

## CRITICISM AND ESTHETICS

POETRY AND CRISIS. By Martin Turnell (Sands : The Paladin Press; 5s.)

As Catholics we should be grateful to Mr. Turnell for the new outlines he gives to what has hitherto been for us a much too obscure question. With balance and learning he considers the position of the Catholic critic, the main lines of the historical background and his task to-day. Undoubtedly the book will serve a very useful purpose.

Perhaps more by way of regret than disagreement, one wonders why those outlines were not drawn more vigorously and the practical advantages of the Catholic critic given more hopeful prominence. For instance, at the end of the book the author appears almost to be defeating his own position when he takes his stand so absolutely along with those who adopt a completely defeatist attitude. It may be that the task of effecting any change in the world is a hopeless one, but the literary critic's is the least hopeless part of it, granted the security and assurance of Mr. Turnell's Catholic critic. For he is in a position to see more clearly and comprehensively the deficiencies of the present position, and correspondingly the desired goal, at least abstractly, and with regard to particular works concretely. The defeatism of many writers is due not to the chaos out of which they have to create, but to their own inability to organise that chaos in a way that proves enduringly satisfactory. They are forever abandoning their original blue-prints. The Catholic critic is saved, not intellectual effort, but the possibility of doing nothing but making false starts. And among those who share his outlook, and work with him, his task is in many ways the most responsible and effective. It is more direct and incisive than that of the philosopher, and less suspect than the theologian's. For instance, a great deal can be done, not only for literature, but for Christianity, by an integral criticism of such a writer as D. H. Lawrence. If it is well done, it constitutes an argument much more forceful than either the philosopher or the theologian is able to produce. And we do not mean the sort of criticism that would use the opportunity as a veil for mere propaganda, but true criticism that would inevitably and unconsciously be propaganda. Mr. Turnell rightly deplores the false criticism of Lawrence that is the result of misapplied dogma, but, perhaps, says too little about the possibilities of the complete critic who, with, sensibility and 'that philosophy which provides a comprehensive view of the universe,' is peculiarly fitted in the modern world to criticise; to

set about the 'elucidation of a work of art and the correction of taste.' This definition from T. S. Eliot contains a great deal. The elucidation of a work of art like *St. Mawr* involves a clear statement of the outlook it so admirably expresses, and it is the critic's first business to point out that the work of art has very little to do with the ideas as such.

Obviously we have suffered too much from the philosopher, theologian and moralist, self-appointed critics, who blindly disregard the canons of art, but the cure for this is not to go to the opposite extreme and exclude them. Perhaps Mr. Turnell would not exclude them, as indeed his whole position shows, but the implications of the following passage could easily be made to follow whichever direction the reader wished; '... the question whether *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, objectively considered, is or is not a healthy book, is not one which can be settled out of hand by the theologian. It can only be determined by a study of the language in which it is written. A study of this sort is purely technical, and can only be undertaken by the trained critic. My point is that though criticism can never be a substitute for metaphysics, neither can metaphysics be a substitute for criticism.' Nor would it be a cure to give the critic, philosopher and theologian equal rights and allow them all to 'start scratch.' Mr. Turnell would have given the final pointing to an admirable treatise if he had made it clearer that although the critic is supreme in his own sphere, he is dependent upon and subject to the philosopher and theologian. He is independent only in technical critical matters, and the healthiness of a book is only partly a matter of technical criticism. Indeed, I think the critic will find that in almost every line he writes he is in something borrowing from the philosopher and theologian.

Perhaps it is asking a great deal for the critic to be so fully equipped, but it is not asking for more than is necessary. The whole challenge of the world is concentrated in the challenge of the arts. The Left Book Club, with its fifty thousand members, reads and discusses, but what really gives that movement a sense of security, inevitability and depth is the way that the more vital manifestations in the arts are somehow gravitating towards the Left for intellectual sanction and patronage. This book will have served a vital purpose if it can rouse us to the need and importance of criticism.

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