

Commencement Thesis.

Subject - American Criticism and
Criticism.

Lura Lurg. June. 1896.

Outline.

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American Criticism and Criticism.

With the "Survival of Darwinism" there came a into life a new form of literary activity. It was born of man's tireless into the realms of an immortal literature, it was developed by his Darwinism more and more the fact that books are but the reflections of real life, and finally that it was destined to become a most powerful factor in the sphere of its origin.

The earliest type of criticism has been most fully described, as "textual", for it dealt with phrases and texts alone. It was a purely scientific conception. As an outgrowth of this we find in time that criticism has made another evolution, losing somewhat its scholarly aspect, and taking into consideration

the laws of art and beauty. This form may be said to exist up to the beginning of this century. But it was yet without thought of the human element, it displayed a utter inability to recognize growth here as elsewhere, and had not yet learned that man, demands that time, and circumstances, as well as mere personality, must be taken into consideration when critical judgement is to be passed upon him. And so we find that slowly these two give way, and a third, and more universal type has been produced.

This last is the form which the critic of to-day is perfecting. Yet he does not forget, nor must we, that there must always be a beginning - that textual criticism opened the way and the field in which criticism from the higher stand-point might expand and perfect

itself, and so establish for the modern critical worker, a foundation on which he might rear his structure and point his hand upward rather than still leave him working upon ground. We owe to the older critic, this - and more too - he established a type but he also reclaimed for us from an almost unintelligible mass of letters - the earliest works of literature, whose value to us is almost infinite.

He gave our Italian Christians and from the minds of men whose advantages were few, modern criticism has been evolved. It spread over Europe, slowly at first, then more rapidly. Men came to recognize its scope, its value, and its possibilities. It set up a standard which every aspirant for literary fame strove to reach, consequently bringing forth all in him that was best, and strongest, and if he reached the standard -

the power which had spurred him on was the one to give him highest praise. It became a vocation for men whose keeness of insight, whose sensitiveness of mind to the facts of individual feelings and genius, whose ideas of strength, of life, and of beauty - all combined to make them fit judges of literary merit; and as a result brought from their pens works that will last - works in touch with man's intellectual, aesthetic, and ethical nature. Works not merely a repetition of the thought of others but works as purely creative as any that we have.

The spirit of modern criticism has crossed the waters from its medieval home, and we welcome it, in its best form, to our own shores.

We can boast of a literature not altogether insignificant and we now have a criticism to fit it. It is yet in its

infancy, for our literature is scarcely beyond that period, and the one must be developed before the other is possible. Criticism comes to us strong with English and Continental influences. But we are breathing into it the freedom of our country, we are following some rules but we are breaking many, we are treading old paths but we occasionally make a new one. Yet we cannot say that so far has our criticism been distinct in the glamour of English theories and mannerisms is still upon us to some extent - we have been broadening in other directions so, are we in this, we have overturned old world ideas in many cases and ultimately we will here. Our country is conducive to the production of broad-minded men, and from broad-minded men we may expect a broad and just criticism. This necessity demands that we assert our individuality, but

we must do it in the most politic of manners - and work up by degrees to the universal toleration of good in literature, irrespective of man and land. This - far better than to make rapid strides which would take for the moment but whose effect would soon be lost.

In making a review of men who have made themselves known as critics in our land, we find with these early advocates it was not a pretension, as it is to-day but that they had generally distinguished themselves in other kinds of literary labor. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a critic of merit but we know him best as poet, and he stands at the head of a class of men who were both critics and poets. James Russell Lowell ranks first in the field of American criticism but he also leads in

the field of American poetry. Oliver Wendell Holmes was the most genial and kindly of critics but he was also a charming essayist. Poe was distinctively a teller of weird tales but was a volatile and irresponsible critic. Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau from the contact into which they necessarily came with all literatures, were critics - but this was not their chief work, it was merely a side view or observation.

But all of these men were critics merely from the fact that these men literary labor naturally interested them in that of others. However they paved the way for men to follow who might be critics, pure and simple.

Continuing in the line of criticism in which Emerson was but a pioneer we find his theory carried out in full by George Ripley and Margaret Fuller, both of these critics of influence,

yet each having left but little behind as a record of their ability and genius. Next we find Whipple exerting his power in American critical literature, and he made it one that was felt for he instilled into it much that was purely American. Among a younger class of men - men who are making American criticism follow more closely the desired channels - we find Woodard, Richard Larrabee White, Edmund Clarence Stedman and Hamilton Wright Mabie. Mr Mabie is constantly pushing his way to the front in his chosen profession, and time has yet to prove whether we may not readily accede to him the position of first critic of all our literature. Purely critical in mind - yet appealing to the heart, a list of American critics would be incomplete without the name of William Dean Howells.

In reviewing American

critics individually, or rather taking one man to represent each period and movement. I have chosen Longfellow as type of poet or critic, Lowell because our leading critic, Margaret Fuller to show the influence of woman in critical circles, Whipple as purely critical, William Dean Howells because he stands at the head of a new school, and Hamilton Wright Mabie because in him we find the culmination of modern critical thought, and because of his bright outlook for the future.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a student of all languages and literatures, and to the advantages of the student he added an intimate friendship with many of the men who made the literature. Thus doubly fitted for his work, he came at a time when he was much needed and his kindly but

solid instruction by means of critical observations was the essential element to stimulate the literary activity of his country. He admired only the good in literature and he made others do the same. He was never ironical, because dealing only with man's best efforts there was no necessity of his being so. However we do not know him well as critic and fail to appreciate what he has done for us in this line, for he helped to supply the knowledge which the development of criticism demands.

James Russel Lowell - possibly displayed the finest mind in all American literature. He was a man who seemed to succeed in all of his undertakings. He turned from the dainty, serious poet, to the kindly yet sometimes stinging satirist of his foibles, and, - again, we will find him in his "humorous

"Proper" the finest and most just
 of literary critics. He took to his
 study of letters, a mind peculiar-
 ly fitted for critical work. But
 an old scholar, he could recog-
 nize this phase of the book; libe-
 ral and generous, he could take
 into consideration the man's en-
 vironment; intensely alive to
 real life he could feel its close
 relation with the book. He has
 some defects but never-the-less
 we place him to-day as our
 foremost literary critic.

In an article which
 came out in a "Public Opinion".
 W. D. Howells says that the pro-
 gress of American criticism
 has been retarded, and its scale
 of excellence lowered by the ad-
 vance into its ranks of many
 women who permit personal
 feelings to bias their judge-
 ment. True in some cases,
 you can not apply this
 to Margaret Fuller for the

Countess Ussoli. Her work was
 not so much a host of criti-
 cal essays, as it was the open-
 ing of a way to American
 women to the field of criticism
 and journalism. Yet that a
 woman was able to master so
 well the philosophy, and the
 literature of her time, incited
 her masculine co-workers to
 more strenuous labor, and this
 alone is surely creditable. Her
 books are not read to-day but
 she had her position, and
 holds her place in the process
 of the evolution of American
 criticism.

Edwin Percy Whipple
 made criticism his life work.
 It is said of him that he
 joined "instruction with dis-
 cussion, analysis with des-
 cription", and that herein
 lies his value, as a critic.
 He realized all the possibil-
 ities of criticism, and

the responsibility of the critic. He widened the scope of criticism to its utmost limitations, and viewed all books from the stand point of time and cause, of personal success and failure, and the connection of book and man. He laid his emphasis upon character and almost forced his belief upon us. Richardson said he admired "gilt" but had no mitigation of contempt for anything that was sham or shoddy in literature as well as in life.

William Dean Howells is a man in some ways broad but in others extremely narrow. One who when he inaugurates a movement pushes it ahead with the greatest of energy. In this one I admire him but he falls below our standard when we view him as a critic. Much

more liable to let personal feelings enter into his judgements than the woman whom he criticizes. We cannot feel that his criticism is either fair or just. If it is not in ~~entire~~ ^{entire}, accord with all his own peculiar realistic doctrines of a literary standard. He condemns it fiercely. Yet even here he has his full honors, his influence, and his place in our critical literature.

Hasty but by no means hasty, in a study of American critics, is Harriet Wright Mable. A man who is becoming more and more a recognized student of all literature. A keen insight, a fine and scholarly mind, an intense love for humanity fits the man for an ideal critic. Without crowding his own opinions forward, without sarcasm and

the sincerity of all feeling
he makes us take his posi-
tion, all most unconsciously
for we recognize the sincerity
and truthfulness with which
he maintains it. In short
his work is not the clear
reflection of the man him-
self.

These are the men who
have made American criti-
cism what it is to-day, and
to those still living we shall
look for a great development
in the future.

But still the position
of our criticism has yet been
clearly defined - we could not
expect this, nor would we
want it, for only in growth
and development can we
gain perfection - We are
now at the stage where
we can feel that our
critical work is a decided
factor in foreign as well

as national literature, and
 those our critics, are men
 whose ability is appreciated
 both at home and abroad
 and whose commendation
 or censure will have some
 effect in moulding liter-
 ary activity. They, and the
 representations of a large
 reading public and their
 real, determines for the Am-
 erican mind whether a
 book is to be read or cast
 aside, and this fact has no
 small effect on the literary
 productions of other countries
 and especially is this true
 of England. For English
 writers of to-day write
 largely for the literary
 demands of America.

As an outgrowth of our
 influence in English litera-
 ture we find, arising, a
 new train of thoughts
 and methods. Having

and established a footing in English letters our critics are too prone to give undivided attention to the strengthening of this position. Not realizing that criticism, as well as charity should begin at home, and that scores of American literary labors are asking their aid in the production of a literature of our own. But the cry is not altogether unheeded - and the mistake is one which is being remedied, and hand-in-hand with the author comes the critic - helping to build up in strength, in beauty and in purity; righting the wrongs; and clearing away the obscurities.

And are we doing too much when we predict for this type of literature, a most brilliant future. What has been done in the

past can still better be done in the future. As man progresses must not his work? The criticism grows in amount it will also grow in thoroughness, as it develops here its influence, and its justice must develop with it. And when all is combined we find as a final outgrowth that the human element will be the dominant one. and when the world as must sometime recognizes a universal literature for this very reason American criticism will lead in this department and be the one to set the universal standard.

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