in a most barbarous sense, full of dogmatic and argumentative “truth.”

So uncivilised and unlovely is this controversial mood that free-thinkers are often tempted to be unfair to the Reformation. This is a fault; for after all it is something, even for ingrained sceptics prepared to offer incense at any official altar, to be saved from the persecuting alliance of church and state.

It is not pleasant to meet argumentative revivalists, and the Puritan influence upon art and letters is no less than deadly; but it is better to be teased with impertinent questions about one’s soul than to be led away to the stake for its salvation.

The mention of the situation, in which in spite of Shakespeare and the rest poor modern sceptics still find themselves, is an indication of how hopelessly illusive all talk of “progress” is. Between Calvin on the one hand and the Sorbonne on the other, Montaigne might well shuffle home from his municipal duties and read Horace in his tower. And we, after three hundred odd years, have little better to do.

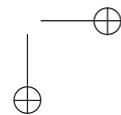
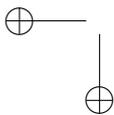
Heine, impish descendant of this great doubter, took refuge from human madness at the feet of Venus in the Louvre. Machiavel – for all his crafty





wisdom – was driven back to his books and his memories. Goethe built up the “pyramid of his existence” among pictures and fossils and love affairs, leaving the making of history to others, and keeping “religious truth” at a convenient distance.

This scepticism of Montaigne is a much rarer quality among men of genius than the egoism with which it is so closely associated. I am inclined to regard it as the sanest of all human moods. What distinguishes it from other intellectual attitudes is the fact that it is shared by the very loftiest with the very simplest minds. It is the prevailing temper of shepherds and ploughmen, of carters and herdsmen, of all honest gatherers at rustic taverns who discuss the state of the crops, the prospects of the weather, the cattle market and the rise and fall of nations. It is the wisdom of the earth itself; shrewd, friendly, full of unaccountable instincts; obstinate and capricious, given up to irrational and inexplicable superstitions; sluggish, suspicious, cautious, hostile to theory, enamoured of inconsistencies, humorously critical of all ideals, realistic, empirical, wayward, ready to listen to any magical whisper, to any faint pipings of the flutes of Pan, but grumblingly reluctant to follow the voices of the prophets and the high doctrines of the leaders of men.



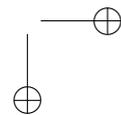
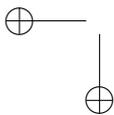


Its wisdom is the wisdom of lazy noons in spacious corn-fields; of dewy mornings in misty lanes and moss-grown paths; of dreamy shadows in deep grass when the apple boughs hang heavily earthward, and long nights of autumn rain have left amber-coloured pools in the hollow places of the trees and in the mud trodden by the cattle.

Its sanity is the sanity of farm-yards and smoking dung-heaps and Priapian jests beneath wintry hedges, and clear earth-sweet thoughtless laughter under large, liquid, mid-summer stars.

The nonchalant “What do I know?” – “What does any one know?” – of this shrewd pagan spirit has nothing in it of the ache of pessimistic disillusion. It has never had any illusions. It has taken things as they appear, and life as it appears, and it is so close to the kindly earth-mud beneath our feet that it is in no fear of any desperate fall.

What lends the sceptical wisdom of Montaigne such massive and enduring weight is the very fact of its being the natural pagan wisdom of generations of simple souls who live close to the earth. No wonder he was popular with the farmers and peasants of his countryside and with the thrifty burgesses of his town. He must have gathered much wisdom from his wayfaring among the fields, and many scandalous sidelights upon human na-



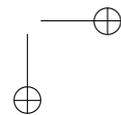
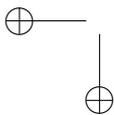


ture as he loitered among the streets and wharfs of the city.

It is indeed the old joyous, optimistic, pagan spirit, full of courage and gaiety; full too, it must be confessed, of a humorous terror now and then, and yet capable enough sometimes of looking very formidable antagonists squarely in the face and refusing to quit the quiet ways it has marked out and the shrewd middle path it has chosen!

Turning over the pages of Cotton's translation – it is my fancy to prefer this one to the more famous Florio's – there seems to me to arise from these rambling discourses, a singularly wholesome savour. I seem to see Montaigne's massive and benignant countenance as he jogs home, wrapped against the wind in the cloak that was once his father's, along the muddy autumn lanes, upon his strong but not over-impetuous nag. Surely I have seen that particular cast of features in the weather-beaten face of many a farm labourer, and listened too, from the same lips, to just as relishing a commentary upon the surprising ways of providence with mortal men.

Full of a profound sense of a physical well-being, which the troublesome accidents of chance and time only served to intensify, Montaigne surveyed the grotesque panorama of human life with a massive and indelible satisfaction.

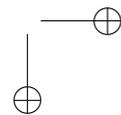
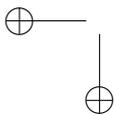




His optimism, if you can call it by such a name, is not the optimism of theory; it is not the optimism of faith, far less is it that mystic and transcendental optimism which teases one, in these later days, with its swollen words and windy rhetoric. It is the optimism of simple, shrewd, sane common sense, the optimism of the poor, the optimism of sound nerves, the optimism of cab-men and bus drivers, of fishermen and gardeners, of “tinkers, tailors, soldiers, sailors, apothecaries and thieves.”

What Montaigne really does is to bring into the courts of philosophy and to heighten with the classic style of one who was “brought up upon Latin,” the sheer, natural, incorrigible love of life, of such persons, rich or poor, as have the earth in their blood and the shrewd wisdom of the earth and the geniality of the earth, and the mischievous wantonness of the earth, and the old, sly chuckling malice of the earth, in their blood and in their soul.

He can record, and does often record, in those queer episodic dips into his scrap-book, the outrageous stories of a thousand freaks of nature. He loves these little impish tricks of the great careless gods. He loves the mad, wicked, astounding, abnormal things that are permitted to happen as the world moves round. He reads Tacitus and Plutarch very much as a Dorsetshire shepherd might read



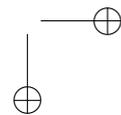
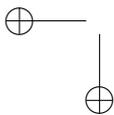


the Western Gazette, and makes, in the end, much of the same commentary.

In a certain sense Montaigne is the most human of all great geniuses. The whole turbulent stream of the motley spectacle passes through his consciousness and he can feel equal sympathy with the heroism of a Roman patriot and with the terrors of a persecuted philosopher.

What pleases him best is to note the accidental little things – “life’s little ironies” – which so frequently intervene between ideal resolutions and their results in practise and fact. He chuckles over the unfortunate lapses in the careers of great men much as a mischievous gossip in a tavern might chuckle over similar lapses in the careers of local potentates.

Montaigne’s scepticism is the result of his looking at the world not through books or through the theories of books, but through his own eyes. He is sceptical because he sees that any one who wishes to live in harmony with the facts of life must be sceptical. Life is made up of such evasive entangled confused elements that any other attitude than this one is a noble madness if it is not knavish hypocrisy. The theories, convictions, moralities, opinions, of every child of Adam are subject to lamentable upheavals, as the incorri-





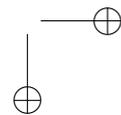
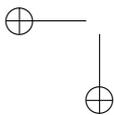
gible earth-gods, with their impish malice, seize them and play nine-pins with them.

“All flows away and nothing remains,” says the ancient philosopher, and Montaigne shows clearly enough how vain it is to put our trust in any theory or system or principle or idea.

It is a mistake to regard his scepticism as merely negative. It is far more than that. Like all wise scepticism it is creative and constructive; not out of theories and phrases, nor out of principles and opinions, but out of events and persons and passions and instincts and chances and occasions.

It is realistic – this Montaignesque method – realistic not materialistic. It takes each occasion as it occurs, each person as he presents himself, each passion, each instinct, each lust, each emotion, and out of these he creates a sort of piece-meal philosophy; modest enough and making no claim to finality, but serving us, at a pinch, as a sort of rough-and-ready clue through the confusions of life.

It will always appear presumptuous to the dogmatic type of mind, the mind made up of rationalistic and logical exigencies, to call scepticism like this by the name of “philosophy.” It will be still more obscure to such a mind how it is possible for a human being to live happily and joyfully in a complete absence of any synthetic system.

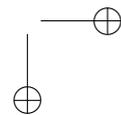
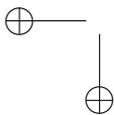




And yet one feels certain enough that amid the jolts and jars and shocks of actual life even the most idealistic of philosophers leave their logic to shift for itself and just drift on as they may in the groove of traditional usages or the track of temperamental bias.

It must not, however, be for a moment supposed that the scepticism of Montaigne is identical with the so-called “pragmatism” of William James or with the “instinct theories” of Bergson.

Both of these modern attitudes make the assumption that a genuine advance in our knowledge of “truth” is really possible; though possible along quite different lines from the old absolute dogmatic metaphysical ones. But the scepticism of Montaigne throws doubt upon every human attempt to get behind the shifting flowing stream of sense impressions. The rough and ready clue which it offers to the confusions of life is not drawn from any individualistic “point d’appui” of pseudo-psychological personal vision, as are these modern clues to the mystery. It is drawn from nothing more recondite than the customary traditions, usages, pieties and customs of the generations of humanity; habits of mind and moods of hope which have behind them, not so much the psychological insight of clever individuals – the William Jameses and Bergsons of past ages – as the primitive and



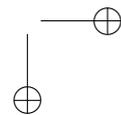
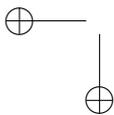


permanent emotions of the masses of average men and women themselves, confronting the eternal silence.

What the scepticism of Montaigne does is to clear out of the path all the individual claims to extraordinary insight of the philosophic great men of the world, by means of showing how, under the pressure of obstinate and malicious reality, such explanations of the universe break down and such great men collapse and become as blind, helpless, groping and uncertain as all the rest of us. Prophets and rationalists alike, logicians and soothsayers together, so collapse and fall away; while in their place the long slow patient wisdom of the centuries, the old shrewd superstitious wisdom of anonymous humanity rises up out of the pagan earth, and offers us our only solution.

Not that what we get in this humble way is really a solution at all. Rather is it a modest working substitute for such solutions, a dim lamp flickering in a great darkness, a faint shadow falling on a long uncertain road; a road of which we can see neither the beginning nor the end, and along which we have nothing better to guide us than such pathetic "omens of the way" as old wives' tales repeat and old traditions hand down from mouth to mouth.

To certain minds the condition of the human race under the burden of such a twilight may well

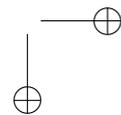
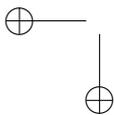




seem intolerable. To Montaigne it was not intolerable. It was his element, his pleasant Arcadia, his natural home. He loved the incongruities and inconsistencies of such a world; its outrageous Rabelaisian jests, its monstrous changes and chances, its huge irrelevancy. He loved its roguish and goblinish refusal to give up its secret to grave and solemn intellects, taking upon themselves the rôle of prophets. He loved a world that hides its treasures from the “wise and prudent” and reveals them – or at any rate all that will ever be revealed of them – to “babes and sucklings.”

Those who read Montaigne with a natural affinity for his peculiar turn of mind, will find themselves in a position to regard very humorously and lightly the portentous claims of modern philosophers whether they be rationalists or intuitivists. “There are more things in Heaven and earth,” they will retort to these scholarly Horatios in the very vein of that Prince of Denmark who – according to reliable critical opinion – was actually modelled on Montaigne himself.

They will be encouraged to go on, as before, making the best of what the traditional wisdom of the centuries brings them, but not taking even this with more seriousness than its pathetic weight of human experience demands, and not dreaming





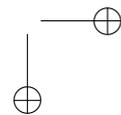
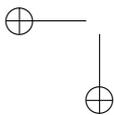
that, with even this to help them, they are very closely initiated into the ultimate mystery.

They will be encouraged to go on as before, enjoying the books of the writers with a pinch of pleasant salt, but enjoying them with infinite zest and profit, and, at least, with full aesthetic appreciation.

They will be encouraged to fall back upon the kindly possibilities and broad hopeful vistas to which the unsophisticated heart of man naturally and spontaneously turns.

They will be encouraged to go to the “highways and hedges” for their omens, to the felicitous encounters of the common road for their auguries and inspirations. They will listen reverently to the chatter of very simple people, and catch the shadow of the wings of fate falling upon very homely heads. The rough earth-wisdom of ploughed fields, heavy with brown sun-lit mud, will be redolent for them with whispers and hints and intimations of things that no philosophy can include and no psychology explain.

Out of the coarse rankness of rude primitive natures strange sweet mysteries will come to light, and upon the sensual lusts of satyrs, gambolling grossly in rain-soaked leafy midnights, the moon of tender purity will shed down her virginal benediction.



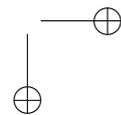
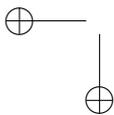


For them the grotesque roots of trees will leer magically from the wayside to meet the uncouth gestures of the labourer and his trull; while in the smoke-thick air of mellow tavern-corners the shameless mirth of honest revellers philosophising upon the world will have a smack of true divinity.

They will be encouraged – the people who read Montaigne – to sink once more into their own souls and enjoy the rare sensations permitted to their own physical and psychological susceptibility, as the great world sweeps by them.

I sometimes think that the wisdom of Montaigne, with its essential roots in physiological well-being, is best realised and understood when on some misty autumn morning, full of the smell of leaves, one lies, just newly awakened out of pleasant dreams, and watches the sunshine on wall and window and floor, and listens to the traffic of the town or the noises of the village. It is then, with the sweet languor of awakening, that one seems conscious of some ineffable spiritual secret to be drawn from the material sensations of the nerves of one's body.

Montaigne, with all his gravity, is quite shameless in the assumption that the details of his bodily habits form an important part, not by any means to be neglected, of the picture he sets out to give of himself.



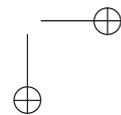
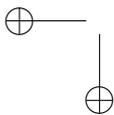


And those who read Montaigne with sympathetic affinity will find themselves growing into the habit of making much of the sensations of their bodies. They will not rush foolishly and stupidly, like dull economic machines, from bedroom to “lunch counter” and from “lunch counter” to office. They will savour every moment which can be called their own and they will endeavour to enlarge such moments by any sort of economic or domestic change.

They will make much of the sensations of waking and bathing and eating and drinking and going to sleep; just as they make much of the sensations of reading admirable books. They will cross the road to the sunny side of the street; they will pause by the toy-shops and the flower-shops. They will go out into the fields, before breakfast, to look for mushrooms.

They will miss nothing of the caprices and humours and comedies of every day of human life; for they will know that in the final issue none of us are wiser than the day and what the day brings; none of us wiser than the wisdom of street and field and market-place; the wisdom of the common people, the wisdom of our mother, the earth.

In the enjoyment of life spent thus fastidiously in the cultivation of our own sensations, and thus largely and generously in a broad sympathy with

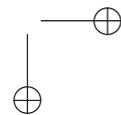
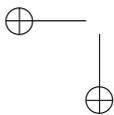




the emotions of the masses of men, there is room for many kinds of love. But of all the love passions which destiny offers us, none lends itself better to the peculiar path we have chosen than the passion of friendship. It is the love of an “alter ego,” a second self, a twin soul, which more than anything else is able to heighten and deepen our consciousness of life.

The “love of women” has always about it something tragic and catastrophic. It means the plunging of one’s hands into frozen snow or burning fire. It means the crossing of perilous glades in tropic jungles. It means the “sowing of the whirlwind” on the edge of the avalanche and the hunting of the mirage in the desert. The ecstasy brought by it is too blinding to serve as an illumination for our days; and for all the tremulous sweetness of its approach it leaves behind it the poison of disillusion and the scars of rancour and remorse.

But the passion of friendship for one of one’s own sex burns with a calm clear flame. A thousand little subtleties of observation, that would mean nothing were we alone, take to themselves a significant and symbolic value and lead us down pleasant and flower-strewn vistas of airy fancy. In the absence of our friend the colour of his imagination falls like a magical light upon the saddest and dullest scenes; while with him at our side, all the



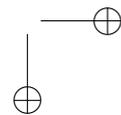
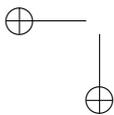


little jerks and jars and jolts and ironical tricks of the hour and the occasion lose their brutish emphasis and sink into humorous perspective. The sense of having some one for whom one's weakest and least effective moments are of interest and for whom one's weariness and unreason are only an additional bond, makes what were otherwise intolerable in our life easy and light to bear.

And what a delicious sense, in the midst of the open or hidden hostilities of our struggle against the world, to feel one has some one near at hand with whom, crouched in any "corner of the hub-bub," we may "make game of that" which makes as much of us!

Love, in the sexual sense, fails us in the bitterest crisis of our days because love, or the person loved, is the chief cause of the misery. Scourged and lacerated by Aphrodite it is of little avail to flee to Eros. But friendship – of the noble, rare, absolute kind such as existed between Montaigne and his sweet Etienne – is the only antidote, the only healing ointment, the only anodyne, which can make it possible for us to endure without complete disintegration "the pangs of despised love" and love's bitter and withering reaction.

Love too – in the ordinary sense – implies jealousy, exclusiveness, insatiable exactions; whereas friendship, sure of its inviolable roots in spiritual





equality, is ready to look generously and sympathetically upon every wandering obsession or passing madness in the friend of its choice.

With the exception of the love of a parent for a child this is the only human love which is outward-looking and centrifugal in its gaze; and even in the case of the love of a mother there is often something possessive and indrawing.

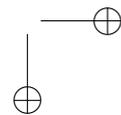
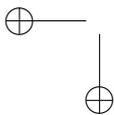
How beautifully, how finally, Montaigne, in his description of this high passion, sweeps aside at one stroke all that selfish emphasis upon “advantage” of which Bacon makes so much, and all that idealistic anxiety to retain one’s “separate identity” in which Emerson indulges!

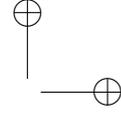
“I love him because he is he and he loves me because I am I.” This is worthy to be compared with the beautiful and terrible “I am Heathcliff” of the heroine in the Brontë novel.

Emerson speaks as though, having sounded the depths of one’s friend’s soul, one moved off, with a wave of the hand, upon one’s lonely quest, having none but God as one’s eternal companion.

This translunar preference for the “Over-soul” over every human feeling is not Montaigne’s notion of the passion of friendship. He is more earth-bound in his proclivities.

“He is he and I am I,” and as long as we are what we are, in our flesh, in our blood, in our



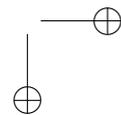
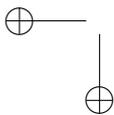


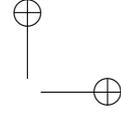
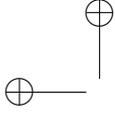
bones, nothing, while we live, can sever the bond between us. And in death? Ah! how much nearer to the pagan heart of this great mystery is the cry of the son of Jesse over the body of his beloved than all the Ciceronian rhetoric in the world – and how much nearer to what that loss means!

Montaigne does not really, as Pater so charmingly hints, break the flexible consistency of his philosophic method when he loves his friends in this unbounded manner. He is too great a sceptic to let his scepticism stand in the way of high adventures of this sort.

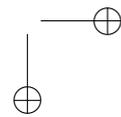
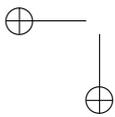
The essence of his unsystematic system is that one should give oneself freely up to what the gods throw in one's way. And if the gods – in their inescapable predestination – have made him “for me” and me “for him,” to cling fast with cold cautious hands to the anchor of moderation were to be false to the philosophy of the “Eternal Now.”

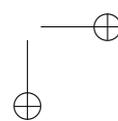
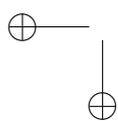
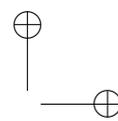
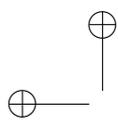
The whole of life is an enormous accident – a dice-throw of eternity in the vapours of time and space. Why not then, with him we love by our side, make richer and sweeter the nonchalant gaiety of our amusement, in the great mad purposeless preposterous show, by the “quips and cranks” of a companionable scepticism; canvassing all things in earth and heaven, reverencing God and Caesar on





this side of idolatry, relishing the foolish, fooling the wise, and letting the world drift on as it will?
“What do I know?” There may be more in life than the moralists guess, and more in death than the atheists imagine.







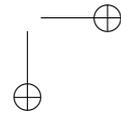
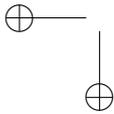
PASCAL

There are certain figures in the history of human thought who in the deepest sense of the word must be regarded as tragic; and this not because of any accidental sufferings they have endured, or because of any persecution, but because of something inherently desperate in their own wrestling with truth.

Thus Swift, while an eminently tragic figure in regard to his personal character and the events of his life, is not tragic in regard to his thought.

It is not a question of pessimism. Schopenhauer is generally, and with reason, regarded as a pessimist; but no one who has read his “World as Will and Idea” can visualise Schopenhauer, even in the sphere of pure thought, as a tragic personality.

The pre-eminent example in our modern world of the sort of desperate thinking which I have in mind as worthy of this title is, of course, Nietzsche;





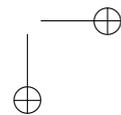
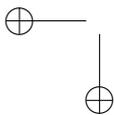
and it is a significant thing that over and over again in Nietzsche's writings one comes upon passionate and indignant references to Pascal.

The great iconoclast seemed indeed, as he groped about like a blind Samson in the temple of human faith, to come inevitably upon the figure of Pascal, as if this latter were one of the main pillars of the formidable edifice. It is interesting to watch this passionate attraction of steel for steel.

Nietzsche was constantly searching among apologists for Christianity for one who in intellect and imagination was worthy of his weapons; and it must be confessed that his search was generally vain. But in Pascal he did find what he sought.

His own high mystical spirit with its savage psychological insight was answered here by something of the same metal. His own "desperate thinking" met in this instance a temper equally "desperate," and the beauty and cruelty of his merciless imagination met here a "will to power" not less abnormal.

It is seldom that a critic of a great writer has, by the lucky throwing of life's wanton dice, an opportunity of watching the very temper he is describing, close at hand. But it does sometimes happen, even when the subject of one's criticism has been dead two hundred years, that one comes across a modern mind so penetrated with its mas-





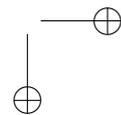
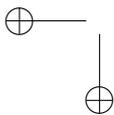
ter's moods; so coloured, so dyed, so ingrained with that particular spirit, that intercourse with it implies actual contact with its archetype.

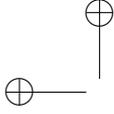
Such an encounter with the subtlest of Christian apologists has been my own good fortune in my association with Mr. W. J. Williams, the friend of Loisy and Tyrrel, and the interpreter, for modern piety, of Pascal's deepest thoughts.

The superiority of Pascal over all other defenders of the faith is to be looked for in the peculiar angle of his approach to the terrific controversy – an angle which Newman himself, for all his serpentine sagacity, found it difficult to retain.

Newman worked in a mental atmosphere singularly unpropitious to formidable intellectual ventures, and one never feels that his essentially ecclesiastical mind ever really grasped the human plausibility of natural paganism. But Pascal went straight back to Montaigne, and, like Pater's Marius under the influence of Aristippus, begins his search after truth with a clean acceptance of absolute scepticism.

Newman was sceptical too, but his peculiar kind of intellectual piety lacked the imagination of Pascal. He could play, cleverly enough, with hypothetical infidelity, and refute it, so to say, "in his study" with his eye on the little chapel door; but there was a sort of refined shrinking from the jagged





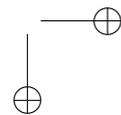
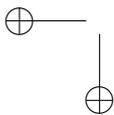
edges of reality in his somewhat Byzantine temperament which throws a certain suspicion of special pleading over his crafty logic.

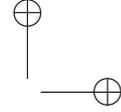
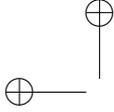
Newman argues like a subtle theologian who has been clever enough to add to his “repertoire” a certain evasive mist of pragmatic modernism, under the filmy and wavering vapours of which the inveterate sacerdotalism of his temperament covers its tracks. But with Pascal we get clean away from the poison-trail of the obscurantist.

Pascal was essentially a layman. There was nothing priestly in his mood; nothing scholastic in his reasoning; nothing sacerdotal in his conclusions. We breathe with him the clear sharp air of mathematics; and his imagination, shaking itself free from all controversial pettifogging, sweeps off into the stark and naked spaces of the true planetary situation.

One feels that Newman under all conceivable circumstances was bound to be a priest. There was priestliness writ large upon his countenance. His manner, his tone, his beautiful style, with something at once pleading and threatening, and a kind of feminine attenuation in its vibrant periods, bears witness to this.

Stripped of his cassock and tossed into the world’s “hurly-burly,” Newman would have drawn back into himself in Puritan dismay, and with Puritan nar-





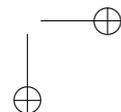
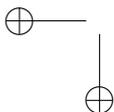
rownness and sourness would have sneered at the feet of the dancers. There was, at bottom, absolutely nothing in Newman of the clear-eyed human sweetness of the Christ of the Gospels; that noble, benignant, tolerant God, full of poetic imagination, whose divine countenance still looks forth from the canvasses of Titian.

Newman's piety, at best, was provincial, local, distorted. His Christ is the Christ of morbid Seminarists and ascetic undergraduates; not the Christ that Leonardo da Vinci saw breaking bread with his disciples; not the Christ that Paolo Veronese saw moving among the crowds of the street like a royal uncrowned king.

It is a mistake to regard Pascal as a Protestant. It is equally a mistake to press hard upon his Catholicity. He was indeed too tragically preoccupied with the far deeper question as to whether faith in Christ is possible at all, to be limited to these lesser disputes.

His quarrel with the Jesuits was not essentially a theological quarrel. It was the eternal quarrel between the wisdom and caution and casuistry of the world and the uncompromising vision of the poet and prophet.

Nietzsche would never have singled out Pascal as his most formidable enemy if the author of "The Thoughts" had been nothing but a theological





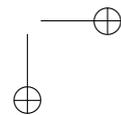
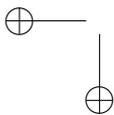
controversialist. What gives an eternal value to Pascal's genius, is that it definitely cleared the air. It swept aside all blurring and confusing mental litter, and left the lamentable stage of the great dilemma free for the fatal duel.

Out of the immense darkness of the human situation, that forlorn stage rises. The fearful spaces of the godless night are its roof, and row above row, tier above tier in its shadowy enclosure, the troubled crowds of the tribes of men wait the wavering issue of the contest. Full on the high stage in this tragic theatre of the universe Pascal throws the merciless searchlight of his imaginative logic, and the rhythm of the duality of man's fate is the rhythm of the music of his impassioned utterances.

The more one dreams over the unique position which Pascal has come to occupy, the more one realises how few writers there are whose imagination is large enough to grapple with the sublime horror of being born of the human race into this planetary system.

They take for granted so many things, these others. They have no power in them to lift eagle wings and fly over the cold grey boundless expanse of the shadowy waters.

They take for granted – materialists and mystics alike – so much; so much, that there is no longer





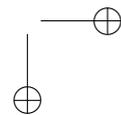
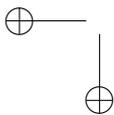
any tragic dilemma left, any sublime “parting of the ways,” any splendid or terrible decision.

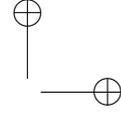
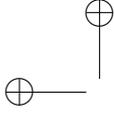
Pascal’s essential grandeur consists in the fact that he tore himself clear of all those peddling and pitiful compromises, those half humorous concessions, those lazy conventionalisms, with which most people cover their brains as if with wool, and ballast their imagination as if with heavy sand.

He tore himself clear of everything; of his own temperamental proclivities, of his pride, of his scientific vanity, of his human affections, of his lusts, of his innocent enjoyments. He tore himself clear of everything; so as to envisage the universe in its unmitigated horror, so as to look the emptiness of space straight between its ghastly lidless eyes.

One sees him there, at the edge of the world, silhouetted against the white terror of infinity, wrestling desperately in the dawn with the angel of the withheld secret.

His pride – his pride of sheer intellect – ah! that, as Nietzsche well knew, was the offering that had the most blood in it, the sacrifice that cried the loudest, as he bound it to the horns of the altar. The almost insane howl of suppressed misery which lurks in the scoriating irony of that terrible passage about sprinkling oneself with “holy water” and rendering oneself “stupid,” is an indication of what I mean. Truly, as his modern representative



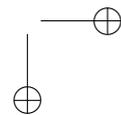
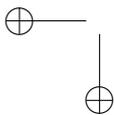


does not hesitate to hint, the hand of Pascal held Christianity by the hair.

To certain placid cattle-like minds, the life we have been born into is a thing simple and natural enough. To Pascal it was monstrously and insolently unnatural. He had that species of grand and terrible imagination which is capable of piercing the world through and through; of rising high up above it, and of pulverising it with impassioned logic.

The basic incongruities of life yawned for him like bleeding eye-sockets, and never for one moment could he get out of his mind the appalling nothingness of the stellar spaces.

Once, after thinking about Pascal, I dreamed I saw him standing, a tall dark figure, above a chaotic sea. In his hand he held a gigantic whip, whose long quivering lash seemed, as he cracked it above the moaning waters, to summon the hidden monsters of the depths to rise to the surface. I could not see in my dream the face of this figure, for dark clouds kept sweeping across his head; but the sense of his ferocious loneliness took possession of me, and since then I have found it increasingly difficult to confine his image to mild Jansenistic heresies, ironic girdings at Jesuitical opponents, philosophic strolls with evangelical friends.



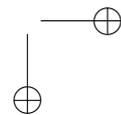
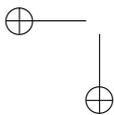


What Pascal does is a thing that, curiously enough, is very rarely done, even by great metaphysical writers; I mean the bringing home to the mind, without any comfortable illusive softenings of the stark reality, of what life really implies in its trenchant outlines. To do this with the more complete efficacy, he goes back to Montaigne and uses the scepticism of Montaigne as his starting point.

The Christian faith, in order to be a thing of beauty and dignity, must necessarily have something desperate about it, something of the terrible sweat and tears of one who wrestles with the ultimate angel. Easy-going Christianity, the Christianity of plump prelates and argumentative presbyters, is not Christianity at all. It is simply the "custom of the country" greased with the unction of professional interests.

One remembers how both Schopenhauer and Heine sweep away the Hegelian Protestantism of their age and look for the spirit of Christ in other quarters.

That so tremendous a hope, that so sublime a chance should have appeared at all in the history of the human race is a thing to wonder at; and Pascal, coming upon this chance, this hope, this supreme venture, from the depths of a corrosive all-devouring scepticism, realised it at its true value.





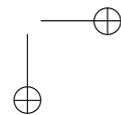
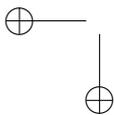
Hung between the infinitely great and the infinitely little, frozen by the mockery of two eternities, this “quintessence of dust” which is ourselves, cries aloud to be delivered from the body of its living death.

A reed that thinks! Could there anywhere be found a better description of what we are? Reed-like we bow ourselves to the winds of the four horizons – reed-like we murmur repetitions of the music of forest and sea – reed-like we lift our heads among the dying stalks of those who came before us – reed-like we wither and droop when our own hour comes – but with it all, we think!

Pascal looking at the face of the world sees evidence on all sides of the presence of something blighting and poisonous, something diabolic and malign in the way things are now organised. He traces the cause of this to the wilful evil in the heart of man, and he finds the only cure for it in the acceptance of God’s grace.

There may be something irritating to the pagan mind about this arbitrary introduction of the idea of “sin” as the cause of the lamentable misery of the world. Among modern writers the idea of “sin” is ridiculed, and the notion of its supernaturalism scouted. But is this true psychology?

Whatever its extraordinary origin, this thing which we call “conscience” has emerged as a def-





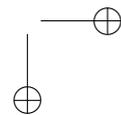
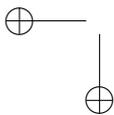
inite and inalienable phenomenon among us. To be exempt from the power of remorse is still, even in these modern days, to be something below or above the level of ordinary humanity. If the thing is everywhere present with us, then, as an actual undeniable experience; if we feel it, if we suffer from it, where is the philosophical or human advantage of slurring over its existence and refusing to take account of it?

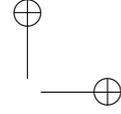
The great artists are wiser in these matters than the philosophers. Are we to suppose that the depths of malignity in an Iago, or the “dark backward and abysm” of remorse in a Macbeth, are things purely relative and illusive?

“Hell is murky,” whispers the sleep-walker, and the words touch the nerves of our imagination more closely than all the arguments of the evolutionists.

We will not follow Pascal through the doctrinal symbols of his escape from the burden of this consciousness. Where we must still feel the grandeur of his imagination is in his recognition of the presence of “evil” in the world as an objective and palpable thing which no easy explanations can get rid of and only a stronger spiritual force can overcome.

The imagination of Pascal once more makes life terrible, beautiful and dramatic. It pushes back the marble walls of mechanical cause and





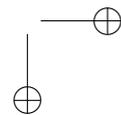
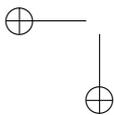
effect, and opens up the deep places. It makes the universe porous again. It restores to life its strange and mysterious possibilities. It throws the human will once more into the foreground, and gives the drama of our days its rightful spaciousness and breadth.

The kind of religious faith which lends itself to our sense of the noble and the tragic is necessarily of this nature. Like the tight-rope dancer in Zarathustra, it balances itself between the upper and the nether gulfs. It makes its choice between eternal issues; it throws the dice upon the cosmic gaming-table; it wagers the safety of the soul against the sanity of the intellect.

And it is pre-eminently the mark of a great religion that it should be founded upon a great scepticism. Anything short of this lacks the true tragic note; anything short of this is mere temperamental cheerfulness, mere conventional assent to custom and tradition.

The great religion must carve its daring protest against the whole natural order of the universe upon the flaming ramparts of the world's uttermost boundary. The great religion must engrave its challenge to eternity upon the forehead of the Great Sphinx.

And after all, even supposing that Pascal is wrong; even supposing that making his grand wa-



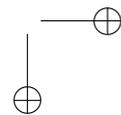
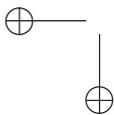


ger he put his money upon the wrong horse, does that diminish the tragedy of his position? Does that lessen the sublimity of his imagination? Obviously it is the practical certainty that he is wrong, and that he did put his money on the wrong horse, which creates the grandeur of the whole desperate business. If he were right, if the universe were really and truly composed in the manner he conceived it – why then, so far from his figure being a tragic one, he would present himself as a shrewd magician, who has found the “wonderful lamp” of the world’s Aladdin’s cave, and has entered upon inestimable treasures while disappearing into the darkness.

The sublimity of Pascal’s vision depends upon its being illusive. The grandeur of his world-logic depends upon its being false. The beauty of his heroic character depends upon his philosophy being a lie.

If all that is left of this desperate dicer with eternity is a little dust and a strangely shaped skull, how magnificently dramatic, in the high classic sense, was his offering up of his intellect upon the altar of his faith!

In the wise psychology of the future – interesting itself in the historic aberrations of the human mind – it is likely that many chapters will be devoted to





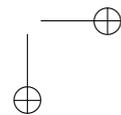
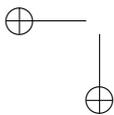
this strange “disease of desperation” full of such wild and fatal beauty.

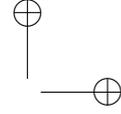
The Spectacle of the world will lack much contrasting shadow when this thing passes away. A certain deep crimson upon black will be missing from the tapestry of human consciousness. There will be more sun-light but less Rembrandian chiaroscuro in the pigments of the great Picture. At any rate this is certain; by his tragic gambling in the darkness of the abyss between the unfathomed spaces, Pascal has drawn the perilous stuff of the great disease to a dramatic head. The thing can no longer diffuse itself like an attenuated evil humour through every vein of the world-body.

Customary piety, conventional religion, the thin security of self-satisfied morality, can now no more tease us with their sleek impertinence. In the presence of a venture of this high distinction, of a faith of this tragic intensity, such shabby counterfeits of the race’s hope dwindle and pale and fade.

We now perceive what the alternative is, what the voice of “deep calling unto deep” really utters, as the constellation of Hercules draws the solar world toward it through the abysmal night. No more ethical foolery; no more pragmatic insolence; no more mystical rhetoric.

The prophets of optimism “lie in hell like sheep.” The world yawns and quivers to its foundations.

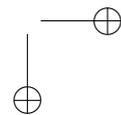
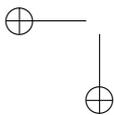


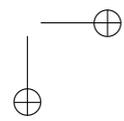
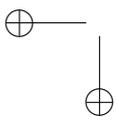
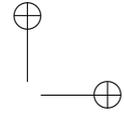
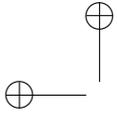


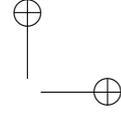
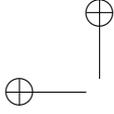
Jotunheim rushes upon Asgard. From the pleasant fields of sun-lit pagan doubt comes to our ears the piping of the undying Pan – older than all the “twilights” of all the “gods.”

But for the rest the issue is now plain, the great dilemma clear. No more fooling with shadows when faith has lost its substance; no more walking on the road to Emmaus when the Master is transformed to a stream of tendency; no more liberal theology when Socrates is as divine as Jesus.

The “Thinking Reed” bows before the wind of the infinite spaces. It bows. It bends. It is broken. Aut Christus aut Nihil!



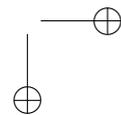
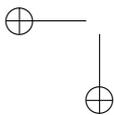


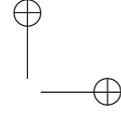
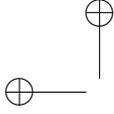


VOLTAIRE

The immense bulk of Voltaire's writings is profoundly uninteresting to me. I once saw – I think it must have been in Liverpool – a wonderful edition of his complete works published during the Revolution and with a duplicate copy of every illustrative print. I couldn't afford the price of the thing just then, amazingly low though it was, but in my devotion to that great name, I swore that, when I made my library, that noble edition should be in it.

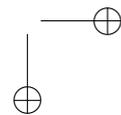
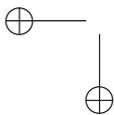
I have never made any library and never intend to. The sight of classical authors in row upon row depresses me beyond words. Public Libraries are still worse. I have no wish to be helped "to get on in the world" by Mr. Carnegie. I resent the association between literature and "public benefactions." Does he propose to dole out the exquisite taste necessary to appreciate these rare things, on

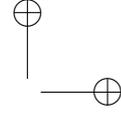
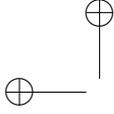




condition that our “home town” pay half the cost? Thank Heaven, a feeling for what is noble and distinguished in human thought is beyond the reach of any philanthropist. I mean beyond his power of giving or taking away, and I do not believe that those among the poor who really have this feeling are often found in libraries. They probably have their “Oxford Book of English Verse” – a gift from their gentlest acquaintance – just as I have; and, for the rest, they can sell their school prizes to buy Hardy and Henry James.

Except for “Candide” and a few excerpts from the “Philosophical Dictionary,” I must confess I have no wish to turn over another page of Voltaire. It is simply incredible to me that human beings possessed of the same senses as ours could find satisfaction for their imagination in the sterile moralising, stilted sentiment, superficial wit, and tiresome persiflage of that queer generation. I suppose they didn’t really. I suppose they used to go off on the sly, and read Rabelais and Villon. I suppose it was only the preposterous “social world” of those days who enjoyed nothing in literature except pseudo-classic attitudes and gestures; just as it is only the preposterous “social world” with us who enjoy nothing but Gaelic mythology and Oriental Mysticism.

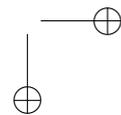
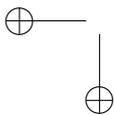


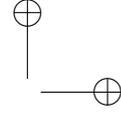
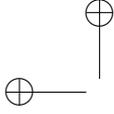


Those pseudo-classic writers of the eighteenth century, in England and France, have their admirers still. I confess such admiration excites in me as much wonder as the works themselves excite distaste. What can they find in them that is thrilling or exciting or large or luminous or magical? I would pile up the whole lot of them along with those books that are no books – biblia-a-biblia – of which Charles Lamb speaks so plaintively. Backgammon boards with lettering behind them should be their companions.

What a relief to turn from contemplation of the works of Voltaire to that bust of him by Houdon!

Ah! there we have him, there we apprehend him, there we catch his undying spirit! And what a man he was! As one looks at that face wherein a mockery more trenchant than the world is able to endure leers and wags the tongue, one feels certain that the soul of the eighteenth century was not really contented with its heroic sentimental mask. The look upon that face, with its aristocratic refinement, its deadly intellect, its beautiful cynicism, is worth all the sessions of the Academy and all the seasons of the Salons. It makes one think somehow of the gardens of Versailles. One seems to see it as a mocking fragment of heathen marble – some Priapian deity of shameless irreverence, peering forth in the moonlight from among



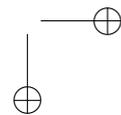
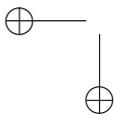


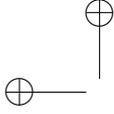
the yew hedges and the fountains; watching the Pierrot of the Minute make love to Columbine, and the generations of men drift by like falling leaves.

Voltaire! – He was well advised to choose that name for himself; a name which sounds even now like the call of a trumpet. And a call it is; a call to the clear intelligences and the unclouded brains; a call to the generous hearts and the unperverted instincts; a call to sanity and sweetness and clarity and noble commonsense; to all that is free and brave and gay and friendly, to rally to the standard of true civilisation against the forces of stupidity, brutality and obscurantism!

Voltaire was one of those great men whose thoughts are armies and whose words are victories in the cause of the liberation of humanity. If we do not read his books, we look at his image and we read his life. We name his name and we seal ourselves of his tribe; the name and tribe of such as refuse to bow their knees to Baal, and if they worship in the house of Rimmon, worship with a large reservation!

Voltaire is much more than a man of letters. He is a prophet of the age to come, when the execrable superstitions of narrow minds shall no longer darken the sunlight, and the infamous compulsion of human manners, human intellects, human tastes,



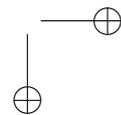
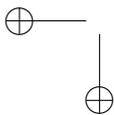


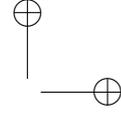
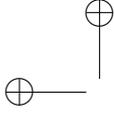
into the petty mould of oppressive public opinion shall be ended forever.

That bust in the Louvre and the sublime story of his life will outlast all but one of those half a hundred volumes of his which Mr. Carnegie's liberality has put at the disposal of our "home town."

We too, like the populace of Paris, on the day when he came back to his own, flock out to see the "saviour of the Calas." We too, like the passionate actresses who crowned his image in the great comedy-house while – as they say – he bowed his head so low that his forehead touched the front of his box, acclaim him still as the Messiah of the Liberty of the human intellect.

How admirable it is to come back to the spirit and temper of Voltaire from the fussy self-love and neurotic introspections of our modern egoists. The new fashionable doctrine among the "intellectuals" is that one is to live in one's ivory tower and let the world go; live in one's ivory tower while brutal and detestable people tyrannise over the gentle and sensitive; live in one's ivory tower while the heavy hand of popular ignorance lies like a dead weight upon all that is fine and rare; live in one's ivory tower while complacent well-paid optimism whispers acquiescence in the "best of all possible worlds."

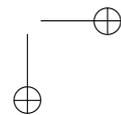
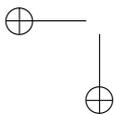


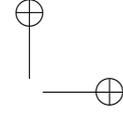
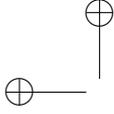


The great Voltaire was made in another mould. Few enjoyed the pleasures of life more than he; but the idea of the stupid brutality and ignorant tyranny from which in this world so many harmless people suffer filled him with fury. The Calas were only one – only the best known – of a long list of victims on whose behalf he entered the arena. In these campaigns of justice, he was tireless, inexhaustible, insatiable. He flooded Europe with pamphlets on behalf of his protégés. He defied Church and State in his crusades to defend them. His house at Ferney became a sort of universal refuge and sanctuary for the persecuted persons of the civilised world.

A great and good man! I sometimes think that of all the heroic champions of sensitiveness against insensitiveness, of weakness against strength, of the individual against public opinion, I would soonest call up the noble shade of Voltaire and kiss his pontifical hand!

The Pantheistic Carlyle grumbles at his levity and rails against his persiflage. One hopes there will always be a “persiflage” like that of Voltaire to clear the human stage of stupid tyranny and drive the mud-monsters of obscurantism back into their mid-night caverns. He was a queer kind of Apollo – this little great man with his old-fashioned wig and the fur-cloak “given him by Catherine of

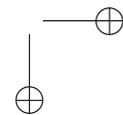
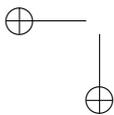


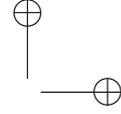
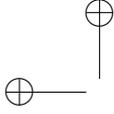


Russia” – but the flame which inspired him was the authentic fire, and the arrows with which he fought were dipped in the golden light of the sun.

I said there was one book of Voltaire’s to which the souls of honest people who love literature must constantly return. This, of course, is “Candide”; a work worthy to be bound up in royal vellum and stained in Tyrian dyes. If it were not for “Candide” – so stiff and stilted was the fashionable spirit of that age – there would be little in Voltaire’s huge shelf of volumes, little except stray flashes of his irrepressible gaiety, to arrest and to hold us. But into the pages of “Candide” he poured the full bright torrent of his immortal wit, and with this book in our hands we can feel him and savour him as he was.

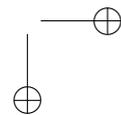
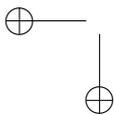
One has only to glance over the face of Europe at this present hour to get the sting and Pythian poison of this planetary irony. It is like a Circean philtre of sweet sunbrewed wine, sparkling with rainbow bubbles and gleaming with the mockery of the deathless gods. Once for all in this scandalous and beautiful book, the lying optimism of the preachers receives its crushing blow. “Candide” is the final retort of all sane and generous spirits, full of magnanimity and laughter, to that morbid and shameful propitiation of the destinies which cries “peace when there is no peace.”

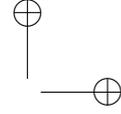




One feels when one reads it as if it were written by some wanton and gracious youth, in the marble courts of some happy palace of Utopia, commenting upon the mad delusions and diseased hypocrisies of the men of the old time when superstition still reigned. No book in the world has more spontaneous gaiety, more of the triumphant spirit of human boyishness in its blood. Certainly the great Voltaire was to the end of his life – and you can see that very thing in the old-young face of the famous bust – inspired by the immortal flame of youth. He never grew old. To the last his attitude toward life was the attitude of that exuberant and unbounded energy which takes nothing seriously and loves the contest with darkness and stupidity for the sake of the divine “sport” of the struggle. There is a certain sun-born sanity of commonsense about such natural youthfulness, which contradicts all popular fallacies.

It is the Mercurio spirit, striking up the swords of both Montagues and Capulets and fooling them all on their grey-haired obsessions. It comes into this solemn custom-ridden world, as if from some younger and gayer star, and makes wanton sport of its pious hypocrisies. It opens its astonished laughing eyes upon the meanness of men and the cruelties of men and the insane superstitions and illusions of men, and it mocks them all with mis-

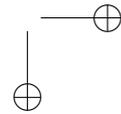
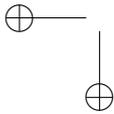


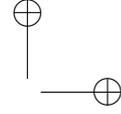
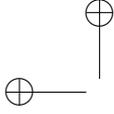


chievous delight. It refuses to bow its head before hoary idols. It refuses to go weeping and penitent and stricken with a sense of “sin” in the presence of natural fleshly instincts. It is absolutely irresponsible – what, in a world like this, should one be responsible for? – and it is shamelessly frivolous. Why not? Where the highest sanctities are so lamentably human, and where the phylacteries of the moralists are embroidered with such earth-spun threads, why go on tip-toe and with forlorn visage? It is outrageously indecent. Why not? Who made this portentous “decency” to be the rule of free-born life? Who put fig-leaves upon the sweet flesh of the immortals? Decency after all is a mere modern barbarism; the evocation of morbid vulgarity and a perverted heart.

The great classic civilisations included a poetic obscenity with easy nonchalance. They had a god to protect its interests, and its sun-burnt youthful wantonness penetrates all their art. This modern cult of “decency” – thrust down the throat of human joy by a set of Calvins and John Knoxes – is only one of the indications in our wretched commercialised age of how far we have sunk from the laughter of the gods and the dancing of the morning stars.

To sit listening in the forlorn streets of a Puritan city – when for one day the cheating tradesmen

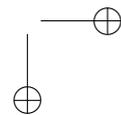
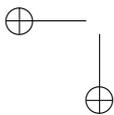


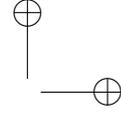


leave their barbarous shops – to the wailing of unlovely hymns, empty of everything except a degraded sentimentality that would make an Athenian or a Roman slave blush with shame, is enough to cause one to regard the most scandalous levity of Voltaire as something positively sacred and holy.

One wonders that scholars are any longer allowed even to read Aristophanes – far less translate him. And cannot they see – these perverts of a purity that insults the sunshine – that humour, decent or indecent, is precisely the thing that puts sex properly in its place? Cannot they see that by substituting morbid sentiment for honest Rabelaisianism they are obsessing the minds of every one with a matter which after all is only one aspect of life?

The great terrible Aphrodite – ruler of gods and men – is not to be banished by conventicle or council. She will find her way back, though she has to tread strange paths, and the punishment for the elimination of natural wantonness is the appearance of hideous hypocrisy. Driven from the haunts of the Muses, expelled from the symposia of the wise and witty, the spirit of sexual irreverence takes refuge in the streets; and the scurrilous vulgarities of the tavern balance the mincing proprieties of the book-shop.



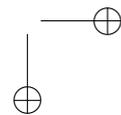
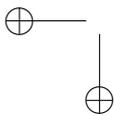


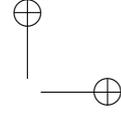
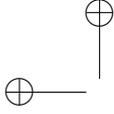
After all sex is a laughable thing. The tragedies connected with it, the high and thrilling pleasures connected with it, do not obliterate its original absurdity. And Voltaire – this sane sun-born child of the shameless intellect – never permits us for a moment to forget how ridiculous in the last resort all this fuss about the matter is.

Puritanical suppression and neurotic obsession are found invariably together. It is precisely in this way that the great goddess revenges herself upon those who disobey her laws. Voltaire, the least Puritanical of men, is also the least neurotic. The Satyrish laughter of his eternally youthful energy clears the air of the world.

Humour of all human things is the most transitory and changing in its moods. As a perambulating interpreter of literature, ancient as well as modern, this has especially been borne in upon me. I have been guilty, in that sickening academic way which makes one howl with shame in one's self-respecting moments, of "trying out" upon people the old stock humours of the standard authors.

I have dragged poor Bottom back to life and made the arms of the Cervantian wind-mill turn and the frogs of Aristophanes croak. But oh, shade of Yorick! how the sap, the ichor, the sharp authentic tang, that really tickles our sensibilities, has thinned out and fallen flat during the centuries.





My hearers have smiled and tittered perhaps – with a pathetic wish to be kind, or a desire to show themselves not quite dull to these classic amenities – and between us we have, in a kind of chuckling pedantry, shuffled through the occasion; but it is not pleasant to recall such moments.

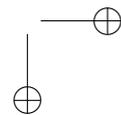
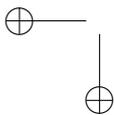
Of course a sly comedian could make anything amusing; but one cannot help feeling that if the humour of these famous scenes were really permanent it would force its way even through the frosty air of academic culture into our human nerves.

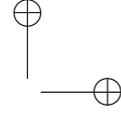
“We are not wood; we are not stones, but men” – and being men the essential spirit of outrageous humour ought surely to hit us, however poorly interpreted. And it does; only the proprieties and the decencies sheer us off from what is permanently appealing!

I recollect on one occasion, how, after making my hearers cry over the natural and permanent tragedy of Shylock, I asked the fatuous question, addressing it, as one does, to the vague air –

“What are we to say about Launcelot Gobbo?”

Now obviously any one but a professional interpreter of literature would know that there’s nothing to say about this harmless fool. Shakespeare threw him in as “a comic relief” and probably felt his strongest appeal to the native genius of the actor who impersonated him. But I can recall





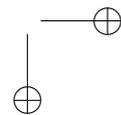
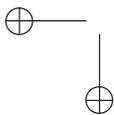
now, with that sense of humiliation which wrings one's withers, the sweetly murmured tones of some tactful woman who answered – and the last thing one wants is an answer to these inanities –

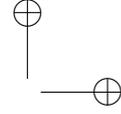
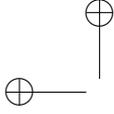
“Oh, we must say that Launcelot Gobbo is charming!”

But Gobbo or no Gobbo, the fact remains that humour is one of the most delicate, the most evasive, and the most unstable of human qualities. I am myself inclined to hold that sheer outrageous ribaldry, especially if graced with an undertone of philosophic irony, is the only kind of humour which is really permanent. To give permanence to any human quality in literature, there must be an appeal to something which is beyond the power of time and change and fashion and custom and circumstance. And, as a matter of fact, nothing in the world except sex itself answers this requirement.

The absurdities of men are infinite, but they alter with every generation. What never alters or can alter, is the absurdity of being a man at all.

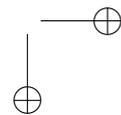
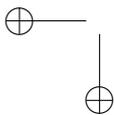
Where Shakespeare's humour still touches us most nearly is precisely in those scenes which the superficial custom of our age finds least endurable. It is not in his Gobbos or in his frolicsome boy-girls, that his essential spirit must be looked for; but in his Falstaffs and Mercutios.

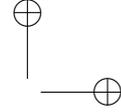
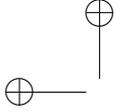




But Shakespeare's humour is largely, after all, a lovely, dreamy, poetical thing. I doubt if it has the weight or the massive solidity of the humour of Rabelais. I think the humour of Charles Lamb wears well; but that is probably because it has a most indisputable flavour of Rabelaisian roguery underlying its whimsical grace. Anatole France has the true classic spirit. His humour will remain fresh forever, because it is the humour of the eternal absurdity of sexual desire. Heine can never lose the sharpness of his bite, for his irreverence is the eternal irreverence of the soul that neither man nor God can scourge into solemn submission.

Humour to be really permanent and to outlast the changes of fashion must go plummet-like to the basic root of things. It is nothing less than extraordinary that Voltaire, living in the age of all ages the most obsessed with the modishness of the hour, should have written "Candide," a book full of the old unalterable laughter. For "Candide" is not only a clever book, a witty book, a wise book. It is a book preposterously and outrageously funny. It tickles one's liver and one's gall; it relaxes one's nerves; it vents the suppressed spleen of years in a shout of irrepressible amusement. Certain passages in it – and, as one would have suspected they are precisely the passages that cannot be quoted in a





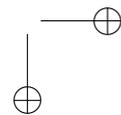
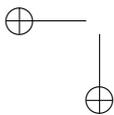
modern book – compel one to laugh aloud as one thinks of them.

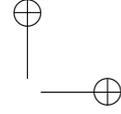
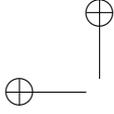
Personally I hold the opinion that “Candide” is the most humorous piece of human writing in the world. And yet its ribaldry, its irreverence, is unbounded. It sticks at nothing. It says everything. It wags the philosophic tongue at every conceivable embodiment of popular superstition.

If the best books are the books which the authors of them have most enjoyed writing, the books that have the thrill of excellent pleasure on every page, then “Candide” certainly bears away the palm. One would like to have watched Voltaire’s countenance as he wrote it. The man’s superb audacity, his courage, his aplomb, his god-like shamelessness, appear in every sentence.

What an indictment of the human race! What an arraignment of the “insolence of office”! What a tract for the philanthropists! What a slap in the face for the philosophers! And all done with such imperturbable good temper, such magnanimity of fine malice.

Poor Candide! how loyally he struggled on, with Pangloss as his master and his ideal; and what shocks he experienced! I would sooner go down to posterity as the author of “Candide” than of any volume in the world except Goethe’s “Faust.”

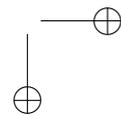
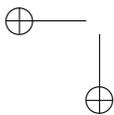


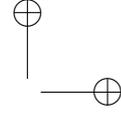
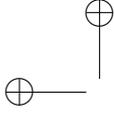


There is something extraordinarily reassuring about the book. It reconciles one to life even at the moment it is piling up life's extravagant miseries. Its buoyant and resilient energy, full of the unconquerable irreverence and glorious shamelessness of youth, takes life fairly by the throat and mocks it and defies it to its face. It indicates courageous gaiety as the only victory, and ironical submission to what even gaiety cannot alter as the only wisdom.

There are few among us, I suppose, who in going to and fro in the world, have not come upon some much-persecuted, much-battered Candide, "cultivating his garden" after a thousand disillusion; and holding fast, in spite of all, to the doctrines of some amazing Pangloss. Such encounters with such invincible derelicts must put us most wholesomely to shame. Our neurotic peevishness, our imaginary grievances, our vanity and our pride, are shown up at such moments in their true light.

If complacent optimism appears an insolent falsifying of life's facts, a helpless pessimism appears a cowardly surrender to life's impertinence. Neither to gloss over the outrageous reality nor to lose our resistant obstinacy, whatever such reality may do to us, is the last word of noble commonsense. And it is a noble commonsense which, after all, is Voltaire's preeminent gift.



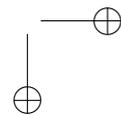
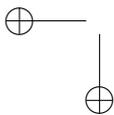


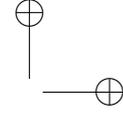
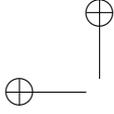
The Voltairian spirit refuses to be fooled by man or god. The universe may batter it and bruise it, but it cannot break it. The brutality of authority, the brutality of public opinion, may crush it to the earth; but from the earth it mocks still, mocks and mocks and mocks, with the eternal youthfulness of its wicked tongue!

Voltaire took the world as he found it. With the weapons of the world he fought the world; with the weapons of the world he overcame the world. The neurotic modern vulgarity which, misinterpreting the doctrines of Nietzsche, worships force and bows down in the dust before the great unscrupulous man, finds no support in Voltaire. Honest people, cultivating their gardens and keeping the prophets away from their backyards, find in the Voltairian spirit their perpetual refuge.

The old Horatian wisdom, clear-eyed, cynical and friendly, leaps up once again from the dust of the centuries, a clean bright flame, and brings joyousness and sanity back to the earth.

Voltaire could be kind and generous without calling to his aid the “immensities” and the “eternities.” He could strike fiercely on behalf of the weak and the oppressed without darkening the sunshine by any worship of “sorrow.” He could be thoroughly and most entirely “good,” while spitting forth his ribald irreverences against ev-





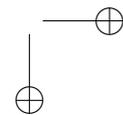
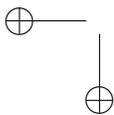
ery pious dogma. He could be long-suffering and considerate and patient, to a degree hardly ever known among men of genius, while ruling Europe with his indomitable pen.

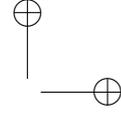
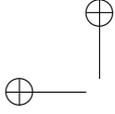
The name of Voltaire is more than a trumpet call of liberty for the oppressed artists and thinkers of the world; it is a challenge to the individual Cándides of our harassed generation to rise above their own weaknesses and introspections and come forth into the sunshine.

The name of Voltaire is a living indictment of the madness of politicians and the insanity of parties and sects. It brings us back to the commonsense of honest men, who “care for none of these things.”

He was a queer Apollo of light and reason – this lean bewigged figure with cane and snuffbox and laced sleeves – but the powers of darkness fled from before his wit as they have not fled from before the wit of any other; for the wit of Voltaire is in harmony with the spirit of the human race, as it shakes itself free from superstition “and all uncharitableness.”

He was a materialist if you will, for his “deism” meant no more to him than a distant blue sky giving the world space and perspective and free air; but a materialism that renders men kind and courteous, urbane and sweet-tempered, honest and





clear-headed, is better than a spirituality that leads to intolerance and madness.

He was a ribald and a scoffer in the presence of much that the world holds sacred; but the most sacred thing of all – the sanity of human reason – has never been more splendidly defended.

He mocked at the traditions of men; but he remains a champion of man's highest prerogative. He turned the churches into indecent ridicule; but wherever an honest man strikes at tyrannous superstition, or a solitary "cultivator of his garden" strikes at stupid mob-rule, one stone the more is added to that great "ecclesia" of civilisation, which "Deo erexit Voltaire"; which Voltaire built – and builds – to God.

