

THE SYNTHETIC ART

AN EXPOSITION OF THE AESTHETIC OF HAVELOCK ELLIS

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IN WORDS that have become, through promiscuous blurb use, widely known, Mencken has termed Havelock Ellis "the most civilized Englishman living today." The appellation is a happy one, for it is with civilization, or conscious fine-living, that Ellis has all his life been chiefly concerned. In characterizing Hutcheson as "an open-minded eclectic who insisted that life itself is the great matter," he made a phrase which applies, with equal aptness, to himself. Havelock Ellis has been, throughout a career remarkable for its success in widely diversified special fields, most of all a connoisseur of those things which tend to raise and ennoble the life of man. His aim has been the achievement of a *practical* vision of the world as beauty, a harmonious arrangement of life under the conditions of our day, and the one instrument he has deemed adequate to the attainment of this goal is the method of art. That living is or may be an art, and that the method of the artist is essential to the really successful life, is the fundamental thesis underlying Ellis' entire body of work. Years ago, in the *New Spirit*, he gave his first expression to this thesis in a passage which is essentially in tune with his latest, and definitive, formulation of this idea:

It is by art and religion that men have always sought rest. Art is a world of man's own making, in which he finds harmonious development, a development that satisfies because framed to the measuring-rod of his most delicate senses. Religion is the anodyne cup—indeed of our own blood—at which we slake our thirst when our hearts are torn by personal misery, or weary and distracted by life's heat and restless hurry. At times, the great motor instincts of our nature, impelling us by a force that we cannot measure or control, cause us to break up our dainty house of art, or to dash down bravely the cup of healing. But we shall always return to them

again; they, too, represent an instinct at the root of our being. In the recognition of this harmony lies the secret of all wise living. . . . For art is nothing less than the world as we ourselves make it, the world remolded nearer to the heart's desire. In the construction of a world around us, in harmonious response to all our senses, we have at once a healthful exercise for our motor activities, and the restful satisfaction of our sensory needs. Art, as no mere hyperaesthesia to external impressions, or exclusive absorption in a single sense, but as a many-sided and active delight in the wholeness of things, is the great restorer of health and rest to the energies distracted by our turbulent modern movements. Thus understood, it has the firmest of scientific foundations; it is but the reasonable satisfaction of the instinctive cravings of the organism.

To the student of orthodox, or formal, aesthetics certain of the above phrases come as a distinct shock. Considerations of art as a "restorer of health," as a "reasonable satisfaction" with the "firmest of scientific foundations" are apt to fall strangely upon ears accustomed to the aesthetician's hymns to the autonomy of beauty and the disinterested freedom of the art experience. But looking further into his work we shall find that the "art" of his discourses upon fine-living is not necessarily the "art" of his aesthetic discussions, and although he considers art and aesthetics "fundamentally the same," he makes very important distinctions between the artistic attitude and the aesthetic attitude, between the creative and the contemplative. Thus it will be profitable, in fact, necessary, to pick our way carefully through the main body of his work, and in the passages dealing with art attempt to settle, if possible, the sense in which the word is used.

We find that the word "art" refers now to the objects of aesthetic contemplation, to the "special arts," and again to the synthetic art which these "special arts" subserve, the whole "art of living." For although Havelock Ellis is perhaps the most readable of all modern "serious" writers, even the clarity of his very excellent style is not always of sufficient efficacy to obviate the reader's wish that these "arts" could be distinguished as "art" and "art-prime." At the same time, separating this art that is the art-of-living base from the art that is "just art," will be rewarded by the possession of two sets of art dicta, the juxtaposition of which will give us the presentation, on the one hand, of certain essential aspects of the art-of-living thesis, and on the other, at least a partial statement of Ellis' ideas in the realm of aesthetics as such.

Thus, abandoning for a time continuity, let us look among his different books for discussions of art which may tend to make more clear the exact meaning of portions of the later "aesthetics of action," as opposed to aesthetics of contemplation.

All literary art lies in the arrangement of life.

. . . There is no connection between coarseness and art.

Is not a certain aloofness essential to our vision of the Heaven of Art?

In a certain sense there is more in the tremulously faint and far reflection of a thing than there is in the thing itself. The dog who preferred the reflection of his bone in the water to the bone itself, though from a practical point of view he made a lamentable mistake, was aesthetically justified. . . . Aloofness is essential to the Beatific Vision. If we entered its portals, Heaven would no longer be Heaven.

. . . That perpetual slight novelty in which lies the secret of life, as well as of art.

. . . A certain outward idleness, a semi-idleness, as Nietzsche said, is the necessary condition for a real religious life, for a real aesthetic life, for any life on the spiritual plane.

All the art of living lies in a fine mingling of letting go and holding on.

Every artist writes his own autobiography. Even Shakespeare's work contains a life of himself for those who know how to read it.

In its chief but rarer aspect literature is the medium of art, and as such can raise no ethical problems. Whatever morality or immorality art may hold is quiescent, or lifted into an atmosphere of radiant immortality where questioning is irrelevant.

It may be observed that the atmosphere into which genius leads us, and indeed all art, is the atmosphere of the world of dreams.

Dreaming is . . . one of our roads into the infinite. And it is interesting to notice how we obtain it—by limitation.

All the matters that enter into courtship tend to fall under the sway of art; their aesthetic pleasure is a secondary reflection of their primary vital joy.

He [Lao Tze] recognized that ceremony is subordinate in the scheme of life, as colour is in a picture, the picture being the real thing.

For the sphere in which ceremonies act is Man's external life; his internal life is the sphere of Music.

Some of the items of this mélange are obvious enough almost to require apology for inclusion, being recognizable counters of innumerable aesthetic discussions; others, seemingly slight and insignificant observations, are important in conjunction with the author's later expressions. In the *Dance of Life*, the latest and, probably, the definitive, presentation of Ellis' outlook on the world, he has

set up the dance as the model on which to pattern our lives. "For dancing is the loftiest, the most moving, the most beautiful of the arts, because it is no mere translation or abstraction from life; it is life itself." Now as an aesthetic deliberation on the dance as an art-form, this jars; it is out of tune with previous statements of the relation of art and life. What art, indeed, has Ellis found to be a mere translation or abstraction from life? Then, too, one senses here the beginning of a difficulty. Granting the idea he is propounding, that "life is a dance," it may seem sheer dunderheadedness to object that the equation is not operative both ways, that "a dance is life" is not equally tenable. And yet, in Ellis' casuistic system this objection may prove, where successions of such dicta are related, a real difficulty. To return, then, life is a dance, our discipline is the strenuous discipline of the dancer, our method of living the method of the dancer who selects from among the possible motions that present themselves as confused, disordered possibilities, only those which blend beautifully in a perfect harmony, in a rhythm best in accord with the fundamental rhythm of the body itself. Here, too, the aesthetic pleasure may be a secondary reflection of the primary vital joy, but the matter tends to fall under the sway of art. This ruling of life by the spirit and method of art, Ellis holds to be the natural manifestation of a fundamental *élan*, or, to check up on the earlier statement of *The New Spirit*, an "instinct at the root of our being." And art in turn is simply the most vital expression of that impulse, though the impulse is contained in other aspects of man's life. To quote:

Religion, or the desire for the salvation of our souls, Art, or the desire for beautification, Science, or the search for the reason 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 fertilizing life.

All these various elements of life are but, as it were, allotropic forms of the same element. The most fundamental among these forms is that of art, for life in all its forms, even morality in the narrowest sense, is, as Duprat has argued, a matter of technique, and technique at once brings us to the elements of art.

Within the small scope of these two paragraphs there has already occurred opportunity for some confusion simply in the use of the word "art." First it is used in the sense in which we most often think of it, as the desire for beautification, as such. Later, "tech-

nique brings us to the elements of art." Here, does not the word have more nearly the meaning of making, or practice? In addition, there is the suggestion that it has, whatever it is, been impeded by alienation from religion and science in its greater function of the fertilization of life. In one case, to fall back upon a phrase used elsewhere in the book, "we are concerned only with the primary stuff of art, the bare simple technique of the human dance," and in the other we are discussing two aspects of art as we are acquainted with it. Later on in the book, this statement throws some light on the meaning toward which the word is tending in its use as representative of the ideal synthesis of the "profound impulses":

Herbert Spencer pointed out, in his early essay on *The Genesis of Science*, that science arose out of art, and that even yet the distinction is "purely conventional," for "it is impossible to say when art ends and science begins." Spencer was here using "art" in the fundamental sense according to which all practice is in the nature of art.

Again:

Dr. Charles Singer . . . now defines science, no longer as a body of organized knowledge, but as "the process which makes knowledge," as "knowledge in the making"; that is to say, "the growing edge between the known and the unknown." As soon as we thus regard it, as a *making* process, it becomes one with art.

We see now that this new casuistry is acquiring a vocabulary all its own, lending new meanings to old words, though not always constant meanings, and occasionally the old meanings come into view. As a matter of fact, much of our acceptance or rejection of Ellis' system depends upon our willingness to accept it as a word-structure. For an integral part of Ellis' system is found in the fact that its growth has been characterized, if, indeed, not accomplished, by a continual slight inconsistency in the matter of things we should have expected to consider, as being axiomatic, unchanging. To this we shall be obliged again to have recourse. As an example of the extent to which word-building on foundations at once relative and, somehow, mutable, is wrapped up in the process of seeing life as an art, we may look at this development of "morals," with its attendant seeming-tangle on "discipline":

We are, indeed, simply concerned with a discipline or routine which in this field is properly described as "custom," and the word "morals" essentially means "custom." That is what morals must always be for the mass, and, indeed, to some extent for all, a dis-

cipline, and, as we have already seen, a discipline cannot properly be regarded as a science or an art.

Yet, . . . there is still some interest in the question of morals. For, after all, there is the small body of individuals ahead, alertly eager to find the road, with a sensitive flair for all the possibilities the future may hold. When the compact majority, blind and automatic and unconscious, follows after, to tramp along the road these pioneers have discovered, it may seem but a dull road. But before they reached it that road was interesting, even passionately interesting.

The reason is that, for those who, in any age, are thus situated, life is not merely a discipline. It is, or may become, really an art.

But again:

For the artist life is always a discipline, and no discipline can be without pain, etc.

Finally:

Insofar as we can infuse it with the spirit and method of art, we have transformed morality into something beyond morality; it has become the embodiment of the dance of life.

Stickling for literalness, we might refuse to go on until made certain whether "morals" is an art or a discipline, or both, or if one, how not the other; on the other hand, we must remember that the *Dance of Life* is a book written by one who holds that thinking, too, is fundamentally an art and an art-process. In art "the continual slight inconsistency" is not, really, inconsistent. Ellis, as he himself both intends and realizes, stands "on Philosophy's threshold"—and in the Age of Relativity. Too, he owes much of his method to Hans Vaihinger, the philosopher of the fictional, of the "*Als Ob*," to whom thinking is a regulated error—which applies, very aptly, to art. And by his own standards and indeed by those of the age, his method is, for its purpose, justified. "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." Thus, at least, until we have envisioned the whole of which these fragments of his thought are but evolutionary parts, we must, even though grumblingly, go on.

Thus we must pursue still further the art-quality which Ellis sees at the base of man's related central impulses, and the regulation of these impulses by the spirit and method of art, which he considers essential to the achievement, in the dance of life, of a civiliza-

tion in beauty. At the risk, and indeed it is the desire, of disappearing entirely from the picture, I shall let the words be his own, for after all the thesis is his, and is best presented by him; only the contemplation and the criticism should be mine. First of all, either the subordination, or the inclusion, of thinking, or, as the "search for the reasons of things," science, to this larger synthetic "art," must be accounted for:

The world is an unrelated mass of impressions, as it first strikes our infant senses, falling at random on the sensory mechanism, and all appearing as it were on the same plane. For an infant the moon is no farther away than his mother's breast, even though he possesses an inherited mental apparatus fitted to coordinate and distinguish the two. It is only when we begin to think, that we can arrange these unrelated impressions into intelligible groups, and thinking is thus of the nature of art.

We have arrived again at Vaihinger, who points out, as Ellis quotes:

"Even when we walk, it is only by a series of regulated errors, a perpetual succession of falls to one side and the other side." Our whole progress through life is of the same nature: all thinking is a regulated error. For we cannot, as Vaihinger insists, choose our errors at random or in accordance with what happens to please us; such fictions are only too likely to turn into deadening dogmas: the old *vis dormitiva* is the type of them, mere husks that are of no vital use and help us not at all. There are good fictions and bad fictions just as there are good poets and bad poets. It is in the choice and regulation of our errors, in our readiness to accept ever-closer approximations to the unattainable reality, that we think rightly and live rightly. We triumph insofar as we succeed in that regulation. "A lost battle," Foch, quoting De Maistre, lays down in his *Principes de Guerre*, "is a battle one thinks one has lost"; the battle is won by the fiction that is won. It is so also in the battle of life, in the whole art of living. Freud regards dreaming as fiction that helps us to sleep; thinking we may regard as fiction that helps us to live. Man lives by imagination.

Imagination is thus a constitutive part of all thinking. We may make distinctions between practical scientific thinking and disinterested aesthetic thinking. Yet all thinking is finally a comparison. Scientific fictions are parallel with aesthetic fictions. The poet is the type of all thinkers: there is no sharp boundary between the region of poetry and the region of science. Both alike are not ends in themselves, but means to higher ends.

"Not ends in themselves, but means to higher ends"; that is not the statement of an aesthetician, but of an aesthetic moralist. Poetry is a special art, which subserves the higher end of "fine liv-

ing," itself an art. But as for the preceding portion, is it "ever-closer approximations to the unattainable reality" that we seek in art? This is, it is true, in harmony with Ellis' earlier and aesthetically not incontrovertible statement that the picture is the real thing, but it is not in harmony with the statement that aloofness is essential to the beatific vision, nor that the atmosphere into which all art leads us is the atmosphere of the world of dreams. Perhaps there is in his mind the Platonic ideal good, or the thing-in-itself of Schopenhauer, but that is traveling from the psychological field into the metaphysical, which Ellis has professed to avoid. The solution suggests itself that, whereas he considers art and aesthetics fundamentally the same, he does not feel the same about the new synthetic art of which the very stuff and fibre is life itself. At any rate, the field of what this new art may be, and still remain an art, or Art, is narrowing.

Referring to this power of fiction on human action, he draws this conclusion from the consideration of the two great fictions of the modern world, the Platonic Socrates, the artistic creation of Plato, and the Christian Jesus, the artistic creation of his disciples:

When we look back at the spiritual history of Europe it may become possible to say that its two supreme figures, the Martyr of Philosophy and the Martyr of Religion, were both—however real the two human persons out of which they were formed—the work of man's imagination. For there on the one hand we see the most accomplished of European thinkers, and on the other a little band of barbarians, awkwardly using the same Greek language, working with an unconscious skill which even transcends all that conscious skill could have achieved, yet both bearing immortal witness to the truth that the human soul only lives truly in art and can only be ruled through art. So it is that in art lies the solution of the conflicts of philosophy. There we see Realism, or the discovery of things, one with Idealism or the creation of things. Art is the embodied harmony of their conflict.

The treatment of the art of religion in the *Dance of Life* is the outgrowth of the idea expressed so long ago in *The New Spirit*, that "there is a religion of science":

If science and mysticism are alike based on fundamental instincts appearing spontaneously all over the world; if, moreover, they naturally tend to be embodied in the same individual, in such a way that each impulse would seem to be dependent upon the other for its full development; then there can be no ground for accepting any disharmony between them. The course of human evolution involves a division of labour, a specialization of science and of mysticism

along special lines and in separate individuals. But a fundamental antagonism of the two, it becomes evident, is not to be thought of; it is unthinkable, even absurd. If at some period in the course of civilization we seriously find that our science and our religion are antagonistic, then there must be something wrong either with our science or our religion. Perhaps not seldom there may be something wrong with both. For if the natural impulses which normally work best together are separated and specialized in different persons, we may expect to find a concomitant state of atrophy and hypertrophy, both alike morbid. The scientific person will become atrophied on the mystical side, the mystical person will become atrophied on the scientific side. Each will become morbidly hypertrophied on his own side. But the assumption that, because there is a lack of harmony between opposing pathological states there must also be a similar lack of harmony in the normal states, is unreasonable.

It is important to observe that although Ellis subserves these related impulses to the one profound impulse of art, he does not confuse them. He does not say that art *is* science, that science *is* religion, he is careful to preserve their distinct natures; he says merely, science is of the nature of art, religion is of the nature of art; therefore there can be, for instance, an art of religion.

It is a harmony that rests on the faith that they are eternally separate, however close, however intimately co-operative. When the mystic professes that, as such, he has knowledge of the same order as the man of science, or when the scientist claims that, as such he has emotion which is like that of the man of religion, each of them deceives himself. . . . Science, by itself, good or bad, can never be religion, any more than religion by itself can ever be science, or even philosophy.

The question of the difference between the aesthetic action of living as an art and the passive contemplation implied in the science of aesthetics, has not yet been resolved:

On the background of general aesthetic judgment we have to concentrate on the forces of creative artistic activity, whose work it is painfully to mould the clay of moral action, and to forge its iron, long before the aesthetic criterion can be applied to the final product. The artist's work in life is full of struggle and toil; it is only the spectator of morals who can assume the calm aesthetic attitude. Shaftesbury, indeed, evidently recognized this, but it was not enough to say, as he said, that we may prepare ourselves for moral action by the study of literature. One may be willing to regard life as an art, and yet be of the opinion that it is as unsatisfactory to learn the art of living in literature as to learn, let us say, the art of music in architecture.

For all art is, primarily, not a contemplation but a doing, a creative action, and morality is so pre-eminently.

Aestheticism, as found in the influence of Pater, Ellis weighed for his purpose years ago, and found it incomplete, inadequate to our life today. He found it admirable for what it was, and it is doubtless true that he was inspired to his vigorous creative aesthetic ideal by the beauty of the contemplative aesthetic valuation of the world in *Marius the Epicurean*, but of a "refined development of the passive sensory sides of the human organism with corresponding atrophy of the motor sides," he said, in *The New Spirit*, that "it is clearly impossible to go any farther on that road."

The material is pretty well before us, and at least we are certain of some of the things that this "art" of the "art of life" is not. But to some people it is no more possible to think of art without thinking of genius than to think of smoke without fire. And the place of genius in this art of governing our everyday life has not yet been considered.

"All genius must work without rest, it cannot do otherwise; only the most happily constituted genius works without haste." Haste, certainly, and a disproportionate attention to one aspect of life, is not the method of art that Ellis has in mind for the average man to whom he advises the governing of life by the method of art. His concern, as stated earlier in this paper, is with the harmonious arrangement of the life we are forced to live in a complex world with the vital needs and capabilities of the average human organism. "There is room, after all, for the sturdy bourgeois laborer who, at the end of a hard life in the service of truth, sits down to enjoy his brown beer and Haydn's quartettes, and to repeat his homely confession of faith in the world as he sees it."

Well, then, if every man is not to become a genius, and yet is to be a good artist in an art that gives range to the profound basic instincts rooted in his being, just what is the nature of this "art"? If genius is not to be automatically infused in the requisite amounts, what is there to distinguish this "art" from a craft? Where is the "art" element contained? And if this art is to be a *practical* vision of the world as beauty, where does beauty as the beauty of art enter in? These are the questions which make necessary a careful analysis of the evolution of the word "art" as used in Ellis.

First of all, is this art of living merely an elaborated revival of the crafts ideal so often sighed for?

The diffused aesthetic sense is correlated with a diffused artistic instinct, based on craftsmanship. . . . William Morris was a pioneer in asserting this association. As a distinguished English writer, Mr. Charles Marriott, the novelist and critic, clearly puts the modern doctrine, "the first step is to absorb, or reabsorb, the 'artist' into the craftsman. . . . Once agreed that the same aesthetic considerations which apply to painting a picture apply, though in a different degree, to painting a door, and you have emancipated labor without any prejudice to the highest art. . . . A good surface of paint on a door is as truly an emotional or aesthetic consideration as 'significant form,' indeed, it *is* 'significant form.'" Professor Santayana has spoken in the same sense: "In a thoroughly humanized society everything—clothes, speech, manners, government—is a work of art." It is, indeed, the general tendency today and is traceable in Croce's later writings.

The danger is immediately evident: far from effecting a reconciliation in the time-old divorce between daily life and art, the new ideal vision of life is apt to be even farther removed from harmony with the scheme of life as we are today obliged to live it, than is the heaven of art itself. Ellis, who repeats at the very outset the Heraclitean saying that no man bathes twice in the same stream, ought of all people best to realize that to prescribe craftsmanship to us of today is like telling us to cool our faces in last winter's snow. But it has been, as we observed, just on this point of the autonomy of art that his structure has once or twice had a suspicious look, as we observed in considering his subjection of certain beauties to "higher ends." The dance indeed, though composed of the very stuff of life, is an art because it is not purposive, and is an end in itself; now if Ellis' dance of life can be shown to be free, and an end in itself, then indeed this way of life is an art, but it is upon the proving of this that that art, as an art, depends.

The idea of the uses of the fictional enters again. Do not hold too tenaciously to familiar axioms, for:

Your business is to invent a truth which shall harmoniously satisfy the need of your nature and aid your efficiency in practical life. There is no transcendent objective truth; each one of us is an artist erecting his own truth from the phenomena presented to him, but if in that creation he allows any alien emotional or practical consideration to influence him he is a bad artist, and his work is wrought for destruction.

This is essentially of the nature of art, in that one should seek form in one's thought but never formula, being content that a resembling unlikeness to the world that has the virtue of harmonizing

with one's nature is a satisfactory truth. The objection is that this is essentially that which genius accomplishes in the achievement of art, and that to set it down unqualifiedly as a working principle calls for the artist's ability to an extent hardly to be expected of everyone. Thus, in this respect life is, as an ideal, an art. In other words, it resolves itself pretty much into this: For the artist in living, life is an art. More general than that one cannot, with assurance, be.

As a general principle, outside of the accidents of genius, one cannot give to this art, with assurance, a quality of beauty befitting a fine art, because upon the artist depends the beauty of his work of art. One can simply say that the method and spirit of art are as beautifully adapted to living as to any of the "special arts," and that is certainly to be conceded. One can say that by the methods of art an art of life may be achieved, but it is like saying that by the handling of a violin bow beautiful music may be produced. In the hands of an artist of nature the art of life of which Ellis speaks might well be one of the finest arts. But as for the "art" to which we have tried applying, as general principles, the qualities of art as it means beatitude to man, that "art" has been used all along in the sense, whether willingly or not, in which all practice is art. The method and spirit of art he has shown to be amenable to the practice of life; for the result one can say only that it would vary from unsuccessful attempts at a paradoxical ascetic-hedonism to a life beautifully proportioned and wrought as a flower. The latter, when the methods prescribed are put into practice by another Leonardo.

Ellis has shown that art as finely selective "doing" is the most fundamental instinct of man's nature. On this may be raised an aesthetics of hope. Meanwhile Art is elusive as ever, mocking us from afar with that fine beauty which makes attempts to catch her with words at once so ridiculously futile and so unceasingly attractive.

The problem of fine living except as an all-too-rare bloom on the dull level path of human life is much the same for Ellis as it was fifty years ago; it has simply become increasingly elaborate under careful thought. Of the path of that achievement from *The New Spirit* to *The Dance of Life* his own words spoken of the two poles of Nietzsche's endeavor, are fair and sufficient: "It would be foolish to regard either of the termini as the last outpost of wisdom. But in the passage between these two points many excellent things are said by the way."