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Shorter Prose Pieces

by Oscar Wilde

February, 2000 [Etext #2061]

Project Gutenberg's Etext of Shorter Prose Pieces by Oscar Wilde

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OSCAR WILDE--SHORTER PROSE PIECES

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PHRASES AND PHILOSOPHIES FOR THE USE OF THE YOUNG

The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What

the second duty is no one has as yet discovered.

Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the

curious attractiveness of others.

If the poor only had profiles there would be no difficulty in

solving the problem of poverty.

Those who see any difference between soul and body have neither.

A really well-made buttonhole is the only link between Art and

Nature.

Religions die when they are proved to be true. Science is the

record of dead religions.

The well-bred contradict other people. The wise contradict

themselves.

Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance.

Dulness is the coming of age of seriousness.

In all unimportant matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential.

In all important matters, style, not sincerity, is the essential.

If one tells the truth one is sure, sooner or later, to be found

out.

Pleasure is the only thing one should live for. Nothing ages like

happiness.

It is only by not paying one's bills that one can hope to live in

the memory of the commercial classes.

No crime is vulgar, but all vulgarity is crime. Vulgarity is the

conduct of others.

Only the shallow know themselves.

Time is waste of money.

One should always be a little improbable.

There is a fatality about all good resolutions. They are

invariably made too soon.

The only way to atone for being occasionally a little overdressed

is by being always absolutely overeducated.

To be premature is to be perfect.

Any preoccupation with ideas of what is right or wrong in conduct

shows an arrested intellectual development.

Ambition is the last refuge of the failure.

A truth ceases to be true when more than one person believes in it.

In examinations the foolish ask questions that the wise cannot

answer.

Greek dress was in its essence inartistic. Nothing should reveal

the body but the body.

One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.

It is only the superficial qualities that last. Man's deeper

nature is soon found out.

Industry is the root of all ugliness.

The ages live in history through their anachronisms.

It is only the gods who taste of death. Apollo has passed away,

but Hyacinth, whom men say he slew, lives on. Nero and Narcissus

are always with us.

The old believe everything: the middle-aged suspect everything;

the young know everything.

The condition of perfection is idleness: the aim of perfection is

youth.

Only the great masters of style ever succeeded in being obscure.

There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men

there are in England at the present moment who start life with

perfect profiles, and end by adopting some useful profession.

To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance.

MRS. LANGTRY AS HESTER GRAZEBROOK

It is only in the best Greek gems, on the silver coins of Syracuse,

or among the marble figures of the Parthenon frieze, that one can

find the ideal representation of the marvellous beauty of that face

which laughed through the leaves last night as Hester Grazebrook.

Pure Greek it is, with the grave low forehead, the exquisitely

arched brow; the noble chiselling of the mouth, shaped as if it

were the mouthpiece of an instrument of music; the supreme and

splendid curve of the cheek; the augustly pillared throat which

bears it all: it is Greek, because the lines which compose it are

so definite and so strong, and yet so exquisitely harmonized that

the effect is one of simple loveliness purely: Greek, because its

essence and its quality, as is the quality of music and of

architecture, is that of beauty based on absolutely mathematical

laws.

But while art remains dumb and immobile in its passionless

serenity, with the beauty of this face it is different: the grey

eyes lighten into blue or deepen into violet as fancy succeeds

fancy; the lips become flower-like in laughter or, tremulous as a

bird's wing, mould themselves at last into the strong and bitter

moulds of pain or scorn. And then motion comes, and the statue

wakes into life. But the life is not the ordinary life of common

days; it is life with a new value given to it, the value of art:

and the charm to me of Hester Grazebrook's acting in the first

scene of the play last night was that mingling of classic grace

with absolute reality which is the secret of all beautiful art, of

the plastic work of the Greeks and of the pictures of Jean Francois

Millet equally.

I do not think that the sovereignty and empire of women's beauty

has at all passed away, though we may no longer go to war for them

as the Greeks did for the daughter of Leda. The greatest empire

still remains for them--the empire of art. And, indeed, this

wonderful face, seen last night for the first time in America, has

filled and permeated with the pervading image of its type the whole

of our modern art in England. Last century it was the romantic

type which dominated in art, the type loved by Reynolds and

Gainsborough, of wonderful contrasts of colour, of exquisite and

varying charm of expression, but without that definite plastic

feeling which divides classic from romantic work. This type

degenerated into mere facile prettiness in the hands of lesser

masters, and, in protest against it, was created by the hands of

the Pre-Raphaelites a new type, with its rare combination of Greek

form with Florentine mysticism. But this mysticism becomes over-

strained and a burden, rather than an aid to expression, and a

desire for the pure Hellenic joy and serenity came in its place;

and in all our modern work, in the paintings of such men as Albert

Moore and Leighton and Whistler, we can trace the influence of this

single face giving fresh life and inspiration in the form of a new

artistic ideal.

SLAVES OF FASHION

Miss Leffler-Arnim's statement, in a lecture delivered recently at

St. Saviour's Hospital, that "she had heard of instances where

ladies were so determined not to exceed the fashionable measurement

that they had actually held on to a cross-bar while their maids

fastened the fifteen-inch corset," has excited a good deal of

incredulity, but there is nothing really improbable in it. From

the sixteenth century to our own day there is hardly any form of

torture that has not been inflicted on girls, and endured by women,

in obedience to the dictates of an unreasonable and monstrous

Fashion. "In order to obtain a real Spanish figure," says

Montaigne, "what a Gehenna of suffering will not women endure,

drawn in and compressed by great coches entering the flesh; nay,

sometimes they even die thereof!" "A few days after my arrival at

school," Mrs. Somerville tells us in her memoirs, "although

perfectly straight and well made, I was enclosed in stiff stays,

with a steel busk in front; while above my frock, bands drew my

shoulders back till the shoulder-blades met. Then a steel rod with

a semi-circle, which went under my chin, was clasped to the steel

busk in my stays. In this constrained state I and most of the

younger girls had to prepare our lessons"; and in the life of Miss

Edgeworth we read that, being sent to a certain fashionable

establishment, "she underwent all the usual tortures of back-

boards, iron collars and dumbs, and also (because she was a very

tiny person) the unusual one of being hung by the neck to draw out

the muscles and increase the growth," a signal failure in her case.

Indeed, instances of absolute mutilation and misery are so common

in the past that it is unnecessary to multiply them; but it is

really sad to think that in our own day a civilized woman can hang

on to a cross-bar while her maid laces her waist into a fifteen-

inch circle. To begin with, the waist is not a circle at all, but

an oval; nor can there be any greater error than to imagine that an

unnaturally small waist gives an air of grace, or even of

slightness, to the whole figure. Its effect, as a rule, is simply

to exaggerate the width of the shoulders and the hips; and those

whose figures possess that stateliness which is called stoutness by

the vulgar, convert what is a quality into a defect by yielding to

the silly edicts of Fashion on the subject of tight-lacing. The

fashionable English waist, also, is not merely far too small, and

consequently quite out of proportion to the rest of the figure, but

it is worn far too low down. I use the expression "worn"

advisedly, for a waist nowadays seems to be regarded as an article

of apparel to be put on when and where one likes. A long waist

always implies shortness of the lower limbs, and, from the artistic

point of view, has the effect of diminishing the height; and I am

glad to see that many of the most charming women in Paris are

returning to the idea of the Directoire style of dress. This style

is not by any means perfect, but at least it has the merit of

indicating the proper position of the waist. I feel quite sure

that all English women of culture and position will set their faces

against such stupid and dangerous practices as are related by Miss

Leffler-Arnim. Fashion's motto is: Il faut souffrir pour etre

belle; but the motto of art and of common-sense is: Il faut etre

bete pour souffrir.

Talking of Fashion, a critic in the Pall Mall Gazelle expresses his

surprise that I should have allowed an illustration of a hat,

covered with "the bodies of dead birds," to appear in the first

number of the Woman's World; and as I have received many letters on

the subject, it is only right that I should state my exact position

in the matter. Fashion is such an essential part of the mundus

muliebris of our day, that it seems to me absolutely necessary that

its growth, development, and phases should be duly chronicled; and

the historical and practical value of such a record depends

entirely upon its perfect fidelity to fact. Besides, it is quite

easy for the children of light to adapt almost any fashionable form

of dress to the requirements of utility and the demands of good

taste. The Sarah Bernhardt tea-gown, for instance, figured in the

present issue, has many good points about it, and the gigantic

dress-improver does not appear to me to be really essential to the

mode; and though the Postillion costume of the fancy dress ball is

absolutely detestable in its silliness and vulgarity, the so-called

Late Georgian costume in the same plate is rather pleasing. I

must, however, protest against the idea that to chronicle the

development of Fashion implies any approval of the particular forms

that Fashion may adopt.

WOMAN'S DRESS

The "Girl Graduate" must of course have precedence, not merely for

her sex but for her sanity: her letter is extremely sensible. She

makes two points: that high heels are a necessity for any lady who

wishes to keep her dress clean from the Stygian mud of our streets,

and that without a tight corset the ordinary number of petticoats

and etceteras' cannot be properly or conveniently held up. Now, it

is quite true that as long as the lower garments are suspended from

the hips a corset is an absolute necessity; the mistake lies in not

suspending all apparel from the shoulders. In the latter case a

corset becomes useless, the body is left free and unconfined for

respiration and motion, there is more health, and consequently more

beauty. Indeed all the most ungainly and uncomfortable articles of

dress that fashion has ever in her folly prescribed, not the tight

corset merely, but the farthingale, the vertugadin, the hoop, the

crinoline, and that modern monstrosity the so-called "dress

improver" also, all of them have owed their origin to the same

error, the error of not seeing that it is from the shoulders, and

from the shoulders only, that all garments should be hung.

And as regards high heels, I quite admit that some additional

height to the shoe or boot is necessary if long gowns are to be

worn in the street; but what I object to is that the height should

be given to the heel only, and not to the sole of the foot also.

The modern high-heeled boot is, in fact, merely the clog of the

time of Henry VI., with the front prop left out, and its inevitable

effect is to throw the body forward, to shorten the steps, and

consequently to produce that want of grace which always follows

want of freedom.

Why should clogs be despised? Much art has been expended on clogs.

They have been made of lovely woods, and delicately inlaid with

ivory, and with mother-of-pearl. A clog might be a dream of

beauty, and, if not too high or too heavy, most comfortable also.

But if there be any who do not like clogs, let them try some

adaptation of the trouser of the Turkish lady, which is loose round

the limb and tight at the ankle.

The "Girl Graduate," with a pathos to which I am not insensible,

entreats me not to apotheosize "that awful, befringed, beflounced,

and bekilted divided skirt." Well, I will acknowledge that the

fringes, the flounces, and the kilting do certainly defeat the

whole object of the dress, which is that of ease and liberty; but I

regard these things as mere wicked superfluities, tragic proofs

that the divided skirt is ashamed of its own division. The

principle of the dress is good, and, though it is not by any means

perfection, it is a step towards it.

Here I leave the "Girl Graduate," with much regret, for Mr.

Wentworth Huyshe. Mr. Huyshe makes the old criticism that Greek

dress is unsuited to our climate, and, to me the somewhat new

assertion, that the men's dress of a hundred years ago was

preferable to that of the second part of the seventeenth century,

which I consider to have been the exquisite period of English

costume.

Now, as regards the first of these two statements, I will say, to

begin with, that the warmth of apparel does not depend really on

the number of garments worn, but on the material of which they are

made. One of the chief faults of modern dress is that it is

composed of far too many articles of clothing, most of which are of

the wrong substance; but over a substratum of pure wool, such as is

supplied by Dr. Jaeger under the modern German system, some

modification of Greek costume is perfectly applicable to our

climate, our country and our century. This important fact has

already been pointed out by Mr. E. W. Godwin in his excellent,

though too brief handbook on Dress, contributed to the Health

Exhibition. I call it an important fact because it makes almost

any form of lovely costume perfectly practicable in our cold

climate. Mr. Godwin, it is true, points out that the English

ladies of the thirteenth century abandoned after some time the

flowing garments of the early Renaissance in favour of a tighter

mode, such as Northern Europe seems to demand. This I quite admit,

and its significance; but what I contend, and what I am sure Mr.

Godwin would agree with me in, is that the principles, the laws of

Greek dress may be perfectly realized, even in a moderately tight

gown with sleeves: I mean the principle of suspending all apparel

from the shoulders, and of relying for beauty of effect not on the

stiff ready-made ornaments of the modern milliner--the bows where

there should be no bows, and the flounces where there should be no

flounces--but on the exquisite play of light and line that one gets

from rich and rippling folds. I am not proposing any antiquarian

revival of an ancient costume, but trying merely to point out the

right laws of dress, laws which are dictated by art and not by

archaeology, by science and not by fashion; and just as the best

work of art in our days is that which combines classic grace with

absolute reality, so from a continuation of the Greek principles of

beauty with the German principles of health will come, I feel

certain, the costume of the future.

And now to the question of men's dress, or rather to Mr. Huyshe's

claim of the superiority, in point of costume, of the last quarter

of the eighteenth century over the second quarter of the

seventeenth. The broad-brimmed hat of 1640 kept the rain of winter

and the glare of summer from the face; the same cannot be said of

the hat of one hundred years ago, which, with its comparatively

narrow brim and high crown, was the precursor of the modern

"chimney-pot": a wide turned-down collar is a healthier thing than

a strangling stock, and a short cloak much more comfortable than a

sleeved overcoat, even though the latter may have had "three

capes"; a cloak is easier to put on and off, lies lightly on the

shoulder in summer, and wrapped round one in winter keeps one

perfectly warm. A doublet, again, is simpler than a coat and

waistcoat; instead of two garments one has one; by not being open

also it protects the chest better.

Short loose trousers are in every way to be preferred to the tight

knee-breeches which often impede the proper circulation of the

blood; and finally, the soft leather boots which could be worn

above or below the knee, are more supple, and give consequently

more freedom, than the stiff Hessian which Mr. Huyshe so praises.

I say nothing about the question of grace and picturesqueness, for

I suppose that no one, not even Mr. Huyshe, would prefer a

maccaroni to a cavalier, a Lawrence to a Vandyke, or the third

George to the first Charles; but for ease, warmth and comfort this

seventeenth-century dress is infinitely superior to anything that

came after it, and I do not think it is excelled by any preceding

form of costume. I sincerely trust that we may soon see in England

some national revival of it.

MORE RADICAL IDEAS UPON DRESS REFORM

I have been much interested at reading the large amount of

correspondence that has been called forth by my recent lecture on

Dress. It shows me that the subject of dress reform is one that is

occupying many wise and charming people, who have at heart the

principles of health, freedom, and beauty in costume, and I hope

that "H. B. T." and "Materfamilias" will have all the real

influence which their letters--excellent letters both of them--

certainly deserve.

I turn first to Mr. Huyshe's second letter, and the drawing that

accompanies it; but before entering into any examination of the

theory contained in each, I think I should state at once that I

have absolutely no idea whether this gentleman wears his hair long

or short, or his cuffs back or forward, or indeed what he is like

at all. I hope he consults his own comfort and wishes in

everything which has to do with his dress, and is allowed to enjoy

that individualism in apparel which he so eloquently claims for

himself, and so foolishly tries to deny to others; but I really

could not take Mr. Wentworth Huyshe's personal appearance as any

intellectual basis for an investigation of the principles which

should guide the costume of a nation. I am not denying the force,

or even the popularity, of the "'Eave arf a brick" school of

criticism, but I acknowledge it does not interest me. The gamin in

the gutter may be a necessity, but the gamin in discussion is a

nuisance. So I will proceed at once to the real point at issue,

the value of the late eighteenth-century costume over that worn in

the second quarter of the seventeenth: the relative merits, that

is, of the principles contained in each. Now, as regards the

eighteenth-century costume, Mr. Wentworth Huyshe acknowledges that

he has had no practical experience of it at all; in fact he makes a

pathetic appeal to his friends to corroborate him in his assertion,

which I do not question for a moment, that he has never been

"guilty of the eccentricity" of wearing himself the dress which he

proposes for general adoption by others. There is something so

naive and so amusing about this last passage in Mr. Huyshe's letter

that I am really in doubt whether I am not doing him a wrong in

regarding him as having any serious, or sincere, views on the

question of a possible reform in dress; still, as irrespective of

any attitude of Mr. Huyshe's in the matter, the subject is in

itself an interesting one, I think it is worth continuing,

particularly as I have myself worn this late eighteenth-century

dress many times, both in public and in private, and so may claim

to have a very positive right to speak on its comfort and

suitability. The particular form of the dress I wore was very

similar to that given in Mr. Godwin's handbook, from a print of

Northcote's, and had a certain elegance and grace about it which

was very charming; still, I gave it up for these reasons:- After a

further consideration of the laws of dress I saw that a doublet is

a far simpler and easier garment than a coat and waistcoat, and, if

buttoned from the shoulder, far warmer also, and that tails have no

place in costume, except on some Darwinian theory of heredity; from

absolute experience in the matter I found that the excessive

tightness of knee-breeches is not really comfortable if one wears

them constantly; and, in fact, I satisfied myself that the dress is

not one founded on any real principles. The broad-brimmed hat and

loose cloak, which, as my object was not, of course, historical

accuracy but modern ease, I had always worn with the costume in

question, I have still retained, and find them most comfortable.

Well, although Mr. Huyshe has no real experience of the dress he

proposes, he gives us a drawing of it, which he labels, somewhat

prematurely, "An ideal dress." An ideal dress of course it is not;

"passably picturesque," he says I may possibly think it; well,

passably picturesque it may be, but not beautiful, certainly,

simply because it is not founded on right principles, or, indeed,

on any principles at all. Picturesqueness one may get in a variety

of ways; ugly things that are strange, or unfamiliar to us, for

instance, may be picturesque, such as a late sixteenth-century

costume, or a Georgian house. Ruins, again, may be picturesque,

but beautiful they never can be, because their lines are

meaningless. Beauty, in fact, is to be got only from the

perfection of principles; and in "the ideal dress" of Mr. Huyshe

there are no ideas or principles at all, much less the perfection

of either. Let us examine it, and see its faults; they are obvious

to any one who desires more than a "Fancy-dress ball" basis for

costume. To begin with, the hat and boots are all wrong. Whatever

one wears on the extremities, such as the feet and head, should,

for the sake of comfort, be made of a soft material, and for the

sake of freedom should take its shape from the way one chooses to

wear it, and not from any stiff, stereotyped design of hat or boot

maker. In a hat made on right principles one should be able to

turn the brim up or down according as the day is dark or fair, dry

or wet; but the hat brim of Mr. Huyshe's drawing is perfectly

stiff, and does not give much protection to the face, or the

possibility of any at all to the back of the head or the ears, in

case of a cold east wind; whereas the bycocket, a hat made in

accordance with the right laws, can be turned down behind and at

the sides, and so give the same warmth as a hood. The crown,

again, of Mr. Huyshe's hat is far too high; a high crown diminishes

the stature of a small person, and in the case of any one who is

tall is a great inconvenience when one is getting in and out of

hansoms and railway carriages, or passing under a street awning:

in no case is it of any value whatsoever, and being useless it is

of course against the principles of dress.

As regards the boots, they are not quite so ugly or so

uncomfortable as the hat; still they are evidently made of stiff

leather, as otherwise they would fall down to the ankle, whereas

the boot should be made of soft leather always, and if worn high at

all must be either laced up the front or carried well over the

knee: in the latter case one combines perfect freedom for walking

together with perfect protection against rain, neither of which

advantages a short stiff boot will ever give one, and when one is

resting in the house the long soft boot can be turned down as the

boot of 1640 was. Then there is the overcoat: now, what are the

right principles of an overcoat? To begin with, it should be

capable of being easily put on or off, and worn over any kind of

dress; consequently it should never have narrow sleeves, such as

are shown in Mr. Huyshe's drawing. If an opening or slit for the

arm is required it should be made quite wide, and may be protected

by a flap, as in that excellent overall the modern Inverness cape;

secondly, it should not be too tight, as otherwise all freedom of

walking is impeded. If the young gentleman in the drawing buttons

his overcoat he may succeed in being statuesque, though that I

doubt very strongly, but he will never succeed in being swift; his

super-totus is made for him on no principle whatsoever; a super-

totus, or overall, should be capable of being worn long or short,

quite loose or moderately tight, just as the wearer wishes; he

should be able to have one arm free and one arm covered or both

arms free or both arms covered, just as he chooses for his

convenience in riding, walking, or driving; an overall again should

never be heavy, and should always be warm: lastly, it should be

capable of being easily carried if one wants to take it off; in

fact, its principles are those of freedom and comfort, and a cloak

realizes them all, just as much as an overcoat of the pattern

suggested by Mr. Huyshe violates them.

The knee-breeches are of course far too tight; any one who has worn

them for any length of time--any one, in fact, whose views on the

subject are not purely theoretical--will agree with me there; like

everything else in the dress, they are a great mistake. The

substitution of the jacket for the coat and waistcoat of the period

is a step in the right direction, which I am glad to see; it is,

however, far too tight over the hips for any possible comfort.

Whenever a jacket or doublet comes below the waist it should be

slit at each side. In the seventeenth century the skirt of the

jacket was sometimes laced on by points and tags, so that it could

be removed at will, sometimes it was merely left open at the sides:

in each case it exemplified what are always the true principles of

dress, I mean freedom and adaptability to circumstances.

Finally, as regards drawings of this kind, I would point out that

there is absolutely no limit at all to the amount of "passably

picturesque" costumes which can be either revived or invented for

us; but that unless a costume is founded on principles and

exemplified laws, it never can be of any real value to us in the

reform of dress. This particular drawing of Mr. Huyshe's, for

instance, proves absolutely nothing, except that our grandfathers

did not understand the proper laws of dress. There is not a single

rule of right costume which is not violated in it, for it gives us

stiffness, tightness and discomfort instead of comfort, freedom and

ease.

Now here, on the other hand, is a dress which, being founded on

principles, can serve us as an excellent guide and model; it has

been drawn for me, most kindly, by Mr. Godwin from the Duke of

Newcastle's delightful book on horsemanship, a book which is one of

our best authorities on our best era of costume. I do not of

course propose it necessarily for absolute imitation; that is not

the way in which one should regard it; it is not, I mean, a revival

of a dead costume, but a realization of living laws. I give it as

an example of a particular application of principles which are

universally right. This rationally dressed young man can turn his

hat brim down if it rains, and his loose trousers and boots down if

he is tired--that is, he can adapt his costume to circumstances;

then he enjoys perfect freedom, the arms and legs are not made

awkward or uncomfortable by the excessive tightness of narrow

sleeves and knee-breeches, and the hips are left quite

untrammelled, always an important point; and as regards comfort,

his jacket is not too loose for warmth, nor too close for

respiration; his neck is well protected without being strangled,

and even his ostrich feathers, if any Philistine should object to

them, are not merely dandyism, but fan him very pleasantly, I am

sure, in summer, and when the weather is bad they are no doubt left

at home, and his cloak taken out. THE VALUE OF THE DRESS IS SIMPLY

THAT EVERY SEPARATE ARTICLE OF IT EXPRESSES A LAW. My young man is

consequently apparelled with ideas, while Mr. Huyshe's young man is

stiffened with facts; the latter teaches one nothing; from the

former one learns everything. I need hardly say that this dress is

good, not because it is seventeenth century, but because it is

constructed on the true principles of costume, just as a square

lintel or pointed arch is good, not because one may be Greek and

the other Gothic, but because each of them is the best method of

spanning a certain-sized opening, or resisting a certain weight.

The fact, however, that this dress was generally worn in England

two centuries and a half ago shows at least this, that the right

laws of dress have been understood and realized in our country, and

so in our country may be realized and understood again. As regards

the absolute beauty of this dress and its meaning, I should like to

say a few words more. Mr. Wentworth Huyshe solemnly announces that

"he and those who think with him" cannot permit this question of

beauty to be imported into the question of dress; that he and those

who think with him take "practical views on the subject," and so

on. Well, I will not enter here into a discussion as to how far

any one who does not take beauty and the value of beauty into

account can claim to be practical at all. The word practical is

nearly always the last refuge of the uncivilized. Of all misused

words it is the most evilly treated. But what I want to point out

is that beauty is essentially organic; that is, it comes, not from

without, but from within, not from any added prettiness, but from

the perfection of its own being; and that consequently, as the body

is beautiful, so all apparel that rightly clothes it must be

beautiful also in its construction and in its lines.

I have no more desire to define ugliness than I have daring to

define beauty; but still I would like to remind those who mock at

beauty as being an unpractical thing of this fact, that an ugly

thing is merely a thing that is badly made, or a thing that does

not serve it purpose; that ugliness is want of fitness; that

ugliness is failure; that ugliness is uselessness, such as ornament

in the wrong place, while beauty, as some one finely said, is the

purgation of all superfluities. There is a divine economy about

beauty; it gives us just what is needful and no more, whereas

ugliness is always extravagant; ugliness is a spendthrift and

wastes its material; in fine, ugliness--and I would commend this

remark to Mr. Wentworth Huyshe--ugliness, as much in costume as in

anything else, is always the sign that somebody has been

unpractical. So the costume of the future in England, if it is

founded on the true laws of freedom, comfort, and adaptability to

circumstances, cannot fail to be most beautiful also, because

beauty is the sign always of the rightness of principles, the

mystical seal that is set upon what is perfect, and upon what is

perfect only.

As for your other correspondent, the first principle of dress that

all garments should be hung from the shoulders and not from the

waist seems to me to be generally approved of, although an "Old

Sailor" declares that no sailors or athletes ever suspend their

clothes from the shoulders, but always from the hips. My own

recollection of the river and running ground at Oxford--those two

homes of Hellenism in our little Gothic town--is that the best

runners and rowers (and my own college turned out many) wore always

a tight jersey, with short drawers attached to it, the whole

costume being woven in one piece. As for sailors, it is true, I

admit, and the bad custom seems to involve that constant "hitching

up" of the lower garments which, however popular in transpontine

dramas, cannot, I think, but be considered an extremely awkward

habit; and as all awkwardness comes from discomfort of some kind, I

trust that this point in our sailor's dress will be looked to in

the coming reform of our navy, for, in spite of all protests, I

hope we are about to reform everything, from torpedoes to top-hats,

and from crinolettes to cruises.

Then as regards clogs, my suggestion of them seems to have aroused

a great deal of terror. Fashion in her high-heeled boots has

screamed, and the dreadful word "anachronism" has been used. Now,

whatever is useful cannot be an anachronism. Such a word is

applicable only to the revival of some folly; and, besides, in the

England of our own day clogs are still worn in many of our

manufacturing towns, such as Oldham. I fear that in Oldham they

may not be dreams of beauty; in Oldham the art of inlaying them

with ivory and with pearl may possibly be unknown; yet in Oldham

they serve their purpose. Nor is it so long since they were worn

by the upper classes of this country generally. Only a few days

ago I had the pleasure of talking to a lady who remembered with

affectionate regret the clogs of her girlhood; they were, according

to her, not too high nor too heavy, and were provided, besides,

with some kind of spring in the sole so as to make them the more

supple for the foot in walking. Personally, I object to all

additional height being given to a boot or shoe; it is really

against the proper principles of dress, although, if any such

height is to be given it should be by means of two props; not one;

but what I should prefer to see is some adaptation of the divided

skirt or long and moderately loose knickerbockers. If, however,

the divided skirt is to be of any positive value, it must give up

all idea of "being identical in appearance with an ordinary skirt";

it must diminish the moderate width of each of its divisions, and

sacrifice its foolish frills and flounces; the moment it imitates a

dress it is lost; but let it visibly announce itself as what it

actually is, and it will go far towards solving a real difficulty.

I feel sure that there will be found many graceful and charming

girls ready to adopt a costume founded on these principles, in

spite of Mr. Wentworth Huyshe's terrible threat that he will not

propose to them as long as they wear it, for all charges of a want

of womanly character in these forms of dress are really

meaningless; every right article of apparel belongs equally to both

sexes, and there is absolutely no such thing as a definitely

feminine garment. One word of warning I should like to be allowed

to give: The over-tunic should be made full and moderately loose;

it may, if desired, be shaped more or less to the figure, but in no

case should it be confined at the waist by any straight band or

belt; on the contrary, it should fall from the shoulder to the

knee, or below it, in fine curves and vertical lines, giving more

freedom and consequently more grace. Few garments are so

absolutely unbecoming as a belted tunic that reaches to the knees,

a fact which I wish some of our Rosalinds would consider when they

don doublet and hose; indeed, to the disregard of this artistic

principle is due the ugliness, the want of proportion, in the

Bloomer costume, a costume which in other respects is sensible.

COSTUME

Are we not all weary of him, that venerable impostor fresh from the

steps of the Piazza di Spagna, who, in the leisure moments that he

can spare from his customary organ, makes the round of the studios

and is waited for in Holland Park? Do we not all recognize him,

when, with the gay insouciance of his nation, he reappears on the

walls of our summer exhibitions as everything that he is not, and

as nothing that he is, glaring at us here as a patriarch of Canaan,

here beaming as a brigand from the Abruzzi? Popular is he, this

poor peripatetic professor of posing, with those whose joy it is to

paint the posthumous portrait of the last philanthropist who in his

lifetime had neglected to be photographed,--yet he is the sign of

the decadence, the symbol of decay.

For all costumes are caricatures. The basis of Art is not the

Fancy Ball. Where there is loveliness of dress, there is no

dressing up. And so, were our national attire delightful in

colour, and in construction simple and sincere; were dress the

expression of the loveliness that it shields and of the swiftness

and motion that it does not impede; did its lines break from the

shoulder instead of bulging from the waist; did the inverted

wineglass cease to be the ideal of form; were these things brought

about, as brought about they will be, then would painting be no

longer an artificial reaction against the ugliness of life, but

become, as it should be, the natural expression of life's beauty.

Nor would painting merely, but all the other arts also, be the

gainers by a change such as that which I propose; the gainers, I

mean, through the increased atmosphere of Beauty by which the

artists would be surrounded and in which they would grow up. For

Art is not to be taught in Academies. It is what one looks at, not

what one listens to, that makes the artist. The real schools

should be the streets. There is not, for instance, a single

delicate line, or delightful proportion, in the dress of the

Greeks, which is not echoed exquisitely in their architecture. A

nation arrayed in stove-pipe hats and dress-improvers might have

built the Pantechnichon possibly, but the Parthenon never. And

finally, there is this to be said: Art, it is true, can never have

any other claim but her own perfection, and it may be that the

artist, desiring merely to contemplate and to create, is wise in

not busying himself about change in others: yet wisdom is not

always the best; there are times when she sinks to the level of

common-sense; and from the passionate folly of those--and there are

many--who desire that Beauty shall be confined no longer to the

bric-a-brac of the collector and the dust of the museum, but shall

be, as it should be, the natural and national inheritance of all,--

from this noble unwisdom, I say, who knows what new loveliness

shall be given to life, and, under these more exquisite conditions,

what perfect artist born? Le milieu se renouvelant, l'art se

renouvelle.

THE AMERICAN INVASION

A terrible danger is hanging over the Americans in London. Their

future and their reputation this season depend entirely on the

success of Buffalo Bill and Mrs. Brown-Potter. The former is

certain to draw; for English people are far more interested in

American barbarism than they are in American civilization. When

they sight Sandy Hook they look to their rifles and ammunition;

and, after dining once at Delmonico's, start off for Colorado or

California, for Montana or the Yellow Stone Park. Rocky Mountains

charm them more than riotous millionaires; they have been known to

prefer buffaloes to Boston. Why should they not? The cities of

America are inexpressibly tedious. The Bostonians take their

learning too sadly; culture with them is an accomplishment rather

than an atmosphere; their "Hub," as they call it, is the paradise

of prigs. Chicago is a sort of monster-shop, full of bustle and

bores. Political life at Washington is like political life in a

suburban vestry. Baltimore is amusing for a week, but Philadelphia

is dreadfully provincial; and though one can dine in New York one

could not dwell there. Better the Far West with its grizzly bears

and its untamed cowboys, its free open-air life and its free open-

air manners, its boundless prairie and its boundless mendacity!

This is what Buffalo Bill is going to bring to London; and we have

no doubt that London will fully appreciate his show.

With regard to Mrs. Brown-Potter, as acting is no longer considered

absolutely essential for success on the English stage, there is

really no reason why the pretty bright-eyed lady who charmed us all

last June by her merry laugh and her nonchalant ways, should not--

to borrow an expression from her native language--make a big boom

and paint the town red. We sincerely hope she will; for, on the

whole, the American invasion has done English society a great deal

of good. American women are bright, clever, and wonderfully

cosmopolitan. Their patriotic feelings are limited to an

admiration for Niagara and a regret for the Elevated Railway; and,

unlike the men, they never bore us with Bunkers Hill. They take

their dresses from Paris and their manners from Piccadilly, and

wear both charmingly. They have a quaint pertness, a delightful

conceit, a native self-assertion. They insist on being paid

compliments and have almost succeeded in making Englishmen

eloquent. For our aristocracy they have an ardent admiration; they

adore titles and are a permanent blow to Republican principles. In

the art of amusing men they are adepts, both by nature and

education, and can actually tell a story without forgetting the

point--an accomplishment that is extremely rare among the women of

other countries. It is true that they lack repose and that their

voices are somewhat harsh and strident when they land first at

Liverpool; but after a time one gets to love those pretty

whirlwinds in petticoats that sweep so recklessly through society

and are so agitating to all duchesses who have daughters. There is

something fascinating in their funny, exaggerated gestures and

their petulant way of tossing the head. Their eyes have no magic

nor mystery in them, but they challenge us for combat; and when we

engage we are always worsted. Their lips seem made for laughter

and yet they never grimace. As for their voices they soon get them

into tune. Some of them have been known to acquire a fashionable

drawl in two seasons; and after they have been presented to Royalty

they all roll their R's as vigorously as a young equerry or an old

lady-in-waiting. Still, they never really lose their accent; it

keeps peeping out here and there, and when they chatter together

they are like a bevy of peacocks. Nothing is more amusing than to

watch two American girls greeting each other in a drawing-room or

in the Row. They are like children with their shrill staccato

cries of wonder, their odd little exclamations. Their conversation

sounds like a series of exploding crackers; they are exquisitely

incoherent and use a sort of primitive, emotional language. After

five minutes they are left beautifully breathless and look at each

other half in amusement and half in affection. If a stolid young

Englishman is fortunate enough to be introduced to them he is

amazed at their extraordinary vivacity, their electric quickness of

repartee, their inexhaustible store of curious catchwords. He

never really understands them, for their thoughts flutter about

with the sweet irresponsibility of butterflies; but he is pleased

and amused and feels as if he were in an aviary. On the whole,

American girls have a wonderful charm and, perhaps, the chief

secret of their charm is that they never talk seriously except

about amusements. They have, however, one grave fault--their

mothers. Dreary as were those old Pilgrim Fathers who left our

shores more than two centuries ago to found a New England beyond

the seas, the Pilgrim Mothers who have returned to us in the

nineteenth century are drearier still.

Here and there, of course, there are exceptions, but as a class

they are either dull, dowdy or dyspeptic. It is only fair to the

rising generation of America to state that they are not to blame

for this. Indeed, they spare no pains at all to bring up their

parents properly and to give them a suitable, if somewhat late,

education. From its earliest years every American child spends

most of its time in correcting the faults of its father and mother;

and no one who has had the opportunity of watching an American

family on the deck of an Atlantic steamer, or in the refined

seclusion of a New York boarding-house, can fail to have been

struck by this characteristic of their civilization. In America

the young are always ready to give to those who are older than

themselves the full benefits of their inexperience. A boy of only

eleven or twelve years of age will firmly but kindly point out to

his father his defects of manner or temper; will never weary of

warning him against extravagance, idleness, late hours,

unpunctuality, and the other temptations to which the aged are so

particularly exposed; and sometimes, should he fancy that he is

monopolizing too much of the conversation at dinner, will remind

him, across the table, of the new child's adage, "Parents should be

seen, not heard." Nor does any mistaken idea of kindness prevent

the little American girl from censuring her mother whenever it is

necessary. Often, indeed, feeling that a rebuke conveyed in the

presence of others is more truly efficacious than one merely

whispered in the quiet of the nursery, she will call the attention

of perfect strangers to her mother's general untidiness, her want

of intellectual Boston conversation, immoderate love of iced water

and green corn, stinginess in the matter of candy, ignorance of the

usages of the best Baltimore Society, bodily ailments, and the

like. In fact, it may be truly said that no American child is ever

blind to the deficiencies of its parents, no matter how much it may

love them.

Yet, somehow, this educational system has not been so successful as

it deserved. In many cases, no doubt, the material with which the

children had to deal was crude and incapable of real development;

but the fact remains that the American mother is a tedious person.

The American father is better, for he is never seen in London. He

passes his life entirely in Wall Street and communicates with his

family once a month by means of a telegram in cipher. The mother,

however, is always with us, and, lacking the quick imitative

faculty of the younger generation, remains uninteresting and

provincial to the last. In spite of her, however, the American

girl is always welcome. She brightens our dull dinner parties for

us and makes life go pleasantly by for a season. In the race for

coronets she often carries off the prize; but, once she has gained

the victory, she is generous and forgives her English rivals

everything, even their beauty.

Warned by the example of her mother that American women do not grow

old gracefully, she tries not to grow old at all and often

succeeds. She has exquisite feet and hands, is always bien

chaussee et bien gantee and can talk brilliantly upon any subject,

provided that she knows nothing about it.

Her sense of humour keeps her from the tragedy of a grande passion,

and, as there is neither romance nor humility in her love, she

makes an excellent wife. What her ultimate influence on English

life will be it is difficult to estimate at present; but there can

be no doubt that, of all the factors that have contributed to the

social revolution of London, there are few more important, and none

more delightful, than the American Invasion.

SERMONS IN STONES AT BLOOMSBURY

THE NEW SCULPTURE ROOM AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Through the exertions of Sir Charles Newton, to whom every student

of classic art should be grateful, some of the wonderful treasures

so long immured in the grimy vaults of the British Museum have at

last been brought to light, and the new Sculpture Room now opened

to the public will amply repay the trouble of a visit, even from

those to whom art is a stumbling-block and a rock of offence. For

setting aside the mere beauty of form, outline and mass, the grace

and loveliness of design and the delicacy of technical treatment,

here we have shown to us what the Greeks and Romans thought about

death; and the philosopher, the preacher, the practical man of the

world, and even the Philistine himself, cannot fail to be touched

by these "sermons in stones," with their deep significance, their

fertile suggestion, their plain humanity. Common tombstones they

are, most of them, the work not of famous artists but of simple

handicraftsmen, only they were wrought in days when every

handicraft was an art. The finest specimens, from the purely

artistic point of view, are undoubtedly the two stelai found at

Athens. They are both the tombstones of young Greek athletes. In

one the athlete is represented handing his strigil to his slave, in

the other the athlete stands alone, strigil in hand. They do not

belong to the greatest period of Greek art, they have not the grand

style of the Phidian age, but they are beautiful for all that, and

it is impossible not to be fascinated by their exquisite grace and

by the treatment which is so simple in its means, so subtle in its

effect. All the tombstones, however, are full of interest. Here

is one of two ladies of Smyrna who were so remarkable in their day

that the city voted them honorary crowns; here is a Greek doctor

examining a little boy who is suffering from indigestion; here is

the memorial of Xanthippus who, probably, was a martyr to gout, as

he is holding in his hand the model of a foot, intended, no doubt,

as a votive offering to some god. A lovely stele from Rhodes gives

us a family group. The husband is on horseback and is bidding

farewell to his wife, who seems as if she would follow him but is

being held back by a little child. The pathos of parting from

those we love is the central motive of Greek funeral art. It is

repeated in every possible form, and each mute marble stone seems

to murmur [Greek text]. Roman art is different. It introduces

vigorous and realistic portraiture and deals with pure family life

far more frequently than Greek art does. They are very ugly, those

stern-looking Roman men and women whose portraits are exhibited on

their tombs, but they seem to have been loved and respected by

their children and their servants. Here is the monument of

Aphrodisius and Atilia, a Roman gentleman and his wife, who died in

Britain many centuries ago, and whose tombstone was found in the

Thames; and close by it stands a stele from Rome with the busts of

an old married couple who are certainly marvellously ill-favoured.

The contrast between the abstract Greek treatment of the idea of

death and the Roman concrete realization of the individuals who

have died is extremely curious.

Besides the tombstones, the new Sculpture Room contains some most

fascinating examples of Roman decorative art under the Emperors.

The most wonderful of all, and this alone is worth a trip to

Bloomsbury, is a bas-relief representing a marriage scene, Juno

Pronuba is joining the hands of a handsome young noble and a very

stately lady. There is all the grace of Perugino in this marble,

all the grace of Raphael even. The date of it is uncertain, but

the particular cut of the bridegroom's beard seems to point to the

time of the Emperor Hadrian. It is clearly the work of Greek

artists and is one of the most beautiful bas-reliefs in the whole

Museum. There is something in it which reminds one of the music

and the sweetness of Propertian verse. Then we have delightful

friezes of children. One representing children playing on musical

instruments might have suggested much of the plastic art of

Florence. Indeed, as we view these marbles it is not difficult to

see whence the Renaissance sprang and to what we owe the various

forms of Renaissance art. The frieze of the Muses, each of whom

wears in her hair a feather plucked from the wings of the

vanquished sirens, is extremely fine; there is a lovely little bas-

relief of two cupids racing in chariots; and the frieze of

recumbent Amazons has some splendid qualities of design. A frieze

of children playing with the armour of the god Mars should also be

mentioned. It is full of fancy and delicate humour.

We hope that some more of the hidden treasures will shortly be

catalogued and shown. In the vaults at present there is a very

remarkable bas-relief of the marriage of Cupid and Psyche, and

another representing the professional mourners weeping over the

body of the dead. The fine cast of the Lion of Chaeronea should

also be brought up, and so should the stele with the marvellous

portrait of the Roman slave. Economy is an excellent public

virtue, but the parsimony that allows valuable works of art to

remain in the grim and gloom of a damp cellar is little short of a

detestable public vice.

L'ENVOI

Amongst the many young men in England who are seeking along with me

to continue and to perfect the English Renaissance--jeunes

guerriers du drapeau romantique, as Gautier would have called us--

there is none whose love of art is more flawless and fervent, whose

artistic sense of beauty is more subtle and more delicate--none,

indeed, who is dearer to myself--than the young poet whose verses I

have brought with me to America; verses full of sweet sadness, and

yet full of joy; for the most joyous poet is not he who sows the

desolate highways of this world with the barren seed of laughter,

but he who makes his sorrow most musical, this indeed being the

meaning of joy in art--that incommunicable element of artistic

delight which, in poetry, for instance, comes from what Keats

called "sensuous life of verse," the element of song in the

singing, made so pleasurable to us by that wonder of motion which

often has its origin in mere musical impulse, and in painting is to

be sought for, from the subject never, but from the pictorial charm

only--the scheme and symphony of the colour, the satisfying beauty

of the design: so that the ultimate expression of our artistic

movement in painting has been, not in the spiritual vision of the

Pre-Raphaelites, for all their marvel of Greek legend and their

mystery of Italian song, but in the work of such men as Whistler

and Albert Moore, who have raised design and colour to the ideal

level of poetry and music. For the quality of their exquisite

painting comes from the mere inventive and creative handling of

line and colour, from a certain form and choice of beautiful

workmanship, which, rejecting all literary reminiscence and all

metaphysical idea, is in itself entirely satisfying to the

aesthetic sense--is, as the Greeks would say, an end in itself; the

effect of their work being like the effect given to us by music;

for music is the art in which form and matter are always one--the

art whose subject cannot be separated from the method of its

expression; the art which most completely realizes for us the

artistic ideal, and is the condition to which all the other arts

are constantly aspiring.

Now, this increased sense of the absolutely satisfying value of

beautiful workmanship, this recognition of the primary importance

of the sensuous element in art, this love of art for art's sake, is

the point in which we of the younger school have made a departure

from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin,--a departure definite and

different and decisive.

Master indeed of the knowledge of all noble living and of the

wisdom of all spiritual things will he be to us ever, seeing that

it was he who by the magic of his presence and the music of his

lips taught us at Oxford that enthusiasm for beauty which is the

secret of Hellenism, and that desire for creation which is the

secret of life, and filled some of us, at least, with the lofty and

passionate ambition to go forth into far and fair lands with some

message for the nations and some mission for the world, and yet in

his art criticism, his estimate of the joyous element of art, his

whole method of approaching art, we are no longer with him; for the

keystone to his aesthetic system is ethical always. He would judge

of a picture by the amount of noble moral ideas it expresses; but

to us the channels by which all noble work in painting can touch,

and does touch, the soul are not those of truths of life or

metaphysical truths. To him perfection of workmanship seems but

the symbol of pride, and incompleteness of technical resource the

image of an imagination too limitless to find within the limits of

form its complete expression, or of love too simple not to stammer

in its tale. But to us the rule of art is not the rule of morals.

In an ethical system, indeed, of any gentle mercy good intentions

will, one is fain to fancy, have their recognition; but of those

that would enter the serene House of Beauty the question that we

ask is not what they had ever meant to do, but what they have done.

Their pathetic intentions are of no value to us, but their realized

creations only. Pour moi je prefere les poetes qui font des vers,

les medecins qui sachent guerir, les peintres qui sanchent peindre.

Nor, in looking at a work of art, should we be dreaming of what it

symbolises, but rather loving it for what it is. Indeed, the

transcendental spirit is alien to the spirit of art. The

metaphysical mind of Asia may create for itself the monstrous and

many-breasted idol, but to the Greek, pure artist, that work is

most instinct with spiritual life which conforms most closely to

the perfect facts of physical life also. Nor, in its primary

aspect, has a painting, for instance, any more spiritual message or

meaning for us than a blue tile from the wall of Damascus, or a

Hitzen vase. It is a beautifully coloured surface, nothing more,

and affects us by no suggestion stolen from philosophy, no pathos

pilfered from literature, no feeling filched from a poet, but by

its own incommunicable artistic essence--by that selection of truth

which we call style, and that relation of values which is the

draughtsmanship of painting, by the whole quality of the

workmanship, the arabesque of the design, the splendour of the

colour, for these things are enough to stir the most divine and

remote of the chords which make music in our soul, and colour,

indeed, is of itself a mystical presence on things, and tone a kind

of sentiment . . . all these poems aim, as I said, at producing a

purely artistic effect, and have the rare and exquisite quality

that belongs to work of that kind; and I feel that the entire

subordination in our aesthetic movement of all merely emotional and

intellectual motives to the vital informing poetic principle is the

surest sign of our strength.

But it is not enough that a work of art should conform to the

aesthetic demands of the age: there should be also about it, if it

is to give us any permanent delight, the impress of a distinct

individuality. Whatever work we have in the nineteenth century

must rest on the two poles of personality and perfection. And so

in this little volume, by separating the earlier and more simple

work from the work that is later and stronger and possesses

increased technical power and more artistic vision, one might weave

these disconnected poems, these stray and scattered threads, into

one fiery-coloured strand of life, noting first a boy's mere

gladness of being young, with all its simple joy in field and

flower, in sunlight and in song, and then the bitterness of sudden

sorrow at the ending by Death of one of the brief and beautiful

friendships of one's youth, with all those unanswered lodgings and

questionings unsatisfied by which we vex, so uselessly, the marble

face of death; the artistic contrast between the discontented

incompleteness of the spirit and the complete perfection of the

style that expresses it forming the chief element of the aesthetic

charm of these particular poems;--and then the birth of Love, and

all the wonder and the fear and the perilous delight of one on

whose boyish brows the little wings of love have beaten for the

first time; and the love-songs, so dainty and delicate, little

swallow-flights of music, and full of such fragrance and freedom

that they might all be sung in the open air and across moving

water; and then autumn, coming with its choirless woods and odorous

decay and ruined loveliness, Love lying dead; and the sense of the

mere pity of it.

One might stop there, for from a young poet one should ask for no

deeper chords of life than those that love and friendship make

eternal for us; and the best poems in the volume belong clearly to

a later time, a time when these real experiences become absorbed

and gathered up into a form which seems from such real experiences

to be the most alien and the most remote; when the simple

expression of joy or sorrow suffices no longer, and lives rather in

the stateliness of the cadenced metre, in the music and colour of

the linked words, than in any direct utterance; lives, one might

say, in the perfection of the form more than in the pathos of the

feeling. And yet, after the broken music of love and the burial of

love in the autumn woods, we can trace that wandering among strange

people, and in lands unknown to us, by which we try so pathetically

to heal the hurts of the life we know, and that pure and passionate

devotion to Art which one gets when the harsh reality of life has

too suddenly wounded one, and is with discontent or sorrow marring

one's youth, just as often, I think, as one gets it from any

natural joy of living; and that curious intensity of vision by

which, in moments of overmastering sadness and despair

ungovernable, artistic things will live in one's memory with a

vivid realism caught from the life which they help one to forget--

an old grey tomb in Flanders with a strange legend on it, making

one think how, perhaps, passion does live on after death; a

necklace of blue and amber beads and a broken mirror found in a

girl's grave at Rome, a marble image of a boy habited like Eros,

and with the pathetic tradition of a great king's sorrow lingering

about it like a purple shadow,--over all these the tired spirit

broods with that calm and certain joy that one gets when one has

found something that the ages never dull and the world cannot harm;

and with it comes that desire of Greek things which is often an

artistic method of expressing one's desire for perfection; and that

longing for the old dead days which is so modern, so incomplete, so

touching, being, in a way, the inverted torch of Hope, which burns

the hand it should guide; and for many things a little sadness, and

for all things a great love; and lastly, in the pinewood by the

sea, once more the quick and vital pulse of joyous youth leaping

and laughing in every line, the frank and fearless freedom of wave

and wind waking into fire life's burnt-out ashes and into song the

silent lips of pain,--how clearly one seems to see it all, the long

colonnade of pines with sea and sky peeping in here and there like

a flitting of silver; the open place in the green, deep heart of

the wood with the little moss-grown altar to the old Italian god in

it; and the flowers all about, cyclamen in the shadowy places, and

the stars of the white narcissus lying like snow-flakes over the

grass, where the quick, bright-eyed lizard starts by the stone, and

the snake lies coiled lazily in the sun on the hot sand, and

overhead the gossamer floats from the branches like thin, tremulous

threads of gold,--the scene is so perfect for its motive, for

surely here, if anywhere, the real gladness of life might be

revealed to one's youth--the gladness that comes, not from the

rejection, but from the absorption, of all passion, and is like

that serene calm that dwells in the faces of the Greek statues, and

which despair and sorrow cannot touch, but intensify only.

In some such way as this we could gather up these strewn and

scattered petals of song into one perfect rose of life, and yet,

perhaps, in so doing, we might be missing the true quality of the

poems; one's real life is so often the life that one does not lead;

and beautiful poems, like threads of beautiful silks, may be woven

into many patterns and to suit many designs, all wonderful and all

different: and romantic poetry, too, is essentially the poetry of

impressions, being like that latest school of painting, the school

of Whistler and Albert Moore, in its choice of situation as opposed

to subject; in its dealing with the exceptions rather than with the

types of life; in its brief intensity; in what one might call its

fiery-coloured momentariness, it being indeed the momentary

situations of life, the momentary aspects of nature, which poetry

and painting new seek to render for us. Sincerity and constancy

will the artist, indeed, have always; but sincerity in art is

merely that plastic perfection of execution without which a poem or

a painting, however noble its sentiment or human its origin, is but

wasted and unreal work, and the constancy of the artist cannot be

to any definite rule or system of living, but to that principle of

beauty only through which the inconstant shadows of his life are in

their most fleeting moment arrested and made permanent. He will

not, for instance, in intellectual matters acquiesce in that facile

orthodoxy of our day which is so reasonable and so artistically

uninteresting, nor yet will he desire that fiery faith of the

antique time which, while it intensified, yet limited the vision;

still less will he allow the calm of his culture to be marred by

the discordant despair of doubt or the sadness of a sterile

scepticism; for the Valley Perilous, where ignorant armies clash by

night, is no resting-place meet for her to whom the gods have

assigned the clear upland, the serene height, and the sunlit air,--

rather will he be always curiously testing new forms of belief,

tinging his nature with the sentiment that still lingers about some

beautiful creeds, and searching for experience itself, and not for

the fruits of experience; when he has got its secret, he will leave

without regret much that was once very precious to him. "I am

always insincere," says Emerson somewhere, "as knowing that there

are other moods": "Les emotions," wrote Theophile Gautier once in

a review of Arsene Houssaye, "Les emotions, ne se ressemblent pas,

mais etre emu--voila l'important."

Now, this is the secret of the art of the modern romantic school,

and gives one the right keynote for its apprehension; but the real

quality of all work which, like Mr. Rodd's, aims, as I said, at a

purely artistic effect, cannot be described in terms of

intellectual criticism; it is too intangible for that. One can

perhaps convey it best in terms of the other arts, and by reference

to them; and, indeed, some of these poems are as iridescent and as

exquisite as a lovely fragment of Venetian glass; others as

delicate in perfect workmanship and as single in natural motive as

an etching by Whistler is, or one of those beautiful little Greek

figures which in the olive woods round Tanagra men can still find,

with the faint gilding and the fading crimson not yet fled from

hair and lips and raiment; and many of them seem like one of

Corot's twilights just passing into music; for not merely in

visible colour, but in sentiment also--which is the colour of

poetry--may there be a kind of tone.

But I think that the best likeness to the quality of this young

poet's work I ever saw was in the landscape by the Loire. We were

staying once, he and I, at Amboise, that little village with its

grey slate roofs and steep streets and gaunt, grim gateway, where

the quiet cottages nestle like white pigeons into the sombre clefts

of the great bastioned rock, and the stately Renaissance houses

stand silent and apart--very desolate now, but with some memory of

the old days still lingering about the delicately-twisted pillars,

and the carved doorways, with their grotesque animals, and laughing

masks, and quaint heraldic devices, all reminding one of a people

who could not think life real till they had made it fantastic. And

above the village, and beyond the bend of the river, we used to go

in the afternoon, and sketch from one of the big barges that bring

the wine in autumn and the wood in winter down to the sea, or lie

in the long grass and make plans pour la gloire, et pour ennuyer

les Philistins, or wander along the low, sedgy banks, "matching our

reeds in sportive rivalry," as comrades used in the old Sicilian

days; and the land was an ordinary land enough, and bare, too, when

one thought of Italy, and how the oleanders were robing the

hillsides by Genoa in scarlet, and the cyclamen filling with its

purple every valley from Florence to Rome; for there was not much

real beauty, perhaps, in it, only long, white dusty roads and

straight rows of formal poplars; but, now and then, some little

breaking gleam of broken light would lend to the grey field and the

silent barn a secret and a mystery that were hardly their own,

would transfigure for one exquisite moment the peasants passing

down through the vineyard, or the shepherd watching on the hill,

would tip the willows with silver and touch the river into gold;

and the wonder of the effect, with the strange simplicity of the

material, always seemed to me to be a little like the quality of

these the verses of my friend.

End of Project Gutenberg's Etext of Shorter Prose Pieces by Oscar Wilde