

STYLE

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BY

WALTER RALEIGH

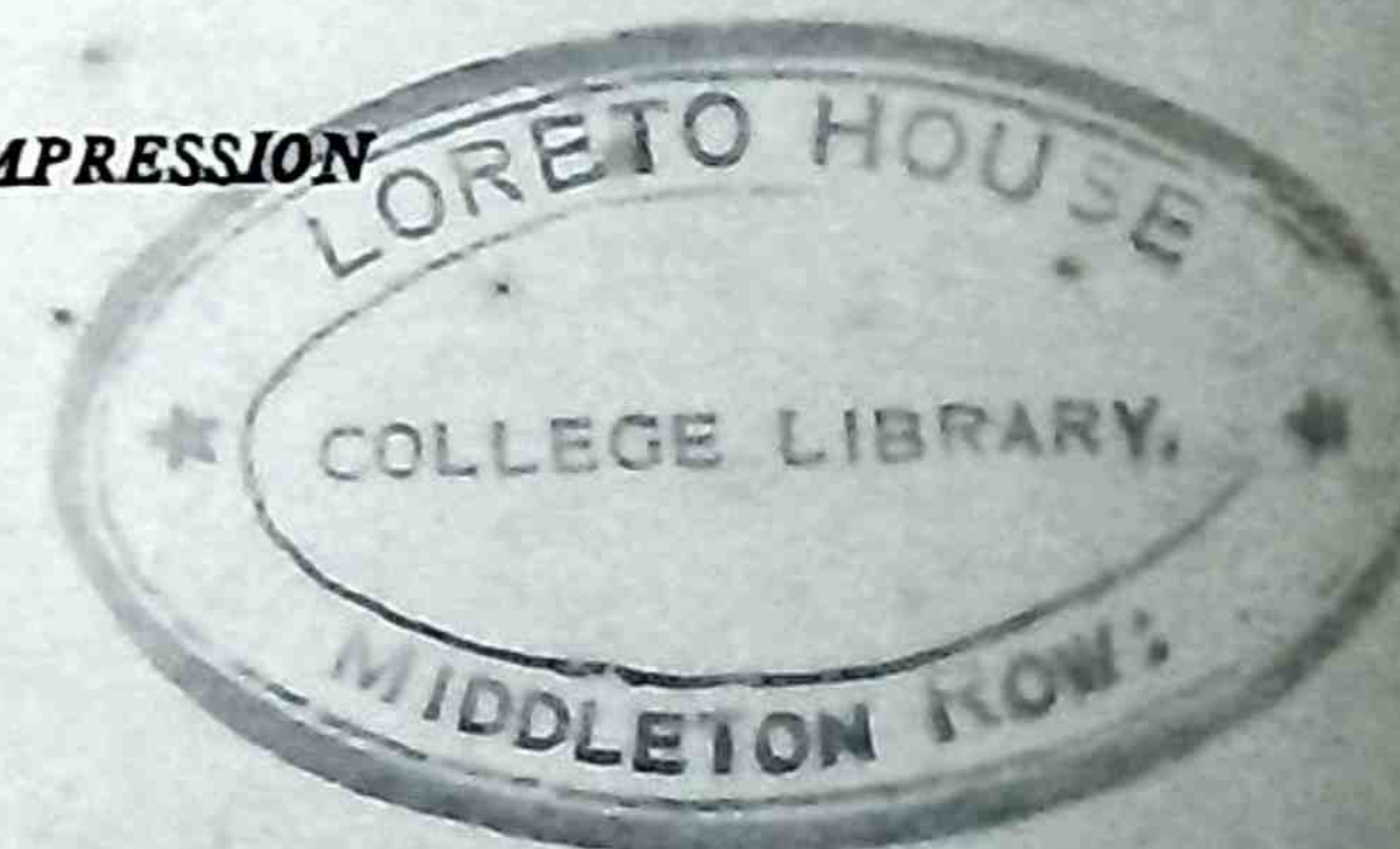
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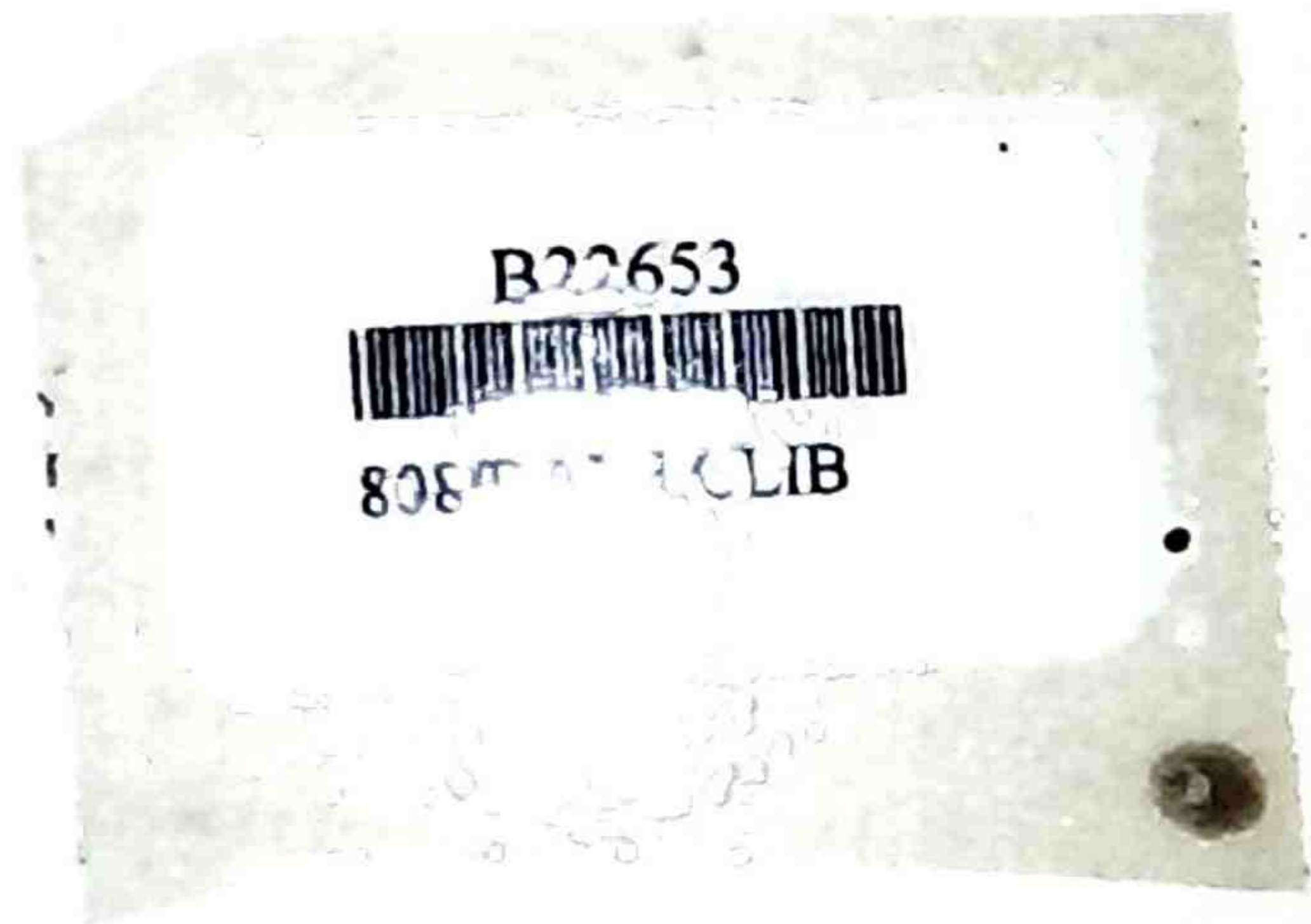


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STYLE

tion—what art but the art of literature admits the entrance of all these, and guards them from the suddenness of mortality? What other art gives scope to natures and dispositions so diverse, and to tastes so contrarious? Euclid and Shelley, Edmund Spenser and Herbert Spencer, King David and David Hume, are all followers of the art of letters.

In the effort to explain the principles of an art so bewildering in its variety, writers on style have gladly availed themselves of analogy from the other arts, and have spoken, for the most part, not without a parable. It is a pleasant trick they put upon their pupils, whom they gladden with the delusion of a golden age, and perfection to be sought backwards, in arts less complex. The teacher of writing, past master in the juggling craft of language, explains that he is only carrying into letters the principles of counterpoint, or that it is all a matter of colour and perspective, or that structure and ornament are the beginning and end of his intent. Professor of eloquence and of thieving, his winged shoes remark him as he skips

*The Problem
of Style.*

from metaphor to metaphor, not daring to trust himself to the partial and frail support of any single figure. He lures the astonished novice through as many trades as were ever housed in the central hall of the world's fair. From his distracting account of the business it would appear that he is now building a monument, anon he is painting a picture (with brushes dipped in a gallipot made of an earthquake); again he strikes a keynote, weaves a pattern, draws a wire, drives a nail, treads a measure, sounds a trumpet, or hits a target; or skirmishes around his subject; or lays it bare with a dissecting knife; or embalms a thought; or crucifies an enemy. What is he really doing all the time?

The Instrument and the Audience, with a Digression on the Actor.

Besides the artist two things are to be considered in every art,—the instrument and the audience; or, to deal in less figured phrase, the medium and the public. From both of these the artist, if he would find freedom for the exercise of all his powers, must sit decently aloof. It is the misfortune of the actor, the singer, and the dancer,

that their bodies are their sole instruments. On to the stage of their activities they carry the heart that nourishes them and the lungs wherewith they breathe, so that the soul, to escape degradation, must seek a more remote and difficult privacy. That immemorial right of the soul to make the body its home, a welcome escape from publicity and a refuge for sincerity, must be largely foregone by the actor, who has scant liberty to decorate and administer for his private behoof an apartment that is also a place of business. His ownership is limited by the necessities of his trade; when the customers are gone, he eats and sleeps in the bar-parlour. Nor is the instrument of his performances a thing of his choice; the poorest skill of the violinist may exercise itself upon a Stradivarius, but the actor is reduced to fiddle for the term of his natural life upon the face and fingers that he got from his mother. The serene detachment that may be achieved by disciples of greater arts can hardly be his, applause touches his personal pride too nearly, the mocking echoes of derision infest the solitude of his retired ima-

disadvantages of an actor.

gination. In none of the world's great polities has the practice of this art been found consistent with noble rank or honourable estate. Christianity might be expected to spare some sympathy for a calling that offers prizes to abandonment and self-immolation, but her eye is fixed on a more distant mark than the pleasure of the populace, and, as in gladiatorial Rome of old, her best efforts have been used to stop the games. Society, on the other hand, preoccupied with the art of life, has no warmer gift than patronage for those whose skill and energy exhaust themselves on the mimicry of life. The reward of social consideration is refused, it is true, to all artists, or accepted by them at their immediate peril. By a natural adjustment, in countries where the artist has sought and attained a certain modest social elevation, the issue has been changed, and the architect or painter, when his health is proposed, finds himself, sorely against the grain, returning thanks for the employer of labour, the genial host, the faithful husband, the tender father, and other pillars of society. The risk of too

The light in which the actor's art is regarded

great familiarity with an audience which insists on honouring the artist irrelevantly, at the expense of the art, must be run by all; a more clinging evil besets the actor, in that he can at no time wholly escape from his phantasmal second self. On this creature of his art he has lavished the last doit of human capacity for expression; with what bearing shall he face the exacting realities of life? Devotion to his profession has beggared him of his personalty; ague, old age and poverty, love and death, find in him an entertainer who plies them with a feeble repetition of the triumphs formerly prepared for a larger and less imperious audience. The very journalist—though he, too, when his profession takes him by the throat, may expound himself to his wife in phrases stolen from his own leaders—is a miracle of detachment in comparison; he has not put his laughter to sale. It is well for the soul's health of the artist that a definite boundary should separate his garden from his farm, so that when he escapes from the conventions that rule his work he may be free to recreate himself. But

art should be studied for the sake of art; audience does not give a true appreciation

actor can never be natural

where shall the weary player keep holiday? Is not all the world a stage?

*The Sense
Elements.*

Whatever the chosen instrument of an art may be, its appeal to those whose attention it bespeaks must be made through the senses. Music, which works with the vibrations of a material substance, makes this appeal through the ear; painting through the eye; it is of a piece with the complexity of the literary art that it employs both channels,—as it might seem to a careless apprehension, indifferently.

For the writer's pianoforte is the dictionary, words are the material in which he works, and words may either strike the ear or be gathered by the eye from the printed page. The alternative will be called delusive, for, in European literature at least, there is no word-symbol that does not imply a spoken sound, and no excellence without euphony. But the other way is possible, the gulf between mind and mind may be bridged by something which has a right to the name of literature although it exacts no aid from the ear. The picture-writing of the Indians, the hieroglyphs

glyphs of Egypt, may be cited as examples of literary meaning conveyed with no implicit help from the spoken word. Such an art, were it capable of high development, would forsake the kinship of melody, and depend for its sensual elements of delight on the laws of decorative pattern. In a land of deaf-mutes it might come to a measure of perfection. But where human intercourse is chiefly by speech, its connexion with the interests and passions of daily life would perforce be of the feeblest, it would tend more and more to cast off the fetters of meaning that it might do freer service to the jealous god of visible beauty. The overpowering rivalry of speech would rob it of all its symbolic intent and leave its bare picture. Literature has favoured rather the way of the ear and has given itself zealously to the tuneful ordering of sounds. Let it be repeated, therefore, that for the traffic of letters the senses are but the door-keepers of the mind; none of them commands an only way of access,—the deaf can read by sight, the blind by touch. It is not amid the bustle of the live senses, but in

an under-world of dead impressions that Poetry works her will, raising that in power which was sown in weakness, quickening a spiritual body from the ashes of the natural body. The mind of man is peopled, like some silent city, with a sleeping company of reminiscences, associations, impressions, attitudes, emotions, to be awakened into fierce activity at the touch of words. By one way or another, with a fanfaronnade of the marching trumpets, or stealthily, by noiseless passages and dark posterns, the troop of suggesters enters the citadel, to do its work within. The procession of beautiful sounds that is a poem passes in through the main gate, and forthwith the by-ways resound to the hurry of ghostly feet, until the small company of adventurers is well-nigh lost and overwhelmed in that throng of insurgent spirits.

*The
Functions of
Sense.*

To attempt to reduce the art of literature to its component sense-elements is therefore vain. Memory, "the warder of the brain," is a fickle trustee, whimsically lavish to strangers, giving up to the appeal of a spoken word or unspoken

symbol, an odour or a touch, all that has been garnered by the sensitive capacities of man. It is the part of the writer to play upon memory, confusing what belongs to one sense with what belongs to another, extorting images of colour at a word, raising ideas of harmony without breaking the stillness of the air. He can lead on the dance of words till their sinuous movements call forth, as if by mesmerism, the likeness of some adamantine rigidity, time is converted into space, and music begets sculpture. To see for the sake of seeing, to hear for the sake of hearing, are subsidiary exercises of his complex metaphysical art, to be counted among its rudiments. Picture and music can furnish but the faint beginnings of a philosophy of letters. Necessary though they be to a writer, they are transmuted in his service to new forms, and made to further purposes not their own.

The power of vision—hardly can a writer, least of all if he be a poet, forego that part of his equipment. In dealing with the impalpable, dim subjects that lie beyond the border-land of exact

Picture.