

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada Ebook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Inferior Religions [The eighth story in Lewis's 1927 collection The Wild Body: A Soldier of Humour and Other Stories]

Author: Lewis, Percy Wyndham (1882-1957)

Date of first publication: 1927

Edition used as base for this ebook: New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928

Date first posted: 18 January 2011

Date last updated: 17 June 2014

Faded Page ebook#20110112

This ebook was produced by Barbara Watson & the Online Distributed Proofreading Canada Team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This ebook was produced from images generously made available by the Internet Archive

INFERIOR RELIGIONS

by Wyndham Lewis

PART I

To introduce my puppets, and the Wild Body, the generic puppet of all, I must project a fanciful wandering figure to be the showman to whom the antics and solemn gambols of these wild children are to be a source of strange delight.

In the first of these stories he makes his appearance. The fascinating imbecility of the creaking men machines, that some little restaurant or fishing-boat works, was the original subject of these studies, though in fact the nautical set never materialized. The boat's tackle and dirty little shell, or the hotel and its technique of hospitality, keeping the limbs of the men and women involved in a monotonous rhythm from morning till night, that was the occupational background, placed in Brittany or in Spanish Galicia.

A man is made drunk with his boat or restaurant as he is with a merry-go-round: only it is the staid, everyday drunkenness of the normal real, not easy always to detect. We can all see the ascendance a 'carousal' has on men, driving them into a set narrow intoxication. The wheel at Carisbrooke imposes a set of movements upon the donkey inside it, in drawing water from the well, that it is easy to grasp. But in the case of a hotel or fishing-boat, for instance, the complexity of the rhythmic scheme is so great that it passes as open and untrammelled life. This subtle and wider mechanism merges, for the spectator, in the general variety of nature. Yet we have in most lives the spectacle of a pattern as circumscribed and complete as a theorem of Euclid. So these are essays in a new human mathematic. But they are, each of them, simple shapes, little monuments of logic. I should like to compile a book of forty of these propositions, one deriving from and depending on the other. A few of the axioms for such a book are here laid down.

These intricately moving bobbins are all subject to a set of objects or to one in particular. Brotcotnaz is fascinated by one object, for instance; one at once another vitality. He bangs up against it wildly at regular intervals, blackens it, contemplates it, moves round it and dreams. He reverences it: it is his task to kill it. All such fascination is religious. The damp napkins of the inn-keeper are the altar-cloths of his rough illusion, as Julie's bruises are the markings upon an idol; with the peasant, Mammon dominating the background. Zoborov and Mademoiselle Péronnette struggle for a Pension de Famille, unequally. Zoborov is the 'polish' cuckoo of a stupid and ill-managed nest.

These studies of rather primitive people are studies in a savage worship and attraction. The inn-keeper rolls between his tables ten million times in a realistic rhythm that is as intense and superstitious as are the figures of a war-dance. He worships his soup, his damp napkins, the lump of procreative flesh probably associated with him in this task. Brotcotnaz circles round Julie with gestures a million times repeated. Zoborov camps against and encircles Mademoiselle Péronnette and her lover Carl. Bestre is the eternal watchdog, with an elaborate civilized ritual. Similarly the Cornac is engaged in a death struggle with his 'Public.' All religion has the mechanism of the celestial bodies, has a dance. When we wish to renew our idols, or break up the rhythm of our naïveté, the effort postulates a respect which is the summit of devoutness.

PART II

I WOULD present these puppets, then, as carefully selected specimens of religious fanaticism. With their attendant objects or fetishes they live and have a regular food and vitality. They are not creations, but puppets. You can be as exterior to them, and live their life as little, as the showman grasping from beneath and working about a Polichinelle. They are only shadows of energy, not living beings. Their mechanism is a logical structure and they are nothing but that.

Boswell's Johnson, Mr. Veneering, Malvolio, Bouvard and Pécuchet, the 'commissaire' in *Crime and Punishment*, do not live; they are congealed and frozen into logic, and an exuberant hysterical truth. They transcend life and are complete cyphers, but they are monuments of dead imperfection. Their only significance is their egoism. So the great intuitive figures of creation live with the universal egoism of the poet. This 'Realism' is satire. Satire is the great Heaven of Ideas, where you meet the titans of red laughter; it is just below intuition, and life charged with black illusion.

PART III

WHEN we say 'types of humanity,' we mean violent individualities, and nothing stereotyped. But Quixote, Falstaff, and Pecksniff attract, in our memory, a vivid following. All difference is energy, and a category of humanity a relatively small group, and not the myriads suggested by a generalization.

A comic type is a failure of a considerable energy, an imitation and standardizing of self, suggesting the existence of a uniform humanity,—creating, that is, a little host as like as ninepins; instead of one synthetic and various ego. It is the laziness that is the habit-world or system of a successful personality. It is often part of our own organism become a fetish. So Boswell's Johnson or Sir John Falstaff are minute and rich religions.

That Johnson was a sort of god to his biographer we readily see. But Falstaff as well is a sort of english god, like the rice-bellied gods of laughter in China. They are illusions hugged and lived in; little dead totems. Just as all gods are a repose for humanity, the big religions an immense refuge and rest, so are these little grotesque fetishes. One reason for this is that, for the spectator or participator, it is a world within the world, full of order, even if violent.

All these are forms of static art, then. There is a great deal of divine olympian sleep in english humour, and its delightful dreams. The most gigantic spasm of laughter is sculptural, isolated, and essentially simple.

PART IV

I WILL catalogue the attributes of Laughter.

1. Laughter is the Wild Body's song of triumph.
2. Laughter is the climax in the tragedy of seeing, hearing and smelling self-consciously.
3. Laughter is the hark of delight of a gregarious animal at the proximity of its kind.
4. Laughter is an independent, tremendously important, and lurid emotion.
5. Laughter is the representative of tragedy, when tragedy is away.
6. Laughter is the emotion of tragic delight.
7. Laughter is the female of tragedy.
8. Laughter is the strong elastic fish, caught in Styx, springing and flapping about until it dies.
9. Laughter is the sudden handshake of mystic violence and the anarchist.
10. Laughter is the mind sneezing.
11. Laughter is the one obvious commotion that is not complex, or in expression dynamic.
12. Laughter does not [progress](#). It is primitive, hard and unchangeable.

PART V

THE Wild Body, I have said, triumphs in its laughter. What is the Wild Body?

The Wild Body, as understood here, is that small, primitive, literally antediluvian vessel in which we set out on our adventures. Or regarded as a brain, it is rather a winged magic horse, that transports us hither and thither, sometimes rushing, as in the Chinese cosmogonies, up and down the outer reaches of space. Laughter is the brain-body's snort of exultation. It expresses its wild sensation of power and speed; it is all that remains physical in the flash of thought, its friction: or it may be a defiance flung at the hurrying fates.

The Wild Body is this supreme survival that is us, the stark apparatus with its set of mysterious spasms; the most profound of which is laughter.

PART VI

THE chemistry of personality (subterranean in a sort of cemetery, whose decompositions are our lives) puffs up in frigid balls, soapy Snowmen, arctic carnival-masks, which we can photograph and fix.

Upwards from the surface of existence a lurid and dramatic scum oozes and accumulates into the characters we see. The real and tenacious poisons, and sharp forces of vitality, do not socially transpire. Within five yards of another man's eyes we are on a little crater, which, if it erupted, would split up as would a cocoa-tin of nitrogen. Some of these bombs are ill-made, or some erratic in their timing. But they are all potential little bombs. Capriciously, however, the froth-forms of these darkly-contrived machines twist and puff in the air, in our legitimate and liveried masquerade.

Were you the female of Bestre or Brotcotnaz and beneath the counterpane with him, you would be just below the surface of life, in touch with a tragic organism. The first indications of the proximity of the real soul would be apparent. You would be for hours beside a filmy crocodile, conscious of it like a bone in an X-ray, and for minutes in the midst of a tragic wallowing. The soul lives in a cadaverous activity; its dramatic corruption thumps us like a racing engine in the body of a car. The finest humour is the great play-shapes blown up or given off by the tragic corpse of life underneath the world of the camera. This futile, grotesque, and sometimes pretty spawn, is what in this book is snapshotted by the imagination.

Any master of humour is an essential artist; even Dickens is no exception. For it is the character of uselessness and impersonality which is found in laughter (the anarchist emotion concerned in the comic habit of mind) that makes a man an 'artist.' So when he begins living on his laughter, even in spite of himself a man becomes an artist. Laughter is that arch complexity that is really as simple as bread.

PART VII

IN this objective play-world, corresponding to our social consciousness, as opposed to our solitude, no final issue is decided. You may blow away a man-of-bubbles with a burgundian gust of laughter, but that is not a personality, it is an apparition of no importance. But so much correspondence it has with its original that, if the cadaveric travail beneath is vigorous and bitter, the dummy or mask will be of a more original grotesqueness. The opposing armies in the early days in Flanders stuck up dummy-men on poles for their enemies to pot at, in a spirit of ferocious banter. It is only a shell of that description that is engaged in the sphere of laughter. In our rather drab revel there is a certain category of spirit that is not quite inanimate and yet not very funny. It consists of those who take, at the Clarkson's situated at the opening of their lives, some conventional Pierrot costume. This is intended to assure them a minimum of strain, of course, and so is a capitulation. In order to evade life we must have recourse to those uniforms, but such a choice leaves nothing but the white and ethereal abstraction of the shadow of laughter.

So the King of Play is not a phantom corresponding to the sovereign farce beneath the surface. The latter must always be reckoned on: it is the Skeleton at the Feast, potentially, with us. That soul or dominant corruption is so real that he cannot rise up and take part in man's festival as a Falstaff of unwieldy spume. If he comes at all it must be as he is, the skeleton or bogey of veritable life, stuck over with corruptions and vices. As such he could rely on a certain succès d'estime: nothing more.

PART VIII

A SCORNFUL optimism, with its confident onslaughts on our snobbism, will not make material existence a peer for our energy. The gladiator is not a perpetual monument of triumphant health: Napoleon was harried with Elbas: moments of vision are blurred rapidly, and the poet sinks into the rhetoric of the will.

But life is invisible, and perfection is not in the waves or houses that the poet sees. To rationalize that appearance is not possible. Beauty is an icy douche of ease and happiness at something *suggesting* perfect conditions for an organism: it remains suggestion. A stormy landscape, and a pigment consisting of a lake of hard, yet florid waves; delight in each brilliant scoop or ragged burst, was John Constable's beauty. Leonardo's consisted in a red rain on the shadowed side of heads, and heads of massive female aesthetes. Uccello accumulated pale parallels, and delighted in cold architecture of distinct colour. Korin found in the symmetrical gushing of water, in waves like huge vegetable insects, traced and worked faintly, on a golden pâte, his business. Cézanne [liked](#) cumbrous, democratic slabs of life, slightly leaning, transfixed in vegetable intensity.

Beauty is an immense predilection, a perfect conviction of the desirability of a certain thing, whatever that thing may be. It is a universe for one organism. To a man with long and consumptive fingers, a sturdy hand may be heaven. We can aim at no universality of form, for what we see is not the reality. Henri Fabre was in every way a superior being to a Salon artist, and he knew of elegant grubs which he would prefer to the Salon's painter's nymphs.—It is quite obvious though, to fulfil the conditions of successful art, that we should live in relatively small communities.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE

The following changes were made to the original text:

Page 238: proress → [progress](#)

Page 242: like → [liked](#)

Minor variations in spelling and punctuation have been preserved.

[End of *Inferior Religions*, by Wyndham Lewis]