

## ON CRITICISM

THE life of the spirit is the life of freedom, the life that responds to nature's charms, to her colour, her cadences, her music: the poetry that sums these up and calls them evanescent and calls them also beauty. Spirit is not created art. Spirit is the poised brush; it is gazing; it is listening. Spirit is sensitivity that asks not why nor whether, that simply enjoys and through enjoyment may give rise to creativity.

What *is* the Imagination? That it is a very important thing, or an essential human faculty, we can all agree; but after that the trouble begins. And, as generally happens, those who have spoken of it with most seriousness and authority are the hardest to understand. "Imagination is the Human existence itself," said Blake, who had plenty of it. It is "the esemplastic power"—that is, the power of shaping diversity into unity—said Coleridge. "It may be compared to Adam's dream." A. C. Bradley, elucidating this, yet speaking with his own authority, said: "Wherever the imagination is satisfied, there, if we had a knowledge we had not, we should discover no idle fancy, but an image of a truth." That brings us back to Blake again, in his dictum: "Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth."

Behind every great work there must be something more than personality, however necessary personality may be. The thing that Aristotle called *ethos* has got to be there. It need not be a religion, or a moral code, or even that odd thing, a philosophy, but there must be something greatly extra-personal, a high general sentiment, a healthy species of cosmic consistency. All the grief and emptiness of our unconscionably clever artists and poets can be traced to their lack of an *ethos*. Homer never thought at all of the *ethos* which he had, but it thunders in his every hexameter. Your contemporary, on the contrary, never thinks of anything except the *ethos* he hasn't got, in whose place he has substituted Economic Determinism, Anglo-

Catholicism, Surrealism, or what have you. Yet it is impossible to attribute our troubles to lost faith, for men have found it only rarely, or to changing standards, for standards have always had a way of changing, or to war, for men have always been acquainted with strife, or to capitalism and communism, for Cæsar and Spartacus knew them for commonplaces two millenniums ago. But if the ethos has been lost, if, as the Greek said long since, there is no "reconciliation between me and not-me," then we must expect weakness and despair and tall talk about trivial techniques until the ethos is found again.

The criticism of poetry cannot yet be ranked as a science, and critics in the past have often deserved the contempt in which they have been held. Sir Henry Wotton called them the brushers of noblemen's clothes; Ben Johnson described them as tinkers who made more faults than they mend; Samuel Butler, as butchers and the fierce inquisitors of wit; Swift, as dogs, rats, wasps, or at best the drones of the learned world; Shenstone, as asses which, by gnawing vines, first taught the advantages of pruning them; Matthew Green, as upholsterers and appraisers; Burns, as cut-throat bandits in the paths of fame; and Washington Irving, as freebooters in the republic of letters. Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging, said Ben Johnson; and criticism, says Dryden, is mere hangman's work. Worse still, critics have not only snapped at poets; they have devoured one another.

The creative faculty of a genius springs from something which ordinary humdrum mortals do not possess. And perhaps it is again a commonplace to tell you that this creative spirit springs from a nature which is neither definitely male nor female, but a nature which is composed spiritually of both. To follow the matter further, it seems quite reasonable to suppose that there are beings who possess the two sex natures so evenly balanced as to make them complete in themselves. To think correctly is the condition of behaving well. It is also in itself a moral act; those who would think correctly must resist considerable temptations.

Undoubtedly our sense of the value of the individual is

among the best achievements of our day. Realizing at last that beauty lives only in the mind that apprehends it, we guard against mistaking labels for experiences, against ready-made knowledge, against borrowed admirations. For all that, the artist must still aim at final accomplishment. If the beauty he creates will live its independent life in every one of its admirers, that only increases his obligation to define and complete it. Every man is to judge it for himself, but he cannot judge the indeterminate, except to say that it is indeterminate. A work of art can never be a half creation, which each admirer completes to taste. It is a realized, organic vision, only living in other minds than its creator's in so far as its total reality can be interfused with theirs. In its artistic influence it is indivisible. Moreover, in every work of art there is an appeal to solidarity as well as to individuality of feeling. Common appreciation is a bond of sympathy. Beauty is not an explosion but a welding, an integrating force. It is philosophically exact to say that the Kreutzer Sonata is a different thing for every hearer; but it is also and equivalently exact to say that it is different for the same hearer at every hearing, or that it never can be heard at all, since the man who heard the beginning is another man when he hears the end. The practical truth is that it is best performed in a crowded hall, because participation in the passion it excites is cumulative and the larger the number of minds it reaches simultaneously the clearer and intenser is the single experience into which it lifts them.

Great passions are liable to make a man one-sided; and Winckelmann may not unjustly be reproached with having obscured the greatness of genuine Roman art by grouping most ancient sculpture together and judging it only by perfection of bodily form, and by ignoring the specific character of the Roman monuments.

It is the nature of an artist that he cannot, as a critic can, be detached and impersonal in his relations with art.

True criticism is threefold. It involves, first, the comparison of all the arts with one another and a discussion of the common element which they are generally admitted to

possess. Second, it involves a study of psychology, a comparison of all the acts with the nature of the mind, its intellectual structure and its ethical needs. Third, it involves a comparison between the results thus obtained and the facts of history, the influence of race, religion and climate. "The great fault of criticism is its ignorance—at least its disregard—of psychology." Even Aristotle, for all his shrewd observation, provides no basis for a systematic criticism.

His leading principle, which makes all poetry, all art, an imitation, is demonstrably false, has rendered his *Poetic* one-sided (a treatise not so much on poetry, as on dramatic poetry), and has transmitted to all after criticism a sort of hereditary squint.

The tendency of the critic, according to Mr. Lucas, is "to say, not his word, but the last word." The only general judgments which Mr. Lucas believes that criticism can attempt are "This is true: that is not," and "This looks sane, and this, diseased." By what standards? jesting Pilate might reply. Mr. Lucas's retort is that good poetry is inseparable from good living, and that poetry must be judged by those "permanent values" which the moralist attaches to the good life—"vitality, strength, courage, devotion, pity, grace, nobility, intensity, and generosity." These qualities apparently are despised or rejected by the moderns, are in abeyance until another Rupert Brooke comes.

Criticism is a matter of sensibility as well as of intelligence. The first business of the literary critic is to discover whether the poem is good or not, whether or not it provides the reader with a valuable experience. It is only later that he can go on to pass judgment on the state of mind behind the work. For if the art is bad, if it is a dead thing, then it can have no vital relation to the society from which it springs and there can be no earthly good in discussing its symptomatic aspects. Only the great writer can be an important symptom because what is happening to him, what is revealed in him, is also happening to society.

There is nothing to prevent your or my mind being in a state of chaos; it is true, in a sense, that they always are

and must be; and it is wholesome to recognise the fact, provided we retain our commonsense and continue to regard chaos as something we mean to get out of as fast as we can. If things have gone wrong with us, and especially with our poetry, in recent years, a main cause surely has been that too many of our leaders in the field have forgotten responsibility, and given way to a passive or cynical enjoyment of the welter. We have had, we have still, the advantage of great constructive and original intelligences in our midst; and we have not troubled to assimilate their contribution. Whitehead's philosophy, for example, includes as part of its rationalisation of "the flux" a doctrine of sense perception, which, incidentally, corroborates that integral poetic attitude which is traditional with us and pricks the bladder of all this contemporary solipsism; nevertheless our jigsawers go on bravely jig-sawing, in holy innocence of the absurdity of their postures.

"A satirist who is to live does not waste his force upon merely transient foibles. His best work must be universal." This truth, so aptly phrased by Professor Duff, doubtless accounts for Horace and Juvenal retaining such unmistakable presence in an age whose own propensities accord to the classics such reluctant recognition. Perhaps it is because England, like Rome, makes life, rather than thought or any other standard, the critical touchstone, that these writers with their "eye on the object" seem to over-top rivals with a more razor-like wit or a more subtle power of analysis. Lucian is a more penetrating humorist, and Petronius beats them in portraiture. But relevancy to the practical business of living will always make an appeal to the normal British mind, and the art of satire, most characteristic of the Roman pen, is probably the surest hold that Latin literature retains on our curriculum of culture.

The weaknesses of the best contemporary poetry are inherent in society and they will only disappear when the spiritual revival has overcome the forces of secularism. The literary critic can point all this out, he can diagnose, but with diagnosis his function comes to an end. The rest be-

longs to God and His theologians. "We shall certainly continue to read the best of its kind of what our time provides," runs a concluding sentence of Eliot's essay, "but we must tirelessly criticize it according to our own principles and not merely according to the principles admitted by the writers and by critics who discuss it in the public Press." "The recovery of religious sanctions in some form seems necessary to the health of the world," writes another distinguished critic, but, as he hastens to add, "they cannot be had for the wanting."

Ought modern writers to find their models and their inspirations in the classics? The humanists were getting rather excited over that question in the early 1930s. Jonathan Swift worried over it in the eighteenth century and Boileau in the seventeenth. But it was already well over a thousand years old. Callimachus had raised it in Alexandria in the third century, B.C. The "Modernists" won out in that ancient argument, only to lose to the ancients when Horace and the Roman critics came uppermost about the time of Caesar Augustus. But the Roman critics later swung back to the earlier views, and the writers of the first century or so of the Christian era were urged to take their contemporaries as models.

What are the virtues of literary modernism of this kind? The Roman, Tacitus, answered that one when he expressed his doubts of Cicero's infallibility as a literary oracle: "When changes occur," he explained, "we must not always conclude that they are for the worse"—a bit of hoary classical wisdom that our ultra-conservatives would do well to ponder.

In a confusion of poetic theory the natural impulse of the poet is easily drowned or diverted; the different waves of modernism alluded to above have swept over literature in such quick succession that their implications have not been understood or assimilated, and the younger poets of to-day seem proudly conscious that Pound and Joyce, Rimbaud and Eliot, Miss Sitwell and Gerald Manley Hopkins stood

## BLACKFRIARS

sponsors at their christening, and to be unaware of how discordant a bevy of godparents they are and what irreconcilable gifts they have bestowed upon their children.

We protect our minds by an elaborate system of abstractions, ambiguities, metaphors, and similes from the reality we do not wish to know too clearly; we lie to ourselves, in order that we may still have the excuse of ignorance, the alibi of stupidity.

CLAUDE WILLIAMSON.