

Nineteenth Century Criticism.

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Criticism does not flourish in great creative epochs, neither do great works come during any great critical epoch; but rather they alternate. In Greece, all the creative force was spent before anything like criticism, in the shape of Aristotle's definitions and canons for tragedy appeared. Upon the Greek works for a basis was founded the first epoch of systematic criticism which the world had seen - the Alexandrian era, as it is called. From this period with the advancing ages criticism has grown and flourished, until now it is one of most important factors in the literary world.

Matthew Arnold says that "Real criticism is essentially the exercise of curiosity as to ideas on all subjects, for their own sakes, apart from any practical interest they may serve; it obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind, and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever". This is true of all criticism whether of poetry, or of other forms of literature and science.

In his "Elements of Criticism" Hamer

says that criticism has for its object the more delicate feelings; and the terms which denote these feelings are not less distinct than those of logic. He says that the advantages of criticism when studied as a rational science are: first, a thorough knowledge of the fine arts increases twofold the pleasure we gain from them; second, a philosophic inquiry into the principles of the fine arts inures the reflecting mind to the most enticing sort of logic; the practice of reasoning upon subjects so agreeable tends to a habit and a habit strengthening the reasoning faculties prepares the mind for entering into subjects more intricate and abstract; third, the reasonings employed on the fine arts are of the same kind with those which regulate our behavior; fourth, it tends to improve the heart no less than the understanding; fifth, it tends no less to invigorate the social affections than to moderate those that are selfish; and sixth, it is a great support to morality.

The earliest development of criticism to any great degree, the criticism of Alexandria and of the later stages of the revival of classical learning in Italy for example, was largely textual: it occupied itself principally with the

settlement of questions of different versions; it was mainly and necessarily absorbed in a study of words and phrases. Textual criticism of the Iliad and Odyssey, began, doubtless, with the attempt in the time of Pisistratus, to collect these wandering stories. Now, it is conceded that it is the business of critical power in all departments of learning, to see the object as it really is. This tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; and thus to make the best ideas prevail. Soon these new views reach society, and there is a stir and a growth everywhere, out of which come the great creative works of all time. According to Matthew Arnold, there is a period of criticism first, then a time of true creative activity after criticism has done its work.

In this world everything has its rise and fall, its period of growth and decay, but the one element that remains ever constant in all critical work, is some aspect of life reflected, reported, and interpreted, in order to make the critical work powerful. The study of this phase of critical work has never been so ardently carried on as during the present century. The

study has become the absorbing passion of many a literary genius. Until now we have in the form of criticism, a body of literary interpretation and philosophy, so plentiful and important as to form one of the chief distinctively modern contributions to literature. This is the result of the work of men who under other influences, and in other literary periods and circumstances would have been masters in the realm of the epic, the drama, or the lyric. Such men are Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Coleridge, Carlyle, Auriel, Arnold, Sainte-Beuve, Emerson, Lowell, and Stedman. These men have not studied the works of other men from any mere scholarly impulse, but they have been forcibly attracted to this study, because literature revealed to them the laws of life and art. The critical movement of this century is not so much of study and comparison for the purpose of judgment by fixed standards, as of search for the purpose of making plain the common laws of life and art, of making it clear that literature is always the expression of insight and experience.

Disinterestedness which has been said to be the rule for fair criticism is obtained by

keeping away from what is called the practical view of things; by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to allow a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches; by steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those utterances, political, practical considerations about ideas which plenty of people will be certain to attach to them, which, perhaps, should be attached to them, and which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them; but with which criticism has nothing to do.

The bane of criticism in this country is that practical considerations cling to it and smother it. It subserves interests not its own. Our organs of criticism are organs of men and parties having practical ends to serve, and with them those practical ends are the first things and the play of mind second; just so much play of mind as is compatible with the prosecution of those practical ends is all that is wanted. In order to keep criticism free of this practical spirit and its aims, the critic must not enter the sphere of immediate practice in the political, social, and humanitarian world.

By many the sole business of is the critic is considered to be judging; and so in a

large sense it is; and the most valuable judgment is that which, along with fresh knowledge, almost insensibly forms itself in the mind of a clear and just person; therefore the critic's great desire is to acquire knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge. The way in which the critic does the most good to his readers is by his giving forth this fresh knowledge, along with his judgments and criticisms, which should take a second rank, going along with the knowledge not as an abstract law, but as a sort of clue. When a critic admits synthesis, constructiveness, and personality into his work, that work begins to show the true human elements, kindness, breadth, tolerance, sympathy, freedom and sincerity. This human element which is lacking in the critical works of many writers is embodied in Augustine Birrell's "Res Judicatae".

Criticism performs an important service to literature, in exposing the shams of many writers, in unmasking pretentiousness, in preventing shallow writers from even being thought profound; or the imposition of second rate authors upon their contemporaries as original thinkers. In this respect, also, the periodical press does much good. Criticisms, also,

does a real service to the writers themselves, for some authors, perhaps, in proportion to their originality are disposed to overestimate their works. Others again live so much in a little circle of their own that they are densely ignorant of what lies beyond it, and their best work is, therefore, out of the line of public sympathy. Still others have no idea of literary proportions and become quixotic as soon as they have gained a single success. Now, to such persons sharp criticism is very valuable. Even in its severest form it does them good, and it is encouraging to think of the bad work that would have come on the market had not the strong hand of criticism wiped it out forever.

The tendency ^{of critics} to individualism often subjects the author to hard conditions. Men of strong minds in this generation have established a sort of intellectual feudal system, every body being on his guard against every body else, an author has to fight his way into esteem. The educated minds have become fonder and hardened. They desire nothing new, good or bad. The influence of this spirit on criticism in the present century has been incalculable. Poets have been tried by tests their poetry was never

to meet. A life spent in examining deceptions and quackeries produces little of fruit, while a well trained power to discern excellencies would include all the negative advantages of the other; and end also in the positive benefit of mental enlargement and elevation. Reading and judgment result in nothing but barrenness, when they but confirm the critic's opinion of himself. To comprehend another mind we must first be tolerant to its peculiarities and place ourselves in the attitude of learners. By contemplation rather than by analysis, by self-forgetfulness rather than self-confidence does the elusive and ethereal life of genius yield itself to the mind of the critic. Some critics understand little but themselves and their skill consists in a dextrous substitute of their own peculiarities for the laws of taste and beauty, or in sneeringly alluding to the difference between the work they review, and the works of established fame. Lord Jeffrey is an example of this class, and the man for whom he had the least regard, Coleridge, is the true exponent of the philosophical criticism of this century. Coleridge made criticism interpretative both of the spirit and forms of the works of genius.

He found his principles in the nature of things. He was not content with judging from his own view; but he looked at the production from the author's position. He had a mind willing to learn, and he changed criticism from censorship into interpretation, evolving laws which others were railing at forms. His influence in this respect has been great. He changed the tone of Jeffrey's own review, and Carlyle, Macaulay, Palford, and all the most popular critics of the day, more or less, follow his mode of judgment and investigation.

However much we may hear about authors not profiting from the critic's remarks on their books, that such is not always the case, the following incidence goes to prove. Christopher North criticized Tennyson's early poems, and he retaliated by writing some lines about "musty Christopher". Nevertheless, when ten years later Tennyson republished the poems, it was found that he had dropped almost all the pieces with the reviewer had found fault, and had corrected almost all the faults the reviewer had pointed out. In this case as in others, the critic got no thanks.

Someone has said that "if a critic declared a book to be obscure, the author would write another and say, 'If you could not understand the last you certainly can not understand this'; and very, very, very few people did understand it, but those who did gave themselves such airs on the strength of it, that obscurity became fashionable". As the critic grows older he becomes more reluctant to condemn. For this reason really bad books ought to be given to men under twenty five to criticise. There is no harm in praising a friend's book if it deserves praise, but there is harm in condemning an enemy's book if it does not deserve condemnation.

Criticism of the higher order that which searches for the laws of beauty in the creation of art is not possible until there has been a large accumulation of material upon which it can work. Nor can any single work of literary art furnish the elements of aesthetic criticism, there must be hundred works with which comparison may be made and resemblances or contrasts noted. When aesthetic criticism is fully equipped and developed, there remains still another stage in

the evolution of the criticism which deals with literature as a whole; which studies the large conditions under which it is created, which takes account of race, time, circumstances, which discerns in the detached works of a man, or a generation, or a race an adequate expression of human experience, and an authentic revelation of human life, is still to come: and this larger criticism is not possible until universal literature is open to the critic.

The true end of criticism is to create a current of true and fresh ideas. Its best spiritual work is to keep man from a self-satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarizing; to lead him towards perfection by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself - the absolute beauty and fitness of things: