THE CENSORSHIP OF FICTION

THERE is perhaps no branch of work amongst the arts so free at the present time as that of the writing of fiction. There are no official prohibitions, no embarrassing or hampering limitations, no oppressive restraints. Subject and method of treatment are both free. A writer is under no special obligation, no preliminary guarantee; he may choose his own subject and treat it in his own way. In fact, his duty to the public—to the State—appears to be *nil*. What one might call the cosmic police do not trouble him at all. Under these conditions, hitherto kept possible by the self-respect of authors, a branch of the art of authorship has arisen and gone on perfecting itself in mechanical excellence, until it has become an important factor of the life of the nation. To-day if the supply of fiction were to be suddenly withdrawn the effect would be felt almost as much as the failure of the supply of breadstuffs. Happily fiction is not dependent on the existence of peace, or the flourishing of trade, or indeed on any form of national well-being. War and business worries—distress in any form—are clamorous in their own ways for intellectual antidotes; so that though the nature of the output may be of every varying kind, the supply is undiminished. Herein it is that the wide scope of the art of fiction proves its excellence; as no subject and no form of treatment is barred it follows that changing needs may find settlement in suitable opposites. And so imaginative work becomes recognised in the higher statecraft as a useful product.

But in the real world all things are finally relative. There is in reality, whose existence and progress must be based on cosmic laws, no such thing as absolute freedom. The needs and necessarily recognised rights of individuals and groups must at times become so conflicting that some sort of give-and-take rules or laws are necessary to the general good. Indeed we might put it in general form that freedom contains in its very structure the germs of restraint. The measure and method of that restraint have to be ascertained by experience, and in some measure by experiment, for if we wait till experience, following a simple course of *laissez faire*, has learned the worst that can happen, at least a part of the protective force of common sense is thrown away.

This is a philosophy too simple to be put in books, and has its existence in the brain of every sane individual. Let us apply it to the subject in question—the union or at least the recognition of two values, the excellences of imagination and of restraint. Restraint may be one of two kinds—either that which is compelled by external forces, or that which comes from within. In art the latter in its usual phase is known as 'reticence.' This is the highest quality of art; that which can be and is its chief and crowning glory. It is an attribute practically undefinable. Its conditions are so varying and so multitudinous, its degrees so finely graded, its workings so mysterious, its end so elusive, that it is not possible to explain it adequately by words which are themselves defective and yet of ever-varying meaning. Suffice it that it is recognisable, and recognised, by all true artists. In it consists largely, if not wholly, the ethics of art; and on it, or in it depends that quality of art which brings it within the classification of 'high' art. The measure of the ethics of the artist is expressed in the reticence shown in his work; and where such self-restraint exists there is no need for external compelling force. In fact, self-restraint is the bulwark of freedom, inasmuch as it makes other forms of restraint unnecessary. Some power must somewhere in the advance of things recognise the imperfection of humanity. When the integer of that great body recognises that imperfection and the evils consequent upon it, those evils are at their least.

This is especially so where imagination is concerned, for the bounds of such being vague, the restraint from within need only be applied to the hither or known edge of the area of demarcation; whereas if laws of restraint have to be made at all they must, in order to be of efficacy, be applicable to the whole area. This proposition may seem at first glance to be in some way a paradox; that as the object of the external power is to prevent a thing of possible good from straying into the region of evil, the mandate should be to prevent excursion beyond the outmost point of good. But it is no paradox at all. The object is not merely to prevent the straying from the region of good, but to do so with the least measure of effort and at the smallest cost of friction. Whatever law, then, can be made or whatever application of force used to effect this—whether such law or force originate from within or from without—should in the first be as little drastic as possible and in the other as gentle as may prevail. Indeed, the difference between the internal and external forces thus applied is something like the difference between ethical and criminal laws. In the great world of fact, if ethical law be not observed the criminal law must come into operation, so that the balance of individual right be maintained and cosmic law vindicated.

I think this may be proved by the history of two great branches of fiction—the novel and the drama. By drama we must take drama

when acted. Unacted drama is but the novel in another literary form. The novel we must accept in its old meaning as a story, quite irrespective of length or divisions. In the case of drama the necessity for an external controlling force has been illustrated throughout some three centuries, and by its history we may by a parity of reasoning gain some light upon the dangers of the other form of literary effort. Of course, primarily the controlling force comes into operation because the possibilities of trouble are multiplied by the fact that its mechanism of exploiting thoughts is by means of the human body ; and inasmuch as poor humanity is likely to err in many ways, possibilities of error in this respect are superadded to the inherent possibilities of purely literary form. There is also another aspect of this control which must be mentioned before being set aside, lest it confuse issues in the case of the novel. This latter is the State aspect of censorship. It must be borne in mind that this is a State and not a political aspect. It came into existence and remains entirely for the protection of the King. The official who has to deal with the question is a State and not a political official, and has his bounds of jurisdiction regarding the drama fixed *ipso facto* by the residence of the King. But in the matter of the general welfare of the public the censorship of the drama is based on the necessity of perpetually combating human weakness. This weakness is of two kinds—or rather in two forms : the weakness of the great mass of people who form audiences, and of those who are content to do base things in the way of catering for these base appetites. In fact, the quarrel rages round the standard of the higher law, made for the elevation as against the degradation of humanity ; another instance of the war between God and devil. The vice of the many of the audience in this case is in the yielding to the pleasant sins or weaknesses of the flesh as against the restraining laws made for the protection of higher effort. The vice of the few who cater is avarice pure and simple. For gain of some form they are willing to break laws—call them conventions if you will, but they are none the less laws. The process of this mutual ill-doing is not usually violent. It creeps in by degrees, each one who takes a part in it going a step beyond his fellows, as though the violation of law had become an established right by its exercise. This goes on till a comparison between what was and what is shows to any eye, even an unskilled one, a startling fact of decadence. Then, as is too often observable in public matters, official guardianship of ethical values wakes up and acts—when it is too late for any practical effect. To prevent this, censorship must be continuous and rigid. There must be no beginnings of evil, no flaws in the mason work of the dam. The force of evil, anti-ethical evil, is the more dangerous as it is a natural force. It is as natural for man to sin as to live and to take a part in the necessary strife of living. But if progress be a good and is to be aimed at in the organisation of national forces, the powers of evil, natural

as well as arbitrary, must be combated all along the line. It is not sufficient to make a stand, however great, here and there; the whole frontier must be protected.

> For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
> Seem here no painful inch to gain,
> Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
> Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

What use is it, then, in the great scheme of national life, to guard against evil in one form whilst in another form it is free to act? In all things of which suggestion is a part there is a possible element of evil. Even in imagination, of whose products the best known and most potent is perhaps fiction, there is a danger of corruption. For imagination is not limited to materials of a special kind; there is no assorted and approved stock of raw material for its use. The whole worlds of fact and fancy are open to it. This is its strength, and those who have imagination and believe in its power as a working factor in education—and so making for good—may well be jealous of its privileges, not the least amongst which is its freedom. Its weakness on its assailable side is that it is absolutely and entirely personal. To what Walt Whitman calls 'the *en masse*' imagination does not apply, does not appeal. If the '*en masse*' feels its effects it does so not as a unit but as a congeries of individuals; a wave there may be, but it is a wave of integers dominated by a common thought or purpose. This being so, the strongest controlling force of imagination is in the individual with whom it originates. No one has power to stop the workings of imagination, not even the individual whose sensoria afford its source. But the individual producer or recorder can control his own utterances; he may have to feel, but he need not of necessity speak or write. And so individual discretion is the first line of defence against such evils as may come from imagination—itself pure, a process of thought, working unintentionally with impure or dangerous material. To the drama as written this argument applies; to the play as acted it does not. The dramatist like any other person of imagination can control his output in the first instance. And like any other writer he has been, up to the present, free to print his work; his publishing it being simply subject to ordinary police control. It is on the stage and acting side that the censorship as existing comes in. Of course it must be borne in mind that if the evil is traceable to thoughts as set forth in words, the words must then come into the purview and under the knife of the censor. But up to the point of stage use the dramatist has the same freedom as any other writer of fiction.

Now as to the possible evils of imagination. Wherein or of what kinds are or may such be? We shall, I think, on considering the matter, find that they are entirely limited to evil effects produced on

the senses. Here I speak only on the ethical side ; there may be evils of revolt against political or social laws, but in such case the work of imagination, novel or drama, must be taken as an educational machine or medium only. Imagination does not appeal to a nation except through its units, and so must be taken as dealing with individuals only, though its effects may ultimately become of general, if not of universal import. As example, in a base play given in a crowded theatre, though many may be gratified and so debased by the exposition of lewd suggestion—either verbal or of movement or appearance—there are others who will be disgusted. It is through the corruption of individuals that the harm is done. A close analysis will show that the only emotions which in the long run harm are those arising from sex impulses, and when we have realised this we have put a finger on the actual point of danger. Practically in this country the danger from unacted plays has not up to the present existed. English people do not as a rule read plays ; they prefer to see them acted. This is no doubt largely due to the fact that for a couple of centuries the plays that have been published, having already for stage purposes passed the censor, have had any passages considered objectionable or suggestive of evil deleted. As a practical matter they are as a rule but dull reading to those who look for salacious matter. Truly even the plays of the Restoration period and after, when Congreve, Wycherley, Farquhar and Mrs. Aphra Behn flourished, were written to suit a debased public taste; even these are but tame affairs compared with some of the work of our novelists. But if the growing custom continues of publishing as literary works stage plays forbidden for that purpose by the censor, the public may—will—end by reading them in the hope of finding offensive matter. They will bring to the study for evil motives an ardour denied for purposes of good.

I may perhaps here explain that I speak of ' the censor ' for purposes of clearness and brevity. We have a certain censorship over plays, but there is no such official as ' the censor.' By the Theatres Act the work of supervision of the stage is entrusted to the Lord Chamberlain, and it is a part of the duty of that functionary to issue the licence decreed by the Act as a necessary preliminary to the production of the play in a licensed theatre. For convenience—since he naturally cannot do such a mass of work himself—the Lord Chamberlain deputes a well-qualified gentleman to make the necessary examination of the plays submitted for licence. It is this gentleman to whom is applied the term ' censor ' by the writers of letters to newspapers and of articles in magazines who clamour against ' oppression ' and call aloud for absolute freedom of subject and treatment of stage productions.

Here we come to a point at which for our present purpose we may speak of ' fiction ' as containing both the forms of imaginative

fiction, the novel and the drama. If we take it as 'published' fiction we can exclude all considerations of the drama, as the word fiction will include all sorts of literary effort as applied to imaginative work, of which the drama is but an accepted form. Henceforth in this article we must take fiction to mean published fiction, irrespective of form or size. By this means the matter narrows itself down to its simplest form, and we find ourselves face to face with the question: Are we or are we not ultimately to allow fiction to be put forth without any form of restraint whatever? The question is not merely a civic or national one. It is racial, all-embracing, human. Fiction is perhaps the most powerful form of teaching available. It can be most potent for good; and if we are to allow it to work for evil we shall surely have to pay in time for the consequent evil effects. Let not anyone with a non-understanding or misapplied moral sense say or believe that fiction, being essentially based on something that is not true, should be excluded altogether from the field of morals. The highest of all teachers and moralists, Christ Himself, did not disdain it as a method or opportunity of carrying great truth. But He seemed to hold it as His chosen means of seeking to instil truth. What is a parable but a novel in little? A parable may be true in historical fact—its ethical truth may be complete, but if so the truth is accidental and not essential. When those who listened to the Master were told that 'a sower went forth to sow,' or that 'a certain man planted a vineyard, and set an hedge about it,' or 'a certain man made a great supper, and bade many,' or 'two men went up into the Temple to pray,' did they believe, or were they intended to believe, that they were being treated to a scrap of veracious history? No. The purpose of the Teacher was to win their hearts through the force of imagination. If there be any doubt of this, read the parable of Dives and Lazarus. Here the Master, who knew the workings of heart and brain, did not hesitate to give even presumably fictitious details which might enhance the force and conviction of His story—just as a novelist of to-day does. He followed the two men into the divisions of the 'under world,' and even heightened the scenic effect by the suggestion of a great gulf between the two. When Christ taught in such a way, are we to reprobate the method or even to forego it? Should we not rather encourage and protect so potent a form of teaching, and guard it against evil use?

The first question then is as to restraint or no restraint. That restraint in some form is necessary is shown by the history of the last few years with regard to works of fiction. The self-restraint and reticence which many writers have through centuries exercised in behalf of an art which they loved and honoured has not of late been exercised by the few who seek to make money and achieve notoriety through base means. There is no denying the fact nor the cause; both are only too painfully apparent. Within a couple of years past

quite a number of novels have been published in England that would be a disgrace to any country even less civilised than our own. The class of works to which I allude are meant by both authors and publishers to bring to the winning of commercial success the forces of inherent evil in man. The word man here stands for woman as well as man; indeed, women are the worst offenders in this form of breach of moral law. As to the alleged men who follow this loathsome calling, what term of opprobrium is sufficient, what punishment could be too great? This judgment of work which claims to be artistic may seem harsh, and punishment may seem vindictive; the writer has no wish to be either harsh or vindictive—except in so far as all just judgment may seem harsh and all punishment vindictive. For look what those people have done. They found an art wholesome, they made it morbid; they found it pure, they left it sullied. Up to this time it was free—the freest thing in the land; they so treated it, they so abused the powers allowed them and their own opportunities, that continued freedom becomes dangerous, even impossible. They in their selfish greed tried to deprave where others had striven to elevate. In the language of the pulpit, they have 'crucified Christ afresh.' The merest glance at some of their work will justify any harshness of judgment; the roughest synopsis will horrify. It is not well to name either these books or their authors, for such would but make known what is better suppressed, and give the writers the advertisement which they crave. It may be taken that such works as are here spoken of deal not merely with natural misdoing based on human weakness, frailty, or passions of the senses, but with vices so flagitious, so opposed to even the decencies of nature in its crudest and lowest forms, that the poignancy of moral disgust is lost in horror. This article is no mere protest against academic faults or breaches of good taste. It is a deliberate indictment of a class of literature so vile that it is actually corrupting the nation.

The subject is one seriously undertaken, and with a full sense of responsibility. The evil is a grave and dangerous one, and may, if it does not already, deeply affect the principles and lives of the young people of this country. The measure of protection from it involves a departure from the custom of free speech hitherto tolerated by the Legislature. But the class it deals with is constructively a criminal class, and repressive measures such as are required in dealing with all crimes are necessary. Press criticism, which might help to restrain, is sadly deficient; the Press generally has manifestly not done its duty in this respect. The offenders are such as are amenable only to punitive measures. They may be described as a class which is thus designated in the searching Doric of the North of Ireland, 'They would do little for God's sake if the devil was dead!' It is hardly possible to obliterate such works of shameful lubricity; unhappily the weakness of poor humanity makes a continuous market for them.

But we should at least try to prevent for the future such filthy and dangerous output. We take steps to deal drastically with evils that menace the well-being of society. Dance houses are regarded jealously, disorderly houses are sternly dealt with, the sale of noxious drugs is carefully regulated, even the sale of intoxicants is limited by restraining measures. In fact, all occupations based on human frailty are by the general wisdom of the State put in greater or less degree under supervision. Why not, then, if necessary, adopt the same attitude towards an evil more grave than any of the above, because more insidious ?

The writer does not, for one, wish such a thing as a censorship of fiction to be brought about if it can be possibly avoided, if some other means of protection for the highest class of literature can be found or designed. He glories, like the others of his calling, in the freedom of letters, and trusts that some way may be found of dealing with the dangers that threaten. But if no other adequate way can be found, and if the plague-spot continues to enlarge, a censorship there must be. Of course there is, in a way, a remedy already. There exists a censorship of a kind, but it is crude and coarse and clumsy, and difficult of operation—the police. No one could wish an art so fine as literature, with a spirit as subtle and evanescent as œnanthic ether—the outward expression of the ' thaumaturgic art of thought '—put under repressive measures carried out by coarse officials. But it is the coarseness and unscrupulousness of certain writers of fiction which has brought the evil ; on their heads be it.

The sad part of the whole thing is the wantonness of it. Coarseness there has always been of some measure. Smollett, for instance, was undeniably and wantonly coarse ; even Fielding's beautiful work was dyed with the colour of an age of luxury and unscrupulousness. But certain of the writers of our time claim absolute freedom of both subject and method of treatment, in order that they may deal with what they call ' problems.' Now there is no problem which may arise to any human being in the long course between the cradle and the grave which need be forbidden to public consideration, and which may not be wholesomely dealt with. There is not a household which may not have its painful experiences of some of them, and they are solved to *some* end with boldness and decorum. But it may be feared that writers who deal with lewd subjects generally use the word ' problem ' either as a shelter for themselves or as a blind for some intention more base than mere honest investigation. The problem they have in reality set themselves is to find an easy and prosperous way to their desires without suffering from public ignominy, police interference, or the reproaches of conscience ; with the inevitable result that they rightly incur the penalties distributable by all three. It is the same old problem which has tortured fallible humanity from the beginning, or, at any rate, since desire of many things found itself

face to face with inadequate powers and insufficient opportunities for attainment.

Truth can always investigate in worthy fashion. Otherwise medicine and surgery would be obnoxious trades, and law and the administration of religion dangerous callings. As it is, those who prostitute their talents—and amongst them the fairest, imagination—must expect the treatment accorded to the class which they have deliberately joined. The rewards of such—personal luxury and perhaps a measure of wealth—may be theirs, but they must not expect the pleasures or profits of the just—love and honour, troops of friends, and the esteem of good men.

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