II

THE OBJECT OF CRITICISM

The historians of literature may be the salt of the earth; but on that very account, they are and must remain a small minority. The young men and women who go through the higher courses of literary studies have, most of them, other objects in view. Whatever walks they may intend to follow in after-life, their common desire is simply to be trained in the intelligent enjoyment of books. Whilst only a few among them are budding scholars, all are willing to be given some finer perception of beauty in words. The seminaries of learning are thus faced with a double task: provision is to be made in teaching for the due apprenticeship of the elect, who will carry on the sacred trust and keep adding to knowledge; at the same time, the mental interests of the more numerous flock are not to be forgotten. How can these two aims be pursued together?

It is no exaggeration to say, that they are but ill reconciled at present. The future historian has it all his own way. Courses are conducted, and examinations held, as if all the members of the professional and business classes were to have written, or be able to write, a thesis for the Ph.D. Now this looks very much like a confusion of issues. The historian of letters is a specialist; his training should answer his particular requirements; he must master the technique of his craft, and this is the end to which the discipline of higher studies has been systematically bent. But the common run of students need not acquire that specialized skill.
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Since what they want is to feel the humanizing influence of great books, the stress laid on technique at the expense of general culture may be, in principle, detrimental to their object; and we know from experience that it is very much so in fact.

The origin of the confusion is not far to seek. It grew naturally out of the search for some common ground, upon which the specialist and the layman could meet. The technical activity of the scholar implies, of course, the normal use of his sensibilities, and his training should make room for their due exercise. On the other hand, it is rightly felt that if the non-professional student of literature is to be capable of an intelligent appreciation, he must go beyond the passive enjoyment of what he reads; he must be instructed, partly at least, in the mysteries of the art, and rub shoulders with the fully initiated. The view is sound; but the arrangement fails entirely, if the cultural virtue of letters is sacrificed to the preoccupation with historical problems, so that the would-be specialist has no chance of keeping his sensibilities fresh and open; and if his own discipline, meanwhile, is inhuman and dry, so that the layman is simply repelled by it.

The common ground on which the scholar and the cultivated man should meet and can meet, is not, as seems to have been taken for granted, literary history; it is the criticism of literature. In the critical functioning of the mind, the technical exertions of the historian find their crowning justification and reality; in it, as well, the unpretending pleasure of the reader of books is refined and deepened. All ranks and varieties of powers, temperaments and tastes are easily brought together in this ample field, where the highest and the lowest are equally at home, because high and low here differ only in degree, not in kind. All sincere reflection upon a text is criticism of a sort; and the best
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criticism is just that reflection carried as far as it can go.

The critical activity is thus seen to be of the widest and the most varied range. In a manner, it concerns all of us. We shall have occasion to point out that the aim of higher literary studies, as an instrument of education, and a formative influence, is to endow every cultivated man or woman with the ability to be, within individual limits, but genuinely, his or her own critic of literature. We cannot, of course, leave it at that. Differences in degree, though not in kind, will at once assert themselves. With some, the function will be exercised to the full; whether or not they make a profession of criticism, their response to the stimulus of a work will be a re-creation of its intent and purpose. With others, the critical act is reduced in scope; these are simply the competent lovers of books. The two species, needless to say, shade off into each other. The distinction is chiefly practical and pedagogical; but under the circumstances, we must make of it the very division of our subject. It is with the former class that the following remarks will deal.

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What is meant here by criticism? Not, surely, the magistracy that was once inseparable from the name. To pass judgment in a definite manner, and to assign ranks, is not exactly a superannuated ideal: there will always be a necessity for it; and persons will always be found, who feel equipped for the task, and like to acquit themselves of it. But it would be vain to ignore the fact, that the essential relativity of taste has entered into the very texture of our thought. The values of literature are fixed gradually, by a process of empirical assessment and unceasing correction; each reader, in the democracy of intellectual life, has inherited a share, however unequal, of the privilege which the
self-appointed guardians of tradition used to reserve for themselves. There are of course voices of authority, which command attention and respect; in the consensus of opinion that evolves, the sustained power of trained, competent appreciations tells in the long run; the ruin of dogmatic criticism has not spelt complete anarchy. Still, eclecticism has come to stay; there is hardly any clear and settled rule of merit outside the reactions of readers, and the belief in a single scale, with unchangeable degrees, has vanished for good. The value of our criticism is measured by the breadth of our sympathies, the acuteness and delicacy of our perceptions; and the hierarchy each of us establishes is valid only for the minds which find their own impressions in ours.

Is the critic thus confined to the passive attitude of impressionism pure and simple; and are the students to be directed toward the cheap and easy ideal of self-sufficient, arbitrary reactions to texts? If it were to be so, we should revert indeed, for the training of youth, to the historical study of literature; as to a discipline that offered at least a promise of objectivity, an outlet for minds bent upon disinterested effort, determined to transcend, if possible, their narrow limits.

But criticism, while losing much of its judicial assurance, and even if we demur at its scientific pretensions, can regain what it lost, and more, in real objectivity of outlook. Its essence is not merely receptive; it implies more than intelligent contact with the stimulus of a book. It is a rich, positive activity, which through sympathy shares in the creative act of the artist. To criticize a work, in the proper sense of the term, is to understand and interpret as fully as possible the urge of energy that produced it; to live again the stages of its development, and partake of the impulses and intentions with which it is still pregnant. This is, in substance,
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Croce's view, such as Mr. Spingarn, some eighteen years ago, sponsored in America for the first time, with an enthusiasm which no doubt fastened too exclusively on the central sense of a liberating message, and cut criticism adrift with too rash a hand from all its safe moorings in history. When all is said, still, there is no theory more acceptable.¹

The critic should do, through other means, and more efficiently, what the orthodox historian was after in his quest for sources. No less than the historian, the critic is keenly desirous of explaining the work in hand; to that explanation, he gives his mind fully; in it, all his faculties have a share. A process is thus started, able, on the one hand, to satisfy the legitimate demands of intelligence, of the power that analyzes, links up and classifies things; in close organic affinity, on the other hand, with the simple humanizing enjoyment of letters.

The process might be figured out somewhat in the following way. History, the erudite knowledge of the conditions, the circumstances, the relations—in a word, the externals—of literature, should have a definite place and function in the full cycle of criticism; again, the impressionism of direct, concrete perceptions should have in it its recognized province. Both are necessary, but neither is supreme; they are adjuncts, preparatory or instrumental, toward the critical act itself. This is of a different order; it is a synthetic activity, which, bearing on the work studied, welds into a central intuition the subjective data gathered by our immediate reaction to the text, and the objective facts supplied by the available historical research.

The end and aim of that synthetic act is to seize from

¹ The text of Mr. Spingarn's address, and the principal pronouncements of authoritative American critics on the issue thus raised, are given in J. C. Bowman's book, Contemporary American Criticism, 1926.
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the inside the creative mood of the writer; the complex of emotions and ideas that lies at the core of the work, and from which it originated. This is not merely to divine a purpose, an artistic intent; it is to possess oneself of the very growth and expansion of the purpose into an accomplished reality. Here we have history indeed, but the inner history of a mind, which has obeyed the prompting of self-expression. Towards that full understanding, so complete that it reproduces, at least to some extent, the actual fashioning and shaping of the product, all auxiliary help is of course welcome; and the biography of the writer, the background of literary development and social conditions, the science of language, analytical aesthetics, are called upon to throw as decisive a light as possible on the psychological heart of the problem. No less indispensable is the fine, accurate perception of those values which are the tangible outcome of the author's endeavor.

Thus it is that the critic worthy of the name is really a creator. Judgment, appreciation, intelligence, are inappropriate terms to denote his activity; intuition, sympathy, would be more fitting words. If his effort is vigorous, and guided by a sufficient body of knowledge, he will fasten unerringly on the genetic idea, the *idée génératrice* \(^1\) of the work; not necessarily an idea, but most often an image, a mental experience, and almost always an emotion of some kind. This is the genuine explanation of the book; in no other way is a concrete relationship established from the effect to its actual cause. The scientific sense, the craving for the intelligibility of things, is thus most substantially satisfied; and our intuition, radiating out from its central focus toward each part and aspect of the work, illuminates

\(^1\) This theory is worked out in M. Pierre Audiat's interesting book, *La Biographie de l'Oeuvre Littéraire, Esquisse d'une Méthode Critique*, 1924.
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it to our gaze, making it transparent with an inner light. Our imaginative perception, following the author’s mind all along the series of its instinctive acts of will, shares in the decisions, the preferences, the choice, which are translated into the characteristics of the work. The major motives and themes of a book, its leading purposes, and every detail of its construction, manner and style, thus appear to us in their organic unity. Explanation is here hardly distinguishable from description; the object studied is presented from within outward, and its various aspects follow one another in an order not exactly logical, but natural; everything seems easy and simple, and is so, analysis being nothing but development.

Sympathy is the first condition and indispensable means of that critical intuition; a sympathy prepared, stimulated, enlightened by knowledge; but of all kinds of knowledge, the most profitable here is that which is not abstract or second-hand, but concrete and direct: the data gathered immediately from the self-revelation of the writer in his book. All thus depends on that crucial contact of the critic with the text; there is no activity comparable in mental life, but the concentration of the inventor on his problem, of the creative artist himself on his work. One might even say that the deciphering of a book, or of a writer’s personality, by a critic—two processes closely allied, almost identical, though the emphasis slightly varies from one to the other—was a more intensive act than the very writing of that book; in this respect only, that literary composition is reconcilable with a good deal of momentary passiveness, the subconscious powers taking the lead, and the lucid faculties being in abeyance; whilst the heightening of consciousness which the critic’s intuition implies—a heightening of the consciousness of himself, as identified with another’s mental
life—is of necessity more clear and connected, making the organic relationships of the work more definite. Criticism mainly consists in realizing, through the power of attention, a complex of intellectual adaptations and sequences which had remained largely obscure in the mind that had lived them first. Hence that paradoxical, but by no means infrequent occurrence: the critic better aware than the author of the purpose and trend of a book. If intelligence were the measure of art, the critic would be the greater artist. But intelligence is not; and the critic, as artist, ranks not indeed necessarily second to the original writer, but somewhere on the same plane; their value being that of creation with one, of re-creation with the other—two perfectly equivalent processes.

Sympathy is a subjective force; it implies affinities which are variable, and may not exist; it has its deficiencies, it is subject to accidents. There will remain, in all criticism worthy of the name, a margin of uncertainty; its working is never safe, as is that of an impersonal scientific experiment. The great critic is the one whose faculty of sympathizing has been almost indefinitely extended, broadened, made more supple by constant exercise, by wide reading, and repeated experience of the unbounded wealth of art. Indeed, the apprenticeship of the critic lies largely in learning how to actualize his sympathetic power to the utmost, in turning to use each and every one of his instincts as the nucleus of a possible personality, the germ of a virtual growth. The critic should be the myriad-minded man. But literature is much more varied and rich than he can be—how could one artist possess in himself, were it only in an infinitesimal form, the personalities of all artists?—and he must have his limits, whatever he may do.

Erudition and knowledge build the background of criti-
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cism, prepare and open the way for it, and last but not least, are a test and a trial of its conclusions; but they play a subordinate part in the critical act itself. The historian and the critic, complementary and indispensable to each other, are rarely united in the same person; their efforts will never be entirely reconciled, because they are not in the same plane. That the joint working of activities so different, so alien in their methods and purposes, should always be smooth, is of course not to be expected. Much can and should be done, though, to harmonize them. The critic, at the present day, has not to make allowance for the historian: the tenure he has of his own domain is so precarious, that he could not think of disputing anybody else's possession of other ground. But the historian has to learn how to tolerate and respect the critic.

Such, then, is the process which the great interpreters of literature have always followed; which Hazlitt would live through, and which Coleridge more than once described with the clear-sightedness of the philosopher. But those were men of genius, and the critic need not be one; our reasonable expectation of good criticism would be too scanty otherwise. Mere mortals may, within the bounds of modesty, claim to practise the craft with full, efficient success. The only strict condition is that they should have been provided by nature with an average faculty of intuitive literary perception; that is to say, of literary talent. There is no good judge of painting, but he who is gifted with the immediate sense of color, drawing and picturesque expression, a sense equivalent to some measure of artistic skill, and in effect very often accompanied by it. There is no good judge of books, but he who is not blind to the intellectual glow that has fused together the elements of a work, and still radiates at its core like its latent life; and of course,
to share in that glow is to recreate it sympathetically, and to recreate it is to be able in some measure to create it. When the operation of criticism is stripped to its essential root, it supposes instinctive activities that cannot directly be taught, the power to trace back the product under study to its last accessible cause, a psychological one. Many men are born with that ability; and we shall try to show that most men are endowed with at least the rudiments of it, so that the purpose of literary education, from its first beginnings, is just to cultivate those rudiments.

But even at the higher level of explicit, full-grown criticism, much can be done to develop and foster that intuitive skill. Critics, once born, are trained, by example and by practice. Here it is that the courses of colleges and universities stand in a vital connection with the literature of the country: they provide, or could provide, the best apprenticeship for the men who are to give it competent appreciation. The taint of academic origin will not disqualify those men for the function of open-minded contact with the new literature in the making, if the special training they have received is not different, in some essential respects, from a cultivation of the creative faculties.

Indeed, in this plane of the full critic, as in that of the mere reader of books, the organized study and interpretation of literary works should provide a schooling for the would-be writers themselves. Entering sympathetically into the genetic process which has produced great books, must stimulate all kinds of productive talents, except, perhaps, that of the genius whose personality discovers itself in rebellion, and with whom independence is the breath of life. We shall be prepared to find that in the future, as in the past, the strongest temperaments are hatched outside the atmosphere of literary nurseries, and are best left to
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themselves, as they manage generally to be. To the others, whether critics or poets, novelists, playwrights, it is a useful discipline that can show how literary qualities are translated into human terms; how an organic connection is established between a character and its expression; and how an individual mind builds itself up in action and reaction with a moral and social environment. Ästhetic acumen, psychological insight, and the sense of historic interdependence, could not be more efficiently encouraged; and training in constructive criticism is thus no bad school for the future student of art, of philosophy, and for all the varieties of the historian. A precise habit of mind, safety in induction, the fine analysis of moral facts, are part and parcel of the critical activity thus understood.

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But even if it is agreed, that history stands here to criticism as a means toward an end, there must be another field where the relation is reversed, and where criticism leads up to history. The growth of literature through the ages has to be studied and organized so as to fit in with the requirements of knowledge. Now it looks as if the critic's endeavor were strictly limited to the solution of individual problems. Each artistic process is unique; to trace books to their formative ideas and emotions is to write mental biographies. How could the method work out to general conclusions, and a satisfactory ordering of facts?

The answer is, that a principle of generalization, no less fruitful than any other, is contained within the critical activity itself, as here defined. It seizes moods, and their genetic relationships with works; psychology is drawn upon in that inference, and it furnishes the guiding light toward the interpretation of literature. Now, psychology, being scientific in character, tends to be general, even if its laws
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are not binding; our inner states, whilst always individual, are capable of bearing various and strong analogies; they lend themselves to classification under many heads. Thus it is that the critic is able to utilize his disconnected findings as the materials for a constructive order.

There are affinities of temperament; there are families of writers. No method more naturally leads to a mapping-out of the literary kind, with its species and sub-species, and to a discrimination of their varieties, than that which brings all its power to bear on the biography of books, and thus on the moral history of writers. From this point of view, such labels as "classicism" and "romanticism" are made to reveal the æsthetic reality which they enclose; they are brought into a causal relation with the predominance of certain psychological states. In that way the classifications of criticism are grounded upon the more solid basis of the inner nature of man.

Again, there is thus opened the possibility of organizing knowledge in time, by establishing a unity through the records of the past. When once the results of psychological analysis, dealing not indeed with single works, but with groups and whole periods, are made the object of comparison, it becomes clear that literary movements do not succeed one another by mere chance; the passing from a prevalent mood to a different mental tenor obeys a fairly regular alternation, which is composed with all the unique incalculable elements of circumstance into a pattern of relatively simple succession. One can speak of a rhythm in literature, and with the help of its recurrent though ever modified phases, interpret the relation of each phase to its predecessor and successor. Such large generalizations are not to be pushed too far; they do not resemble in the least the "laws" of the physical, or even those of the biological,
worlds; still, they afford a clue to the maze of artistic development, and make the history of letters, as well as that of thought, amenable to a measure of logical presentment. In so far as all explanation is not out of place in those fields, those schemes can be regarded as acceptable diagrams, offering the mind a sense of unity and order, whilst leaving a full margin for the original characteristics of each new period and of each new writer.

But whether or not those more ambitious attempts are indulged in, literary criticism, such as it is described here, is a rich and varied activity, appealing to all the powers of our intellectual nature; and it does not leave unsatisfied that craving for connection and dependence between facts, without which there can be the knowledge, but not the history of literature.

For the history of literature there must be; and the literary historian will not be contented with peering into books and writers, joining them in groups and periods, or linking up the periods in a progressive chain of moments. He has to study the connection between each period of literature, and the background of social influences; he has to take into account the parallel developments of language on the one hand—the medium of expression, with its own range, possibilities, limits—of thought on the other, with its prevailing attitudes and fashions. He has to be aware of the material circumstances that told on the art of writing, from the production and the sale of books to the formation of the reading public and the interrelations of the various literatures. But those subjects have received, during the last half century, a very large share of attention; they have been again and again thought out, methodized, written up; it would be more than superfluous to dwell upon them. Since it is our contention that those
various tasks, useful, interesting, important as they may be, are neither the central object of criticism, nor the proper means for the training of the critical mind, we shall only mention them, and pass on. They have too often absorbed the best energy of the best minds among the students of letters; let the specialist be familiar with them, and the layman keep with them a bowing acquaintance; they are not, or at least should not be, the substance of criticism itself; and their formative value for the non-specialist is not such, that he should exercise himself in them for their own sake.

The road seems to be clear for the causal interpretation of books through intuition guided by knowledge. But there remains the difficulty of application. It may be objected, that the ideal which has been sketched out is within the reach only of the gifted few; that it cannot, on the other hand, be put to practice with the economy of effort toward which all habitual operations more or less necessarily tend. One must confess that the method thus briefly outlined seems to provide for no control of regularity, and leave everything to the chance of happy hits; that its routine is not easily formulated; and that as a technique of intuition, relying not on quantity but on quality, not on erudition but on skill, it implies at every step the play of original, creative powers. The objection can be faced with equanimity; it does not seem to be destructive; it does not erect a formidable barrier against the inclusion of criticism in the curriculum of colleges, at the very centre of higher literary studies. It is the common faith of pedagogues that the jewel of spirituality can be cut out of the sometimes very unpromising rough material with which nature has endowed every mind; it must be the belief of every professor of literature, that living reactions to books are within the reach of all the young men and women who for the benefit
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of their culture choose to walk the literary paths. There, and nowhere else, is the animating breath to be found; in no other way will the dry bones of dead authors and distant thoughts be vitalized. That the teacher must give constantly of his best, and radiate out a good deal of the necessary energy, goes without saying. But what teacher ever discoursed of his craft in public, who was not inclined to think with optimistic pride of all the members of his profession? One thing is sure: the young mind whose sensibilities have been called to life in that way, never will lose the ability which has once stirred into being. If the masters of to-morrow are to be able to quicken their disciples, they must be themselves quickened as the students of to-day. The faith is its own proof, and the hope of its votaries will be justified, if sound, by the event.