

**THE SOUL: AN
ESSAY TOWARDS A
POINT OF VIEW**

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The Soul: An Essay Towards a Point of View by Van Wyck Brooks

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VAN WYCK BROOKS

**THE SOUL: AN
ESSAY TOWARDS A
POINT OF VIEW**

TO
J. B. YEATS
R. H. A.

Or se'tu quel Virgilio, e quella fonte
Che spande di parlar sì largo fiume?
* * * * *
Tu se'lo mio maestro.

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I.

THE life of a child is indeed that of a chameleon. Who forbade us then to live many lives which had no resemblance to each other? By what magic was it given us then to see that nothing contradicts anything else? We threw off the solemn weight of consistency and in a winter's afternoon, without stirring from the four walls of a room, experienced all the modes of being. And if in later years we feel that then we were above all natural, can we doubt that the destiny of man is to experience the whole of life? Or shall we conclude that a golden age was given us, not as a vision to which life can be made to conform, but as a consolation for what it cannot be?

II.

But in youth a fact confronts us. A man has actually to be something, and therefore he cannot be other things as well. And again, to be something implies that one has to do something. The social world opens before us and requires of us an economy of morals, a singleness of aim. We possess qualities that cannot exist together in a human being. What selection is to be made? What is to be kept, encouraged, fostered in ourselves?

III.

Everything we do is the realization of something we have thought or of something our ancestors have thought for us. And our life is the projection of all those thoughts that have the special kind of vitality required for visible existence. They are few indeed beside the multitudinous thoughts which have a different vitality,—those which cannot express themselves because they are framed for a different set of circumstances than that in which they find themselves. Every thought that is born in the heart begs to be allowed to live, to share our life. If we deny it life it will die, and is it well to carry within us things that are dead? One thought is born as a kiss, one as an empire, one as an act of mercy. These are thoughts that life can contain because there are those to kiss, those

to conquer, and those to pity. But not less real than these are thoughts that we call happiness, love, and truth.

Does life contain these things, throw back to us these mysteries, laid bare of all they contain which torments us?

Life can offer us nothing but a multitude of objects upon which we can expend ourselves and in doing so forget that we desire all, all, all.

IV.

Perhaps we should be less fortunate if life allowed us a wider latitude. It would then be a sleep in which we should expend ourselves in the way that nature seems to intend, unconsciously, as if in deep weariness after one eternity and as if in preparation for the second eternity to which only death shall open our eyes.

Then indeed the sleep of life would be untroubled with splendid dreams and we should have passed through it like elemental forces which have not yet become ripe to assume individual consciousness. Nature indeed does her best to postpone that day when we shall be free, for a little instant, to accuse her if we feel a force in our pretensions or to thank her for so tenderly keeping us in ignorance of their futility. Or what if nature understands that the human heart is of such a kind that the terms of life cannot express it, cannot do it justice? How can we accuse her who has laboured to prevent us from becoming aware of ourselves, to keep our motives obscure, to destroy in us the faculty of criticism which can only teach us that we are better than the materials we are allowed to work in? Is death then not even a rebuke? Perhaps it is rather a silent opening of the door—without the irony of an invitation—back into an eternity which appears to be second best only because we fancy that failure in life is the same as failure in us. . . .

V.

When I thought of this it seemed to me that humanity was like a vast ocean which contained all things known and unknown and was without a bottom. And the lives of men were like so many ships, great full-rigged barks and small vessels, carefully built up and sealed against the storm, sailing, tacking, drifting across this

ocean. Some sailed swiftly, with vigilant pilots, as if they steered for a distant shore: but this ocean had no shore. Now and again one of these pilots dropped a plummet into the sea. And as it struck the pilot would take his bearings from this depth, supposing it to be the bottom. But this bottom was in reality, though he did not know it, only the wreckage of other ships floating under the surface.

Then I said, I will be this ocean: and if I have to be a ship I will be only a raft for the first wave to capsize and sink. . . .

VI.

Here, surely, something was utterly wrong. Existence could not be wrong, for existence is all there is to give us the meaning of right and wrong. The mistake then must lie in what is made of life. Perhaps, I thought, I shall understand better if I consider exactly what is the composition of a man. A man is a certain gathering of elements like water and air,—such as compose the universe. Now, in the universe there are actually no dimensions. Things are only greater or smaller after they have been applied to a touchstone which exists in man himself and forms his point of view. A single flame is fire, and just as simply fire as a whole conflagration. It takes its form as flame when it unites with certain other elements, and passes back into its infinite condition when those other elements have exhausted the impulse which for the moment combined them. But how can there be any such thing as quantity of flame, when all flame comes out of infinity and returns to infinity? None at all, except from the point of view of life itself, which measures things in relation to its own period of manifestation, that is according to a given conception of time and space. And life itself is just such another flame. No man therefore can be greater or smaller than another man except in relation to the time and space of what he calls life.

VII.

Certainly the gradual process by which we become accustomed to life turns our attention more and more from the spectacle of a

shifting universe, dims the inward eye, replaces the mood of wonder in the presence of immense and undiscovered forces to a mood of lesser possibilities, probabilities, and what we call facts. A child newly born has no sense of dimension: it knows simply that there are some things you can hold in your hand and some you cannot. But we begin to speculate and in doing so to compare. And we are filled at once with a sense of our own insignificance. Yet we do not see that we feel ourselves insignificant only because we compare ourselves with stars. No sooner do we consider ourselves to be entities than we colour all else with our mood and everything becomes to us an entity. The world becomes one, the universe of worlds another, and as we have created the idea of large and small, how very small must we needs seem beside immensities for which we have devised a scale?

What chagrin then falls upon us! What catalepsy! We fly to each other to distract ourselves from the insane remembrance and to reassure ourselves that there are others, ephemeral and without protection even as we are.

But alas! even our comforters are not exempt from the judgment we carry with us. Gnats that we think ourselves, we introduce a scale by which some appear to be greater gnats and some lesser, and we are never more pleased than when some illusion justifies our discovery of men more insignificant than we.

Life then turns into a competition. We pass it in accumulating unrealities, and even in solitude we keep our minds steadfastly upon all things that are able to distract us from the thought of our destiny lest for one moment the inward voice might reach us and give the lie to our endeavours. . . .

VIII.

I read lately a book by Anatole France in which the philosopher, Monsieur Bergeret, discovers that he has once for all to do with an impossible wife. He does not return unkindness for unkindness. He remains calm with all the high tolerance of disillusion. Day follows day, but still he says nothing. The servants, awed, frozen, go away,—the heart of that household is broken. And silent amid

the ruins, pinnaced upon the cold heights of judgment, principle, reason, the philosopher sits and surveys the waste places of disenchantment.

Here is most reasonable truth. But I, too, was frozen by it. To know that you are nothing, that other men are nothing, that life and time are nothing—surely this is not so true as to believe that all these things are a little something, and to be rather careless now and again just how little or big they are.

Above all, I thought, we are born to be undignified, to be of the scufflers, of the scramblers, of the ragamuffins, to answer back, to strike back, to lose our tempers when others lose their temper, to be fallible when the only way to forgive is by being fallible—lest that precious fatalism of ours heap coals of fire upon some blundering head.

What can be the value of a conception of truth if the soul thereby imagines that it has found the final truth—a truth final enough to justify this massacre of love?

IX.

As I thought over this book I asked myself what was the innermost motive of Monsieur Bergeret's point of view. Did he perhaps consider his own destiny more important than that of his wife or his servants? No, it was the reverse of this. He could not be so ingenuous, under the eye of eternity, as to feel more important than the least of his servants. The fatal thing was that he considered himself of no importance, not because he felt humble but because he felt small. Humility is free and full of joy. The man who feels himself small is a slave aware of slavery and full of pride. It was because Monsieur Bergeret felt himself to be of no importance that he returned the compliment to all creation. He thought himself sufficiently unimportant to make his unimportance an issue, a criterion: whereas a humble man does not stop to think of his unimportance because he does not think of himself at all,—the soul breaks down its dams, floods out in all directions, and becomes lost in the energy of the universe. How can there be anything petty but the moods in which we think things petty!