Those Personal Touches, Aldous Leonard Huxley

Those Personal Touches

Some little while ago old England was visited by an emissary from one of the most fabulously prosperous of American journals. I shall not divulge the journal's name. Suffice it to say that its circulation is an affair of millions and that the pages of advertising matter in every issue are, or were, before the slump, to be numbered by the hundred. The patient reader may discover, interspersed with the advertisements, a little healthy and uplifting fiction, a few articles.

It was in search of these last-mentioned commodities—articles—that the emissary came to England. In the course of an extended tour he must have visited almost all the literary men and women on the island. I had the honour of being among those visited. The journal is one, I am afraid, which seldom comes my way and which, even when it does come, I never read. (Life, after all, is so short, time flows so stanchlessly and there are so many interesting things to be done and seen and learnt, that one may be excused, I think, from perusing journals with circulations of over a million.) I do not know, therefore, what success attended the emissary's efforts to procure articles from England. All that I can say with certainty is that he has not yet received one from me. I wish he had; for then I should have received from him a very handsome cheque in return. I should have liked the money. The trouble was that I simply could not write the required article.

Now I have, in the course of a strenuous journalistic career, written articles on an extraordinary variety of subjects, from music to house decorating, from politics to painting, from plays to horticulture and metaphysics. Diffident at first of my powers, I learnt in the end to have confidence. I came to believe that I could, if called upon, write an article about anything. But I was wrong. The article which the emissary from the great American journal demanded of me was one, I found, which it was impossible for me to write. It was not that I was ignorant of the subject about which he asked me to hold forth. Ignorance is no deterrent to the hardened journalist, who knows by experience that an hour's reading in a well-stocked library will be enough to make him more learned about the matter in hand than ninety-nine out of every hundred of his readers. If it had been only a matter of ignorance, I should by this time have written a dozen articles and earned, I hope, a dozen cheques. No, it was not lack of knowledge that deterred me from writing. I was not ignorant of the subject of the proposed article. On the contrary, I knew a great deal about it—I knew perhaps too much. The emissary from the great American journal had asked me to write about myself.

Now there are certain aspects of myself about which I should feel no hesitation in writing. I should have no objection, for example, to explaining in print why I am not a Seventh Day Adventist, why I dislike playing bridge, why I prefer Chaucer as a poet to Keats. But the emissary of the great American journal did not want me to write about any of these aspects of myself. He wanted me to tell his million readers one of two things, either 'Why Women Are No Mystery To Me,' or 'Why Marriage Converted Me From My Belief In Free Love.' (I quote the actual formulae.) My protests that I had never believed in Free Love, that women were profoundly mysterious to me—no less mysterious, at any rate, than men, dogs, trees, stones, and all the other objects, living or inanimate in this extraordinary world—were ignored. It was in vain that I proposed alternative titles; they were turned down at once and with decision. The million readers, it appeared, were interested in me only in so far as I had been initiated into the mysteries of Aphrodite, or converted from the worship of illicit Eros to that of Hymen. I thought of the handsome cheque and told the emissary from the great American journal that I would see what I could do to satisfy the million readers. That was long ago, and I have done nothing; I am afraid that I never shall. That handsome cheque will never find its way into my banking account.

What astonished and still astonishes me (though the wise man is astonished by

nothing) is that similar handsome cheques should have found their way into the banking accounts of other literary men and women. For the earning of them seems to me personally an impossibility. The emissary from the great American journal himself admitted the difficulty of it. ‘In writing personal confessions,’ he epigrammatically put it, ‘it’s hard to strike the happy mean between reticence and bad taste.’ And he cited, as an example of reticence, the case of a lady who had been married successively to a prizefighter, a poet, an Italian duke, and a murderer, and whose personal confessions were yet entirely devoid of any ‘human’ interest whatever. I said nothing, but I reflected that my personal confessions, if I were to make them, would be no less completely lacking in the human, the all too human, touches demanded by the million readers. I have no objection to indulging in bad taste when I am writing about other people, particularly imaginary people. But with regard to myself, I can tolerate only reticence.

But not every one, it seems, shares my love of reticence. From the emissary of the great American journal, I gathered that no difficulty was experienced in finding literary men and women who were prepared to tell the world why their marriages were failures or successes, whichever the case might be; why they did, or didn’t, practise birth control; why and on what experimental grounds they believed in polygamy or polyandry; and so on. As I have never read this particular great American journal, I cannot say what may have been disclosed, megaphonically, in its confessional. But from its emissary I gathered that there was almost nothing which had not been disclosed. These confessions, he further assured me, were very popular. The circulation had gone up by six hundred thousand since the publication of them had started. Readers, it seemed, found them very helpful. He gave me to understand that by writing at length and in detail why women were no mystery to me I should be doing a great Social Service, I should be a Benefactor of Humanity. The account of my experiences, he said, would help the million readers to solve their own soul-problems; my example would lighten them over dark and difficult stretches of Life’s Road. And so on. Again I said nothing.

The hardest thing in the world is to understand, and, understanding, to allow for and forgive other people’s tastes and other people’s vices. Some people, for example, adore whisky, but would like to see all infringers of the seventh commandment thrown into prison and all who tell the truth about such infringements in print put to death. There are others, on the contrary, who love their neighbours’ wives and the naked truth, and regard excessive drinkers with physical disgust and moral horror. Readers of magazine fiction find it hard to sympathize with those whose favourite reading is ‘The Critique of Pure Reason.’ Nor can those whose hobby is astral physics easily understand the passion of so many of their fellow beings for watching football and betting on horse races. Similarly, since my own tastes run to reticence, I find it difficult to understand the confessor. To me he seems an exhibitionist, a monster of spiritual impudicity. For his part, I suppose, he finds me odiously selfish, unsociable, and misanthropic.

But the discussion of personal tastes is unfruitful. ‘I like this,’ asserts one; ‘I like that,’ says another. Each is obviously right, each is giving utterance to a truth that cannot be questioned, a truth that is beyond logic, immediate and compelling. Some authors like making public confessions; some don’t. Those are the cardinal, personal truths of the matter. Fashion may a little modify personal inclination. More authors now resort to the confessional than resorted in the past. For Confession is fashionable, and the fashion is strong enough to make the writers whose tastes in this matter are neutral, swing over to the side of the unreticent.

The present modishness of self-revelation is only the latest symptom of that great tendency, manifest in recent history, for art to become more personal. In ancient times the arts were almost completely anonymous. The artist worked, but without expecting his labours to bring him personal fame or what is known as ‘immortality.’ Consider the retiring modesty of the Egyptian fresco painter who spent his life producing unsigned masterpieces in tombs, where no living eye was ever intended to see them. Primitive literature in all countries is shrouded in

a similar anonymity.

It was the Greeks who first attached to works of art the names of their authors, and among whom it became customary for artists to work for the sake of immediate glory and immortal memory. It was among the Greeks that an interest in the personality of artists began to be widely felt. Several anecdotes illustrative of the characters and personal habits of Greek authors, painters, and sculptors have been preserved. The fall of the Roman Empire ushered in a second period of artistic anonymity. The Middle Ages produced a vast quantity of nameless painting, architecture, and sculpture, of ballads and narratives whose authors are unknown. And even of those artists whose names have come down to us very little has been recorded. Their contemporaries were not sufficiently interested in their private lives or personalities to set down the sort of details that it would have interested us to know.

With the Renaissance art once more ceased to be anonymous. Artists worked for contemporary celebrity and posthumous fame, and the public began to be interested in them as human beings, apart from their art. The autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini is a work symptomatic of the age in which it was written.

Since the days of the Renaissance public interest in the personality of artists has increased rather than diminished. And the artist, for his part, has done his best to satisfy this curiosity. In recent times it is from America that the demand for personal contacts with popular artists has been strongest, that curiosity about their intimate life has been most eager. The American public, it would seem, is not content to admire works of art; it wants to see and hear the artist in person. That is the principal reason, I suppose, why lectures are so enormously popular in America. The artists find this curiosity extremely profitable to themselves. From the time of Dickens onwards, authors have found that they could make more money by showing themselves and talking to American audiences than by going on writing books.

Increased demand for information about the private lives and characters of artists has led to an increased supply of autobiographies, reminiscences, and memoirs. Hundreds of people have made small fortunes by writing down what they remember of distinguished artists, and the artists have found it very profitable to play Boswell to their own Johnson. In the past, however, it has always been customary, except in rare cases, such as that of Rousseau, to pass over certain aspects of the intimate life in silence. A decent obscurity has generally veiled at least the nuptial chamber. It was an obscurity, I must admit, whose decency we have all had reasons to deplore. There are facts about the private lives of the departed Great which we would give much to know—facts which, owing to the silence of the Great themselves or of their friends, we shall never know.

But this decent obscurity, it seems, is a thing already of the past. When great American journals start organizing the public demand for personal touches and inside information, there is not much hope for decency or obscurity. Persuaded by the dumb eloquence of handsome cheques, literary men and women have begun to tell the world their most intimate and amorous secrets. We know why X divorced his wife, how Y enjoyed her experiments in Harlem, what made young Z decide to become a monk, and so on. One wishes that a few great American journals had existed in Shakespeare’s day. He might have contributed some interesting articles about Anne Hathaway and the Dark Lady of the Sonnets. He might; on the other hand he might not. And, much as I should like to know about Anne Hathaway and the Dark Lady, I rather hope he would not have written those articles. The only resemblance I have so far been able to discover between Shakespeare and myself is the fact that, like the Bard, I know little Latin and less Greek. I like to think that we also share a dislike for confession and a taste for reticence.

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