

THE DANCE OF LIFE

BY

HAVELOCK ELLIS

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

- I
- II
- III
- IV
- V

CHAPTER II THE ART OF DANCING

- I
- II
- III
- IV
- V

CHAPTER III THE ART OF THINKING

- I
- II
- III
- IV
- V

CHAPTER IV THE ART OF WRITING

- I
- II

CHAPTER V THE ART OF RELIGION

- I
- II

III

IV

V

CHAPTER VI THE ART OF MORALS

I

II

III

IV

V

CHAPTER VII CONCLUSION

I

II

III

IV

INDEX

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 today 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 synthesise.

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 classicomathematical 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 I

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.^u 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.^[2]

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.^[3]

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 obtusity, 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.^[4] 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

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

