

Reticence in Literature

Some Roundabout Remarks

By Hubert Crackanthorpe

DURING the past fifty years, as every one knows, the art of fiction has been expanding in a manner exceedingly remarkable, till it has grown to be the predominant branch of imaginative literature. But the other day we were assured that poetry only thrives in limited and exquisite editions; that the drama, here in England at least, has practically ceased to be literature at all. Each epoch instinctively chooses that literary vehicle which is best adapted for the expression of its particular temper: just as the drama flourished in the robust age of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson; just as that outburst of lyrical poetry, at the beginning of the century in France, coincided with a period of extreme emotional exaltation; so the novel, facile and flexible in its conventions, with its endless opportunities for accurate delineation of reality, becomes supreme in a time of democracy and of science—to note but these two salient characteristics.

And, if we pursue this light of thought, we find that, on all sides, the novel is being approached in one especial spirit, that it would seem to be striving, for the moment at any rate, to perfect itself within certain definite limitations. To employ a hackneyed,

and often quite unintelligent, catchword—the novel is becoming realistic.

Throughout the history of literature, the jealous worship of beauty—which we term idealism—and the jealous worship of truth—which we term realism—have alternately prevailed. Indeed, it is within the compass of these alternations that lies the whole fundamental diversity of literary temper.

Still, the classification is a clumsy one, for no hard and fast line can be drawn between the one spirit and the other. The so-called idealist must take as his point of departure the facts of Nature ; the so-called realist must be sensitive to some one or other of the forms of beauty, if each would achieve the fineness of great art. And the pendulum of production is continually swinging, from degenerate idealism to degenerate realism, from effete vapidty to slavish sordidity.

Either term, then, can only be employed in a purely limited and relative sense. Completely idealistic art—art that has no point of contact with the facts of the universe, as we know them—is, of course, an impossible absurdity ; similarly, a complete reproduction of Nature by means of words is an absurd impossibility. Neither emphasis nor abstraction can be dispensed with : the one, eliminating the details of no import ; the other, exaggerating those which the artist has selected. And, even were such a thing possible, it would not be Art. The invention of a highly perfected system of coloured photography, for instance, or a skilful recording by means of the phonograph of scenes in real life, would not subtract one whit from the value of the painter's or the playwright's interpretation. Art is not invested with the futile function of perpetually striving after imitation or reproduction of Nature ; she endeavours to produce, through the adaptation of a restricted number of natural facts, an harmonious and satisfactory whole. Indeed, in
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this very process of adaptation and blending together, lies the main and greater task of the artist. And the novel, the short story, even the impression of a mere incident, convey each of them, the imprint of the temper in which their creator has achieved this process of adaptation and blending together of his material. They are inevitably stamped with the hall-mark of his personality. A work of art can never be more than a corner of Nature, seen through the temperament of a single man. Thus, all literature is, must be, essentially subjective; for style is but the power of individual expression. The disparity which separates literature from the reporter's transcript is ineradicable. There is a quality of ultimate suggestiveness to be achieved; for the business of art is, not to explain or to describe, but to suggest. That attitude of objectivity, or of impersonality towards his subject, consciously or unconsciously, assumed by the artist, and which nowadays provokes so considerable an admiration, can be attained only in a limited degree. Every piece of imaginative work must be a kind of autobiography of its creator—significant, if not of the actual facts of his existence, at least of the inner working of his soul. We are each of us conscious, not of the whole world, but of our own world; not of naked reality, but of that aspect of reality which our peculiar temperament enables us to appropriate. Thus, every narrative of an external circumstance is never anything else than the transcript of the impression produced upon ourselves by that circumstance, and, invariably, a degree of individual interpretation is insinuated into every picture, real or imaginary, however objective it may be. So then, the disparity between the so-called idealist and the so-called realist is a matter, not of æsthetic philosophy, but of individual temperament. Each is at work, according to the especial bent of his genius, within precisely the same limits. Realism, as a creed, is as ridiculous as any other literary creed.

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Now, it would have been exceedingly curious if this recent specialisation of the art of fiction, this passion for draining from the life, as it were, born, in due season, of the general spirit of the latter half of the nineteenth century, had not provoked a considerable amount of opposition—opposition of just that kind which every new evolution in art inevitably encounters. Between the vanguard and the main body there is perpetual friction.

But time flits quickly in this hurried age of ours, and the opposition to the renascence of fiction as a conscientious interpretation of life is not what it was; its opponents are not the men they were. It is not so long since a publisher was sent to prison for issuing English translations of celebrated specimens of French realism; yet, only the other day, we vied with each other in doing honour to the chief figure-head of that tendency across the Channel, and there was heard but the belated protest of a few worthy individuals, inadequately equipped with the jaunty courage of ignorance, or the insufferable confidence of second-hand knowledge.

And during the past year things have been moving very rapidly. The position of the literary artist towards Nature, his great inspirer, has become more definite, more secure. A sound, organised opinion of men of letters is being acquired; and in the little bouts with the *bourgeois*—if I may be pardoned the use of that wearisome word—no one has to fight single-handed. Heroism is at a discount; Mrs. Grundy is becoming mythological; a crowd of unsuspected supporters collect from all sides, and the deadly conflict of which we had been warned becomes but an interesting skirmish. Books are published, stories are printed, in old-established reviews, which would never have been tolerated a few years ago. On all sides, deference to the tendency of the time is spreading. The truth must be admitted: the roar of unthinking prejudice is dying away.

All this is exceedingly comforting : and yet, perhaps, it is not a matter for absolute congratulation. For, if the enemy are not dying as gamely as we had expected, if they are, as I am afraid, losing heart, and in danger of sinking into a condition of passive indifference, it should be to us a matter of not inconsiderable apprehension. If this new evolution in the art of fiction—this general return of the literary artist towards Nature, on the brink of which we are to-day hesitating—is to achieve any definite, ultimate fineness of expression, it will benefit enormously by the continued presence of a healthy, vigorous, if not wholly intelligent, body of opponents. Directly or indirectly, they will knock a lot of nonsense out of us, will these opponents ;—why should we be ashamed to admit it ? They will enable us to find our level, they will spur us on to bring out the best—and only the best—that is within us.

Take, for instance, the gentleman who objects to realistic fiction on moral grounds. If he does not stand the most conspicuous to-day, at least he was pre-eminent the day before yesterday. He is a hard case, and it is on his especial behalf that I would appeal. For he has been dislodged from the hill top, he has become a target for all manner of unkind chaff, from the ribald youth of Fleet Street and Chelsea. He has been labelled a Philistine : he has been twitted with his middle-age ; he has been reported to have compromised himself with that indecent old person, Mrs. Grundy. It is confidently asserted that he comes from Putney, or from Sheffield, and that, when he is not busy abolishing the art of English literature, he is employed in safeguarding the interests of the grocery or tallow-chandler's trade. Strange and cruel tales of him have been printed in the monthly reviews ; how, but for him, certain well-known popular writers would have written masterpieces ; how, like the ogre in the fairy tale, he consumes every morning at break-
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fast a hundred pot-boiled young geniuses. For the most part they have been excellently well told, these tales of this moral ogre of ours; but why start to shatter brutally their dainty charm by a soulless process of investigation? No, let us be shamed rather into a more charitable spirit, into making generous amends, into rehabilitating the greatness of our moral ogre.

He is the backbone of our nation; the guardian of our mediocrity; the very foil of our intelligence. Once, you fancied that you could argue with him, that you could dispute his dictum. Ah! how we cherished that day-dream of our extreme youth. But it was not to be. He is still immense; for he is unassailable; he is flawless, for he is complete within himself; his lucidity is yet unimpaired; his impartiality is yet supreme. Who amongst us could judge with a like impartiality the productions of Scandinavia and Charpentier, Walt Whitman, and the Independent Theatre? Let us remember that he has never professed to understand Art, and the deep debt of gratitude that every artist in the land should consequently owe to him; let us remember that he is above us, for he belongs to the great middle classes; let us remember that he commands votes, that he is candidate for the County Council; let us remember that he is delightful, because he is intelligible.

Yes, he is intelligible; and of how many of us can that be said? His is no complex programme, no subtly exacting demand. A plain moral lesson is all that he asks, and his voice is as of one crying in the ever fertile wilderness of Smith and of Mudie.

And he is right, after all—if he only knew it. The business of art is to create for us fine interests, to make of our human nature a more complete thing: and thus, all great art is moral in the wider and the truer sense of the word. It is precisely on this point of the meaning of the word "moral" that we and our ogre
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part company. To him, morality is concerned only with the established relations between the sexes and with fair dealing between man and man: to him the subtle, indirect morality of Art is incomprehensible.

Theoretically, Art is non-moral. She is not interested in any ethical code of any age or any nation, except in so far as the breach or observance of that code may furnish her with material on which to work. But, unfortunately, in this complex world of ours, we cannot satisfactorily pursue one interest—no, not even the interest of Art, at the expense of all others—let us look that fact in the face, doggedly, whatever pangs it may cost us—pleading magnanimously for the survival of our moral ogre, for there will be danger to our cause when his voice is no more heard.

If imitation be the sincerest form of flattery, then our moral ogre must indeed have experienced a proud moment, when a follower came to him from the camp of the lovers of Art, and the artistic objector to realistic fiction started on his timid career. I use the word timid in no disparaging sense, but because our artistic objector, had he ventured a little farther from the vicinity of the coat-tails of his powerful protector, might have secured a more adequate recognition of his performances. For he is by no means devoid of adroitness. He can patter to us glibly of the "gospel of ugliness"; of the "cheerlessness of modern literature"; he can even juggle with that honourable property-piece, the maxim of Art for Art's sake. But there have been moments when even this feat has proved ineffective, and some one has started scoffing at his pretended "delight in pure rhythm or music of the phrase," and flippantly assured him that he is talking nonsense, and that style is a mere matter of psychological suggestion. You fancy our performer nonplussed, or at least boldly bracing himself to brazen the matter out. No, he passes dexterously to his certain effect

effect—a fervid denunciation of express trains, evening newspapers, Parisian novels, or the first number of *THE YELLOW BOOK*. Verily, he is a versatile person.

Sometimes, to listen to him you would imagine that pessimism and regular meals were incompatible; that the world is only ameliorated by those whom it completely satisfies, that good predominates over evil, that the problem of our destiny had been solved long ago. You begin to doubt whether any good thing can come out of this miserable, inadequate age of ours, unless it be a doctored survival of the vocabulary of a past century. The language of the coster and cadger resound in our midst, and, though Velasquez tried to paint like Whistler, Rudyard Kipling cannot write like Pope. And a weird word has been invented to explain the whole business. Decadence, decadence: you are all decadent nowadays. Ibsen, Degas, and the New English Art Club; Zola, Oscar Wilde, and the Second Mrs. Tanqueray. Mr. Richard Le Gallienne is hoist with his own petard; even the British playwright has not escaped the taint. Ah, what a hideous spectacle. All whirling along towards one common end. And the elegant voice of the artistic objector floating behind: "*Après vous le déluge.*" A wholesale abusing of the tendencies of the age has ever proved, for the superior mind, an inexhaustible source of relief. Few things breed such inward comfort as the contemplation of one's own pessimism—few things produce such discomfort as the remembrance of our neighbour's optimism.

And yet, pessimists though we may be dubbed, some of us, on this point at least, how can we compete with the hopelessness enjoyed by our artistic objector, when the spectacle of his despondency makes us insufferably replete with hope and confidence, so that while he is loftily bewailing or prettily denouncing the completeness of our degradation, we continue to delight in the evil of
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our ways? Oh, if we could only be sure that he would persevere in reprimanding this persistent study of the pitiable aspects of life, how our hearts would go out towards him? For the man who said that joy is essentially, regrettably inartistic, admitted in the same breath that misery lends itself to artistic treatment twice as easily as joy, and resumed the whole question in a single phrase. Let our artistic objector but weary the world sufficiently with his despair concerning the permanence of the cheerlessness of modern realism, and some day a man will arise who will give us a study of human happiness, as fine, as vital as anything we owe to Guy de Maupassant or to Ibsen. That man will have accomplished the infinitely difficult, and in admiration and in awe shall we bow down our heads before him.

In one radical respect the art of fiction is not in the same position as the other arts. They—music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and the drama—possess a magnificent fabric of accumulated tradition. The great traditions of the art of fiction have yet to be made. Ours is a young art, struggling desperately to reach expression, with no great past to guide it. Thus, it should be a matter for wonder, not that we stumble into certain pitfalls, but that we do not fall headlong into a hundred more.

But, if we have no great past, we have the present and the future—the one abundant in facilities, the other abundant in possibilities. Young men of to-day have enormous chances: we are working under exceedingly favourable conditions. Possibly we stand on the threshold of a very great period. I know, of course, that the literary artist is shamefully ill-paid, and that the man who merely caters for the public taste, amasses a rapid and respectable fortune. But how is it that such an arrangement seems other than entirely equitable? The essential conditions of the two cases are entirely distinct. The one man is free to give untrammelled
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expression to his own soul, free to fan to the full the flame that burns in his heart : the other is a seller of wares, a unit in national commerce. To the one is allotted liberty and a living wage ; to the other, captivity and a consolation in Consols. Let us whine, then, no more concerning the prejudice and the persecution of the Philistine, when even that misanthrope, Mr. Robert Buchanan, admits that there is no power in England to prevent a man writing exactly as he pleases. Before long the battle for literary freedom will be won. A new public has been created—appreciative, eager and determined ; a public which, as Mr. Gosse puts it, in one of those admirable essays of his, “ has eaten of the apple of knowledge, and will not be satisfied with mere marionnettes. Whatever comes next,” Mr. Gosse continues, “ we cannot return, in serious novels, to the inanities and impossibilities of the old well-made plot, to the children changed at nurse, to the madonna-heroine and the god-like hero, to the impossible virtues and melodramatic vices. In future, even those who sneer at realism and misrepresent it most wilfully, will be obliged to put their productions more in accordance with veritable experience. There will still be novel-writers who address the gallery, and who will keep up the gaudy old convention, and the clumsy *Family Herald* evolution, but they will no longer be distinguished men of genius. They will no longer sign themselves George Sand or Charles Dickens.”

Fiction has taken her place amongst the arts. The theory that writing resembles the blacking of boots, the more boots you black, the better you do it, is busy evaporating. The excessive admiration for the mere idea of a book or a story is dwindling ; so is the comparative indifference to slovenly treatment. True is it that the society lady, dazzled by the brilliancy of her own conversation, and the serious-minded spinster, bitten by some sociological theory, still decide in the old jaunty spirit, that fiction is the obvious
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medium through which to astonish or improve the world. Let us beware of the despotism of the intelligent amateur, and cease our toying with that quaint and winsome bogey of ours, the British Philistine, whilst the intelligent amateur, the deadliest of Art's enemies, is creeping up in our midst.

For the familiarity of the man in the street with the material employed by the artist in fiction, will ever militate against the acquisition of a sound, fine, and genuine standard of workmanship. Unlike the musician, the painter, the sculptor, the architect, the artist in fiction enjoys no monopoly in his medium. The word and the phrase are, of necessity, the common property of everybody ; the ordinary use of them demands no special training. Hence the popular mind, while willingly acknowledging that there are technical difficulties to be surmounted in the creation of the sonata, the landscape, the statue, the building, in the case of the short story, or of the longer novel, declines to believe even in their existence, persuaded that in order to produce good fiction, an ingenious idea, or "plot," as it is termed, is the one thing needed. The rest is a mere matter of handwriting.

The truth is, and, despite Mr. Waugh, we are near recognition of it, that nowadays there is but scanty merit in the mere selection of any particular subject, however ingenious or daring it may appear at first sight ; that a man is not an artist, simply because he writes about heredity or the *demi-monde*, that to call a spade a spade requires no extraordinary literary gift, and that the essential is contained in the frank, fearless acceptance by every man of his entire artistic temperament, with its qualities and its flaws.