

LAY READING PHILOSOPHY

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THERE seems no good reason why the term "lay reader" should be confined to the ecclesiastical usage which has traditionally monopolized it. All unprofessional dealings are lay. A business man deep in Kant's *Critique*—is he not a lay reader? Or a society woman wrestling with the *Origin of Species*? And, just as lay readers in the Church have a recognized dignity of their own, so do lay readers of science and philosophy form a reputable class.

At once it should be stated that humility is the first of their qualifications. If they are intelligent and sincere (and otherwise how should they care to exert themselves to read philosophy at all?), they know their places; and would no more think of presuming to speak *ex cathedra* concerning the great subjects they have in hand than the devout churchman, reading Matins in the absence of his rector, would think of celebrating Mass. "It seems to me," "As I understand it," "Speaking frankly as an amateur,"—these modest phrases must preface all philosophical remarks on the part of the untrained.

Yet, deprecation being assumed as a natural attitude of mind, the class has its dignity, as I have stated; and there is a good deal that it can find to say in defence of itself.

Perhaps the very fact that it has to defend itself at all may seem an argument in its disfavor; especially when it is seen to be open to criticism on both sides. The philosophers say to it, "Run along, child"; and the rest of the world murmurs dubiously, "What is the use?"

But these are great days of judgment for almost all of us, days of being called to account for our interests. We have grown used to challenge. People no longer permit themselves to drift along pleasantly, doing those things which they just happen to want to do and because they want to do them. They pull themselves up short: "What is the use of this occupation? How am I going to justify this enthusiasm?" Our faith without works is quite dead.

It is curious how a standard, a mood, will impose itself on a whole generation, obliging all the sheep in a flock to nibble with their noses turned in the same direction. To save his life, the most western-hearted creature can hardly get his head around to look at the sunset if all his fellows are pointing due east. So that what most of our comrades agree in exacting of themselves and one another and us, we are pretty sure to feel the necessity of rendering. Efficiency is our watchword now, practical application our uniform direction. A grudging word, rather, efficiency! Some of us lend wistful ears to the doctrines of the Reincarnationists, and hope that we may be lucky enough to revisit the earth when some more inspiring slogan is in general use. But, meantime, living right here and now, we have no manly choice but to take up the cry. When our neighbors call us to account for our interests and occupations, we do not resent the interference, but soberly set ourselves to meet the issue.

The books on most library tables explain themselves obviously enough, and fall into line with the general practical tendency. Sociological investigations, arguments for or against suffrage, theories of reform in Church and State and school and prison and the family, socialistic treatises, eugenic admonitions—these volumes have no ambiguity of immediate application. Nor have the novels. When they are not simply treatises themselves, sugar-coated, they exist frankly to serve the purpose of occasional relaxation which even the strenuous modern world must still permit itself lest it go wholly mad. But now and then, rarely, the inquiring hand picks up a book of metaphysical speculation, and then of course the challenge is inevitable: "Ah! I see. Um! Well, tell me, really, what do you get from a book like this?"

The poor lay reader! If the fatal question is put in that straight, uncompromising form, and if he answers it honestly, he is apt to disgrace himself at the outset by sitting down and taking his head in his hands and saying, "Good heavens! I don't know." Whereat, of course, his inquisitor triumphs with exceeding ease and scorn. Yet the disgrace is not real, any more than the scorn is justified.

Lay reading philosophy is an extremely perilous and baffling

occupation. It may be likened to the crossing of a strange and stormy sea by an adventurous voyager who has made his own boat. Lured by the immensity before him, he has knocked together a raft from a few haphazard boards which he has found lying on his native shore, and he has put forth with temerity. Of course the raft goes to pieces at once—the unfaltering waves see to that—and he has to swim for his life. He would like to go slowly, to pause and consider; but he does not dare. If he stood still in this welter of unfamiliar phrases, they would close over his head and that would be the end of him. He must push on, breasting, cleaving the waves, keeping his eye fixed on the land ahead of him. Then, when he scrambles up on a rock and sits down to catch his breath and look back, somebody calls to him, “Hi! Did you get anything out of that?” “At least, you can see that I am dripping wet,” he might do well to reply.

Dripping wet. It is a sort of baptism which he has received from his experiment with philosophy. His soul has been immersed, washed, purified in the waters of the infinite. He cannot fathom them, cannot tell whence they come or whither they go; but their vastness and vigor have made him a new man. Surely that is “getting something” out of the experience.

Nay, more, as he sits on his rock and ponders, he perceives that he has learned some definitely valuable things: the futility of his raft, the possibilities of his own arms and legs, the buoyancy of the ocean of thought. Before he knows it, he goes to work on a new raft, bigger and better than the old one, and again ventures forth. The allurements of the metaphysical ocean, once experienced, can henceforth never be dismissed.

It is in the face of this gasping, drowning method of reading their careful pages that the disgusted criticism of the philosophers themselves must be most poignantly felt and expressed. They elaborated their thoughts to be gravely and solidly dealt with, not to be dashed through recklessly. Such dashing amounts to skimming. And think of the insult of skimming a book of philosophy! But it behooves the grave masters to be patient and tolerant awhile, considering the situation. Skimming is a perfectly legitimate device by which—and sometimes by which alone—the philosophical lay reader approaches knowledge. He

rushes through his book swiftly, then runs and stands off at a distance and studies the general effect. In this way, he apprehends largely and vaguely "what it is all about." By and by, not too soon, he goes back and steers his course more soberly; goes back again and again, makes no end of going back. But if his first headlong career has not sketched the cloudy image for him, all his later investigations must be in vain. There is nothing like that first headlong career. It grasps at infinity.

Not too soon must he go back, we said; and indeed it is a dire mistake to turn straight from the last chapter of a book of philosophy back to the first. A long pause is needed, a pause which is just as much a part of the book's "message" as any separate chapter. In it, the image shapes itself, the significance gathers weight, the vast abstract possibility relates itself to the affairs and demands of everyday life and begins to take on concreteness. The author, the reader and heaven conspire together to write that pause as an indispensable epilogue.

But neither must he wait too long. For he has by no means as yet laid hold on the truth that allures him; he has only tangled his fingers in the fringe of its garment. If he does not get up and follow soon, the gracious presence will imperceptibly free itself and be gone from him. This must never be allowed. There comes a point beyond which the lay reader's failure to stand and deliver himself of his faith is a real disgrace. The peril is insidious. No one is more surprised than the reader himself when, asked to state the creed which he openly professes, he remains with his lips apart, stupefied and silent. He has read a great book on the subject, has thrilled through and through with conviction, has fallen prostrate and vowed himself to the cause; he really is a convert, but, being questioned, he finds himself unable to formulate one explicit statement. This disconcerting inefficacy comes from remaining content with the first cloudy vision, and neglecting to follow it up and make it his own. Lay readers have to be very severe with themselves in this matter. It is so easy—comparatively—to adumbrate things in a general way, so hard to cast a net of thought about them and hold them fast. But only a net of thought will persuade any bird of heaven to fold its wings and abide with us. Glimpsing

the significance of a system of philosophy is a glorious adventure; really understanding it is downright hard work.

Not yet, however, have we answered the question which started our whole discussion: What does it all amount to? What good does it do the average person to read philosophy? By "good" it is here understood that the questioner means some definite, practical result in the daily life of the reader, some assistance in the solving of his problems, some inspiring instruction as to his treatment of his fellow-men. The question of our generation is: How does it apply?

Well, in the first place, philosophy gives a man control over his life by the somewhat paradoxical method of setting him free from it. This is an age-old device. The psalmist knew all about it when he sang: "I will run the way of thy commandments when thou hast set me free."

It is partly a matter of perspective, partly of relation, direction, and unity. The lover of philosophy wonders how people can understand their lives at all, can even see them, when they remain so perpetually embroiled in them. How can they tell which way they are going, how can they know which step to take next, unless they frequently stand off and view themselves in relation to others and to the whole? Books on sociology are indispensable as manuals; but they complicate the vision, carry one deeper and deeper among the trees of the human forest. Books of philosophy bear one away, out of the forest, among the hills, under the open sky, where one may look at forest and mountain and sky all together, and perhaps form a fresh judgment of their relative values.

They ease the personal ache and throb too. Perhaps that is what the psalmist meant when he suggested his yearning bargain. He was unhappy. The pains of the hell of his immediate circumstances had got hold upon him. He was riddled with misery—for himself or his friend or his country,—he was bound hand and foot, tied down to an inexorable engagement with suffering; it was simply beyond his power to get up and run the way of any commandment whatever.

Now the altruistic standards of the present day are so sturdy and noble that they will not allow us to defend philosophy on

the ground that it affords a refuge from pain for the individual soul. But if it saves that soul from impotence, and sets him free to master his pain and turn it into service—surely, it proves itself.

One great trouble with us nowadays is that we depend so exclusively on our own powers. We do not mean to be arrogant about this; in fact, strangely enough, the self-reliance has come about in a very unselfish and humble way. We look on ourselves simply as instruments of service; we believe that we must use ourselves, give ourselves, utterly, always. The man who stops and goes off and sits down by himself is shirking, contemptible. But of course it follows that we consider ourselves stored with wisdom and power to last a whole lifetime; we feel no need of filling our cups again and again from the infinite. Good luck to us, then! The average man will have to dole himself out very carefully, drop by drop, if he expects to last more than a year or two.

But perhaps we no longer believe in the infinite. Then, of course, there is no hope for us and no sort of use in working for the crumbling world. All is vanity; and the sooner the crumbling process is complete, the better for all concerned. People should think out their positions, and be consistent and logical. Either there is an infinite, and everything is worth while and should be done as well as possible; or there is no infinite, and nothing matters.

As a matter of fact, it has been proved again and again that the infinite is the only reality about which we can be perfectly sure. Ourselves, our neighbors, our circumstances, the progress or decline of the world—all these things are problematical and open to dispute. But no subtlety of reasoning can evade the infinite. There it lies at the end of all our arguments, as serene and inevitable as the open country at the end of all city streets. It is the only entirely simple and natural thing with which we have to do. That being so, it is surely wise in us to keep in close, constant touch with this our best reality; it is even the height of unwisdom to allow any long separation. Creatures of limited power, we have to devote ourselves wholly to one thing at a time; so that, when we are working hard at some

partial aspect of our temporal destiny, we are almost obliged to forget the universal significance which it helps to indicate. But the universal still gives the only intelligible meaning to the particular; and we cannot work well unless again and again we recur to the general truth of things. Everything must be tested by the standard of the absolute. A sociological worker, intent on remedying some particular evil of some particular industry in some particular city, could hardly do better than free himself from the whole particular order of things once in a while and lose himself in the great, quiet whole which, through him and his fellows, is surely hastening to bring good out of its evil. Not only will he rest his soul, he will also purge his vision.

Habitual readers of philosophy tend to acquire an inner poise of mind which is immensely valuable to them and to their fellows. To them because it helps them to deal with difficulty and disappointment; to their fellows because it often makes them less irritable and exacting than nature fashioned them. One of my lay reading philosophical friends told me once of a great experience he had had in escaping from trouble. It was a sudden trouble, quite fortuitous, and it threatened to overwhelm him. But, before it could make any headway, he ran and climbed on board a big, grave book of philosophy which he happened to have on hand. Deliberately, he dropped everything, and, giving himself no time for brooding or even for realization, he sat down and read all the afternoon. He said that he was intensely aware of the process at work in him. He could feel his dismay rising to claim him, he could feel the natural, dizzying tendency to succumb to it; then he could feel himself refusing, surmounting, escaping.

"It was not I that did it, though," he said thoughtfully. "I had never exerted my will so strenuously, but it would not have saved me if it had not been reinforced by the Will of the universe. My will was taken up into the latter. I felt that, in actual truth, I had an omnipotent volition to draw upon. Of course I succeeded then; I couldn't fail. I know now what people mean when they say that the stars fight for them."

That is the whole thing in a nutshell—that matter of the will. We are effective individuals only in so far as we have strong and

active volitions; and naturally, the more we lay hold on the infinite forces that are available to us all, the stronger and more active we shall be. It is literally true that there is nothing a man cannot do if his purpose is firm enough; but he has to begin his doing by allying himself with the infinite.

It all comes to this: that philosophy is another name for religion, and that absorption in it is a kind of prayer. Philosophers do not often call the infinite and the absolute by the familiar name of God; but one definition would have to be very little changed to fit all three terms. And God:—there is nothing in all the world so interesting to us. We do not always understand this. We cheat and belittle our immortal, insatiable concern by calling it love of beauty, zeal for justice and equity, scientific enthusiasm, desire for progress, what not. But always, if we would honestly follow our motives back to their fountain heads, we should find that love for, or curiosity about, the nature of God prompted our whole endeavor. This being so, it follows that philosophy is the subject of widest, most universal interest and application. Every human soul really wants to know everything that has been discovered about God.

As for the prayerful attitude which philosophical reading induces, there is nothing so effective in all the realm of action. One earnest prayer for a given cause does more good than a score of finite deeds. Why? Because it relates the matter to the whole, refers it to the general decision, claims for it the invincible purpose of the universe. Instead of striving to renew its individual battery, so soon exhausted, it connects it with the cosmic dynamo whose force is generated by eternity. Then he who prays goes to work with renewed assurance, knowing that he cannot fail.

Readers of philosophy, then, even lay readers, are no mere dreamers, no visionaries. They are engaged in the most practical, the most purposeful of occupations. They are trying to keep themselves in touch with the great purpose of the ages which alone is sure of fulfilment. They are trying, reverently, to learn as much as they can of the content and direction of that purpose and of the nature of the God who sways it. When they emerge from their meditations, they take hold of their tasks with the fingers of the sun and the stars.

THE SHADOWY MR. YEATS

B. RUSSELL HERTS

SLOW and sure seems the forte—or may one say the *piano*?—of Mr. Yeats. On the instrument of his talent the sonatas he plays are soft and melodious. Compared with the poetic symphonies of Masfield, the work of Mr. Yeats is that of a veritable MacDowell. And this is high praise; for MacDowell, despite his notorious repression by the president of Columbia, composed with surety and success—that is, with beauty.

That Mr. Yeats's poems have something near to beauty in them is almost the first thing one feels the need to say of them; that this presence is not always that of beauty itself, is the second. So often is it merely the atmosphere of beauty, the hypnotic influence of the expectation of beauty; for always we are led by Mr. Yeats to expect, continually and everlastingly, beauty of the first order. In a way, his claim to beauty is like the claim to seriousness of a writer of ponderous prose, resounding with profound phrases, the writer of some book of pseudo-science by a man who knows not how to be simple: the matter of the book may be the merest buncombe, but it persuades us of its seriousness by its size and ponderosity. So Mr. Yeats seems always to be telling us, as we turn his pages, "This poem or this play is going to be beautiful, very, very beautiful," and certainly the atmosphere of the thing invariably calls up beauty; but, examining the lines, we find that those actually of rare and wondrous quality are few.

Perhaps this is because the work is comatose. It is, at least, unstimulating in a high degree. There is something soporific about it, and although we may admit that bed is a beatific place, we do not desire our poets to drive us there. Nor is this sleepiness to be explained by reference to Mr. Yeats's obvious mysticism. Many a mystic besides Jesus has been a stirrer-up of the spirit. It is, perhaps, because the slow-moving calm of religion is what his mind requires. He happens to be a Protestant, but he has