

Reticence in Literature

By Arthur Waugh

HE never spoke out. Upon these four words, gathered by chance from a private letter, Matthew Arnold, with that super-subtle ingenuity which loved to take the word and play upon it and make it of innumerable colours, has constructed, as one may conjecture some antediluvian wonder from its smallest fragment, a full, complete, and intimate picture of the poet Thomas Gray. *He never spoke out.* Here, we are told, lies the secret of Gray's limitation as much in life as in literature: so sensitive was he in private life, so modest in public, that the thoughts that arose in him never got full utterance, the possibilities of his genius were never fulfilled; and we, in our turn, are left the poorer for that nervous delicacy which has proved the bane of the poet, living and dead alike. It is a singularly characteristic essay—this paper on Gray, showing the writer's logical talent at once in its strongest and its weakest capacities, and a complete study of Arnold's method might well, I think, be founded upon its thirty pages. But in the present instance I have recurred to that recurring phrase, *He never spoke out*, not to discuss Matthew Arnold's estimate of Gray, nor, indeed, to consider Gray's relation to his age; but merely to point out, what the turn of Arnold's argument did not require him to consider, namely, the extraordinarily un-English aspect of this reticence

reticence in Gray, a reticence alien without doubt to the English character, but still more alien to English literature. Reticence is not a national characteristic—far otherwise. The phrase “national characteristic” is, I know well, a cant phrase, and, as such, full of the dangers of abuse. Historical and ethnographical criticism, proceeding on popular lines, has tried from time to time to fix certain tendencies to certain races, and to argue from individuals to generalities with a freedom that every law of induction belies. And so we have come to endow the Frenchman, universally and without exception, with politeness, the Indian, equally universally, with cunning, the American with the commercial talent, the German with the educational, and so forth. Generalisations of this kind must, of course, be accepted with limitations. But it is not too much, perhaps, to say that the Englishman has always prided himself upon his frankness. He is always for speaking out; and it is this faculty of outspokenness that he is anxious to attribute to those characters which he sets up in the market-places of his religion and his literature, as those whom he chiefly delights to honour. The demigods of our national verse, the heroes of our national fiction, are brow-bound, above all other laurels, with this glorious freedom of free speech and open manners, and we have come to regard this broad, untrammelled virtue of ours, as all individual virtues *will* be regarded with the revolution of the cycle of provinciality, as a guerdon above question or control. We have become inclined to forget that every good thing has, as Aristotle pointed out so long ago, its corresponding evil, and that the corruption of the best is always worst of all. Frankness is so great a boon, we say: we can forgive anything to the man who has the courage of his convictions, the fearlessness of freedom—the man, in a word, who speaks out.

But we have to distinguish, I think, at the outset between a
national

national virtue in the rough and the artificial or acquired fashion in which we put that virtue into use. It is obvious that, though many things are possible to us, which are good in themselves, many things are inexpedient, when considered relatively to our environment. Count Tolstoï may preach his gospel of non-resistance till the beauty of his holiness seems almost Christ-like ; but every man who goes forth to his work and to his labour knows that the habitual turning of the right cheek to the smiter of the left, the universal gift of the cloak to the beggar of our coat, is subversive of all political economy, and no slight incentive to immorality as well. In the same way, it will be clear, that this national virtue of ours, this wholesome, sincere outspokenness, is only possible within certain limits, set by custom and expediency, and it is probably a fact that there was never a truly wise man yet but tempered his natural freedom of speech by an acquired habit of reticence. The man who never speaks out may be morose ; the man who is always speaking out is a most undesirable acquaintance.

Now, I suppose every one is prepared to admit with Matthew Arnold that the literature of an age (we are not now speaking of poetry alone, be it understood, but of literature as a whole), that this literature must, in so far as it is truly representative of, and therefore truly valuable to, the time in which it is produced, reflect and criticise the manners, tastes, development, the life, in fact, of the age for whose service it was devised. We have, of course, critical literature probing the past : we have philosophical literature prophesying the future ; but the truly representative literature of every age is the creative, which shows its people its natural face in a glass, and leaves to posterity the record of the manner of man it found. In one sense, indeed, creative literature must inevitably be critical as well, critical in that it employs the
double

double methods of analysis and synthesis, dissecting motives and tendencies first, and then from this examination building up a type, a sample of the representative man and woman of its epoch. The truest fiction of any given century, yes, and the truest poetry, too (though the impressionist may deny it), must be a criticism of life, must reflect its surroundings. Men pass, and fashions change; but in the literature of their day their characters, their tendencies, remain crystallised for all time: and what we know of the England of Chaucer and Shakespeare, we know wholly and absolutely in the truly representative, truly creative, because truly critical literature which they have left to those that come after.

It is, then, the privilege, it is more, it is the duty of the man of letters to speak out, to be fearless, to be frank, to give no ear to the *hypocritans* of his hour, to have no care for the objections of prudery; the life that he lives is the life he must depict, if his work is to be of any lasting value. He must be frank, but he must be something more. He must remember—hourly and momentarily he must remember—that his virtue, step by step, inch by inch, imperceptibly melts into the vice which stands at its pole; and that (to employ Aristotelian phraseology for the moment) there is a sort of middle point, a centre of equilibrium, to pass which is to disturb and upset the entire fabric of his labours. Midway between liberty and license, in literature as in morals, stands the pivot of good taste, the centre-point of art. The natural inclination of frankness, the inclination of the virtue in the rough, is to blunder on resolutely with an indomitable and damning sincerity, till all is said that can be said, and art is lost in photography. The inclination of frankness, restrained by and tutored to the limitations of art and beauty, is to speak so much as is in accordance with the moral idea: and then, at the point where ideas melt into mere report, mere journalistic detail, to feel intuitively the
restraining,

restraining, the saving influence of reticence. In every age there has been some point (its exact position has varied, it is true, but the point has always been there) at which speech stopped short ; and the literature which has most faithfully reflected the manners of that age, the literature, in fine, which has survived its little hour of popularity, and has lived and is still living, has inevitably, invariably, and without exception been the literature which stayed its hand and voice at the point at which the taste of the age, the age's conception of art, set up its statue of reticence, with her finger to her lips, and the inscription about her feet : " So far shalt thou go, and no further."

We have now, it seems, arrived at one consideration, which must always limit the liberty of frankness, namely, the standard of contemporary taste. The modesty that hesitates to allign itself with that standard is a shortcoming, the audacity that rushes beyond is a violence to the unchanging law of literature. But the single consideration is insufficient. If we are content with the criterion of contemporary taste alone, our standard of judgment becomes purely historical : we are left, so to speak, with a sliding scale which readjusts itself to every new epoch : we have no permanent and universal test to apply to the literature of different ages : in a word, comparative criticism is impossible. We feel at once that we need, besides the shifting standard of contemporary taste, some fixed unit of judgment that never varies, some foot-rule that applies with equal infallibility to the literature of early Greece and to the literature of later France ; and such an unit, such a foot-rule, can only be found in the final test of all art, the necessity of the moral idea. We must, in distinguishing the thing that may be said fairly and artistically from the thing whose utterance is inadmissible, we must in such a decision control our judgment by two standards—the one, the shifting

shifting standard of contemporary taste : the other, the permanent standard of artistic justification, the presence of the moral idea. With these two elements in action, we ought, I think, to be able to estimate with tolerable fairness the amount of reticence in any age which ceases to be a shortcoming, the amount of frankness which begins to be a violence in the literature of the period. We ought, with these two elements in motion, to be able to employ a scheme of comparative criticism which will prevent us from encouraging that retarding and dangerous doctrine that what was expedient and justifiable, for instance, in the dramatists of the Restoration is expedient and justifiable in the playwrights of our own Victorian era ; we ought, too, to be able to arrive instinctively at a sense of the limits of art, and to appreciate the point at which frankness becomes a violence, in that it has degenerated into mere brawling, animated neither by purpose nor idea. Let us, then, consider these two standards of taste and art separately : and first, let us give a brief attention to the contemporary standard.

We may, I think, take it as a rough working axiom that the point of reticence in literature, judged by a contemporary standard, should be settled by the point of reticence in the conversation of the taste and culture of the age. Literature is, after all, simply the ordered, careful exposition of the thought of its period, seeking the best matter of the time, and setting it forth in the best possible manner ; and it is surely clear that what is written in excess of what is spoken (in excess I mean on the side of license) is a violence to, a misrepresentation of, the period to whose service the literature is devoted. The course of the highest thought of the time should be the course of its literature, the limit of the most delicate taste of the time the limit of literary expression : whatever falls below that standard is a shortcoming,
whatever

whatever exceeds it a violence. Obviously the standard varies immensely with the period. It would be tedious, nor is it necessary to our purpose, to make a long historical research into the development of taste ; but a few striking examples may help us to appreciate its variations.

To begin with a very early stage of literature, we find among the Heracleidae of Herodotus a stage of contemporary taste which is the result of pure brutality. It is clear that literature adjusted to the frankness of the uxorious pleasantries of Candaules and Gyges would justifiably assume a degree of license which, reasonable enough in its environment, would be absolutely impossible, directly the influences of civilisation began to make themselves felt. The age is one of unrestrained brutality, and the literature which represented it would, without violence to the contemporary taste, be brutal too. To pass at a bound to the Rome of Juvenal is again to be transported to an age of national sensuality : the escapades of Messalina are the inevitable outcome of a national taste that is swamped and left putrescent by limitless self-indulgence ; and the literature which represented this taste would, without violence, be lascivious and polluted to its depth. In continuing, with a still wider sweep, to the England of Shakespeare, we find a new development of taste altogether. Brutality is softened, licentiousness is restrained, immorality no longer stalks abroad shouting its coarse phrases at every wayfarer who passes the Mermaid or the Globe. But, even among types of purity, reticence is little known. The innuendoes are whispered under the breath, but when once the voice is lowered, it matters little what is said. Rosalind and Celia enjoy their little *doubles entendres* together. Hero's wedding morning is an occasion for delicate hints of experiences to come. Hamlet plies the coarsest suggestions upon Ophelia in the intervals of a theatrical performance.

The

The language reflects the taste : we feel no violence here. To take but one more instance, let us end with Sheridan. By his time speech had been refined by sentiment, and the most graceful compliments glide, without effort, from the lips of the adept courtier. But even still, in the drawing-rooms of fashion, delicate morsels of scandal are discussed by his fine ladies with a freedom which is absolutely unknown to the Mayfair of the last half-century, where innuendo might be conveyed by the eye and suggested by the smile, but would never, so reticent has taste become, find the frank emphatic utterance which brought no blush to the cheek of Mrs. Candour and Lady Sneerwell. In the passage of time reticence has become more and more pronounced ; and literature, moving, as it must, with the age, has assumed in its normal and wholesome form the degree of silence which it finds about it.

The standard of taste in literature, then, so far as it responds to contemporary judgment, should be regulated by the normal taste of the hale and cultured man of its age : it should steer a middle course between the prudery of the manse, which is for hiding everything vital, and the effrontery of the pot-house, which makes for ribaldry and bawdry ; and the more it approximates to the exact equilibrium of its period, the more thoroughly does it become representative of the best taste of its time, the more certain is it of permanent recognition. The literature of shortcoming and the literature of violence have their reward :

“ They have their day, and cease to be ” ;

the literature which reflects the hale and wholesome frankness of its age can be read, with pleasure and profit, long after its openness of speech and outlook has ceased to reproduce the surrounding life.

The

The environment is ephemeral, but the literature is immortal. But why is the literature immortal? Why is it that a play like *Pericles*, for instance, full as it is of scenes which revolt the moral taste, has lived and is a classic forever, while innumerable contemporary pieces of no less genius (for *Pericles* is no masterpiece) have passed into oblivion? Why is it that the impurity of *Pericles* strikes the reader scarcely at all, while the memory dwells upon its beauties and forgets its foulness in recollection of its refinement? The reason is not far to seek. *Pericles* is not only free of offence when judged by the taste of its age, it is no less blameless when we subject it to the test by which all literature is judged at last; it conforms to the standard of art; it is permeated by the moral idea. The standard of art—the presence of the idea—the two expressions are, I believe, synonymous. It is easy enough to babble of the beauty of things considered apart from their meaning, it is easy enough to dilate on the satisfaction of art in itself, but all these phrases are merely collocations of terms, empty and meaningless. A thing can only be artistic by virtue of the idea it suggests to us; when the idea is coarse, ungainly, unspeakable, the object that suggests it is coarse, ungainly, unspeakable; art and ethics must always be allied in that the merit of the art is dependent on the merit of the idea it prompts.

Perhaps I shall show my meaning more clearly by an example from the more tangible art of painting; and let me take as an instance an artist who has produced pictures at once the most revolting and most moral of any in the history of English art. I mean Hogarth. We are all familiar with his coarsenesses; all these have we known from our youth up. But it is only the schoolboy who searches the Bible for its indecent passages; when we are become men, we put away such childish satisfactions.

Then

Then we begin to appreciate the idea which underlies the subject : we feel that Hogarth—

“ Whose pictured morals charm the mind,
And through the eye correct the heart ”—

was, even in his grossest moments, profoundly moral, entirely sane, because he never dallied lasciviously with his subject, because he did not put forth vice with the pleasing semblance of virtue, because, like all hale and wholesome critics of life, he condemned excess, and pictured it merely to portray the worthlessness, the weariness, the dissatisfaction of lust and license. Art, we say, claims every subject for her own ; life is open to her ken ; she may fairly gather her subjects where she will. Most true. But there is all the difference in the world between drawing life as we find it, sternly and relentlessly, surveying it all the while from outside with the calm, unflinching gaze of criticism, and, on the other hand, yielding ourselves to the warmth and colour of its excesses, losing our judgment in the ecstasies of the joy of life, becoming, in a word, effeminate.

The man lives by ideas ; the woman by sensations ; and while the man remains an artist so long as he holds true to his own view of life, the woman becomes one as soon as she throws off the habit of her sex, and learns to rely upon her judgment, and not upon her senses. It is only when we regard life with the untrammelled view of the impartial spectator, when we pierce below the substance for its animating idea, that we approximate to the artistic temperament. It is unmanly, it is effeminate, it is inartistic to gloat over pleasure, to revel in immoderation, to become passion's slave ; and literature demands as much calmness of judgment, as much reticence, as life itself. The man who loses
reticence

reticence loses self-respect, and the man who has no respect for himself will scarcely find others to venerate him. After all, the world generally takes us at our own valuation.

We have now, I trust, arrived (though, it may be, by a rather circuitous journey) at something like a definite and reasonable law for the exercise of reticence; it only remains to consider by what test we shall most easily discover the presence or absence of the animating moral idea which we have found indispensable to art. It seems to me that three questions will generally suffice. Does the work, we should ask ourselves, make for that standard of taste which is normal to wholesomeness and sanity of judgment? Does it, or does it not, encourage us to such a line of life as is recommended, all question of tenet and creed apart, by the experience of the age, as the life best calculated to promote individual and general good? And does it encourage to this life in language and by example so chosen as not to offend the susceptibilities of that ordinarily strong and unaffected taste which, after all, varies very little with the changes of the period and development? When creative literature satisfies these three requirements—when it is sane, equable, and well spoken, then it is safe to say it conforms to the moral idea, and is consonant with art. By its sanity it eludes the risk of effeminate demonstration; by its choice of language it avoids brutality; and between these two poles, it may be affirmed without fear of question, true taste will and must be found to lie.

These general considerations, already too far prolonged, become of immediate interest to us as soon as we attempt to apply them to the literature of our own half-century, and I propose concluding what I wished to say on the necessity of reticence by considering, briefly and without mention of names, that realistic movement in English literature which, under different titles, and protected by the ægis of variou

various schools, has proved, without doubt, the most interesting and suggestive development in the poetry and fiction of our time. During the last quarter of a century, more particularly, the English man-of-letters has been indulging, with an entirely new freedom, his national birthright of outspokenness, and during the last twelve months there have been no uncertain indications that this freedom of speech is degenerating into license which some of us cannot but view with regret and apprehension. The writers and the critics of contemporary literature have, it would seem, alike lost their heads; they have gone out into the byways and hedges in search of the new thing, and have brought into the study and subjected to the microscope mean objects of the roadside, whose analysis may be of value to science but is absolutely foreign to art. The age of brutality, pure and simple, is dead with us, it is true; but the age of effeminacy appears, if one is to judge by recent evidence, to be growing to its dawn. The day that follows will, if it fulfils the promise of its morning, be very serious and very detrimental to our future literature.

Every great productive period of literature has been the result of some internal or external revulsion of feeling, some current of ideas. This is a commonplace. The greatest periods of production have been those when the national mind has been directed to some vast movement of emancipation—the discovery of new countries, the defeat of old enemies, the opening of fresh possibilities. Literature is best stimulated by stirrings like these. Now, the last quarter of a century in English history has been singularly sterile of important improvements. There has been no very inspiring acquisition to territory or to knowledge: there has been, in consequence, no marked influx of new ideas. The mind has been thrown back upon itself; lacking stimulus without, it has sought inspiration within, and the most characteristic literature of the
time

time has been introspective. Following one course, it has betaken itself to that intimately analytical fiction which we associate primarily with America; it has sifted motives and probed psychology, with the result that it has proved an exceedingly clever, exact, and scientific, but scarcely stimulating, or progressive school of literature. Following another course, it has sought for subject-matter in the discussion of passions and sensations, common, doubtless, to every age of mankind, interesting and necessary, too, in their way, but passions and sensations hitherto dissociated with literature, hitherto, perhaps, scarcely realised to their depth and intensity. It is in this development that the new school of realism has gone furthest; and it is in this direction that the literature of the future seems likely to follow. It is, therefore, not without value to consider for a moment whither this new frankness is leading us, and how far its freedom is reconciled to that standard of necessary reticence which I have tried to indicate in these pages.

This present tendency to literary frankness had its origin, I think, no less than twenty-eight years ago. It was then that the dove-cotes of English taste were tremulously fluttered by the coming of a new poet, whose naked outspokenness startled his readers into indignation. Literature, which had retrograded into a melancholy sameness, found itself convulsed by a sudden access of passion, which was probably without parallel since the age of the silver poets of Rome. This new singer scrupled not to revel in sensations which for years had remained unmentioned upon the printed page; he even chose for his subjects refinements of lust, which the commonly healthy Englishman believed to have become extinct with the time of Juvenal. Here was an innovation which was absolutely alien to the standard of contemporary taste—an innovation, I believe, that was equally opposed to that final moderation without which literature is lifeless.

Let

Let us listen for one moment :

“ By the ravenous teeth that have smitten
 Through the kisses that blossom and bud,
 By the lips intertwisted and bitten
 Till the foam has a savour of blood,
 By the pulse as it rises and falters,
 By the hands as they slacken and strain,
 I adjure thee, respond from thine altars,
 Our Lady of Pain.

As of old when the world's heart was lighter,
 Through thy garments the grace of thee glows,
 The white wealth of thy body made whiter
 By the blushes of amorous blows,
 And seamed with sharp lips and fierce fingers,
 And branded by kisses that bruise ;
 When all shall be gone that now lingers,
 Ah, what shall we lose ?

Thou wert fair in thy fearless old fashion,
 And thy limbs are as melodies yet,
 And move to the music of passion
 With lithe and lascivious regret.
 What ailed us, O gods, to desert you
 For creeds that refuse and restrain ?
 Come down and redeem us from virtue,
 Our Lady of Pain.”

This was twenty-eight years ago ; and still the poetry lives. At first sight it would seem as though the desirable reticence, upon which we have been insisting, were as yet unnecessary to immortality. A quarter of a century has passed, it might be argued, and the
 verse

verse is as fresh to-day and as widely recognised as it was in its morning: is not this a proof that art asks for no moderation? I believe not. It is true that the poetry lives, that we all recognise, at some period of our lives, the grasp and tenacity of its influence; that, even when the days come in which we say we have no pleasure in it, we still turn to it at times for something we do not find elsewhere. But the thing we seek is not the matter, but the manner. The poetry is living, not by reason of its unrestrained frankness, but in spite of it, for the sake of something else. That sweet singer who charmed and shocked the audiences of 1866, charms us, if he shocks us not now, by virtue of the one new thing that he imported into English poetry, the unique and as yet imperishable faculty of musical possibilities hitherto unattained. There is no such music in all the range of English verse, seek where you will, as there is in him. But the perfection of the one talent, its care, its elaboration, have resulted in a corresponding decay of those other faculties by which alone, in the long run, poetry can live. Open him where you will, there is in his poetry neither construction nor proportion; no development, no sustained dramatic power. Open him where you will, you acquire as much sense of his meaning and purpose from any two isolated stanzas as from the study of a whole poem. There remains in your ears, when you have ceased from reading, the echo only of a beautiful voice, chanting, as it were, the melodies of some outland tongue.

Is this the sort of poetry that will survive the trouble of the ages? It cannot survive. The time will come (it must) when some newer singer discovers melodies as yet unknown, melodies which surpass in their modulations and varieties those poems and ballads of twenty-eight years ago; and, when we have found the new note, what will be left of the earlier singer, to which we shall of necessity return? A message? No. Philosophy? No.

A new vision of life? No. A criticism of contemporary existence? Assuredly not. There remains the melody alone; and this, when once it is surpassed, will charm us little enough. We shall forget it then. Art brings in her revenges, and this will be of them.

But the new movement did not stop here. If, in the poet we have been discussing, we have found the voice among us that corresponds to the decadent voices of the failing Roman Republic, there has reached us from France another utterance, which I should be inclined to liken to the outspoken brutality of Restoration drama. Taste no longer fails on the ground of a delicate, weakly dalliance, it begins to see its own limitations, and springs to the opposite pole. It will now be virile, full of the sap of life, strong, robust, and muscular. It will hurry us out into the fields, will show us the coarser passions of the common farm-hand; at any expense it will paint the life it finds around it; it will at least be consonant with that standard of want of taste which it falsely believes to be contemporary. We get a realistic fiction abroad, and we begin to copy it at home. We will trace the life of the travelling actor, follow him into the vulgar, sordid surroundings which he chooses for the palace of his love, be it a pottery-shed or the ill-furnished lodging-room with its black horsehair sofa—we will draw them all, and be faithful to the lives we live. Is that the sort of literature that will survive the trouble of the ages? It cannot survive. We are no longer untrue to our time, perhaps, if we are to seek for the heart of that time in the lowest and meanest of its representatives; but we are untrue to art, untrue to the record of our literary past, when we are content to turn for our own inspiration to anything but the best line of thought, the highest school of life, through which we are moving. This grosser realism is no more representative of its time than were the elaborate pastiches of classical degradation; it is as though one
should

should repeople Eden with creatures imagined from a study of the serpent's head. In the history of literature this movement, too, will with the lapse of time pass unrecognised; it has mourned unceasingly to an age which did not lack for innocent piping and dancing in its market-places.

The two developments of realism of which we have been speaking seem to me to typify the two excesses into which frankness is inclined to fall; on the one hand, the excess prompted by effeminacy—that is to say, by the want of restraints which starts from enervated sensation; and on the other, the excess which results from a certain brutal virility, which proceeds from coarse familiarity with indulgence. The one whispers, the other shouts; the one is the language of the courtesan, the other of the bargee. What we miss in both alike is that true frankness which springs from the artistic and moral temperament; the episodes are no part of a whole in unity with itself; the impression they leave upon the reader is not the impression of Hogarth's pictures; in one form they employ all their art to render vice attractive, in the other, with absolutely no art at all, they merely reproduce, with the fidelity of the kodak, scenes and situations the existence of which we all acknowledge, while taste prefers to forget them.

But the latest development of literary frankness is, I think, the most insidious and fraught with the greatest danger to art. A new school has arisen which combines the characteristics of effeminacy and brutality. In its effeminate aspect it plays with the subtler emotions of sensual pleasure, on its brutal side it has developed into that class of fiction which for want of a better word I must call *chirurgical*. In poetry it deals with very much the same passions as those which we have traced in the verse to which allusion has been made above; but, instead of leaving these refinements of lust to the haunts to which they are fitted, it has introduced

duced them into the domestic chamber, and permeated marriage with the ardours of promiscuous intercourse. In fiction it infects its heroines with acquired diseases of names unmentionable, and has debased the beauty of maternity by analysis of the process of gestation. Surely the inartistic temperament can scarcely abuse literature further. I own I can conceive nothing less beautiful.

It was said of a great poet by a little critic that he wheeled his nuptial couch into the area ; but these small poets and smaller novelists bring out their sick into the thoroughfare, and stop the traffic while they give us a clinical lecture upon their sufferings. We are told that this is a part of the revolt of woman, and certainly our women-writers are chiefly to blame. It is out of date, no doubt, to clamour for modesty ; but the woman who describes the sensations of childbirth does so, it is to be presumed—not as the writer of advice to a wife—but as an artist producing literature for art's sake. And so one may fairly ask her : How is art served by all this ? What has she told us that we did not all know, or could not learn from medical manuals ? and what impression has she left us over and above the memory of her unpalatable details ? And our poets, who know no rhyme for “rest” but that “breast” whose snowinesses and softnesses they are for ever describing with every accent of indulgence, whose eyes are all for frills, if not for garters, what have they sung that was not sung with far greater beauty and sincerity in the days when frills and garters were alluded to with the open frankness that cried shame on him who evil thought. The one extremity, it seems to me, offends against the standard of contemporary taste ; (“people,” as Hedda Gabler said, “do not say such things now”) ; the other extremity rebels against that universal standard of good taste that has from the days of Milo distinguished between the naked and the nude. We are
losing

losing the distinction now ; the cry for realism, naked and unashamed, is borne in upon us from every side :

“Rip your brother’s vices open, strip your own foul passions bare ;
Down with Reticence, down with Reverence—forward—naked—
let them stare.”

But there was an Emperor once (we know the story) who went forth among his people naked. It was said that he wore fairy clothes, and that only the unwise could fail to see them. At last a little child raised its voice from the crowd ! “Why, he has nothing on,” it said. And so these writers of ours go out from day to day, girded on, they would have us believe, with the garments of art ; and fashion has lacked the courage to cry out with the little child : “They have nothing on.” No robe of art, no texture of skill, they whirl before us in a bacchanalian dance naked and unashamed. But the time will come, it must, when the voices of the multitude will take up the cry of the child, and the revellers will hurry to their houses in dismay. Without dignity, without self-restraint, without the morality of art, literature has never survived ; they are the few who rose superior to the baser levels of their time, who stand unimpugned among the immortals now. And that mortal who would put on immortality must first assume that habit of reticence, that garb of humility by which true greatness is best known. To endure restraint—*that* is to be strong.