

The background is a complex, abstract composition of organic, flowing shapes. It features a central vertical column of grey and white, flanked by vibrant, swirling patterns in shades of purple, magenta, and pink. Diagonal bands of blue and white, and orange and red, cut across the scene, creating a sense of dynamic movement and depth. The overall effect is reminiscent of a microscopic view of biological tissue or a fluid simulation.

The Dance of Life

Havelock Ellis

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Preface

This book was planned many years ago. As to the idea running through it, I cannot say when that arose. My feeling is, it was born with me. On reflection, indeed, it seems possible the seeds fell imperceptibly in youth—from F. A. Lange, maybe, and other sources—to germinate unseen in a congenial soil. However that may be, the idea underlies much that I have written. Even the present book began to be written, and to be published in a preliminary form, more than fifteen years ago. Perhaps I may be allowed to seek consolation for my slowness, however vainly, in the saying of Rodin that “slowness is beauty,” and certainly it is the slowest dances that have been to me most beautiful to see, while, in the dance of life, the achievement of a civilisation in beauty seems to be inversely to the rapidity of its pace.

Moreover, the book remains incomplete, not merely in the sense that I would desire still to be changing and adding to each chapter, but even incomplete by the absence of many chapters for which I had gathered material, and twenty years ago should have been surprised to find missing. For there are many arts, not among those we conventionally call “fine,” which seem to me fundamental for living. But now I put forth the book as it stands, deliberately, without remorse, well content so to do.

Once that would not have been possible. A book must be completed as it had been originally planned, finished, rounded, polished. As a man grows older his ideals change. Thoroughness is often an admirable ideal. But it is an ideal to be adopted with discrimination, having due reference to the nature of the work in hand. An artist, it seems to me now, has not always to finish his work in every detail; by not doing so he may succeed in making the spectator his co-worker, and put into his hands the tool to carry on the work which, as it lies before him, beneath its veil of yet partly unworked material, still stretches into infinity. Where there is most labour there is not always most life, and by

doing less, provided only he has known how to do well, the artist may achieve more.

He will not, I hope, achieve complete consistency. In fact a part of the method of such a book as this, written over a long period of years, is to reveal a continual slight inconsistency. That is not an evil, but rather the avoidance of an evil. We cannot remain consistent with the world save by growing inconsistent with our own past selves. The man who consistently—as he fondly supposes “logically”—clings to an unchanging opinion is suspended from a hook which has ceased to exist. “I thought it was she, and she thought it was me, and when we come near it weren’t neither one of us”—that metaphysical statement holds, with a touch of exaggeration, a truth we must always bear in mind concerning the relation of subject and object. They can neither of them possess consistency; they have both changed before they come up with one another. Not that such inconsistency is a random flux or a shallow opportunism. We change, and the world changes, in accordance with the underlying organisation, and inconsistency, so conditioned by truth to the whole, becomes the higher consistency of life. I am therefore able to recognise and accept the fact that, again and again in this book, I have come up against what, superficially regarded, seemed to be the same fact, and each time have brought back a slightly different report, for it had changed and I had changed. The world is various, of infinite iridescent aspect, and until I attain to a correspondingly infinite variety of statement I remain far from anything that could in any sense be described as “truth.” We only see a great opal that never looks the same this time as when we looked last time. “He never painted to-day quite the same as he had painted yesterday,” Elie Faure says of Renoir, and it seems to me natural and right that it should have been so. I have never seen the same world twice. That, indeed, is but to repeat the Heraclitean saying—an imperfect saying, for it is only the half of the larger, more modern synthesis I have already quoted—that no man bathes twice in the same stream. Yet—and this opposing fact is fully as significant—we really have to accept a continuous stream as constituted in our minds; it flows in the same direction; it

coheres in what is more or less the same shape. Much the same may be said of the ever-changing bather whom the stream receives. So that, after all, there is not only variety, but also unity. The diversity of the Many is balanced by the stability of the One. That is why life must always be a dance, for that is what a dance is: perpetual slightly varied movements which are yet always held true to the shape of the whole.

We verge on philosophy. The whole of this book is on the threshold of philosophy. I hasten to add that it remains there. No dogmas are here set forth to claim any general validity. Not that even the technical philosopher always cares to make that claim. Mr. F. H. Bradley, one of the most influential of modern English philosophers, who wrote at the outset of his career, "On all questions, if you push me far enough, at present I end in doubts and perplexities," still says, forty years later, that if asked to define his principles rigidly, "I become puzzled." For even a cheese-mite, one imagines, could only with difficulty attain an adequate metaphysical conception of a cheese, and how much more difficult the task is for Man, whose everyday intelligence seems to move on a plane so much like that of a cheese-mite and yet has so vastly more complex a web of phenomena to synthetise.

It is clear how hesitant and tentative must be the attitude of one who, having found his life-work elsewhere than in the field of technical philosophy, may incidentally feel the need, even if only playfully, to speculate concerning his function and place in the universe. Such speculation is merely the instinctive impulse of the ordinary person to seek the wider implications bound up with his own little activities. It is philosophy only in the simple sense in which the Greeks understood philosophy, merely a philosophy of life, of one's own life, in the wide world. The technical philosopher does something quite different when he passes over the threshold and shuts himself up in his study—

"Veux-tu découvrir le monde,
Ferme tes yeux, Rosemonde"—

and emerges with great tomes that are hard to buy, hard to read, and, let us be sure, hard to write. But of Socrates, as of the

English philosopher Falstaff, we are not told that he wrote anything.

So that if it may seem to some that this book reveals the expansive influence of that great classico-mathematical Renaissance in which it is our high privilege to live, and that they find here “relativity” applied to life, I am not so sure. It sometimes seems to me that, in the first place, we, the common herd, mould the great movements of our age, and only in the second place do they mould us. I think it was so even in the great earlier classico-mathematical Renaissance. We associate it with Descartes. But Descartes could have effected nothing if an innumerable crowd in many fields had not created the atmosphere by which he was enabled to breathe the breath of life. We may here profitably bear in mind all that Spengler has shown concerning the unity of spirit underlying the most diverse elements in an age’s productivity. Roger Bacon had in him the genius to create such a Renaissance three centuries earlier; there was no atmosphere for him to live in and he was stifled. But Malherbe, who worshipped Number and Measure as devoutly as Descartes, was born half a century before him. That silent, colossal, ferocious Norman—vividly brought before us by Tallement des Réaux, to whom, rather than to Saint-Simon, we owe the real picture of seventeenth-century France—was possessed by the genius of destruction, for he had the natural instinct of the Viking, and he swept all the lovely Romantic spirit of old France so completely away that it has scarcely ever revived since until the days of Verlaine. But he had the Norman classico-mathematical architectonic spirit—he might have said, like Descartes, as truly as it ever can be said in literature, *Omnia apud me mathematica fiunt*—and he introduced into the world a new rule of Order. Given a Malherbe, a Descartes could hardly fail to follow, a French Academy must come into existence almost at the same time as the “Discours de la Méthode,” and Le Nôtre must already be drawing the geometrical designs of the gardens of Versailles. Descartes, it should be remembered, could not have worked without support; he was a man of timid and yielding character, though he had once been a soldier, not of the heroic temper of Roger Bacon. If Descartes could have been put back

into Roger Bacon's place, he would have thought many of Bacon's thoughts. But we should never have known it. He nervously burnt one of his works when he heard of Galileo's condemnation, and it was fortunate that the Church was slow to recognise how terrible a Bolshevik had entered the spiritual world with this man, and never realised that his books must be placed on the Index until he was already dead.

So it is to-day. We, too, witness a classico-mathematical Renaissance. It is bringing us a new vision of the universe, but also a new vision of human life. That is why it is necessary to insist upon life as a dance. This is not a mere metaphor. The dance is the rule of number and of rhythm and of measure and of order, of the controlling influence of form, of the subordination of the parts to the whole. That is what a dance is. And these same properties also make up the classic spirit, not only in life, but, still more clearly and definitely, in the universe itself. We are strictly correct when we regard not only life but the universe as a dance. For the universe is made up of a certain number of elements, less than a hundred, and the "periodic law" of these elements is metrical. They are ranged, that is to say, not haphazard, not in groups, but by number, and those of like quality appear at fixed and regular intervals. Thus our world is, even fundamentally, a dance, a single metrical stanza in a poem which will be for ever hidden from us, except in so far as the philosophers, who are to-day even here applying the methods of mathematics, may believe that they have imparted to it the character of objective knowledge.

I call this movement of to-day, as that of the seventeenth century, classico-mathematical. And I regard the dance (without prejudice to a distinction made later in this volume) as essentially its symbol. This is not to belittle the Romantic elements of the world, which are equally of its essence. But the vast exuberant energies and immeasurable possibilities of the first day may perhaps be best estimated when we have reached their final outcome on the sixth day of creation.

However that may be, the analogy of the two historical periods in question remains, and I believe that we may consider it holds good to the extent that the strictly mathematical elements of

the later period are not the earliest to appear, but that we are in the presence of a process that has been in subtle movement in many fields for half a century. If it is significant that Descartes appeared a few years after Malherbe, it is equally significant that Einstein was immediately preceded by the Russian ballet. We gaze in admiration at the artist who sits at the organ, but we have been blowing the bellows; and the great performer's music would have been inaudible had it not been for us.

This is the spirit in which I have written. We are all engaged—not merely one or two prominent persons here and there—in creating the spiritual world. I have never written but with the thought that the reader, even though he may not know it, is already on my side. Only so could I write with that sincerity and simplicity without which it would not seem to me worth while to write at all. That may be seen in the saying which I set on the forefront of my earliest book, "The New Spirit": he who carries farthest his most intimate feelings is simply the first in file of a great number of other men, and one becomes typical by being to the utmost degree one's self. That saying I chose with much deliberation and complete conviction because it went to the root of my book. On the surface it obviously referred to the great figures I was there concerned with, representing what I regarded—by no means in the poor sense of mere modernity—as the New Spirit in life. They had all gone to the depths of their own souls and thence brought to the surface and expressed—audaciously or beautifully, pungently or poignantly—intimate impulses and emotions which, shocking as they may have seemed at the time, are now seen to be those of an innumerable company of their fellow men and women. But it was also a book of personal affirmations. Beneath the obvious meaning of that motto on the title-page lay the more private meaning that I was myself setting forth secret impulses which might some day be found to express the emotions also of others. In the thirty-five years that have since passed, the saying has often recurred to my mind, and if I have sought in vain to make it mine I find no adequate justification for the work of my life.

And now, as I said at the outset, I am even prepared to think that that is the function of all books that are real books. There are

other classes of so-called books: there is the class of history books and the class of forensic books, that is to say, the books of facts and the books of argument. No one would wish to belittle either kind. But when we think of a book proper, in the sense that a Bible means a book, we mean more than this. We mean, that is to say, a revelation of something that had remained latent, unconscious, perhaps even more or less intentionally repressed, within the writer's own soul, which is, ultimately, the soul of mankind. These books are apt to repel; nothing, indeed, is so likely to shock us at first as the manifest revelation of ourselves. Therefore, such books may have to knock again and again at the closed door of our hearts. "Who is there?" we carelessly cry, and we cannot open the door; we bid the importunate stranger, whatever he may be, to go away; until, as in the apologue of the Persian mystic, at last we seem to hear the voice outside saying: "It is thyself."

H. E.

Chapter 1. Introduction

I

It has always been difficult for Man to realise that his life is all an art. It has been more difficult to conceive it so than to act it so. For that is always how he has more or less acted it. At the beginning, indeed, the primitive philosopher whose business it was to account for the origin of things usually came to the conclusion that the whole universe was a work of art, created by some Supreme Artist, in the way of artists, out of material that was practically nothing, even out of his own excretions, a method which, as children sometimes instinctively feel, is a kind of creative art. The most familiar to us of these primitive philosophical statements—and really a statement that is as typical as any—is that of the Hebrews in the first chapter of their Book of Genesis. We read there how the whole cosmos was fashioned out of nothing, in a measurable period of time by the art of one Jehovah, who proceeded methodically by first forming it in the rough, and gradually working in the details, the finest and most delicate last, just as a sculptor might fashion a statue. We may find many statements of the like kind even as far away as the Pacific.¹ And—also even at the same distance—the artist and the craftsman, who resembled the divine creator of the world by making the most beautiful and useful things for Mankind, himself also partook of the same divine nature. Thus, in Samoa, as also in Tonga, the carpenter, who built canoes, occupied a high and almost sacred position, approaching that of the priest. Even among ourselves, with our Roman traditions, the name Pontiff, or Bridge-Builder, remains that of an imposing and hieratic personage.

But that is only the primitive view of the world. When Man developed, when he became more scientific and more moralistic, however much his practice remained essentially that of the artist, his conception became much less so. He was learning to discover the mystery of measurement; he was approaching the beginnings of geometry and mathematics; he was at the same time becoming warlike. So he saw things in straight lines, more rigidly; he formulated laws and commandments. It was, Einstein assures us, the right way. But it was, at all events in the first place, most unfavourable to the view of life as an art. It remains so even to-day.

Yet there are always some who, deliberately or by instinct, have perceived the immense significance in life of the conception of art. That is especially so as regards the finest thinkers of the two countries which, so far as we may divine,—however difficult it may here be to speak positively and by demonstration,—have had the finest civilisations, China and Greece. The wisest and most recognisably greatest practical philosophers of both these lands have believed that the whole of life, even government, is an art of definitely like kind with the other arts, such as that of music or the dance. We may, for instance, recall to memory one of the most typical of Greeks. Of Protagoras, calumniated by Plato,—though, it is interesting to observe that Plato's own transcendental doctrine of Ideas has been regarded as an effort to escape from the solvent influence of Protagoras' logic,—it is possible for the modern historian of philosophy to say that “the greatness of this man can scarcely be measured.” It was with measurement that his most famous saying was concerned: “Man is the measure of all things, of those which exist and of those which have no existence.” It was by his insistence on Man as the active creator of life and knowledge, the artist of the world, moulding it to his own measure, that Protagoras is interesting to us to-day. He recognised that there are no absolute criteria by which to judge actions. He was the father of relativism and of phenomenalism, probably the initiator of the modern doctrine that the definitions of geometry are only approximately true abstractions from empirical experiences. We need not, and probably should not, suppose that in undermining dogmatism he

was setting up an individual subjectivism. It was the function of Man in the world, rather than of the individual, that he had in mind when he enunciated his great principle, and it was with the reduction of human activity and conduct to art that he was mainly concerned. His projects for the art of living began with speech, and he was a pioneer in the arts of language, the initiator of modern grammar. He wrote treatises on many special arts, as well as the general treatise "On the Art" among the pseudo-Hippocratic writings,—if we may with Gomperz attribute it to him,—which embodies the spirit of modern positive science.

Hippias, the philosopher of Elis, a contemporary of Protagoras, and like him commonly classed among the "Sophists," cultivated the largest ideal of life as an art which embraced all arts, common to all mankind as a fellowship of brothers, and at one with natural law which transcends the convention of human laws. Plato made fun of him, and that was not hard to do, for a philosopher who conceived the art of living as so large could not possibly at every point adequately play at it. But at this distance it is his ideal that mainly concerns us, and he really was highly accomplished, even a pioneer, in many of the multifarious activities he undertook. He was a remarkable mathematician; he was an astronomer and geometer; he was a copious poet in the most diverse modes, and, moreover, wrote on phonetics, rhythm, music, and mnemonics; he discussed the theories of sculpture and painting; he was both mythologist and ethnologist, as well as a student of chronology; he had mastered many of the artistic crafts. On one occasion, it is said, he appeared at the Olympic gathering in garments which, from the sandals on his feet to the girdle round his waist and the rings on his fingers, had been made by his own hands. Such a being of kaleidoscopic versatility, Gomperz remarks, we call contemptuously a Jack-of-all-trades. We believe in subordinating a man to his work. But other ages

have judged differently. The fellow citizens of Hippias thought him worthy to be their ambassador to the Peloponnesus. In another age of immense human activity, the Renaissance, the vast-ranging energies of Leo Alberti were honoured, and in yet a later like age, Diderot—Pantophile as Voltaire called him—displayed a like fiery energy of wide-ranging interests, although it was no longer possible to attain the same level of wide-ranging accomplishment. Of course the work of Hippias was of unequal value, but some of it was of firm quality and he shrank from no labour. He seems to have possessed a gracious modesty, quite unlike the conceited pomposity Plato was pleased to attribute to him. He attached more importance than was common among the Greeks to devotion to truth, and he was cosmopolitan in spirit. He was famous for his distinction between Convention and Nature, and Plato put into his mouth the words: “All of you who are here present I reckon to be kinsmen and friends and fellow citizens, and by nature, not by law; for by nature like is akin to like, whereas law is the tyrant of mankind, and often compels us to do many things that are against nature.” Hippias was in the line of those whose supreme ideal is totality of existence. Ulysses, as Benn remarks, was in Greek myth the representative of the ideal, and its supreme representative in real life has in modern times been Goethe.²

II

But, in actual fact, is life essentially an art? Let us look at the matter more closely, and see what life is like, as people have lived it. This is the more necessary to do since, to-day at all events, there are simple-minded people—well-meaning honest people whom we should not ignore—who pooh-pooh such an idea. They point to the eccentric individuals in our Western civilisation who make a little idol they call “Art,” and fall down and worship it, sing incomprehensible chants in its honour, and spend most of their time in pouring contempt on the people who

refuse to recognise that this worship of “Art” is the one thing needed for what they may or may not call the “moral uplift” of the age they live in. We must avoid the error of the good simple-minded folk in whose eyes these “Arty” people loom so large. They are not large, they are merely the morbid symptoms of a social disease; they are the fantastic reaction of a society which as a whole has ceased to move along the true course of any real and living art. For that has nothing to do with the eccentricities of a small religious sect worshipping in a Little Bethel; it is the large movement of the common life of a community, indeed simply the outward and visible form of that life.

Thus the whole conception of art has been so narrowed and so debased among us that, on the one hand, the use of the word in its large and natural sense seems either unintelligible or eccentric, while, on the other hand, even if accepted, it still remains so unfamiliar that its immense significance for our whole vision of life in the world is scarcely at first seen. This is not altogether due to our natural obtuseness, or to the absence of a due elimination of subnormal stocks among us, however much we may be pleased to attribute to that dysgenic factor. It seems largely inevitable. That is to say that, so far as we in our modern civilisation are concerned, it is the outcome of the social process of two thousand years, the result of the breakup of the classic tradition of thought into various parts which under post-classic influences have been pursued separately.³ Religion or the desire for the salvation of our souls, “Art” or the desire for beautification, Science or the search for the reasons of things—these conations of the mind, which are really three aspects of the same profound impulse, have been allowed to furrow each its own narrow separate channel, in alienation from the others, and so they have all been impeded in their greater function of fertilising life.

It is interesting to observe, I may note in passing, how totally new an aspect a phenomenon may take on when transformed from some other channel into that of art. We may take, for instance, that remarkable phenomenon called Napoleon, as impressive an individualistic manifestation as we could well find in human history during recent centuries, and consider two contemporary, almost simultaneous, estimates of it. A distinguished English writer, Mr. H. G. Wells, in a notable and even famous book, his "Outline of History," sets down a judgment of Napoleon throughout a whole chapter. Now Mr. Wells moves in the ethico-religious channel. He wakes up every morning, it is said, with a rule for the guidance of life; some of his critics say that it is every morning a new rule, and others that the rule is neither ethical nor religious; but we are here concerned only with the channel and not with the direction of the stream. In the "Outline" Mr. Wells pronounces his ethico-religious anathema of Napoleon, "this dark little archaic personage, hard, compact, capable, unscrupulous, imitative, and neatly vulgar." The "archaic"—the old-fashioned, outworn—element attributed to Napoleon, is accentuated again later, for Mr. Wells has an extremely low opinion (hardly justifiable, one may remark in passing) of primitive man. Napoleon was "a reminder of ancient evils, a thing like the bacterium of some pestilence"; "the figure he makes in history is one of almost incredible self-conceit, of vanity, greed, and cunning, of callous contempt and disregard of all who trusted him." There is no figure, Mr. Wells asserts, so completely antithetical to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. He was "a scoundrel, bright and complete."

There is no occasion to question this condemnation when we place ourselves in the channel along which Mr. Wells moves; it is probably inevitable; we may even accept it heartily. Yet, however right along that line, that is not the only line in which we may move. Moreover—and this is the point which concerns us—it is possible to enter a sphere in which no such merely negative, condemnatory, and dissatisfying a conclusion need be reached. For obviously it is dissatisfying. It is not finally acceptable that so supreme a protagonist of humanity, acclaimed by millions, of whom many gladly died for him, and still

occupying so large and glorious a place in the human imagination, should be dismissed in the end as merely an unmitigated scoundrel. For so to condemn him is to condemn Man who made him what he was. He must have answered some lyric cry in the human heart. That other sphere in which Napoleon wears a different aspect is the sphere of art in the larger and fundamental sense. Élie Faure, a French critic, an excellent historian of art in the ordinary sense, is able also to grasp art in the larger sense because he is not only a man of letters but of science, a man with medical training and experience, who has lived in the open world, not, as the critic of literature and art so often appears to be, a man living in a damp cellar. Just after Wells issued his "Outline," Élie Faure, who probably knew nothing about it since he reads no English, published a book on Napoleon which some may consider the most remarkable book on that subject they have ever come across. For to Faure Napoleon is a great lyric artist.

It is hard not to believe that Faure had Wells's chapter on Napoleon open before him, he speaks so much to the point. He entitled the first chapter of his "Napoléon" "Jesus and He," and at once pierces to what Wells, too, had perceived to be the core of the matter in hand: "From the point of view of morality he is not to be defended and is even incomprehensible. In fact he violates law, he kills, he sows vengeance and death. But also he dictates law, he tracks and crushes crime, he establishes order everywhere. He is an assassin. He is also a judge. In the ranks he would deserve the rope. At the summit he is pure, distributing recompense and punishment with a firm hand. He is a monster with two faces, like all of us perhaps, in any case like God, for those who have praised Napoleon and those who have blamed him have alike not understood that the Devil is the other face of God." From the moral point of view, Faure says (just as Wells had said), Napoleon is Antichrist. But from this standpoint of art, all grows clear. He is a poet of action, as Jesus was, and like him he stands apart. These two, and these two alone among the world's supremely great men of whom we have any definite knowledge, "acted out their dream instead of dreaming their action." It is possible that Napoleon himself was able to estimate the moral

value of that acted dream. As he once stood before the grave of Rousseau, he observed: "It would have been better for the repose of France if that man and I had never existed." Yet we cannot be sure. "Is not repose the death of the world?" asks Faure. "Had not Rousseau and Napoleon precisely the mission of troubling that repose? In another of the profound and almost impersonal sayings that sometimes fell from his lips, Napoleon observed with a still deeper intuition of his own function in the world: "I love power. But it is as an artist that I love it. I love it as a musician loves his violin, to draw out of it sounds and chords and harmonies. I love it as an artist." As an artist! These words were the inspiration of this finely illuminating study of Napoleon, which, while free from all desire to defend or admire, yet seems to explain Napoleon, in the larger sense to justify his right to a place in the human story, so imparting a final satisfaction which Wells, we feel, could he have escaped from the bonds of the narrow conception of life that bound him, had in him the spirit and the intelligence also to bestow upon us.

But it is time to turn from this aside. It is always possible to dispute about individuals, even when so happy an illustration chances to come before us. We are not here concerned with exceptional persons, but with the interpretation of general and normal human civilisations.

III

I take, almost at random, the example of a primitive people. There are many others that would do as well or better. But this happens to come to hand, and it has the advantage not only of being a primitive people, but one living on an island, so possessing until lately its own little-impaired indigenous culture, as far as possible remote in space from our own; the record also has been made, as carefully and as impartially as one can well expect, by a missionary's wife who speaks from a knowledge covering over twenty years.⁴ It is almost needless to add that she is as little concerned with any theory of the art of life as the people she is describing.

The Loyalty Islands lie to the east of New Caledonia, and have belonged to France for more than half a century. They are thus situated in much the same latitude as Egypt is in the Northern hemisphere, but with a climate tempered by the ocean. It is with the Island of Lifu that we are mainly concerned. There are no streams or mountains in this island, though a ridge of high rocks with large and beautiful caves contains stalactites and stalagmites and deep pools of fresh water; these pools, before the coming of the Christians, were the abode of the spirits of the departed, and therefore greatly revered. A dying man would say to his friends: "I will meet you all again in the caves where the stalactites are."

The Loyalty Islanders, who are of average European stature, are a handsome race, except for their thick lips and dilated nostrils, which, however, are much less pronounced than among African negroes. They have soft large brown eyes, wavy black hair, white teeth, and rich brown skin of varying depth. Each tribe has its own well-defined territory and its own chief. Although possessing high moral qualities, they are a laughter-loving people, and neither their climate nor their mode of life demands prolonged hard labour, but they can work as well as the average Briton, if need be, for several consecutive days, and, when the need is over, lounge or ramble, sleep or talk. The basis of their culture—and that is doubtless the significant fact for us—is artistic. Every one learned music, dancing, and song. Therefore it is natural for them to regard rhythm and grace in all the actions of life, and almost a matter of instinct to cultivate beauty in all social relationships. Men and boys spent much time in tattooing and polishing their brown skins, in dyeing and dressing their long wavy hair (golden locks, as much admired as they always have been in Europe, being obtained by the use of lime), and in anointing their bodies. These occupations were, of course, confined to the men, for man is naturally the ornamental sex and woman the useful sex. The women gave no attention to their hair, except to keep it short. It was the men also who used oils and perfumes, not the women, who, however, wore bracelets above the elbow and beautiful long strings of jade beads. No clothing is worn until the age of twenty-five or thirty, and then

all dress alike, except that chiefs fasten the girdle differently and wear more elaborate ornaments. These people have sweet and musical voices and they cultivate them. They are good at learning languages and they are great orators. The Lifuan language is soft and liquid, one word running into another pleasantly to the ear, and it is so expressive that one may sometimes understand the meaning by the sound. In one of these islands, Uvea, so great is the eloquence of the people that they employ oratory to catch fish, whom indeed they regard in their legends as half human, and it is believed that a shoal of fish, when thus politely plied with compliments from a canoe, will eventually, and quite spontaneously, beach themselves spellbound.

For a primitive people the art of life is necessarily of large part concerned with eating. It is recognised that no one can go hungry when his neighbour has food, so no one was called upon to make any great demonstration of gratitude on receiving a gift. Help rendered to another was help to one's self, if it contributed to the common weal, and what I do for you to-day you will do for me to-morrow. There was implicit trust, and goods were left about without fear of theft, which was rare and punishable by death. It was not theft, however, if, when the owner was looking, one took an article one wanted. To tell a lie, also, with intent to deceive, was a serious offence, though to tell a lie when one was afraid to speak the truth was excusable. The Lifuans are fond of food, but much etiquette is practised in eating. The food must be conveyed to the mouth gracefully, daintily, leisurely. Every one helped himself to the food immediately in front of him, without hurry, without reaching out for dainty morsels (which were often offered to women), for every one looked after his neighbour, and every one naturally felt that he was his brother's keeper. So it was usual to invite passers-by cordially to share in the repast. "In the matter of food and eating," Mrs. Hadfield adds, "they might put many of our countrymen to shame." Not only must one never eat quickly, or notice dainties that are not near one, but it would be indelicate to eat in the presence of people who are not themselves eating. One must always share, however small one's portion, and one

must do so pleasantly; one must accept also what is offered, but slowly, reluctantly; having accepted it, you may, if you like, openly pass it on to some one else. In old days the Lifuans were, occasionally, cannibals, not, it would seem, either from necessity or any ritual reason, but because, like some peoples elsewhere, they liked it, having, indeed, at times, a kind of craving for animal food. If a man had twenty or thirty wives and a large family, it would be quite correct if, now and then, he cooked one of his own children, although presumably he might prefer that some one else's child was chosen. The child would be cooked whole, wrapped in banana or coconut leaves. The social inconveniences of this practice have now been recognised. But they still feel the utmost respect and reverence for the dead and fail to find anything offensive or repulsive in a corpse. "Why should there be, seeing it was once our food?" Nor have they any fear of death. To vermin they seem to have little objection, but otherwise they have a strong love of cleanliness. The idea of using manure in agricultural operations seems to them disgusting, and they never do use it. "The sea was the public playground." Mothers take their little ones for sea-baths long before they can walk, and small children learn to swim as they learn to walk, without teaching. With their reverence for death is associated a reverence for old age. "Old age is a term of respect, and every one is pleased to be taken for older than he is since old age is honoured." Still, regard for others was general—not confined to the aged. In the church nowadays the lepers are seated on a separate bench, and when the bench is occupied by a leper healthy women will sometimes insist on sitting with him; they could not bear to see the old man sitting alone as though he had no friends. There was much demonstration on meeting friends after absence. A Lifuan always said "Olea" ("Thank you") for any good news, though not affecting him personally, as though it were a gift, for he was glad to be able to rejoice with another. Being divided into small tribes, each with its own autocratic chief, war was sometimes inevitable. It was attended by much etiquette, which was always strictly observed. The Lifuans were not acquainted with the civilised custom of making rules for warfare and breaking them when war actually broke

out. Several days' notice must be given before hostilities were commenced. Women and children, in contrast to the practice of civilised warfare, were never molested. As soon as half a dozen fighters were put out of action on one side, the chief of that side would give the command to cease fighting and the war was over. An indemnity was then paid by the conquerors to the vanquished, and not, as among civilised peoples, by the vanquished to the conquerors. It was felt to be the conquered rather than the conqueror who needed consolation, and it also seemed desirable to show that no feeling of animosity was left behind. This was not only a delicate mark of consideration to the vanquished, but also very good policy, as, by neglecting it, some Europeans may have had cause to learn. This whole Lifuan art of living has, however, been undermined by the arrival of Christianity with its usual accompaniments. The Lifuans are substituting European vices for their own virtues. Their simplicity and confidence are passing away, though, even yet, Mrs. Hadfield says, they are conspicuous for their honesty, truthfulness, good-humour, kindness, and politeness, remaining a manly and intelligent people.

IV

The Lifuans furnish an illustration which seems decisive. But they are savages, and on that account their example may be invalidated. It is well to take another illustration from a people whose high and long-continued civilisation is now undisputed. The civilisation of China is ancient: that has long been a familiar fact. But for more than a thousand years it was merely a legend to Western Europeans; none had ever reached China, or, if they had, they had never returned to tell the tale; there were too many fierce and jealous barbarians between the East and the West. It was not until the end of the thirteenth century, in the pages of Marco Polo, the Venetian Columbus of the East,—for it was an Italian who discovered the Old World as well as the New,—that China at last took definite shape alike as a concrete fact and a marvellous dream. Later, Italian and Portuguese travellers described it, and it is interesting to note what they had to say. Thus Perera in the sixteenth century, in a narrative which Willes translated for Hakluyt's "Voyages," presents a detailed

picture of Chinese life with an admiration all the more impressive since we cannot help feeling how alien that civilisation was to the Catholic traveller and how many troubles he had himself to encounter. He is astonished, not only by the splendour of the lives of the Chinese on the material side, alike in large things and in small, but by their fine manners in all the ordinary course of life, the courtesy in which they seemed to him to exceed all other nations, and in the fair dealing which far surpassed that of all other Gentiles and Moors, while in the exercise of justice he found them superior even to many Christians, for they do justice to unknown strangers, which in Christendom is rare; moreover, there were hospitals in every city and no beggars were ever to be seen. It was a vision of splendour and delicacy and humanity, which he might have seen, here and there, in the courts of princes in Europe, but nowhere in the West on so vast a scale as in China.

The picture which Marco Polo, the first European to reach China (at all events in what we may call modern times), presented in the thirteenth century was yet more impressive, and that need not surprise us, for when he saw China it was still in its great Augustan age of the Sung Dynasty. He represents the city of Hang-Chau as the most beautiful and sumptuous in the world, and we must remember that he himself belonged to Venice, soon to be known as the most beautiful and sumptuous city of Europe, and had acquired no small knowledge of the world. As he describes its life, so exquisite and refined in its civilisation, so humane, so peaceful, so joyous, so well ordered, so happily shared by the whole population, we realise that here had been reached the highest point of urban civilisation to which Man has ever attained. Marco Polo can think of no word to apply to it—and that again and again—but Paradise.

The China of to-day seems less strange and astonishing to the Westerner. It may even seem akin to him—partly through its decline, partly through his own progress in civilisation—by virtue of its direct and practical character. That is the conclusion of a sensitive and thoughtful traveller in India and

Japan and China, G. Lowes Dickinson. He is impressed by the friendliness, the profound humanity, the gaiety, of the Chinese, by the unequalled self-respect, independence, and courtesy of the common people. "The fundamental attitude of the Chinese towards life is, and has always been, that of the most modern West, nearer to us now than to our mediæval ancestors, infinitely nearer to us than India."⁵

So far it may seem scarcely as artists that these travellers regard the Chinese. They insist on their cheerful, practical, social, good-mannered, tolerant, peaceable, humane way of regarding life, on the remarkably educable spirit in which they are willing, and easily able, to change even ancient and deep-rooted habits when it seems convenient and beneficial to do so; they are willing to take the world lightly, and seem devoid of those obstinate conservative instincts by which we are guided in Europe. The "Resident in Peking" says they are the least romantic of peoples. He says it with a *nuance* of dispraise, but Lowes Dickinson says precisely the same thing about Chinese poetry, and with no such *nuance*: "It is of all poetry I know the most human and the least symbolic or romantic. It contemplates life just as it presents itself, without any veil of ideas, any rhetoric or sentiment; it simply clears away the obstruction which habit has built up between us and the beauty of things and leaves that, showing in its own nature." Every one who has learnt to enjoy Chinese poetry will appreciate the delicate precision of this comment. The quality of their poetry seems to fall into line with the simple, direct, childlike quality which all observers note in the Chinese themselves. The unsympathetic "Resident in Peking" describes the well-known etiquette of politeness in China: "A Chinaman will inquire of what noble country you are. You return the question, and he will say his lowly province is so-and-so. He will invite you to do him the honour of directing your jewelled feet to his degraded house. You reply that you, a discredited worm, will crawl into his magnificent palace." Life becomes all play. Ceremony—the Chinese are unequalled for ceremony, and a Government Department, the Board of Rites and Ceremonies,

exists to administer it—is nothing but more or less crystallised play. Not only is ceremony here “almost an instinct,” but, it has been said, “A Chinese thinks in theatrical terms.” We are coming near to the sphere of art.

The quality of play in the Chinese character and Chinese civilisation has impressed alike them who have seen China from afar and by actual contact. It used to be said that the Chinese had invented gunpowder long before Europeans and done nothing with it but make fireworks. That seemed to the whole Western world a terrible blindness to the valuable uses of gunpowder, and it is only of late years that a European commentator has ventured to remark that “the proper use of gunpowder is obviously to make fireworks, which may be very beautiful things, not to kill men.” Certainly the Chinese, at all events, appreciate to the full this proper use of gunpowder. “One of the most obvious characteristics of the Chinese is their love of fireworks,” we are told. The gravest people and the most intellectual occupy themselves with fireworks, and if the works of Bergson, in which pyrotechnical allusions are so frequent, are ever translated into Chinese, one can well believe that China will produce enthusiastic Bergsonians. All toys are popular; everybody, it is said, buys toys of one sort or another: paper windmills, rattles, Chinese lanterns, and of course kites, which have an almost sacred significance. They delight, also, in more complicated games of skill, including an elaborate form of chess, far more difficult than ours. It is unnecessary to add that to philosophy, a higher and more refined form of play, the Chinese are peculiarly addicted, and philosophic discussion is naturally woven in with an “art of exquisite enjoyment”—carried probably to greater perfection than anywhere else in the world. Bertrand Russell, who makes this remark, in the suggestive comments on his own visit to China, observes how this simple, child-like, yet profound attitude towards life results in a liberation of the impulses to play and enjoyment which “makes Chinese life unbelievably restful and delightful after the solemn cruelties of the West.” We are reminded of Gourmont’s remark that “pleasure is a human creation, a delicate art, to which, as for music or painting, only a few are apt.”

The social polity which brings together the people who thus view life is at once singular and appropriate. I well remember how in youth a new volume of the Sacred Books of the East Series, a part of the Confucian Lî-kî, came into my hands and how delighted I was to learn that in China life was regulated by music and ceremony. That was the beginning of an interest in China that has not ceased to grow, though now, when it has become a sort of fashion to exalt the spiritual qualities of the Chinese above those of other peoples, one may well feel disinclined to admit any interest in China. But the conception itself, since it seems to have had its beginning at least a thousand years before Christ, may properly be considered independently of our Western fashions. It is Propriety—the whole ceremony of life—in which all harmonious intercourse subsists; it is “the channel by which we apprehend the ways of Heaven,” in no supernatural sense, for it is on the earth and not in the skies that the Confucian Heaven lies concealed. But if human feelings, the instincts—for in this matter the ancient Chinese were at one with our modern psychologists,—are the field that has to be cultivated, and it is ceremony that ploughs it, and the seeds of right action that are to be planted on it, and discipline that is to weed it, and love that is to gather in the fruits, it is in music, and the joy and peace that accompany music, that it all ends. Indeed, it is also in music that it all begins. For the sphere in which ceremonies act is Man’s external life; his internal life is the sphere of music. It is music that moulds the manners and customs that are comprised under ceremony, for Confucius held that there can be music without sound where “virtue is deep and silent”; and we are reminded of the “Crescendo of Silences” on the Chinese pavilion in Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s story, “Le Secret de l’ancienne Musique.” It is music that regulates the heart and mind and with that development brings joy, and joy brings repose. And so “Man became Heaven.” “Let ceremonies and music have their course until the earth is filled with them!”

It is sometimes said that among Chinese moralists and philosophers Lao-tze, the deepest of them all, alone stands aside from the chorus in praise of music and ceremony. When once Confucius came to consult Lao-tze concerning the rules of

propriety, and reverence for the teaching of the sages of antiquity, we are told, Lao-tze replied: "The men of whom you speak, sir, have, if you please, together with their bones, mouldered." Confucius went away, puzzled if not dissatisfied. He was willing to work not only from within outwards, but from without inwards, because he allowed so large a place for social solidity, for traditionalism, for paternalism, though he recognised that ceremony is subordinate in the scheme of life, as colour is in a painting, the picture being the real thing. Lao-tze was an individualist and a mystic. He was little concerned with moralities in the ordinary sense. He recognised no action but from within outwards. But though Confucius could scarcely have altogether grasped his conception, he was quite able to grasp that of Confucius, and his indifference to tradition, to rule and propriety was simply an insistence on essential reality, on "music." "Ceremonies," he said, "are the outward expression of inward feeling." He was no more opposed to the fundamental Chinese conception than George Fox was opposed to Christianity in refusing to observe the mere forms and ceremonies of the Church. A sound Confucianism is the outward manifestation of Taoism (as Lao-tze himself taught it), just as a sound socialism is the outward manifestation of a genuine individualism. It has been well said that Chinese socialistic solidarity rests on an individualistic basis, it is not a bureaucratic State socialism; it works from within outward. (One of the first European visitors to China remarked that there a street was like a home.) This is well shown by so great and typical a Chinese philosopher as Mehti, who lived shortly after Confucius, in the fifth century B.C. He taught universal love, with universal equality, and for him to love meant to act. He admitted an element of self-interest as a motive for such an attitude. He desired to universalise mutual self-help. Following Confucius, but yet several centuries before Jesus, he declared that a man should love his neighbour, his fellow man, as himself. "When he sees his fellow hungry, he feeds him; when he sees him cold, he clothes him; ill, he nurses him; dead, he buries him." This, he said, was by no means opposed to filial piety; for if one cares for the parents of others, they in turn will care for his. But, it was brought against him, the power of

egoism? The Master agreed. Yet, he said, Man accepts more difficult things. He can renounce joy, life itself, for even absurd and ridiculous ends. A single generation, he added, such is the power of imitation, might suffice to change a people's customs. But Meh-ti remained placid. He remarked that the great ones of the earth were against human solidarity and equality; he left it at that. He took no refuge in mysticism. Practical social action was the sole end he had in view, and we have to remember that his ideals are largely embodied in Chinese institutions.

We may understand now how it is that in China, and in China alone among the great surviving civilisations, we find that art animates the whole of life, even its morality. "This universal presence of art," remarks an acute yet discriminating observer, Émile Hovelague, whom I have already quoted, "manifested in the smallest utensil, the humblest stalls, the notices on the shops, the handwriting, the rhythm of movement, always regular and measured, as though to the tune of unheard music, announces a civilisation which is complete in itself, elaborated in the smallest detail, penetrated by one spirit, which no interruption ever breaks, a harmony which becomes at length a hallucinatory and overwhelming obsession." Or, as another writer has summed up the Chinese attitude: "For them the art of life is one, as this world and the other are one. Their aim is to make the Kingdom of Heaven here and now."

It is obvious that a natural temperament in which the art-impulse is so all-embracing, and the æsthetic sensibility so acute, might well have been of a perilous instability. We could scarcely have been surprised if, like that surpassing episode in Egyptian history of which Akhenaten was the leader and Tell-el-Amarna the tomb, it had only endured for a moment. Yet Chinese civilisation, which has throughout shown the dominating power of this sensitive temperament, has lasted longer than any other. The reason is that the very excesses of their temperament forced the Chinese to fortify themselves against its perils. The Great Wall, built more than two thousand years ago, and still to-day

image

not

available

end, by the irony of fate, morality, grown insolent, sought to crush its own parent, and for a time succeeded only too well. Four centuries ago dancing was attacked by that spirit, in England called Puritanism, which was then spread over the greater part of Europe, just as active in Bohemia as in England, and which has, indeed, been described as a general onset of developing Urbanism against the old Ruralism. It made no distinction between good and bad, nor paused to consider what would come when dancing went. So it was that, as Remy de Gourmont remarks, the drinking-shop conquered the dance, and alcohol replaced the violin.

But when we look at the function of dancing in life from a higher and wider standpoint, this episode in its history ceases to occupy so large a place. The conquest over dancing has never proved in the end a matter for rejoicing, even to morality, while an art which has been so intimately mixed with all the finest and deepest springs of life has always asserted itself afresh. For dancing is the loftiest, the most moving, the most beautiful of the arts, because it is no mere translation or abstraction from life; it is life itself. It is the only art, as Rahel Varnhagen said, of which we ourselves are the stuff. Even if we are not ourselves dancers, but merely the spectators of the dance, we are still—according to that Lippsian doctrine of *Einfühlung* or “empathy” by Groos termed “the play of inner imitation”—which here, at all events, we may accept as true—feeling ourselves in the dancer who is manifesting and expressing the latent impulses of our own being.

It thus comes about that, beyond its manifold practical significance, dancing has always been felt to possess also a symbolic significance. Marcus Aurelius was accustomed to regard the art of life as like the dancer’s art, though that Imperial Stoic could not resist adding that in some respects it was more like the wrestler’s art. “I doubt not yet to make a figure in the great Dance of Life that shall amuse the spectators in the sky,” said, long after, Blake, in the same strenuous spirit. In our own time, Nietzsche, from first to last, showed himself possessed by the conception of the art of life as a dance, in which the dancer achieves the rhythmic freedom and harmony of his soul beneath

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