ON THE CATHEDRAL AT SEVILLE AND "THE MISANTHROPE"

By Hilaire Belloc

I, WITHIN one week, experienced, felt, saw and handled, as it were, with my mind, the two chief creations of the human spirit: a marvelous piece of luck. I heard mass in Seville Cathedral on a Sunday. The Sunday after I sat at the Français marveling at "The Misanthrope". These two creations, the one in stone, the other in the verb, are, so far as I know, the summit of our European creative power, and therefore of the world. They praise the Giralda of Seville, the great tower outside the Cathedral, and they are right. But they are wrong when they praise it with a more or less conscious motive of crying up Islam and running down their own blood. The beauty of the Giralda is not an Islamic beauty, though Islam built the most of it. It is what it is because Europe repairs and finishes. If you doubt this you may go and look at that twin tower of Hassan on the Hill above Rabat in Morocco. That huge brown tower at Rabat looks over the Atlantic Seas toward its sister, the Giralda: imperfect thing looking at a perfected thing. A thing essentially weak because not permanent, looking at a symbol of permanence: a thing destined to ruin looking at a thing destined to life. And I say in the maugre of the teeth of

those with whom I disagree that the Giralda would not be the Giralda but for its Christian cap. However, there it stands, useful at least as a contrast. For if the Giralda be very beautiful (as it is), what is it compared to the Cathedral itself? That building can never be excelled. Our race once, in one great moment of three centuries, reached its highest level. We shall hardly return to such a summit. The Gallic spirit had created the Gothic; the unfathomed suggestion of the hands in prayer and of the uplifted arch of sixty degrees, had spread from Paris outward; it had built all the ring of great shrines—Chartres, Beauvais, Amiens, Rheims. It was proceeding in outer circles to Britain, and even to the Rhine and beyond, and on through the Reconquista, southward, shooting up Burgos like a fire, and planting the nobility of Oviedo and Leone, when the Christian Cavalry entered Seville and began the last and the noblest of all those things.

What a mood of making, what an enlarging passion to produce and to form and to express must have possessed the men who through those centuries completed that thing! From the thirteenth century to the *Reyes Catolicos* it is everything from St. Ferdinand to Ferdinand and Isabel.

Castille rode in and made this marvelous thing. I wonder what Aragon would have done. Often, as I have gone down the banks of that torrent, which is also a god, and which gave its name to the mighty kingdom, often, as I have gone down the gorge of the Pyrenees with the Aragon tumbling at my side, I have meditated upon its spirit, broader, I think, less piercing, with more grasp, less thrust than the chivalry to the west, than the raiders of Castille. Suffused, I think, with the Catalan blood, though they would hate to be told it, and in some way at once less solemn and yet more solid. Aragon had no chance. It was blocked. It was Castille that rode in and made this thing. And in making it, it made the greatest monument which our race can boast.

There is some unexplained power in proportion which not only symbolizes, not only suggests, but actually presents that which has no proportions, the illimitable vastness — eternity. There is a mystery about just proportion. It has this magic about it. It will express both the sublime and the merely just, the merely accurate. It will suggest repose, it will suggest a disdainful superiority to inferior things. It carries a patent of nobility always. But in rare times and places it can also effect what I have said—a vision of the eternal.

A man in the Cathedral of Seville understands the end of his being. He is, while standing there on earth, surrounded by stones and rocks of the earth, with his own body in decay and all about him in decay—he is in the midst of all this material affair, in a side manner out of it all, in possession of the last truth. Nowhere else in the world that I know of has the illimitable finally fixed itself in expression. And it is not only proportion—it is also multiplicity. It is not only that factor of true creative power, the making it something more than that which you make through an instinct for form; it is also the other factor of creative power — diversity, endless breeding, burgeoning, foison, which everywhere clothes this amazing result. Seville has not (for its area, its great space) the actual number of carven things which glorify Brou and the Jewel of the House of Savoy. It has not perhaps any one statue which will match the immortal Magdalen of

Brou or the new German (to my astonishment!) little sandstone Madonna of Trèves, nor that other Madonna praying to her own self, which for a long time I believed to be the loveliest figure in the world. I mean the one over the southern porch of Rheims (Prussian ineptitude has spared it and it still remains). But if Seville has not some one statue, it has the effect of multiplicity more greatly developed than any other building I know, and here again you will ask yourself in vain, as the creators themselves would have asked themselves in vain, how that effect arose. It is so, and there stands Seville. If you would know how silence can be full and how a supreme unity can be infinitely diverse, if you would touch all the mysteries, and comprehend them as well as they can be comprehended within the limits of our little passage through the daylight, you must see Seville. But do not go there in Holy Week.

And "The Misanthrope".

The supreme art of words is the production of multiple and profound effect coupled with simplicity in construction. There is hardly in this masterpiece one phrase which is not the phrase of convention or of daily use. Where the words are not the words that men used, nor the sentences the sentences they used at the Court of Louis XIV, then they are the words conventionally used in the heroic couplets of that day. And each character has so much to say (not very much), and there is, you may say, no rhetoric, and there is, you may say, no lyric, no deliberate poignancy; one might by paradox go further and say no effect, meaning by *effect* a sudden, sharp, contrasted effect. This comedy of Molière's represents no more than the simplest conjunction, the everyday business of a man who expects too much of mankind, who is in love and expects too much of the lady, who has a friend, a man, and another friend, a woman, who would marry him willingly enough if he only would, and who yet advises quietly and is more a support than a lover. And there is hardly any plot, merely the discovery that the young widow for whom the Misanthrope feels such passion is a chatterbox and runs her friends down behind their backs for the sake of chat. There is the fatuous bad poet, there are the silly men of the world. These are the materials, and into them a man who was not, I think, of the very first rank in the matter of art, did once breathe such life that he made a thing standing quite apart from all his other creations and above all that not only his contemporaries, but any other, had accomplished. What depths and further depths, what suggestions to the left and to the right, what infinite complexity of real character (and just as infinite complexity of real character exists in all of us) shine through those few pages, illumine and glorify two hours of acting on a stage! There is perhaps no man intelligent and sensitive who has reached the age of forty, who will not, as he watches the acting of "The Misanthrope", see all that he knows of life passing before him and sounding exactly in tune with the vibrations of his own soul. There is love intense and disappointed, and there is the foil, that large, that honest, that domestic thing which rare women possess and when they possess it afford food, sustenance, sacrament to the life of men. There is friendship, there is the ideal sought and unattained, the disappointment which comes to all nobility.

There is here all human character put into a little frame. How? No one

can tell how. Molière himself could not have told how. When those simple words, spoken quickly and in a low tone — *"Faut-il que je vous aime?"* — are heard, the hearer's whole self, his whole past (if he has loved fully), his security, his doubt, all of him respond. Why? I cannot tell. I only know that the great poets do it, and they themselves do not know how. It is the muse. It is something divine. It is inspiration. That word was justly framed. It would seem that among the solutions afforded to the miserable race of men, among the little hints of a possible coming Beatitude, the Creator has especially chosen from the storehouse this gem, this priceless gem of poetical power.

I am reminded of it when I read the foolish judgment so often repeated— that the Ancients had no landscape.

Θήσουσ' ἐν Λυκίης εὐρείης πίονι δήμῳ
Iliad: XVI — 673

When I read that I see what I think Flaxman saw, the sunlight, the Ægean, the Asian hills, and the fertile plain; and I feel the warmer air. Yet, is there not one word which describes these things, unless you except the common word and symbol which says that Lycia is rich. Tennyson did it too: "And the moon was full." So did Byron: "The moon is up and yet it is not night." So did they all. But Molière in "The Misanthrope" did it all the time. It is not single lines (though I have quoted one); it is the whole river of the thing, high in flood, up to the top of its banks, majestic, and upon a scale to which one would have thought mere man could not build. All that!

For two hours, hearing this thing, I was quite outside the world. And the memory of it is a possession which should endure, I think, forever, by which word I mean even beyond the limitations of this life; but therein I may be wrong.