

**VITAL LIES: STUDIES OF
SOME
VARIETIES OF RECENT
OBSCURANTISM; VOL. I**

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Vital lies: studies of some varieties of recent obscurantism; Vol. I by Vernon Lee

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BY
VERNON LEE

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How then may we devise one of those falsehoods in the hour of need, I said, which we lately spoke of—just one royal lie [*γενναῖόν τι ἐν ψευδομένους*] which may deceive the rulers, if that be possible, and at any rate the rest of the city?

Plato, *Republic*, iii. 414

(Jowett's Translation).

Relling. I'm fostering the vital lie in him.

Gregers. Vital lie? Is that what you said?

Relling. Yes—I said vital lie—for illusion, you know, is the stimulating principle.

Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*.

TO THE MEMORY OF MY FRIEND

GIOVANNI VAILATI

WHO, BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE, EXPLAINED

THE INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN

"WILLING TO BELIEVE"

AND

"MAKING ONE'S IDEAS CLEAR"

PREFACE

SCIENCE is for ever invalidating some part of its statements, because it is for ever perfecting their whole ; and reason, as it develops, takes its own self as subject for its criticism, asking, with Berkeley, Hume and Kant, and now with the Pragmatism of Peirce : What can we know ? or rather, How do we know ? Encouraged by, and taking advantage of this, the minds reluctantly shaken in their religious habits, are laying about them for excuses to disbelieve whatever has made them unbelievers. They allege reason's criticism of its own nature and methods to discredit reason's conclusions. They argue that if religion is made by man it must be worth re-making. Philological exegesis, anthropological study of myths and institutions, psychology and metaphysical analysis, and all the sciences which have undermined what used to be called *religious truths*, are now invoked to re-instate some portion of them in the garb of desirable and valuable errors.

Some of these thinkers, unable to maintain that the ideas which they cling to are true, put their backs to the wall and explain that their value is symbolic, mythical, in short, dependent upon their being partially false.

Another group—or the same group at another moment—refuse to forgo the compelling power, or at least the reassuring sound, of the word *true*; and these apply their logic to re-defining truth in such a way as to include edifying and efficacious fallacy and falsehood.

It is to both these groups, and any cross-groups derived from them, that I venture to apply the name of Obscurantists, because they employ, they increase, and, for- emotional and sometimes æsthetic reasons, they prefer, a certain amount of darkness, or at all events, a convenient, a reposeful, a suggestive intellectual penumbra.

Moreover, these thinkers have attached themselves, without exception, to the philosophical school which makes *Life* the central and ultimate and paramount mystery. Hence I take the liberty of symbolizing the various vague creeds (clung to by themselves, or recommended for the use of others) of these intellectual Obscurantists in the formula given by Ibsen's Doctor Relling, and calling them, and these studies of them, "Vital Lies."

March 1912.