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The Dane of Life, 1924.

"THE DANCE OF LIFE."

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING

JUNE 1, 1924, CLEVELAND, O.

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JOSEPH T. KRAUS
Shorthand
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I have fixed upon this book of Mr. Havilock Ellis, "The Dance of Life," as the theme or text of my address this morning, because the book is a profound book--a profound book which contains the crystalized thoughts of a profound thinker; a book written in a style which is artistic, in a manner which is frank and honest, and, withal, reverential; altogether a stimulating and challenging book.

It would be most difficult to give the content of this book, even in summary form. The subject matter is so vast, and the erudition of the book so encyclopedic, and the reasoning of it so close and consecutive, that one would have to restate the whole book in order to do justice to it.

The Dance of Life is a criticism of the whole of life; a criticism of civilization; an historical retrospect, and a prophetic prospect about human existence. One feels that this philosopher, who was also a scientist, this student, who was also an artist, is taking stock of civilization; not only of the achievements of civilization but of the basic impulses and primary tendencies of civilization, from the beginning of time to our own day.

I can do no more this morning, in the brief hour allotted to us, than to single out one or two dominant ideas of this book and expound them, perhaps

elaborate upon them. The two cardinal ideas of this book, The Dance of Life--which I recommend to all those who love to read books which stimulate their minds instead of putting them to sleep; the most of our literature today is written for the "tired business man"--the two cardinal ideas of this book are, first, the basic unity of life, and, secondly, the artistic quality of all life. Mr. Ellis illustrates his idea of the unity of life with the symbol of the dance. He calls his book the Dance of Life. To him life is a dance; to him the whole universe is a dance. And this concept of the dance is more than a mere metaphor, as far as life is concerned. Mr. Ellis shows at great length that the primary art of man is the dance. Man danced long before he was able to write, or perhaps, also, long before he was able to speak.

The dance is much more a part of man than, say, the art of painting, or the art of sculpture. In painting and in sculpture man uses material outside of himself; in the dance he uses nothing but himself. The religion of primitive man expressed itself in the dance, and the religion of perhaps the most civilized people of all times, the Greeks, expressed itself most perfectly in the dance. Early man never prayed as we pray today, with our lips and with our thoughts. He prayed with dancing. Dancing was his ritual; dancing was his prayer; dancing was the mode of expressing all his great emotions--his love and his hate and his passions and his desires, his wishes and

his hopes, all expressed themselves in the form of a dance.

It has been suggested, maintains Ellis, that all work is a form of dance. When you find groups of people doing a common job, they will in all probability sing; there will be a rhythm to the work they do; just as soldiers on a march, or sailors hoisting sails--they sing because they want to control the rhythmic movement of their muscles; it helps them in their work.

Now, the dance, maintains Ellis, is true to human life, and is perhaps the highest expression of human life and the symbol of human life, because it contains number and measure and rhythm and coordination, and the subordination of the part to the whole, because the dance is a unification--a unification of the whole of human life. It represents man in the most supreme, integrated, unified activity.

The universe is a dance, because the universe, too, is one. The universe we say is made up of elements, perhaps a hundred elements, but the periodic law of these elements is a metrical law. These elements stand in definite numerical relation, one to the other; they are controlled, as it were, by a rhythm. The ancients spoke of the "music of the spheres." It is very likely that all elements are derived from one basic element; it is very likely that all elements may be only molds of one basic energy, of one throbbing, rhythmic movement in creation. The universe is one because the universe is a dance.

Now, starting from this major premise,

Mr. Ellis proceeds to show how every human activity-- scientific, artistic, religion, morals, thinking, writing-- ultimately derives from one common source and ultimately moves towards one common goal. We have been accustomed to think of the human mind as departmentalized; every human activity in an air-tight compartment. We think with our minds and feel with our souls; there is no interrelation of the two. Mr. Ellis at great length demonstrates the unsoundness and absurdity of such a point of view. He takes, for example, science and art, which we have been in modern times in the habit of regarding as of the two extreme poles. Science, we have been accustomed to say, has to do with ascertainable, classifiable, provable facts; objective reality. Art has to do with these vague, indefinable human impulses. They are two different spheres; they have nothing in common. And yet, says Mr. Ellis, psychology has demonstrated that the human mind is not at all that cold, impersonal receptacle of ascertainable and demonstrable truth.

In the first place, the human mind depends for its information upon our five senses, each one of which is imperfect and faulty and inadequate; in the second place, the whole structure of human thought bases itself upon certain axioms and certain assumptions, which cannot be proved and never have been proved--fictions of the mind. So that even in the realm of science, the subjective element-- man, the artist in the broadest sense of the word; the

creator, the maker, the fashioner,--man enters; man makes his thoughts; man creates his thoughts. So that this line of demarcation between science and art is an artificial one. And similarly, Mr. Ellis demonstrates that this line of division which men have drawn between science and religion is a false one, is an unreal one. We used to think that science has to do with facts, and religion has to do with faith. Mr. Ellis shows, first, historically, that science and religion were one in primitive society. The medicine man was both the priest and the doctor. In primitive society religion was the beginning of science. When the primitive man used a charm of magic, he was trying to do exactly what the scientist was trying to do today--control and master the forces of nature.

The object of science and the object of religion are one and the same. The scientist tries to adjust himself intellectually to the universe in order to control and master and understand it; the religious man tries to adjust himself emotionally to the universe in order to control and master and understand it. Both are seeking the one thing: oneness with the universe. Both of the one mind through two channels. Through his mind, his thinking and his feeling, which cannot be separated one from another, man is trying, along two avenues, to accomplish the one thing, namely, to place himself in the universe, to establish contacts in the world about him.

It is only, says Mr. Ellis, as the one

sense or the other, the religious sense or the scientific sense, is atrophied in the individual,--it is only as one is developed at the expense of the other, that this seeming conflict between science and religion occurs. The real great scientists, who are the real great poets, the real great artists of mankind--the Newtons and the Copernicuses and the Keplers and the Darwins and the Einsteins--says Mr. Ellis, were deeply religious souls, because their very science was a religious impulse in them, and their very religion was a scientific seeking after truth.

And so Mr. Ellis underscores his first basic idea: that all life is one, all human thought is one. And there we are able to understand how true was the old Jewish ideal of the unity of God. When the Jew said, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one," he did not, of course, have in mind a numerical unity; he was not playing with numbers, one as against many, one as against three; that was not the basic idea at all. When the Jew spoke of the unity of God, he had in mind exactly what the scientist today has in mind when he speaks of the unity of life and the unity of the universe. He had in mind a basic, creative, organizing and informing spirit in the universe--one and indivisible, of which every form of existence was a phase or a manifestation. When the Jew spoke of the unity of God, he had in mind that God, this spirit, all-embracing, all-inclusive, all-pervasive, was the heart abiding through creation, and that everything that exists was body of it, expression of it.

manifestation of it, but belonging to it and part of it.

The Jewish mystics, known as the Cabalists, expressed this idea in this form: at the top of the scale was the En-Sof----the Eternal One, the Infinite One--God; and from him, by his volition, there emanated spheres, one sphere lower than the other--the planets, the constellations of the heavens, and down the scale of creation until man is reached, and the lower forms of creation. Everything was derived from the original source--the En-Sof. Each sphere combined the sphere below it; they differed in expression, they differed in their form which they assumed, but organically they were all related to the En-Sof----to God himself. And so the famous phrase of the Cabalist: "There is no place where God is not"; for everything, the substance of a thing and the form of a thing, was of God and in God.

And from that they derived tremendous moral and spiritual truths. If life is one, if man is related essentially to God--made, as it were, in the image of God, then man must try to imitate God, then man must try to express the God idea. Then man must imitate God. Just as God is holy, so must you be holy; just as God is just, so must you be just. And so from the same idea of the unity of God there was derived the idea of the unity, first, of Israel. "God and His Torah and Israel are one," said the mystics of our faith. "All the children of Israel are brothers." And then they extended that notion to all mankind. "If God is one and man is one, are we not all

brothers? Hath not one God created us all? Why, then, should we deal treacherously with one another?" And so from this basic idea of unity Judaism derived its entire system of ethics as between man and man, and ethics as between people and people, and its entire world conception. So that idea in 1924, the psychologist and the philosopher and the artist and the student is restating, in his own words, it is true, and in his own imagery,--the fundamental idea which your people and mine have advocated for twenty-five centuries.

The second idea of Mr. Ellis is that all life, all human activity, partakes of the character of an art. All life is art. The divisions of the book are called, the Art of Thinking, the Art of Writing, the Art of Religion, the Art of Morality. What is art? Mr. Ellis acknowledges, and wisely, that there can be no true definition of art because art is infinite. Every definition is true, and therefore every definition is false. Art in the broadest sense of the word means the whole sphere of human activity; art means the whole stream of human action. Man is an artist in the truest sense of the word, because man tries to improve upon nature with the tools which nature gives man; man tries to reveal that which is hidden in nature by means of those things which are hidden in his own mind and in his own soul; man tries to express nature in higher moods; man tries to remake and refashion nature with the very things which nature gives him. Man is an artist; because that is

exactly what an artist does. An artist is a doer, an inspired doer, an inspired artisan. The word poet means a doer; because a poet creates a new thing which is in reality an old thing. Thinking is an art, because man creates thoughts. The idea that all man has to do is to open his mind and let truth enter is an erroneous and a childish conception. Man creates artistically; manufactures his own truths .

I spoke before of certain axioms and certain fictions which man creates in order to make thinking possible. And that is true. Man speaks today of infinity. What is infinity? Man speaks today of absolute space? What is space? Who has ever seen space? Man speaks today of force, of energy. What is force and energy? Nobody has ever seen it. We speak of cause and effect as though this were a provable, seizable, recognizable thing; but nobody has ever seen any cause or any effect. We speak of matter as though it were real. This (desk) is matter. And yet when we come to analyze this which is so touchable and so real, we find it vanishes under ourself; it reduces itself to atoms and electrons, to a sea of liquid electricity. We speak of an atom. What is an atom? We act as though we were free. You say, "I am going to do that tomorrow." And yet it can be demonstrated quite conclusively that there is no such thing as freedom. All these notions are fictions, figments of the human mind--necessary fictions, indispensable fictions. Without them we could not live or think or plan

or do anything. But they are fictions. They are not even hypotheses, because a hypothesis is something which may possibly be true. These things are just fancies of the human mind, but without these fancies we could not live. Man created them; man, the artist, created the fundamental fictions in order to make his life possible, in order to advance and to grow. On the basis of these fictions he has been able to build up the entire superstructure of thought, his entire civilization. And so thinking is an art.

Religion is an art, says Mr. Ellis.

Religion is not a set of doctrines given you, and if you do not believe in them you are a heretic and you ought to be driven out of the church, and tried for heresy. Religion is not a collection of truths final for all time; a revelation, complete and final, given at one time or in one book.

Religion is an achievement of the human soul; religion is an artistic creation of man; religion is an effort--I stress the word "effort"--an act, a doing, an attempt to adjust ourselves to the world about us. Prayer is a seeking for communion, a pilgrimage; ritual is an attempt to represent the great drama of life about us. Every man, in a sense, creates his own religion, because every man is an artist, and the work of one man is not like the work of another man. Every man must re-live and re-create his religion for himself. And that is why religion is such a terribly difficult thing; that is why religion demands such terribly harsh and rigorous discipline. Because all art is discipline.

Morality is an art, says Mr. Ellis.

We are accustomed to think of morality as the word signifies: custom. That which is customary is moral; that which society at a given time and a given place accepts, that is moral. That, says Mr. Ellis, is good for the masses; that is helpful for the great, unthinking masses of mankind. But for the moral pathfinder, for the pioneer, morality is not a set of rules, a regimen, rigid and inflexible; but morality, too, is an art; morality, too, is an achievement; morality, too, is a creation of man. Because if morality were not an art, morals would never advance; mankind would stagnate. It is only the moral revolutionary, it is only the moral pathfinder, who, projecting a new vision, a new moral concept, pulls mankind along with him to the higher levels.

All art is thought. Morality is an artistic impulse. Mr. Ellis underscores very forcibly this thought. "Because I say," declares Mr. Ellis, "that morality is an art, it does not mean that morality is a whimsical thing, that morality may be a namby-pamby, self-indulgent, easy-going thing, which every man may accept or reject at his convenience." Morality is not something for the Bohemian type of mind; for the so-called emancipated type of mind; for those who trip adown the primrose path of dahlias, tasting everything along the way, wallowing in the mire and in the dirt, under the impression that they are free and emancipated human beings; that sort of life which wrecked the lives of three young Jewish lads in a neighboring city;

that sort of desperately dangerous view upon life, lacking purpose, lacking seriousness, lacking discipline, lacking self-control--wealth-destroyed, mind-corrupted, soul-corroded life. You cannot play fast and loose with morality simply because morality is an art. And art, true art, is the most exacting thing that a man can do. You see a beautiful dancer, says Mr. Ellis, on the stage--a Pavlowa--skipping over the stage with such grace, with such beauty, so airily, so daintily, and you think that has come almost naturally and spontaneously; all that a woman has to do in order to dance so gracefully is just to get on the stage and dance. Ah, says Ellis, but when you read of ballet dancers who find their slippers after the dance stained with blood, and when you hear of dancers after the dance physically and emotionally exhausted, needing to spend hours in order to recuperate their strength, you realize that art is not that easy, self-indulgent thing that you imagine it to be. The real artist must go down, oftentimes, to the suffering of hell in order to perfect his art.

And so with morality. If you want to live your life as a real moral being, you must subject yourself to a most rigid discipline, of self-control, of renunciation, of sacrifice. That is what Mr. Ellis means when he speaks of morality as an art. The beauty of conceiving of morality as an art is this: that your standard of judgment, once you conceive of morality as an art, becomes subjective instead of objective. Then you do a thing not

because you want to live up to a law, not because you are free of popular opinion, not because you are afraid of the rigors of the law, of punishment; then you do a thing as the artist creates a thing, by your own standards; and you want to live a moral life because you want to be an artist; you want to give expression to the finest and the noblest thing; but you are never satisfied, even as the artist, the real artist, is never satisfied, until the highest in him and the noblest in him has had a chance to express itself. Then you will be moral, even if everybody about you is immoral.

Marcus Aurelius once said, "The emerald should so live its life as if it would be constantly saying: 'Whatever happens, I must be emerald.'" And Hillel said, "Where there are no men, you try to be a man." That is the artist speaking. His judgments, his standards, are not based upon the opinion of the standards of the people about him. He is his own judge, his own critic, his own master, and his own type.

And another beauty in conceiving of morality as an art is that it becomes an end in itself. When you speak of "art for art's sake," you do not mean that art can be indifferent to morality or to the needs of human life; you do not mean that art is a sort of an anarchistic member of society, primely individualistic to everything else in life. That is a childish conception of the idea of art for art's sake. What the real master of art means by that is that when you do a thing, you do it not with the expectation

of reward, not if given a profit, not for prestige, not for recognition, but for its own sake; because it is beautiful, because it is fine, because it responds to the best in you. "Be not like servants who serve their master," said the rabbis, "in order to receive a reward, but be like the servants who serve their master, the Master in heaven, who is also the master within us, without any expectation of reward." And you do the true, you do the just, you do the honorable, even when it causes you suffering and tears and humiliation; you will do it because it is the just and it is the honorable and it is the truthful.

To sum up the dominant idea of this book, as I read it, as I interpret it, every man should make of himself an artist; that is all. Every man should come to look upon life as an art. God has placed in your hands certain tools. Look upon yourself as a sculptor. Here is a block of marble that destiny has given to you; and destiny has also placed in you certain tools--mind, soul, reason, emotions, sentiments; these are all hammers, chisels and tools which life gave you, and this marble is your life; that is your fate, that is your destiny; that is yours, and you are to mould it. And use your tools wisely, use your tools intelligently, and chisel out of this marble not a thing awry, ugly, distorted, but chisel out of it an image that will body forth some eternal beauty. Make of yourself a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

All life is art; all life is one.

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