<Saturday Review, 21 May 1870, 667-8>

<THE ART OF RETICENCE.>

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Among other classifications we may divide the world into those who

live by impulse and the undirected flow of circumstance, and those who

map out their lives according to art and a definite design. These last

however, are rare; few people having capacity enough to construct any

persistent plan of life or to carry it through if even begun--it being

so much easier to follow nature than to work by rule and square, and

to drift with the stream than to build up even a beaver's dam. Now, in

the matter of reticence;--How few people understand this as an art,

and how almost entirely it is by the mere chance of temperament

whether a person is confidential or reticent--with his heart on his

sleeve or not to be got at by a pickaxe--irritatingly silent or

contemptibly loquacious. Sometimes indeed we do find one who, like

Talleyrand, has mastered the art of an eloquent reticence from alpha

to omega, and knows how to conceal everything without showing that he

conceals anything; but we find such a person very seldom, and we do

not always understand his value when we have him.

Any one not a born fool can resolve to keep silence on certain points,

but it takes a master-mind to be able to talk, and yet not tell.

Silence indeed, self-evident and without disguise, though a safe

method, is but a clumsy one, and to be tolerated only in very timid or

very young people. "Le silence est le parti plus sûr pour celui qui se

défie de soi-même," says Rochefoucauld. So is total abstinence for him

who cannot control himself. Yet we do not preach total abstinence as

the best order of life for a wise and disciplined person, any more

than we would put strong ankles into leg-irons, or forbid a rational

man to handle a sword. Besides, silence may be as expressive, as

tell-tale even, as speech; and at the best there is no science in

shutting one's lips and sitting mute; though indeed too few people

have got even so far as this in the art of reticence, but tell

everything they know so surely as water flows through a sieve, and are

safe just in proportion to their ignorance.

But there is art, the most consummate art, in appearing absolutely

frank, yet never telling anything which it is not wished should be

known; in being pleasantly chatty and conversational, yet never

committing oneself to a statement nor an opinion which might be used

against one afterwards--\_ars celare artem\_ being a true maxim in

keeping one's own counsel as well as in other things. It is only after

a long acquaintance with this kind of person that you find out he has

been substantially reticent throughout, though apparently so frank.

Caught by his easy manner, his genial talk, his ready sympathy, you

have confided to him not only all that you have of your own, but all

that you have of other people's; and it is only long after, when you

reflect quietly, undisturbed by the magnetism of his presence, that

you come to the knowledge of how reticent he has been in the midst of

his seeming frankness, and how little reciprocity there has been in

your confidences together. You know such people for years, and you

never really know more of them at the end than you did in the

beginning. You cannot lay your finger on a fact that would in any way

place them in your power; and though you did not notice it at the

time, and do not know how it has been done now, you feel that they

have never trusted you, and have all along carefully avoided anything

like confidence. But you are at their mercy by your own rashness, and

if they do not destroy you it is because they are reticent for you as

well as towards you; perhaps because they are good-natured; perhaps

because they despise you for your very frankness too much to hurt you;

but above all things not because they are unable. How you hate them

when you think of the skill with which they took all that was offered

to them, yet never let you see they gave back nothing for their own

part--rather by the jugglery of manner made you believe that they were

giving back as much as they were receiving! Perhaps it was a little

ungenerous; but they had the right to argue that if you could not

keep your own counsel you would not be likely to keep theirs, and it

was only kind at the time to let you hoodwink yourself so that you

might not be offended.

In manner genial, frank, conversational, sympathetic--in substance

absolutely secret, cautious, never taken off their guard, never

seduced into dangerous confidences, as careful for their friends as

they are for themselves, and careful even for strangers unknown to

them--these people are the salvation as they are the charm of society;

never making mischief, and, by their habitual reticence, raising up

barriers at which gossip halts and rumour dies. No slander is ever

traced to them, and what they know is as though it were not. Yet they

do not make the clumsy mistake of letting you see that they are better

informed than yourself on certain subjects, and know more about the

current scandals of the day than they choose to reveal. On the

contrary, they listen to your crude mistakes with a highly edified

air, and leave you elated with the idea that you have let them behind

the scenes and told them more than they knew before. If only they had

spoken, your elation would not have been very long-lived.

Of all personal qualities this art of reticence is the most important

and most valuable for a professional man to possess. Lawyer or

physician, he must be able to hold all and hear all without betraying

by word or look--by injudicious defence no more than by overt

treachery--by anger at a malicious accusation no more than by a smile

at an egregious mistake. His business is to be reticent, not

exculpatory; to maintain silence, not set up a defence nor yet

proclaim the truth. To do this well requires a rare combination of

good qualities--among which are tact and self-respect in about equal

amount--self-command and the power of hitting that fine line which

marks off reticence from deception. No man was ever thoroughly

successful as either a lawyer or physician who did not possess this

combination; and with it even a modest amount of technical skill can

be made to go a long way.

Valuable in society, at home the reticent are so many forms of living

death. Eyes have they and see not; ears and hear not; and the faculty

of speech seems to have been given them in vain. They go out and they

come home, and they tell you nothing of all they have seen. They have

heard all sorts of news and seen no end of pleasant things, but they

come down to breakfast the next morning as mute as fishes, and if you

want it you must dig out your own information bit by bit by

sequential, categorical questioning. Not that they are surly nor

ill-natured; they are only reticent. They are really disastrous to

those who are associated with them, and make the worst partners in the

world in business or marriage; for you never know what is going on,

nor where you are, and you must be content to walk blindfold if you

walk with them. They tell you nothing beyond what they are obliged to

tell; take you into no confidence; never consult you; never arrest

their own action for your concurrence; and the consequence is that you

live with them in the dark, for ever afraid of looming catastrophes,

and more like a captive bound to the car of their fortunes than like

the coadjutor with a voice in the manner of the driving and the right

to assist in the direction of the journey. This is the reticence of

temperament, and we see it in children from quite an early age--those

children who are trusted by the servants, and are their favourites in

consequence, because they tell no tales; but it is a disposition that

may become dangerous unless watched, and that is always liable to

degenerate into falsehood. For reticence is just on the boundary of

deception, and it needs but a very little step to take one over the

border.

That obtrusive kind of reticence which parades itself--which makes

mysteries and lets you see there are mysteries--which keeps silence

and flaunts it in your face as an intentional silence brooding over

things you are not worthy to know--that silence which is as loud as

words, is one of the most irritating things in the world and can be

made one of the most insulting. If words are sharp arrows, this kind

of dumbness is paralysis, and all the worse to bear because it puts it

out of your power to complain. You cannot bring into court a list of

looks and shrugs, nor make it a grievance that a man held his tongue

while you raved, and to all appearance kept his temper when you lost

yours. Yet all of us who have had any experience that way know that

his holding his tongue was the very reason why you raved, and that if

he had spoken for his own share the worst of the tempest would have

been allayed. This is a common manner of tormenting with reticent

people who have a moral twist; and to fling stones at you from behind

the shield of silence by which they have sheltered themselves is a

pastime that hurts only one of the combatants. Reticence, though at

times one of the greatest social virtues we possess, is also at times

one of the most disastrous personal conditions.

Half our modern novels turn on the misery brought about by mistaken

reticence; and though novelists generally exaggerate the circumstances

they deal with, they are not wrong in their facts. If the waters of

strife have been let loose because of many words, there have been

broken hearts before now because of none. Old proverbs, to be sure,

inculcate the value of reticence, and the wisdom of keeping one's own

counsel. If speech is silvern, silence is golden, in popular

philosophy; and the youth is ever enjoined to be like the wise man,

and keep himself free from the peril of words. Yet for all that, next

to truth, on which society rests, mutual knowledge is the best working

virtue, and a state of reticent distrust is more prudent than noble.

Many people think it a fine thing to live with their most intimate

friends as if they would one day become their enemies, and never let

even their deepest affections strike root so far down as confidence.

They rearrange La Bruyère's famous maxim, 'L'on peut avoir la

confiance de quelqu'un sans en avoir le coeur,' and take it quite the

contrary way; but perhaps the heart which gives itself, divorced from

confidence, is not worth accepting; and reticence where there is love

sounds almost a contradiction in terms. Indeed, the certainty of

unlimited confidences where there is love is one of the strongest of

all the arguments in favour of general reticence. For in nine cases

out of ten you tell your secrets and open your heart, not only to your

friend, but to your friend's wife, or husband, or lover; and

secondhand confidence is rarely held sacred if it can be betrayed with

impunity.

By an apparent contradiction, reticent people who tell nothing are

often the most charming letter-writers. Full of chit-chat, of

descriptions dashed off with a warm and flowing pen, giving all the

latest news well authenticated and not scandalous, and breathing just

the right amount of affection according to the circumstances of the

correspondents--a naturally eloquent person who has cultivated the art

of reticence writes letters unequalled for charm of manner. The first

impression of them is superb, enchanting, enthralling, like the

bouquet of old wine; but, on reconsideration, what have they said?

Absolutely nothing. This charming letter, apparently so full of

matter, is an answer to a great, good, honest outpour wherein you laid

bare that foolish heart of yours and delivered up your soul for

anatomical examination; and you looked for a reply based on the same

lines. At first delighted, you are soon chilled and depressed by such

a return, and you feel that you have made a fool of yourself, and that

your correspondent is laughing in his sleeve at your insane propensity

to gush. So must it be till that good time comes when man shall have

no need to defend himself against his fellows; when confidence shall

not bring sorrow nor trust betrayal; and when the art of reticence

shall be as obsolete as the art of fence, or the Socratic method.