

XLIII

IRVING'S PHILOSOPHY OF HIS ART

The key-stone—The scientific process—Character—The Play—Stage Perspective—Dual Consciousness—Individuality—The True Realism

I

IRVING and I were alone together one hot afternoon in August 1889, crossing in the steamer from South-sea to the Isle of Wight, and were talking of that phase of Stage Art which deals with the conception and development of character. In the course of our conversation, whilst he was explaining to me the absolute necessity of an actor's understanding the prime qualities of a character in order that he may make it throughout consistent, he said these words :

“ If you do not pass a character through your own mind it can never be sincere ! ”

I was much struck with the phrase, coming as it did as the crown of an argument—the explanation of a great artist's method of working out a conceived idea. To me it was the embodiment of an artistic philosophy. Even in the midst of an interesting conversation, during which we touched upon many subjects of inner mental working, the phrase presented itself as one of endless possi-

bilities, and hung as such in my mind. Lest I should forget the exact words I wrote them then and there in my pocket-book, whence I entered them later in my diary.

I think that if I had interrupted the conversation at the above words and asked my friend to expound his philosophy and elaborate it, he would have been for an instant amused, and on the impulse of the moment would have deprecated the use of such an important word. Men untrained to Mental Science and unfamiliar with its terminology are apt to place too much importance on abstract, wide-embracing terms, and to find the natural flow of their true thought interrupted by disconcerting fears. His amusement would have been only momentary, however. I know now, after familiar acquaintance with his intellectual method for over a quarter of a century, that with his mental quickness—which was so marked as now and again to seem like inspiration—he would have grasped the importance of the theme as bearing upon the Art to which he had devoted himself and to his own part in it. And would have tried to explain matters as new and relevant subjects, consequences or causes, presented themselves. But such an exposition would have been—must have been confused and incomplete. The process of a creative argument is a silent and lonely one, requiring investigation and guesses; the following up of clues in the labyrinth of thought till their utility or their falsity has been proved. The most that a striving mind can do at such a time is to keep sight of some main purpose or tendency; some perpetual recognition of its objective. If in addition the thinker has to keep

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eternally and consciously within his purview a lot of other subjects bearing on his main idea, each with its own attendant distractions and divergencies, his argument would to a listener seem but a jumble of undigested facts, deductions and imaginings. Moreover, it would leave in the mind of the latter a belief that the speaker is without any real conviction at all; a mere groping in the dark. If, on the other hand, the man in thinking out his problem tries to bear in mind his friend's understanding—with an eye to his ultimate approval and acceptance of his argument and conclusion—he is apt to limit himself to commonplace and accepted truths. In such case his thought is machine-made, and lacks the penetrative force which has its origin in intellectual or psychic fire. A whole history of such thought cannot equal a single glimpse or hint of an earnest mind working truly.

As Irving on that pleasant voyage spoke the words which seemed to explain his whole intellectual method I grasped instinctively the importance of the utterance, though the argument for present reticence did not present itself in its entirety.

To me the words became a text of which the whole of his work seemed the expounding. From him, as an artist, the thought was elementary and basic; explanatory and illuminative.

II

To “pass a character through your mind” requires a scientific process of some kind; some process which is natural, and therefore consistent. If

we try to analyse the process we shall find that it is in accord with any other alimentative process. Nature varies in details, but her intents and objects are fixed: to fit and sustain each to its appointed task. In the animal or vegetable kingdoms, so in the mind of man. The hemlock and the apple take the juices of the earth through different processes of filtration; the one to noxious ends, the other to beneficence. Hardness and density have their purpose in the mechanism of the vegetable world; the wood rejects what the softer and more open valves or tissues receive. So too in the world of animal life. The wasp and the viper, the cuttlefish and the stinging ray work to different ends from the sheep and the sole, the pheasant and the turtle. But one and all draw alimentative substance from common sources. But he who would understand character must draw varying results from common causes. And the only engine powerful enough in varying purposes for this duty is the human brain. Again, the worker in imagination is the one who most requires different types and varying methods of development. And still again, of all workers in imagination, the actor has most need for understanding; for on him is imposed the task of re-creating to external and material form types of character written in abstractions. It behoves him, then, primarily to understand what exactly it is that he has to materialise. To this end two forms of understanding are necessary: first that which the poet—the creator or maker of the play, sets down for him; second the truth of the given individual to the type or types which he is supposed to represent. This latter implies a

UNDERSTANDING OF CHARACTER 5

large knowledge of types ; for how can any man judge of the truth of things when to him both the type and the instance are strange. Thus it happens that an actor should be a judge of character ; an understander of those differences which discriminate between classes, and individuals of the class. This is an actor's study at the beginning of his work—when he is preparing to study his Art.

Let me say at the outset of this branch of my subject that I am in it trying to put into words, and the words into some sort of ordered sequence, that knowledge of his craft which in a long course of years Irving conveyed to me. Sometimes the conveyance was made consciously ; sometimes unconsciously. By words, by inferences, by acting ; by what he added to seemingly completed work, or by what he omitted after fuller thought or experience. One by one, or group by group, these things were interesting, though often of seeming unimportance ; but taken altogether they go to make up a philosophy. In trying to formulate this I am not speaking for myself ; I am but following so well as I can the manifested wisdom of the master of his craft. Here and there I shall be able to quote Irving's exact words, spoken or written after mature thought and with manifest and deliberate purpose. For the rest, I can only illustrate by his acting, or at worst by the record of the impression conveyed to my own mind.

III

We may I think divide the subject thus :

CHARACTER

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| A. ITS ESSENCE | { | <i>x.—The Dramatist's setting out of it</i>
<i>y.—Its truth to accepted type</i>
<i>z.—The Player's method of studying</i>
<i>these two</i> |
| B. RETICENCE | | |
| C. ART AND TRUTH | | |

THE PLAY

STAGE PERSPECTIVE

DUAL CONSCIOUSNESS

INDIVIDUALITY, AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF IT

IV

CHARACTER

A.—ITS ESSENCE

We think in abstractions ; but we live in concretions. In real life an individual who is not in any way distinguishable from his fellows is but a poor creature after all and is not held of much account by anybody. That law of nature which makes the leaves of a tree or the units of any genus, any species, any variety all different—which in the animal or the vegetable world alike makes each unit or class distinguishable whilst adhering to the type—is of paramount importance to man. Tennyson has hammered all this out and to a wonderful conclusion in those splendid stanzas of *In Memoriam* LIV to LVI beginning “ Oh yet we trust that somehow good ” to “ Behind the veil, behind the veil.”

ESSENCE OF CHARACTER

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Let it be sufficient for us to know and accept that there can be endless individual idiosyncrasies without violation of type. To understand these is the study of character. The *differentia* of each individual is an endless and absorbing study, not given to all to master. Some at least of this mastery is a necessary part of the equipment of an actor. Now there is a common saying that "the eyebrow is the actor's feature." This is largely true; but there is a double purpose in its truth. In the first place the eyebrow is movable at will; a certain amount of exercise can give mobility and control. It can therefore heighten expression to a very marked degree. But in addition it, when in a marked degree, is the accompaniment of a large frontal sinus—that bony ridge above the eyebrows which in the terminology of physiognomy implies the power to distinguish minute differences, and so is credited with knowledge of "character"—the difference between one and another; divergencies within a common type. With this natural equipment and the study which inevitably follows—for powers are not given to men in vain—the actor can by experience know types, and endless variants and combinations of the same. So can any man who has the quality. But the actor alone has to work out the ideas given to him by this study in recognisable material types and differentiated individual instances of the same type.

x

The dramatist having, whether by instinct or reason, selected his type has in the play to give him situations which can allow opportunity for the

expression of his qualities ; words in which he can expound the thoughts material to him in the given situations ; and such hints as to personal appearance, voice and bearing as can assist the imagination of a reader. All these things must be consistent ; there must be nothing which would show to the student falsity to common knowledge. “ Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles ? ” has a large application in art, and specially in stage art. It is the ignorance or neglect of this eternal law which is to my mind the weakness of some writers. Instance Ibsen who having shown in some character an essential quality through one or two acts makes the after action of the character quite at variance with it. A similar fault weakens certain of the fine work of “ Ian Maclaren ” when he proceeds to explain away in a later story some perfectly consistent and understandable quality of mind or action in one of his powerful and charming character stories. No after-explanation can supersede the conviction of innate character.

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Now a dramatist is at perfect liberty to choose any type he likes and to deal with his individual creations just as he chooses. There is no law against it ; however ridiculous it may be, it makes no breach of any code in accepted morals. But he should for his own sake be consistent ; the character should at least be true to itself. It is by such qualities that posterity as well as the juries of the living judge. The track of literary progress is littered with wreckage from breaches of this truth.

A LESSON FROM THE BLIND 9

Of this we may be sure : if a character have in itself opposing qualities which cannot be reconciled, then it can never have that unity which makes for strength. Therefore the actor who has to represent the abstract idea as a concrete reality must at the beginning understand the dramatist's intention. He can by emphasis of one kind or another help to convey the dominant idea. There is an exact instance of this from Irving's own work ; one which at the same time illustrates how an actor, howsoever thoughtful and experienced he may be, can learn : For a good many years he had played Shylock to universal praise ; then, all at once, he altered it. Altered it in the manner of utterance of the first words he speaks : " Three thousand ducats,—well." He explained it to me when having noticed the change I asked him about it. He said that it was due to the criticism of a *blind* man—I think it was the Chaplain of the American Senate, Dr. Milburn.

"What did he say?" I asked. He answered with a thoughtful smile :

"He said : ' I thought at first that you were too amiable. I seemed to miss the harsh note of the usurer's voice ! ' He was quite right ! The audience should from the first understand, if one can convey it, the dominant note of a character ! "

This was distinctly in accordance with his own theory ; and he always remembered gratefully the man who so enlightened him. The incident illustrates one phase of " passing a character through one's own mind." When it has gone through this process it takes a place as an actual thing—a sort of clothing of the player's own identity with the

attributes of another. This new-seeming identity must have at first its own limitations ; the clothing does not fit—somewhere too tight, elsewhere too loose. But at last things become easier. The individuality within, being of plastic nature, adapts itself by degrees to its surroundings. And then for purposes of external expression the mastery is complete.

Experience adds much to this power of mastery. When an actor has played many parts he learns to express the dominant ideas of various characters in simple form, so that each, through a sort of artistic metonymy, becomes a type. In fact, as he goes on studying fresh characters he gets a greater easiness of expression ; he is not creating every time, but is largely combining things already created. This is true Art. The etymology of the word shows that its purpose is rather to join than to create. Were it not that each mind must create the units which have to be joined, histrionic art would not be primarily a creative art.

In Irving's own words :

“ It is often supposed that great actors trust to the inspiration of the moment. Nothing can be more erroneous. There will, of course, be such moments when an actor at a white heat illumines some passages with a flood of imagination (and this mental condition, by the way, is impossible to the student sitting in his arm-chair) ; but the great actor's surprises are generally well weighed, studied, and balanced. . . . And it is this accumulation of such effects which enables an actor, after many