

# NEW IMPRESSIONS

## *Part One*

HAVELOCK ELLIS

### *Genius in Its Final Phase*

I SPENT an afternoon before leaving Paris at the old Hôtel de Biron where the almost complete work of Rodin is now admirably displayed. What here interested me most was the final development of his art in the last sculptures of his old age, because this was new to me; he had not reached that stage when I saw him at work in the little studio in a remote district of Paris, where at that time he sought seclusion, far from the show place in the rue de l'Université. These things have a distinct character of their own as a group. They are effaced, the details are smoothed out, as it were washed away by the action of running water, so that only the largest and simplest harmonies of line and form remain. The effect is well seen in "Ariane" and the bust of Lady Warwick. It is really the same liquid quality, — *morbidezza* they call it, — which is now recognized as a trait of the Alexandrian School of Old Greek sculpture, and it gives so subtle a charm to that work; but Rodin has pushed it to an extreme which the Greeks would have thought inconceivable.

With this final development the large sweep of Rodin's art was completed. There was no further development possible. He began as a minute realist and in that early stage his work even caused offence because it was said to be merely photographic. Then, during the greater and most active part of his career, he developed his characteristic style of deliberate exaggeration, the heightening of natural proportions for the ends of art, the play of light and shade. Finally that stage, too, passed away, and this last period arrived of large simple masses, softened and alleviated of all semblance to reality, gliding into a vast dim dream.

Have not all the supreme artists tended to follow a like course? Not the lesser artists, the artists of talent, for they seem with the progress of years to be seeking ever further to emphasize the vision of the world which they set out to present. But look at Michelangelo, whose development among great sculptors we can

best follow. In that little chapel in Florence devoted to the last stage of his art, one of the shrines of the creative human spirit, we seem to see the marble itself bursting into a life so significant because not completely disentangled out of the obscure depths of Nature from which it draws its life.

But it is not only among artists in this medium that we find the same course of development. It is still clearer to see among painters. I think of the marvellous picture of Titian's old age at Munich in which the splendors of that master's earlier works are forgotten in the attainment of a subdued and clouded glory which rises to still greater heights. I think of Rembrandt whose art reached its climax as it passed away in the golden haze which, to memory, seems to fill the Hermitage. I think of the fascinating pictures of Hals' old age at Haarlem which, in place of the superb bravura of his earlier years, have almost the semblance of awkward crudity, and yet, as I recall them, live with so vivid a power that I forget the work of his youth. I think of Turner, whose early genius of the earth, sober and sombre, leapt up to heaven at last in mist and flame: of Carrière, — if he may be included in this noble company, — who began so precisely and ended with those vast figures that seem to come to us out of the world of dreams.

Nor is it in painting only. It is so also in poetry. Look at the last plays of Shakespeare, so loose and undramatic, so flowing or so broken, so full of exquisite music of the spirit more than of poetic form, of a heavenly atmosphere refined beyond any that was ever breathed on earth and yet so humanly tender; or at Shelley, who completed a large cycle of art in a short time, and wrote at last, in *The Witch of Atlas*, only with water and fire; or, within a yet greater and yet shorter cycle, trace the evolution of the ideals of Keats.

The critics have always stumbled a little over this final phase of supreme genius. They used to think that Michelangelo's last work was unfinished. They still often think that what we must recognize in such a manifestation is lassitude, failure of energy, a weakening grasp of brain or hand. I am not sure that there is not an element of truth in such criticism. Only let us not forget that it is the mark of high genius, less to display athletically Titanic strength than to be able to use weakness to reach divine

ends. That power, it may well seem to us, is supremely visible in the typical last phase of the highest genius. The artist has lost his early power of realistic grip, and with it lost also his early taste for such power. But he has lost it only to attain a wider and deeper and more symbolic mastery of the world. He no longer cares for the mere literal imagery of a scene he will leave so soon. But he cares more than he has ever before cared for its essence, and he is conscious of that essence with a delicacy of sensitive perception he never before possessed. He is no longer concerned with things; they are receding from his view. As he rises above the earth, like Elijah in his chariot of fire, he now sees it only in the distance. Henceforth he no longer deals with things. It is the soul of things that he brings before us. That is why his later work fascinates us endlessly as, slowly, after many years, enlightened by the long course of our own experience, we begin at last to understand what it means.

### *Religion as a Function*

"How is Religion still possible?" This question is posed by so able a thinker as Dr. Merz as the question of paramount importance, and he can only find a paradoxical answer.

It is a question which still seems to be taken seriously by many otherwise intelligent persons who are thereby stranded in the end on all sorts of hidden sandbanks. They do not ask: How is Walking still possible? They do not ask: How is Hunger still possible? Yet it is really the same kind of question.

It is always marvelous to find how people worry themselves over unnecessary problems and spin the most fantastic webs of abstruse speculation around even the simplest things. Religion, if it is anything at all, must be a natural organic function, like walking, like eating, better still, one may say, like loving. For the closest analogy, and indeed real relationship, of religion, is with the function of reproduction and the emotions of sex. The functions of walking and eating are more or less necessary to life in their rhythmic recurrence, and it is legitimate in their absence to endeavor to stimulate them into action. But the function of religion, like that of love, is not necessary to life, nor may it with any certainty be stimulated into activity. Need it? These functions are either working within you or they are not. If not,

then it is clear that your organism is in no need of them at the present moment, and perhaps is born without the aptitude to experience them. And if so, there are those who will tell you that you represent a superior type of humanity. Therefore whether if not so, or whether so, why worry?

I do not, indeed, myself think that the inaptitude for the function of religion, — ancient as the religious emotions are, — represents a higher stage of development. But I am sure that either the function is there or it is not there, and that no intellectual speculations will take its place or hasten its manifestation. Religion, like love, develops and harmonizes our rarest and most extravagant emotions. It exalts us above the commonplace routine of our daily life, and it makes us supreme over the world. But, like love also, it is a little ridiculous to those who are unable to experience it. And since they can survive quite well without experiencing it, let them be thankful, as we also are thankful.

### *Nature and Ritual*

I am frequently brought up against the contempt of ritual in life. It is a widespread feeling, most usually, of course, directed against religion, especially, among ourselves, that of the Catholic Church, in its ancient and fantastic, seemingly absurd and unnatural shapes. When in the last century the Evangelicals invented the term "ritualistic" for a kind of ritual they disliked, they felt sure they were appealing to a sound common-sense principle of life.

Yet all social life is ritualistic. You cannot walk along the street or enter a house without observing a ritual which you could not violate without an overwhelming sense of guilt. A child has not yet grown up to the sense of ritual. Imagine yourself doing in public the things a child does! Human society, as much that of the savage as of the civilized, seems, in practice, if not in theory, impossible without ritual, however we may have simplified it, or conventionalized it, from its primitively more elaborate and sacredly significant forms. The ancient Chinese, who had so profound a feeling for the essential things of life, based morals on ceremony and music. It is impossible to construct even Utopia without ritual, however novel a ritual it may be, and even Thelema was an abbey.

It is not only society, it is all life, that is full of ritual, ancient and fantastic, seemingly absurd and unnatural ritual, that is indeed moulded into the very shape of life. Where can we find such wildly and diversely extravagant embodiments of ritual as in the greenhouses of Kew or the cages of the Zoo? For Nature is herself the maker of ritual. We are all ritualists, carrying out rites so widely diverse that we cannot enter into the spirit of one another's ritual. Yet, whether devised by Nature's direct mechanistic action or through the human brain, it is all the manifestation of an underlying vital meaning.

The diversity of the world, therefore, is natural. Yet not less natural is this inability to accept its own diversity. It is by limitation, — the limitation which all art involves, — that Nature becomes diverse, fantastic, seemingly artificial. It is by that same limitation that these diverse forms cannot accept each other. I recall the critical, disdainful gaze of a small terrier as he stood still to watch a great goose pass by. Let us therefore accept with joy the diversity of the world, and with equal joy its inability to accept its own diversity. For that also is delightful.

*Ariel and Caliban*

I note that Garcia Calderon in his excellent book on Latin America seems passingly to suggest that he regards Ariel and Caliban together as the symbolic representative of the English spirit, much as we may regard Don Quixote and Sancho Panza together as the complete representative of the Spaniard. Whether in the vast jungle of Shakespearian commentary this idea has ever been worked out, I have no knowledge; it may have been, even to the last detail. At all events, it seems an idea that is worth bearing in mind. Most nations present two totally unlike aspects. A nation that failed to do so would probably fail also to play any great part in the world.

Of no people could this be more emphatically said than of the English. Napoleon, like other observers before and since, said that the English are a nation of shopkeepers. To yet some others they have seemed a nation of singing birds. On the one hand, as so many foreigners have stated, often with a touch of contempt, practical, cold, short-sighted, cautious, hard-headed, grasping, unimaginative; on the other hand, as they have said just as

often and with a touch of enthusiasm, idealistic, humanitarian, daring, adventurous, extravagant, high-pitched, imaginative. In reality we are both; so it has come about that Caliban has given us an Empire (as indeed the Spanish American remarks) and Ariel a Shakespeare. It is, in fact, the combination of those two elements which produces the characteristically English quality, what is unsympathetically called cant or humbug being the inevitable outside manifestation of their union. They may even be united in the same person, and our most ethereal poets have been well able and content to earn their living by keeping a shop, or preaching sermons, or carrying out the most varied and tedious round of official duties; Caliban is the materialistic aspect of our Ariel, Ariel the spiritual aspect of our Caliban.

The achievement of Shakespeare, — however instinctive and unconscious it may have been, — in thus finally embodying and symbolizing the English genius adds a further seal to the fascination of *The Tempest*. Nowadays I am not much drawn to read the plays of Shakespeare. Their extravagance no longer attracts me; the fury of their passionate interest in life ceases to be of much concern as one recedes from the combat of life. But I am more and more drawn to *The Tempest*, and my thoughts are often lingering over its loveliness. Here Shakespeare has emerged from the conflict, even though it may possibly have been by shipwreck; he had passed beyond tragedy and beyond comedy, beyond and above to a serene air in which they could at last be seen as one by the magician Prospero, who is the final embodiment of Shakespeare's inner self. Prospero's return to his dukedom was a weak concession to a stage convention. One knows that in his heart Shakespeare also knew that Prospero would never return. For an earthly dukedom can mean nothing to the man who has finally grasped the whole universe in his vision, as an evanescent mist, and stands serenely on the last foothold and ultimate outlook of the world.

### *Poets and Fingoes*

I have brought down with me to this sunny cove, — where all day long I may remain undisturbed by any foot save of the gulls on the sands or the crows on the cliff above, — the beautiful and individual little commonplace book of choice things, prose and



verse, familiar and unfamiliar, which Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate, published in 1915. A poet of so high a quality, a connoisseur of such fine taste, a man of such lofty impulse, so lifted by noble contemplation over the passions of the herd, it is a rare pleasure to brood reverently on the pages of this anthology, wayward and exquisite.

But I read the preface, — and with a shock of horror. This esoteric poet and scholar, this high minded recluse, securely perched, one imagined, on a summit of the spirit far removed from the base passions of the mob, reveals himself as the most pharisaic of self-righteous Jingoës, as a war-monger of the kind we associate with our popular gutter-press, as the inspired prophet of Hysteria. Here are the familiar catchwords and counters and despicably one-sided accusations which have rendered the Great War for ever nauseous. No single glimmer of a suspicion that what he says of the German may perhaps also be said of their English cousins, no perception that the cold-blooded atrocities of the blockade easily outweigh those committed in hot blood, no insight to see that the frightfulness of the Germans in Belgium is put into the shade by the more ruthless and more reckless frightfulness of our “heroes and saints” in Ireland, against men and women and children who were not remote foreigners speaking an unknown tongue, but of our own nation and speech, inflicting physical and moral wounds of which I saw the fresh traces every morning three months ago. This preface to *The Spirit of Man* is fit to be held in memory as a monument to the imbecility of that Spirit under the influences of war even when embodied in the person of a superior man; for there are times, said Carlyle of old, though he might have said it today, when the creed of persons in authority, — and surely Bridges is among us a person in spiritual authority, — becomes either a Machiavellism or an Imbecility.

No doubt the Poet Laureate has since repented in sackcloth. He has, indeed, of late been distinguished by encouraging others to hold out the hand of friendship to Germany. But it is easy even for the ordinary man to be just and humane, as well as wise, after the event, let alone a man who is able to present, as in this book, the antidote to the poisons he himself exhibits. So, although it may seem unkind to refer to the past, the occasion is

profitable for meditation. We are told nowadays that the herd instinct, which has proceeded so far as to mould large isolated nations, will in course of time proceed yet farther and attain the form of a universal herd instinct, embracing all humanity; but our movements towards that end are likely to be excessively slow when we realize the state of mind of even our Superior Persons. Certainly long before that consummation it would seem likely that we and all the generations of our civilization will have disappeared in the pit. Well, it is certainly no more than we deserve. Let us depart smiling. There are others to come.

*Part Two will be published in October*

## LOVER TO LOVER

DAVID MORTON

*Leave me a while, for you have been too long  
A nearness that is perilous and sweet:  
Loose me a little from the tightening thong  
That binds my spirit, eyes and hands and feet.  
For there are old communions I would hold,  
To mind my heart what field and sky may be:  
Earth bears her fruit. . . . November has a gold. . . .  
And stars are still high points in constancy.*

*Loose me a little, now. . . . I have a need  
Of standing in an open, windy place,  
Of saying names again, of giving heed  
To these companions of man's lonely race. . . .  
Loose me to these, between one dusk and dawn; —  
I shall have need of them, when you are gone.*