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**Adventures in the Arts Informal
Chapters on Painters, Vaudeville,
and Poets**

Marsden Hartley

Imprint

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series.

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PREFATORY NOTE

The papers in this book are not intended in any way to be professional treatises. They must be viewed in the light of entertaining conversations. Their possible value lies in their directness of impulse, and not in weight of argument. I could not wish to go into the qualities of art more deeply. A reaction, to be pleasant, must be simple. This is the apology I have to offer: Reactions, then, through direct impulse, and not essays by means of stiffened analysis.

Marsden Hartley.

Some of the papers included in this book have appeared in *Art and Archeology*, *The Seven Arts*, *The Dial*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *The Touchstone*. Thanks are due to the editors of these periodicals for permission to reprint.

TO

ALFRED STIEGLITZ

INTRODUCTION

TO

ADVENTURES IN THE ARTS

Perhaps the most important part of Criticism is the fact that it presents to the creator a problem which is never solved. Criticism is to him a perpetual Presence: or perhaps a ghost which he will not succeed in laying. If he could satisfy his mind that Criticism was a certain thing: a good thing or a bad, a proper presence or an irrelevant, he could psychologically dispose of it. But he can not. For Criticism is a configuration of responses and reactions so intricate, so kaleidoscopic, that it would be as simple to category Life itself.

The artist remains the artist precisely in so far as he rejects the simplifying and reducing process of the average man who at an early age puts Life away into some snug conception of his mind and race. This one turns the key. He has released his will and love from the vast Ceremonial of wonder, from the deep Poem of Being, into some particular detail of life wherein he hopes to achieve comfort or at least shun pain. Not so, the artist. In the moment when he elects to avoid by whatever [xii] makeshift the raw agony of life, he ceases to be fit to create. He must face experience forever freshly: reduce life each day anew to chaos and remould it into order. He must be always a willing virgin, given up to life and so enlacing it. Thus only may he retain and record that pure surprise whose earliest voicing is the first cry of the infant.

The unresolved expectancy of the creator toward Life should be his way toward Criticism also. He should hold it as part of his Adventure. He should understand in it, particularly when it is impatient, stupid and cruel, the ponderable weight of Life itself, reacting upon his search for a fresh conquest over it. Though it persist unchanged in its rôle of purveying misinformation and absurdity to the Public, he should know it for himself a blessed dispensation.

With his maturity, the creator's work goes out into the world. And in this act, he puts the world away. For the artist's work de-

finer: and definition means apartness: and the average man is undefined in the social body. Here is a danger for the artist within the very essence of his artistic virtue. During the years of his apprenticeship, he has struggled to create for himself an essential world out of experience. Now he begins to succeed: and he lives too fully in his own selection: he lives too simply in the effects of his effort. The gross and fumbling impact of experience is eased. The grind of ordinary intercourse is dimmed. The rawness of Fam [xiii] ily and Business is refined or removed. But now once more the world comes in to him, in the form of the Critic. Here again, in a sharp concentrated sense, the world moves on him: its complacency, its hysteria, its down-tending appetites and fond illusions, its pathetic worship of yesterdays and hatred of tomorrows, its fear-dogmas and its blood-avowals.

The artist shall leave the world only to find it, hate it only because he loves, attack it only if he serves. At that epoch of his life when the world's gross sources may grow dim, Criticism brings them back. Wherefore, the function of the Critic is a blessing and a need.

The creator's reception of this newly direct, intense, mundane intrusion is not always passive. If the artist is an intelligent man, he may respond to the intervening world on its own plane. He may turn critic himself.

When the creator turns critic, we are in the presence of a consummation: we have a complete experience: we have a sort of sacrament. For to the intrusion of the world he interposes his own body. In his art, the creator's body would be itself intrusion. The artist is too humble and too sane to break the ecstatic flow of vision with his personal form. The true artist despises the personal as an end. He makes fluid, and distils his personal form. He channels it beyond himself to a Unity which of course contains it. But Criticism is nothing which [xiv] is not the sheer projection of a body. The artist turns Self into a universal Form: but the critic reduces Form to Self. Criticism is to the artist the intrusion, in a form irreducible to art, of the body of the world. What can he do but interpose his own?

This is the value of the creator's criticism. He gives to the world himself. And his self is a rich life.

It includes for instance a direct experience of art, the which no professional critic may possess. And it includes as well a direct knowledge of life, sharpened in the retrospect of that devotion to the living which is peculiarly the artist's. For what is the critic after all, but an "artistic" individual somehow impeded from satisfying his esthetic emotion and his need of esthetic form in the gross and stubborn stuff of life itself: who therefore, since he is too intelligent for substitutes, resorts to the already digested matter of the hardier creators, takes their assimilated food and does with it what the athletic artist does with the meat and lymph and bone of God himself? The artist mines from the earth and smelts with his own fire. He is higher brother to the toilers of the soil. The critic takes the products of the creator, reforges, twists them, always in the cold. For if he had the fire to melt, he would not stay with metals already worked: when the earth's womb bursts with richer.

When the creator turns critic, we are certain of [xv] a feast. We have a fare that needs no metaphysical sauce (such as must transform the product of the Critic). Here is good food. Go to it and eat. The asides of a Baudelaire, a Goethe, a Da Vinci outweigh a thousand tomes of the professional critics.

I know of no American book like this one by Marsden Hartley. I do not believe American painting heretofore capable of so vital a response and of so athletic an appraisal. Albert Ryder barricaded himself from the world's intrusion. The American world was not intelligent enough in his days to touch him to an activer response. And Ryder, partaking of its feebleness, from his devotion to the pure subjective note became too exhausted for aught else. As a world we have advanced. We have a fully functioning Criticism ... swarms and schools of makers of the sonorous complacencies of Judgment. We have an integral body of creative-minded men and women interposing itself with valiance upon the antithesis of the social resistance to social growth. Hartley is in some ways a continuance of Ryder. One stage is Ryder, the solitary who remained one. A second stage is Hartley, the solitary who stands against the more aggressive, more interested Marketplace.

You will find in this book the artist of a cultural epoch. This man has mastered the plastic mes [xvi] sages of modern Europe: he has

gone deep in the classic forms of the ancient Indian Dance. But he is, still, not very far from Ryder. He is always the child—whatever wise old worlds he contemplates—the child, wistful, poignant, trammelled, of New England.

Hartley has adventured not alone deep but wide. He steps from New Mexico to Berlin, from the salons of the Paris of Marie Laurencin to the dust and tang of the American Circus. He is eclectic. But wherever he goes he chronicles not so much these actual worlds as his own pleasure of them. They are but mirrors, many-shaped and lighted, for his own delicate, incisive humor. For Hartley is an innocent and a *naïf*. At times he is profound. Always he is profoundly simple.

Tragedy and Comedy are adult. The child's world is Tragicomic. So Marsden Hartley's. He is not deep enough—like most of our Moderns—in the pregnant chaos to be submerged in blackness by the hot struggle of the creative will. He may weep, but he can smile next moment at a pretty song. He may be hurt, but he gets up to dance.

In this book—the autobiography of a creator—Marsden Hartley peers variously into the modern world: but it is in search of Fairies.

Waldo Frank.

Lisbon, June, 1921.

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FOREWORD

CONCERNING FAIRY TALES AND ME

Sometimes I think myself one of the unique children among children. I never read a fairy story in my childhood. I always had the feeling as a child, that fairy stories were for grown-ups and were best understood by them, and for that reason I think it must have been that I postponed them. I found them, even at sixteen, too involved and mystifying to take them in with quite the simple gullibility that is necessary. But that was because I was left alone with the incredibly magical reality from morning until nightfall, and the nights meant nothing more remarkable to me than the days did, no more than they do now. I find moonlight merely another species of illumination by which one registers continuity of sensation. My nursery was always on the edge of the strangers' knee, wondering who they were, what they might even mean to those who were as is called "nearest" them.

I had a childhood vast with terror and surprise. If it is true that one forgets what one wishes to forget, then I have reason for not remembering the major part of those days and hours that are supposed to introduce one graciously into the world and [4] offer one a clue to the experience that is sure to follow. Not that my childhood was so bitter, unless for childhood loneliness is bitterness, and without doubt it is the worst thing that can happen to one's childhood. Mine was merely a different childhood, and in this sense an original one. I was left with myself to discover myself amid the multitudinous other and far greater mysteries. I was never the victim of fear of goblins and ghosts because I was never taught them. I was merely taught by nature to follow, as if led by a rare and tender hand, the then almost unendurable beauty that lay on every side of me. It was pain then, to follow beauty, because I didn't understand beauty; it must always, I think, be distressing to follow anything one does not understand.

I used to go, in my earliest school days, into a little strip of woodland not far from the great ominous red brick building in a small

manufacturing town, on the edge of a wonderful great river in Maine, from which cool and quiet spot I could always hear the dominant clang of the bell, and there I could listen with all my very boyish simplicity to the running of the water over the stones, and watch—for it was spring, of course—the new leaves pushing up out of the mould, and see the light-hued blossoms swinging on the new breeze. I cared more for these in themselves than I did for any legendary presences sitting under them, shaking imperceptible fingers and waving invisible wands [5] with regality in a world made only for them and for children who were taught mechanically to see them there.

I was constantly confronted with the magic of reality itself, wondering why one thing was built of exquisite curves and another of harmonic angles. It was not a scientific passion in me, it was merely my sensing of the world of visible beauty around me, pressing in on me with the vehemence of splendor, on every side.

I feel about the world now precisely as I did then, despite all the reasons that exist to encourage the change of attitude. I care for the magic of experience still, the magic that exists even in facts, though little or nothing for the objective material value.

Life as an idea engrosses me with the same ardor as in the earlier boyish days, with the difference that there is much to admire and so much less to reverence and be afraid of. I harp always on the "idea" of life as I dwell perpetually on the existence of the moment.

I might say, then, that my childhood was comparable, in its simplicity and extravagance of wonder, to the youth of Odilon Redon, that remarkable painter of the fantasy of existence, of which he speaks so delicately in letters to friends. His youth was apparently much like mine, not a youth of athleticism so much as a preoccupation with wonder and the imminence of beauty surrounding all things. [6]

I was preoccupied with the "being" of things. Things in themselves engrossed me more than the problem of experience. I was satisfied with the effect of things upon my senses, and cared nothing for their deeper values. The inherent magic in the appearance of the world about me, engrossed and amazed me. No cloud or blossom or bird or human ever escaped me, I think.

I was not indifferent to anything that took shape before me, though when it came to people I was less credulous of their perfection because they pressed forward their not always certain credentials upon me. I revered them then too much for an imagined austerity as I admire them now perhaps not enough for their charm, for it is the charm of things and people only that engages and satisfies me. I have completed my philosophical equations, and have become enamored of people as having the same propensities as all other objects of nature. One need never question appearances. One accepts them for their face value, as the camera accepts them, without recommendation or specialized qualification. They are what they become to one. The capacity for legend comes out of the capacity for experience, and it is in this fashion that I hold such high respect for geniuses like Grimm and Andersen, but as I know their qualities I find myself leaning with more readiness toward Lewis Carroll's superb "Alice in Wonderland."

I was, I suppose, born backward, physically [7] speaking. I was confronted with the vastitude of the universe at once, without the ingratiating introduction of the fairy tale. I had early made the not so inane decision that I would not read a book until I really wanted to. One of the rarest women in the world, having listened to my remark, said she had a book she knew I would like because it was so different, and forthwith presented me with Emerson's Essays, the first book that I have any knowledge of reading, and it was in my eighteenth year. Until then I had been wholly absorbed with the terrors and the majestic inferences of the moment, the hour, and the day. I was alone with them, and they were wonderful and excessively baffling in their splendors; then, after filling my mind and soul with the legendary splendors of Friendship, and The Oversoul-Circles, and Compensation, each of these words of exciting largeness in themselves, I turned to the dramatic unrealities of Zarathustra, which, of course, was in no way to be believed because it did not exist. And then came expansion and release into the outer world again through interpretation of Plato, and of Leaves of Grass itself.

I have saved myself from the disaster of beliefs through these magical books, and am free once more as in my early childhood to indulge myself in the iridescent idea of life, as Idea.

But the fairy story is nothing after all but a means whereby we, as children, may arrive at some clue as to the significance of things around us, and [8] it is through them the child finds his way out from incoherency toward comprehension. The universe is a vast place, as we all know who think we comprehend it in admiring it. The things we cannot know are in reality of no consequence, in comparison with the few we can know. I can know, for instance, that my morning is the new era of my existence, and that I shall never live through another like it, as I have never lived through the one I recall in my memory, which was Yesterday. Yesterday was my event in experience then, as it is my event in memory now. I am related to the world by the way I feel attached to the life of it as exemplified in the vividness of the moment. I am, by reason of my peculiar personal experience, enabled to extract the magic from the moment, discarding the material husk of it precisely as the squirrel does the shell of the nut.

I am preoccupied with the business of transmutation—which is to say, the proper evaluation of life as idea, of experience as delectable diversion. It is necessary for everyone to poetize his sensations in order to comprehend them. Weakness in the direction of philosophy creates the quality of dogmatic interrogation. A preoccupation with religious characteristics assists those who are interested in the problem of sublimation. The romanticist is a kind of scientific person engaged in the correct assembling of chemical constituents that will produce a formula by which he can live out every one of his [9] moments with a perfect comprehension of their charm and of their everlasting value to him. If the romanticist have the advantage of comprehension of the sense of beauty as related to art, then he may be said to be wholly equipped for the exquisite legend of life in which he takes his place, as factor in the perfected memory of existence, which becomes the real history of life, as an idea. The person of most power in life is he who becomes high magician with the engaging and elusive trick.

It is a fairy-tale in itself if you will, and everyone is entitled to his or her own private splendor, which, of course, must be invented from intelligence for oneself.

There will be no magic found away from life. It is what you do with the street-corner in your brain that shall determine your gift. It will not be found in the wilderness, and in one's toying with the magic of existence is the one gift for the management of experience.

I hope one day, when life as an "idea" permits, and that I have figured will be somewhere around my ninetieth year, to take up books that absorb the brains of the intelligent. When I read a book, it is because it will somehow expose to me the magic of existence. My fairy tales of late have been "Wuthering Heights," and the work of the Brothers James, Will and Henry. I am not so sure but that I like William best, and I assure you that is [10] saying a great deal, but it is only because I think William is more like life as idea.

I shall hope when it comes time to sit in a garden and fold one's hands gently, listening to the birds all over again, watching the blossoms swinging with a still acuter eye, to take up the books of Grimm and Andersen, for I have a feeling they will be the books that will best corroborate my comprehension of life as an idea. I think it will be the best time to read them then, to go out with a memory softened by the warm hues and touches of legend that rise out of the air surrounding life itself.

There will be a richer comprehension of "once upon a time there was a princess"—who wore a great many jewelled rings on her fingers and whose eyes were like deep pools in the farthest fields of the sky—for that will be the lady who let me love in the ways I was made to forget; the lady whose hands I have touched as gently as possible and from whom I have exacted no wish save that I might always love someone or something that was so like herself as to make me think it was no other than herself. It is because I love the idea of life better than anything else that I believe most of all in the magic of existence, and in spite of much terrifying and disillusioning experience of late, I *believe*.

