

ELLA OF THE CINDERS,
OR
THE ART OF THE ACTOR

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ALTHOUGH there are comparatively few people who read or wish to read Shakespeare, it is part of an average education to have a certain facility with the better known quotations from his works. And the average man or woman, if asked to define or even describe the art of the actor, would probably fall back on the words of the master dramatist himself, and talk of "holding the mirror up to nature." Nor can we hope to improve upon this dictum; and yet, as often happens with a tersely-stated truth, it may be quite misleading. For if we take these words in their most obvious literal sense, we reduce acting to a purely mimic art, and the vaudeville "impersonator" would be the greatest of all actors.

Shakespeare himself expands his description thus:—"to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." Obviously more than a mere replica is implied. We see this more clearly in another place where he uses the metaphor of the mirror. In *Julius Caesar* this passage occurs:—

Cassius. Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?

Brutus. No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself
But by reflection, by some other things.

Cassius. 'Tis just; and it is very much lamented, Brutus,
That you have no such mirrors as will turn
Your *hidden* worthiness into your eye,
That you might see your shadow.

And again Cassius says:

I, your glass,
Will modestly discover to yourself
That of yourself which you yet know not of.

Here it is definitely stated that the function of the mirror is not merely the exact reproduction of an image, but the discovery of a *hidden* quality—the showing forth of something that would not be perceived without its aid.

Let us consider for a moment what constitutes an "art." Full definition is impossible; we must fall back on an illuminating phrase. "Art is an intelligent abstraction from nature." Take a camera to the nearest window, fire it off at the landscape, and the result will be a technically faithful reproduction of nature. "The camera cannot lie." But a twig in the foreground may be so magnified that it obscures a mountain peak in the background. And the view, so reproduced without intelligent selection, may not be worth reproduction. Take the same camera, select your view, move about until the majority of the objects at least are "in focus", and there is no disfiguring object in the foreground; and in so far as your selection is intelligent, you will be an artist, though still a photographer. But what if nature has thoughtlessly deposited the decomposing carcass of a cow in the exact centre of the woodland dell which you wish to reproduce? Now the camera is helpless—it cannot "abstract" the cow from the landscape or the landscape from the cow. But the artist, with his pencil or pigments, will succeed where the camera fails; with his artistic eye he will refuse to see the cow, while making for you an excellent and memorable reproduction of the woodland dell.

An artist, then, is one who strives to convey to others an impression that he has received. He may employ marble, clay, pigment, the plain difference in light values that we call "black and white", sound pure and simple, or sound allied to thought in the form of words. He selects with infinite care among his materials, and he is the greater or less artist in proportion as he succeeds in making those others perceive through his presentation something that they would not have perceived without it. As Browning says,

For, don't you mark? We're made so that we love,
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times, nor cared to see;
And so they are better, painted—better for us,
Which is the same thing.

A man is an artist by virtue of an insight—an inspiration—that enables him to perceive a greater harmony, a deeper meaning, in objects around him or in thoughts that he receives than is granted to the majority of his fellows. He justifies his existence as an artist by a mastery of materials and a power of selection that enables him to convey this perception to others. There is a story told of the painter, William Mallord Turner. A man said to him, "I don't see sunsets as you paint them." Turner replied "Ah! but don't you wish you could?" The perfect epitaph for the perfect

artist has been written in the phrase:—*Nihil tetigit quod non ornavit*, "He touched nothing without adding to its beauty."

There is a useful, though erroneous, classification which divides artists into "the creative" and "the interpretative." It is erroneous, because no man, whether artist or no, can create: that is a divine prerogative. The so-called creative artist is but arranging in new combinations with careful art the thoughts he has received from other men or by direct inspiration. "Interpretative" is, however, a useful word to describe the artist whose function in the main is to add new beauty and new meaning to the artistic productions of another. Under this category come executant musicians and actors.

If one wishes to convey to the plain man, who has not thought much about it, the true artistic function of the actor, it is most easily done by showing the parallelism between the actor and the executant musician. The composer writes a piece of music—that is to say, he writes on paper a set of symbols which convey to the initiate a sequence of sounds. The expert musician can "read" this music; he can even hear it more clearly and perceive its artistic merit more fully by so reading it than if it were played on an instrument by any but a first-class executant. But to the huge majority of men written music remains a sealed mystery—a soundless and meaningless set of symbols—until a pianist or other interpreter comes along and plays it for them, translates it into sound which they can appreciate.

The relation of the reciter or actor to the literary composer—poet or dramatist—is exactly parallel. Parallel, but not identical. In these days of universal education, nearly everyone can read written words; which, be it remembered, are just as much arbitrary symbols conveying sounds and thoughts as are quavers and demi-semi-quavers between ruled lines. Consequently, the vast majority of men can understand and appreciate, up to a certain point, the printed works of the poet or dramatist; the interpreter, to justify his artistic existence, must always be able to go beyond that point, and reveal more beauty and more meaning by his spoken rendering than the reader can get from the printed word. Many people, particularly scholastics, will maintain that the plays of great literary artists—those of Shakespeare in particular—can be better enjoyed in the study than at a representation on the public stage. In saying this, they are doing two very opposite things. In the first place, they are flattering their own understanding and imagination, preferring the mental images seen by themselves to any that can be assembled by a body of artists working in unison to that one

purpose; in the second place, they are adversely criticizing all actors that they have ever seen. For it cannot be too often repeated that if the interpretative artist cannot *increase* and make fuller the meaning of that which he interprets, whether it be the work of Shakespeare or another, he has no justification for his artistic existence. And this necessity is too often ignored. A memorable conversation between a handful of "legitimate" actors and a vaudeville entertainer is to the point. The vaudeville man—technically known as an "equilibrist"—was, as often happens, profoundly ignorant of the methods of the legitimate stage. He was asking questions:—

V. E. These "parts," as yer call 'em—they're just pieces to speak as another feller 'as made up for yer?

Chorus of Legits. Yes.

V. E. Yer jest learns the words by 'eart?

Chorus of Legits. Yes.

V. E. Yer doesn't 'ave to make nothin' up yerself?

Chorus of Legits. (with memories of Hamlet's speech to the players): We're not supposed to, anyway.

V. E. Ah! (pause): Now we 'as to use our brains!

The artistic function of the actor having been at least partially analysed, it may be of interest to attempt some comparison of acting as an art with other artistic existences. And let me say at the outset that it is futile in this connection to speak of greater or less, higher or lower. There are no real and universal criteria by which we can decide that painting is greater or less than sculpture. But we may say that there is a tendency to look upon acting as the Cinderella of the Arts—to speak rather slightly of its aims, possibilities and achievements, and to sneer at those who practise it. This is largely due to its close alliance with entertainment. Every art, especially on its commercial side, is linked with entertainment—that is to say, with the appeal to the normal—to lower rather than to the normal among the mental and emotional faculties of the public. In all the arts, notoriety, popularity, financial reward come more swiftly and easily to him who follows the lower road than to him who would scale the heights. The choice between a popular waltz and a fugue, a "Child and Dog" and a "Madonna," a "Snappy Story" and "Paradise Lost," a high-kick dancer figurine and a Juno, a "Little Bit of Fluff" and "Hamlet," is eternally the choice between the possibility of immediate sale and recognition and the certainty of hope deferred.

But whereas, in other arts, high aims and lofty achievements are admittedly worthy of great striving and ultimate recognition, and are usually subsidized either by public money or by semi-public subscription, in the English-speaking countries at least the drama is left to stand or fall by its power of immediate sale—the test of the box-office. And many people both speak and behave as though the only legitimate function of the theatre was to entertain, by which they mean to administer a narcotic, interspersed with titillations, to the already partially stupified senses of the tired business man. Moreover, to fail in drama, whether as author or actor, must be a deadly sin, for the wages of such failure is certainly death. Nothing else is quite so dead as a dead play. Actor and author may try again and finally succeed; but the particular artistic product that has been slain on the altar of the box-office is dead beyond all power of resuscitation.

In permanence of achievement, again, the art of acting is sorely handicapped. Horace, and Shakespeare after him, said that their verse would be a monument more enduring than brass; and by this very claim they implied the more enduring qualities of other artistic products. But verse, even though it be dramatic verse, is the province of the dramatist; the art of the actor cannot achieve permanence. He has to make his effect at the moment, a brief fleeting moment, under circumstances often adverse to high artistic achievement. It is true that he can repeat his effect, can alter and improve that with which he is dissatisfied on one occasion; but however often he may make such improvement, he can never leave his effect in a form that will endure beyond him. In his autobiography the actor Macready notes each day his own appraisal of the performance which he gave on that day. The concluding sentence of each day's record generally runs:—"played Hamlet as well as I ever did in my life" or "played Othello exceeding ill to-night." But the point is that the performance which most completely satisfied him, which he would have liked to leave as a permanent record of his dramatic attainment, was just as ephemeral, just as fleeting, as that other performance with which he was himself dissatisfied. There is nothing more difficult than to endeavour to give to a younger generation one's own memory of a great dramatic performance. One can exhibit a picture of the man Salvini, Irving, Booth, or whom you will; one can attempt to convey to a younger generation the effect upon one's self of some great moment in one of his performances; but one cannot really bring that performance to life again, and make it as clear to others as it was to one's self; and the younger genera-

tion, one may be assured, will listen politely, but will feel convinced that the leading actor or actress of their own day is more vivid and more arresting. We have the sculptures of Greece, we have the pictures of the Renaissance, we have music of the Elizabethan age and earlier, we have literature dating back to an antiquity so remote that we can only theorize about the original authorship; but an actor, as far as he passes into artistic history at all, remains a name and nothing more. Even the great strides made by modern ingenuity in the direction of recording machines do not really help us very greatly; for dramatic representation is so tremendously a question of personality that the most accurate record of speech—possibly even, through the film, of appearance and gesture—omits the really vital essence of the actor's art.

We have seen that acting is an interpretative art. It cannot exist by itself; it must collaborate with at least one other artistic form. Whether this is a weakness or a merit, must be left to the individual judgment. There are some who will always award the highest place to an unmixed art; there are others who prefer a harmony of interwoven arts. We may perhaps be guided by the recorded opinion of a celebrated humorist, who said that whisky and soda was better without a cigar, and a cigar was better without whisky and soda, but that both together were better than either one separately. At all events, if collaboration between the arts be a merit, then a very high place must be awarded to the art of the theatre. For the theatre indeed becomes a temple, where all votaries join in the service of the god. Colour, form, the rhythm and cadence of words, the harmonies of music, are all brought together to subserve and assist that presentation of life which is the actor's aim. The most perfect collaboration should probably be found in what is usually known as "Grand Opera"; and many people will urge that it is so found. But the limitation of opera, from the actor's point of view, is to be found in the artistic arrogance of music, which is hardly ever content with its appointed place in the collaboration, but claims to dominate the whole. Song-speech should be the most perfectly expressive of all forms of speech, but the musician's insistence upon "tone" renders it far less expressive of thought and the harsher emotions than it might be. A beautiful speaking voice even can be a great snare to the actor; and when singing enters the door, real dramatic illusion is almost certain to fly out of the window. Yet, as an interpretative artist, the actor has this one great advantage over the instrumentalist with whom he has been compared, that he can avail himself of the assistance of every art in creating his

background and his atmosphere, provided always that he does not allow these accessories to elbow themselves into the foreground,—that he does not allow the scenery or the lighting to dominate the play.

The comparison between the actor and the instrumentalist or interpretative musician brings to mind another noteworthy point about acting as an art, perhaps a limitation, but certainly a necessity. The famous instrumentalist is usually a soloist; the great actor, on the other hand, must always be in a position similar to that of a member of an orchestra. The solo-actor, if we may coin the phrase—the reciter or reader, as he is now usually called—can very seldom expect to compete with the actor proper. Acting is essentially a concerted artistic achievement, because it is concerned with the representation of life, and life is essentially a concerted thing. Broadly speaking, we may say that the actions of any given individual are interesting only in so far as they re-act upon the lives of others; and it is this re-action, this interplay of thoughts, emotions, and passions, which contains the germ of dramatic interest. The tragedy of Othello is the tragedy of his yielding to the insidious suggestions of Iago, and the reaction of his love and his jealousy upon the life of Desdemona. Shakespeare made a large use of monologue or soliloquy; but it is interesting to note that, in almost every case, he employs it in order that a given character may reveal to the audience the true motives for his action, whereas he has been endeavouring to mislead the other characters in the play as to these motives. Cassius poses to Brutus as a true patriot, and a republican with a hatred of tyranny. As soon as Brutus leaves him, he reveals to the audience in soliloquy his petty motives of personal jealousy, in pursuance of which he seeks to make Brutus his catspaw. The modern stage has almost entirely banned monologue, as an unnatural form of utterance; and where it is necessary to reveal the inmost thoughts of some character—the motives which from the nature of the play cannot be revealed in conversation with any other character—the dramatist resorts to such devices as a letter which is read aloud, a telephone conversation with an unseen person, or silent pantomimic expression. Except in very rare cases, drama can be expressed only in dialogue, not in monologue; and naturally, when it comes to the interpretation of dialogue, the solo reader or reciter is greatly handicapped. If he succeeds in interesting his audience, that interest is centred on his skill in suggesting the change from one character to another, rather than on the true dramatic interest of what he is reciting. There is, of course, enormous scope for

the reader in interpreting poems; and occasionally, as in the case of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, these poems contain a strong element of drama and are, in effect, a special form of art—a monologue play:—but, in general, the fact remains that acting is a concerted art.

This fact brings with it to the actor a special difficulty. However desirous he may be of perfecting his own artistic achievement, he can do less than any other artist in the way of individual study and practice. One might as well attempt to play cricket by one's self as to act by one's self, and the assembling of even a small body of people for the practice of the art of acting is naturally a matter of difficulty; considerations of time and expense intervene. Consequently, if four weeks' rehearsal are given to one definite dramatic presentation, that is about the maximum; and such a thing as purely practice rehearsal with a view of perfecting the art of individual actors is practically unknown. There are many things which the actor may and should study by himself: command of voice; command of body, which we call gesture and facial expression; but every actor knows, and even the layman can guess, the tremendous modifications that are brought about by the necessary interplay with other personalities. One reads over a part to one's self, and practises what one imagines to be the best delivery of a given speech, only to find in rehearsal and performance that this delivery is tremendously modified, sometimes completely changed, in obedience to a tempo or an intonation used by another actor with whom the scene has to be played. A student may be taught how to recite the famous "Quality of Mercy" speech from *The Merchant of Venice*. Any experienced Portia knows that her delivery of the speech is tremendously affected by the way in which Shylock delivers the line, "On what compulsion must I, tell me that?" to which the speech is an answer.

And this question of the difficulty of practice brings us to one of the most basic things which distinguish the art of acting from other arts. It is exceedingly easy to act badly; it is even easy to reach a higher level of proficiency in the art of acting than in any other art. From our earliest years we use speech and bodily gestures to express our own everyday thoughts. We all attain a certain facility in this power of expression; and in the ordinary intercourse of life we dull our standards, we accept a slovenliness of diction, a lack of grace in movement, which we should not accept in any less universal form of expression. Most of us can detect, and are shocked by, a false note in music, an ugly shape in sculpture, a flagrantly false piece of drawing or colouring. We are

not nearly so much repelled by a faulty inflection or a slovenly pronunciation. Where our ears are attuned to local dialect, we may even resent pure English as affectation. It is possible for an actor, who is really very unskilled in the technical side of his profession (command of voice and body), to arouse considerable interest and public attention through some trick of personality or glamour of individual charm. The art of acting lacks the obstinate resistance of inanimate matter. Clay, stone, and marble, alike refuse to be bluffed; brushes, pigments, and canvas reveal to the inexperienced hand the fact that he has not learned to master them. Above all, any musical instrument will display most clearly the lack of artistic proficiency on the part of the person seeking to use it. It will not merely refuse its full harmonies, but with excruciating discords it will underline the fact that the would-be performer is technically inexpert. As a consequence, the would-be sculptor, painter, or musician must give many toilsome years to the mastery of the tools of his trade; whereas it is not by any means unknown in theatrical history that a very inexpert performer, with an unbelievable lack of practice, may not merely "get away" with a dramatic presentation, but may even be accorded an amount of popular favour in excess of that given to a really fine dramatic artist. And when technically bad, or at least indifferent, acting is so easy, and frequently so popular, there is no very great inducement to the young actor to attempt laboriously to perfect himself as an artist. The average personal standard in the art of acting is probably considerably lower than in any other art; and when we remind ourselves that acting is a concerted art, we see at once how this drags down the general level of the art as a whole. The greatest artist may be so hampered by the inexpertness of those with whom he has to play that his own performance will be practically ruined. Imagine, if you can, a great violinist being asked to play in an orchestra in which the majority of the members are continually playing false notes.

In this point, as in others, the art of acting suffers from its lack of permanence. In every realm of artistic achievement the immediate popular verdict is hardly ever right. The painter, sculptor, or musician, with a new view, perhaps a new technique,—the very man who in the end makes the most valuable contribution to his art—is more often than not decried by the immediate verdict, not merely of the so-called public, but often of the trained critic. Wagner in music, Whistler in painting, Rodin in sculpture, are names that instantly present themselves. We have yet to see what may be the permanent contribution of such artistic rebels

as Epstein, the Cubists, or the musical and literary Vorticists. It is certain that all real artistic advance is made by those artists who first of all master the laws and conventions of their art, and then deliberately and of set purpose break one or more of these rules. But their final recognition and their permanent achievement are possible only because their artistic products remain on permanent record, to be judged dispassionately and by an increasing number of people as the heat of the first outcry against their rebellion dies down. Whistler triumphantly survived Ruskin; expert mathematicians have proved that the alleged discords of Wagner are merely the higher mathematics of true harmony;—the immediate popular verdict would probably have swept both of these artists into oblivion. Success in acting is almost entirely a matter of the immediate popular verdict, and it is the popular demand which is responsible for much that is artistically worst in acting. One remembers the two Yorkshire farmers talking over a performance of *A Pair of Spectacles* by a company headed by Sir John Hare. Said one to the other:—"That little fellow Hare, he baint no actor; I've met fellers like he every day o' my life": to which the other rejoined, 'So'v I; but that friend of his 'as bustled and bellowed so as you could hear him in the market-place—now he was some'at worth calling an actor." As an artist, Shakespeare implored his actors to avoid imitating "the robustious periwig-pated fellow who tears a passion to tatters." But as a practical student of the commercial theatre, he recognized that such acting "tickled the ears of the groundlings." The Star system again, which every real dramatic artist deplures, is almost entirely a creation of the popular demand. This is so insistent upon the personality and individual appeal of the Star, and so consistently ignores the merits or demerits of what is known as his "support", that it encourages him to save money by employing a cheap cast, no member of which is likely to be possessed of sufficient personal excellence to take off a moment's attention from the leading man.

And indeed, however much one may deplore it, one cannot be blind to the fact that acting is the most intensely personal of all the arts. The tools of the actor are his own body, his own face, his own voice, his own individuality. This makes criticism an intensely personal thing. Favourable criticism becomes very like personal flattery; adverse criticism tends to be personally offensive. A man may possibly hear with equanimity that you do not like his brush-work or drawing. He will find it far more difficult to preserve a philosophical calm if you tell him that you

do not like his voice or the shape of his nose. And yet no artist is more completely dependent on outside criticism. The actor cannot see himself; he cannot really hear himself; for in so far as he is critically listening to the sound of his own voice, he must be outside his part. Above all, he cannot put his work aside and return to it with a fresh eye, or criticize it in cold blood when the necessary mental disturbance of the moment of creation is over. It is easy to call an actor self-centred; he must centre upon himself, because that self is his only medium of expression. It is easy to call him conceited; but remember that, owing to the personal character of dramatic criticism to which I have referred, he usually has conveyed to him, as personal comment, the pleasant rather than the unpleasant; and when dozens, perhaps hundreds, of spectators are ready to tell him to his face how charming and romantic, how wonderful he is, he would be more than human if he did not discount the occasional unfavourable comments that may creep into a printed newspaper notice. It may be that mechanical reproduction will in future tend to correct this dependence on personal opinion. Every school of acting should be equipped with a Motion Picture Machine and some form of voice-recording instrument; for most of us (I speak from personal experience) get a shock that is very far from pleasant when we first find how the screen records our untutored movements, or the disc reproduces our delivery; and such shocks are highly beneficial. But even so, such mechanical records can hardly be made of an actor's public performance in a theatre; they are, of course, reproductions of certain sides of the actor's art, and do not allow for that vital element which we call personality, with its strange power to fuse and bring into harmony discordant elements. For the present, and probably for the future, as long as an actor "gets his laughs" or "gets his round" (of applause), it is usually waste of breath to try to convince him that his performance could be improved.

This peculiar personal element in the art is additionally important if we consider acting as a form of training or development for the individual artist, rather than as an artistic achievement to be put before the public. The ideal actor, as he is called upon to represent every phase of human life, must be in mental sympathy with all those different phases. I have not the space here to discuss, however cursorily, the very vexed question of how far an actor must "live" his part, how far he must himself feel the actual emotions that he is attempting to portray. But he must certainly possess a sympathetic and imaginative understanding

of the entire range of human thoughts, emotions, and passions. It is obvious that he cannot personally experience all of them. One cannot ask a lady to go and stick a carving knife into her guest in order to learn how to play Lady Macbeth; to practise larceny in order convincingly to play the part of a thief, would bring one into conflict with the law of the land. But it is certainly part of the necessary training of a great dramatic artist that he should feel as deeply, and experience as fully, as is consistent with the sane regulation of his individual life. This is largely why it was, for so many years, considered impossible for any reputable woman to follow the art of acting. It was held impossible for her to gain the necessary experience of life, and retain her reputation. And if one analyses closely, one will find that something of the same fear is the basic objection which many parents have to a dramatic career for their sons, and particularly for their daughters. Yet, of course, properly used, such a study of the emotions of humanity should lead to a very wonderful development of character. But again the personal element comes as a limitation; and a "pastor and master", who would possibly admit the value of sympathetic understanding of vice, would deprecate the public interpretation of vice by the individual person for whose guidance he feels himself responsible. To certain people the stage villain must be a villain off the stage, and it is difficult to convince the ordinary member of the public that one can play a dope fiend realistically without having become a drug addict.

Having regard to all these disabilities, we may well call acting the Cinderella of the Arts. Yet there comes a time—at the close of the day—when the fairy godmother waves her wand. The mice turn to long-tailed ponies:—

Other horses are clowns, but these macaronies.

The drab rags of experience are transmuted to the shining robe of inspiration; the proud sister-arts are content to admire and assist; the Baron-parent, Drama, shines only in the reflected glory of his daughter; and it is Cinderella herself who is the cynosure of all eyes, the darling of every heart. With sense-pulsations and with living breath she sways, she inspires, she teaches, she inflames; our eyes are opened by her magic; where she beckons, we follow; our innermost selves are the lute-strings wherefrom she plucks her harmonies. The blood that races to her lure—the brain that quickens to catch her subtlest thought—the tides of laughter and tears that ebb and flow in obedience to her lunar

spell—these are the tributes we pay to her. Living man to living woman, we pay her homage

with eager heart and eye;
And a little gift in the doorway, and the praise no gift can buy.

Midnight will chime, the curtain fall, the magic fade; yet there will be other nights, and a renewal of magics: and though his art be

Not marble nor the gilded monuments
Of princes,

yet may the actor dream of a niche in memory—a corner in some human heart—a little glass slipper to which no other foot is perfectly and justly shaped.