

jungle? Or finally is not the critic's chief concern with the public, lest it inoculate itself with the germs of its own obscure maladies? Is he not more than ever before called upon to act as judge, censor, executioner in the interest of public welfare? Undoubtedly a plausible case can be made out for any one of these three functions of criticism, or of all together, for as I have said they are not necessarily exclusive. But the assumption of any or all of them depends upon the critic's being Don Quixote. It happens indeed that he sometimes justifies a new relation of subject matter and form; or that, by a tour de force, he rescues a sinking artist, or even that before his condemning eloquence the wayward public stands rebuked. These triumphs, however, are byproducts of his activity, not the main objects of his endeavor.

In the general *saue qui peut*, I believe that the critic's chief occupation should be with himself. His first duty is to save his own soul. And this he will accomplish most surely by divesting himself of preconceptions and prejudices whether derived from the authority of history or of science, by preserving in the whirl of phenomena the self-consciousness and detachment of the artist. The mass of production about him is part of the material of the world, the stuff of life. Among the paradoxes of Oscar Wilde a sentence emerges which is profoundly true. "The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and color, or the unseen world of passion and thought." It is his primary function to bear a faithful record of his impressions. He is valuable for the sensitiveness of his nerves, for the fineness of his perceptions, for the validity of his thought, whether in the field of aesthetics, ethics or human sympathy. His service to the artist, to art, or to the people is comprehended in his conscience toward himself. He will stimulate the artist to more passionate creation by his appreciation and by his competition; he will serve art by enlarging its boundaries, not by circumscribing them; and he will aid the public not by imposing impressions of his own or theories of other men upon it, but by arousing it to reaction on its own account. For "The aim of criticism is to make every man his own critic."

ROBERT MORSS LOVETT.

### *The Motive of the Critic*

NEARLY all discussions of criticism, it seems to me, start off with a false assumption, to wit, the assumption that the primary motive of the critic, the impulse which makes a critic of him and not a politician or a stockbroker, is pedagogical—that he writes because he is possessed by a yearning to disseminate some specific doctrine, epistemological, psychological, historical, or aesthetic. This is true, I believe, only of bad critics, and its degree of truth increases in direct ratio to their badness. The motive of the critic who is really worth reading—the only critic of whom, indeed, it may be said truthfully that it is at all possible to read him—is something quite different. That motive is not the motive of the pedagogue, but the motive of the artist. It is simply a desire for self-expression, a thirst to function more broadly and brilliantly than the general, obscure in origin but irresistible in force. His choice of criticism rather than creative writing is chiefly a matter of temperament—perhaps, more accurately, a matter of hormones and intestinal flora—with

accidents of education and environment to help. The feelings that happen to be dominant in him at the moment the scribbling frenzy seizes him and that move him powerfully to seek expression for them in words, are feelings inspired, not by life itself, but by books, pictures, music, sculpture, architecture, religion, philosophy—in brief by some other man's feelings about life. They are thus second-hand, and are rightly regarded by creative artists as inferior to their own first-hand reactions.

If a critic continues on this plane, if he lacks the intellectual agility and enterprise needed to make the leap from the work of art to the vast and mysterious complex of phenomena behind it, then he remains a mere reviewer of and valet to the ideas of his betters, and is of little more importance to the world than a schoolmaster, a news-monger, or an auctioneer. But if a genuine artist is concealed within him—if his feelings are really profound and original, and his capacity for self-expression is above the average of educated men—then he moves inevitably from the work of art to life itself, and begins to take on a dignity that he formerly lacked. It is impossible to think of a man of any actual force and originality, universally recognized as having those qualities, who spent his whole life appraising and describing the work of other men. Did Goethe, or Carlyle, or Matthew Arnold, or Sainte-Beuve, or Macaulay, or even, to come down a few pegs, Lewes, or Lowell, or Hazlitt? Certainly not. The thing that becomes most obvious about the writings of all such men, once they are examined carefully, is that the critic is always being swallowed up by the creative artist—that what starts out as the review of a book, or a play, or other work of art, usually develops very quickly into an independent essay upon the theme of that work of art, or upon some theme that it suggests—in a word, that it becomes a fresh work of art, and only indirectly related to the one that suggested it. This fact, indeed, is so plain that it scarcely needs statement. What the pedagogues always object to in, say, the Quarterly reviewers is that they forgot the books they were supposed to review, and wrote long papers—often, in fact, small books—expounding ideas of their own, many of them vastly removed from the ideas in the books under review. Every critic who is really worth reading falls into this habit. He cannot stick to his task: what is before him is always infinitely less interesting to him than what is within him. If he is genuinely first-rate—if what is within him stands the test of type, and wins an audience, and produces the reactions that every artist craves—then he usually ends by abandoning the criticism of specific works of art altogether, and setting up shop as a general merchant in general ideas, i. e., as an artist working in the materials of life itself.

Mere reviewing, however conscientiously and competently it is done, is plainly a much inferior business. Like writing poetry, it is chiefly a function of intellectual immaturity. The young literatus just out of the university, having as yet no capacity for grappling with the fundamental mysteries of existence, is put to writing reviews of books, or plays, or music, or painting. Very often he does it extremely well; it is, in fact, not hard to do well, for even decayed pedagogues often do it, as such graveyards of the intellect as the New York Times bear witness. But if he continues to do it, whether well or ill, it is a sign to all the world that his growth ceased when they made him *Artium Baccalaureus*. Gradually he be-

comes, whether in or out of the academic grove, a pedagogue, which is to say, an artisan devoted to diluting and retailing the ideas of his superiors—not an artist, not even a bad artist, but almost the antithesis of an artist. He is learned, he is sober, he is painstaking and accurate—but he is as hollow as a jug. Nothing is in him save the ghostly echoes of other men's thoughts and feelings. If he were a genuine artist he would have thoughts and feelings of his own, and the impulse to give them objective form would be irresistible. An artist can no more withstand that impulse than a politician can withstand the temptations of a job. There are no mute, inglorious Miltons, save in the hallucinations of poets. The one sound test of a Milton is that he functions as a Milton. His difference from other men lies precisely in the superior vigor of his impulse to self-expression, not in the superior beauty and loftiness of his ideas. Other men, in point of fact, often have the same ideas, or perhaps even loftier ones, but they are able to suppress them, usually on grounds of decorum, and so they escape being artists, and are respected by right-thinking persons, and die with money in the bank, and are forgotten in two weeks.

Obviously, the critic whose performance we are commonly called upon to investigate is a man standing somewhere along the path leading from the beginning that I have described to the goal. He has got beyond being a mere cataloguer and valuer of other men's ideas, but he has not yet become an autonomous artist—he is not yet ready to challenge attention with his own ideas alone. But it must be plain that his motion, in so far as he is moving at all, must be in the direction of that autonomy—that is, unless one imagines him sliding backward into senile infantilism: a spectacle not unknown to literary pathology, but too pathetic to be discussed here. Bear this motion in mind, and the true nature of his aims and purposes becomes clear; more, the incurable falsity of the aims and purposes usually credited to him becomes equally clear. He is not actually trying to perform an impossible act of arctic justice upon the artist whose work gives him a text. He is not trying, with mathematical passion, to find out exactly what was in that artist's mind at the moment of creation, and to display it precisely and in an ecstasy of appreciation. He is not trying to bring the work discussed into accord with some gaudy theory of aesthetics, or ethics, or truth, or to determine its degree of departure from that theory. He is not trying to lift up the fine arts, or to defend democracy against sense, or to promote happiness at the domestic hearth, or to convert sophomores into right-thinkers, or to serve God. He is not trying to fit a group of novel phenomena into the orderly process of history. He is not even trying to discharge the catalytic office that I myself, in a romantic moment, once sought to force upon him. He is, first and last, simply trying to express himself. He is trying (a) to arrest and challenge a sufficient body of readers, to make them pay attention to him, to impress them with the charm and novelty of his ideas, to provoke them into an enchanted awareness of him, and (b) to achieve thereby for his own inner ego that agreeable feeling of a function performed, a tension relieved, a katharsis attained which Beethoven achieved when he wrote the Fifth Symphony, and a hen achieves every time she lays an egg.

It is, in brief, the "obscure, inner necessity" of Joseph Conrad that moves him: everything else is an afterthought. Conrad is moved by that necessity to write romances;

Beethoven was moved to write music; poets are moved to write poetry; critics are moved to write criticism. The form is nothing; the only important thing is the motive power—and it is the same in all cases. It is the hot yearning of every man who has ideas to empty them upon the world, to hammer them into plausible and ingratiating shapes, to compel the attention and respect of his equals, to lord it over his inferiors. So seen, the critic becomes a far more transparent and agreeable fellow than ever he was in the discourses of the psychologists who sought to make him a mere appraiser in an intellectual customs house, a gauger in a distillery of the spirit, a just and infallible judge upon the cosmic bench. Such offices, in point of fact, never fit him. He always bulges over their confines. So labelled and estimated, it always turns out that the specific critic under examination is a very bad one, or no critic at all. But when he is thought of, not as pedagogue, but as artist, then he begins to take on reality, and, what is more, dignity. Carlyle was surely no just and infallible judge; on the contrary, he was full of prejudices, biles, naïvetés, humors. Yet he is read, consulted, attended to. Macaulay was unfair, inaccurate, fanciful, lyrical—yet his essays live. Arnold had his faults too, and so did Sainte-Beuve, and so did Goethe, and so did many another of that line—and yet they are remembered today, and all the learned and conscientious critics of their time, laboriously concerned with the precise intent of the artists under review, and passionately determined to set it forth with god-like care and to relate it exactly to this or that great stream of ideas—all these pedants are forgotten. What saved Carlyle, Macaulay and company is as plain as day. They were first-rate artists. They could make the thing charming, and that is always a million times more important than making it true.

Truth, indeed, is something that is believed in only by persons who have never tried personally to pursue it to its fastnesses and grab it by the tail. It is the adoration of second-rate men—men who always receive it at second-hand. Pedagogues believe in immutable truths and spend their lives trying to determine them and propagate them; the intellectual progress of man consist largely of a concerted effort to block and destroy their enterprise. In the department of aesthetics, wherein critics mainly disport themselves, it is almost impossible to think of a so-called truth that shows any sign of being permanently true. The most profound of principles begins to fade and quiver almost as soon as it is stated. But the work of art, as opposed to the theory behind it, has a longer life, particularly if that theory is obscure and questionable, and so cannot be determined accurately. Hamlet, the Mona Lisa, Faust, Dixie, Parsifal, Mother Goose, Annabel Lee, Huckleberry Finn—these things, so baffling to pedagogy, so contumacious to the categories, so mysterious in purpose and utility—these things live. And why? Because there is in them the delightful flavor of odd and attractive personality, because the quality that shines from them is not that of correct demeanor but that of creative passion, because they pulse and breathe and speak, because they are genuine works of art. So with criticism. Let us forget all the heavy effort to make a science of it; it is a fine art, or nothing. If the critic, retiring to his cell to concoct his treatise upon a book or play or what-not, produces a piece of writing that shows sound structure, and brilliant color, and the flash of novel and persuasive ideas, and civilized manners, and the charm of an uncommon personality in

free function, then he has given something to the world that is worth having, and sufficiently justified his existence. Let him leave the exact truth to professors of aesthetics, who can no more determine it than he can, and will infallibly make it idiotic. He is an artist, not a school-master.

What I preach will be labelled at once and thrust into its pigeon-hole: it is impressionism. True. But it is impressionism that is not to be monkeyed with: it depends too much upon the impressionist.

H. L. MENCKEN.

### *A Critical Credo*

**I**T is a waste and weary labor to open up again the old question of reviewing and criticism. On the one hand there should be no distinction between them; the reviewer's business is to criticize the book before him. But too often in practice the reviewer is expected to compile a library list for the average unintelligent reader. On the other hand, economic necessity nowadays compels the critic to become a reviewer. So that the valuable modern distinction is not so much the distinction between the critic and the reviewer, as the impossibilists frequently urge, as that between the critic-reviewer and the puff-reviewer. We must leave out the puff-reviewer. God will reward him as surely as his employer does.

Speaking of criticism, Rémy de Gourmont said that "the whole effort of a sincere man was to erect his personal impressions into laws." That is the motto of a true criticism, conscious of its limitations and its strength. The emphasis falls even more decidedly upon the law-making than upon the personal basis of the impressions, for that is inevitable. The man who is content to record his own impressions, without making an effort to stabilize them in the form of laws, whatever he is, is not a critic. A law or rule, or rather a system of laws or rules, is necessary to the critic; it is a record of all his past impressions and reactions; but it must be his own law, his own system, refined by his own effort out of his own experience. Otherwise he is a pedant and not a critic.

The function of criticism is, therefore, primarily the function of literature itself, to provide a means of self-expression for the critic. He begins like any other writer, with the conviction (which may of course be an illusion) that his views and conclusions on the subject-matter which is literature are of importance in themselves and to others; and he proceeds to promulgate and propagate them. Like any other writer, he stands or falls in the long run, by the closer or more remote approximation of his views to the common experience of that comparatively small fraction of the human race which itself comes to conclusions about life and literature, which is the concentrated record of life. As Dr. Johnson said:

Nothing can please many and please long, but just representations of human nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight awhile, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can repose only on the stability of truth.

The critic stands or falls by the stability of his truth, and to a less degree by his technique in expressing his truth.

That the critic has to interest his readers is true, but in exactly the same sense as it is true that every writer has to interest his readers. He does not have to aim at being more interesting than other writers. This is one of the prime heresies of modern criticism. Its adherents appear to hold that a critical article is a kind of knockabout turn. Unless the critic is turning a somersault or making a grimace in every sentence, he is dull. Another, and more persuasive heresy is that it is the critic's business to make the best of a bad book by picking out the one or two plums that have wandered into the wilderness of dough. A critic, they argue, has to communicate "gusto" to his readers, no matter what book he may be writing about. These seem to me to be pure heresies and the critics who embrace them will surely be forgotten.

Criticism is a particular art of literature. It is possible not to like the art, and possible for the critic to regret that his art is not liked. But it is not, or ought not to be possible for a critic to play the traitor to his art in order to get a bigger audience for his raree-show. Because a sculptor knows that sculpture is not popular, he does not paint moustaches on his figures or plant billycock hats on the top of their heads. The critic's business is to express himself by expressing his opinion on the work of literature before him. He has therefore to make sure that his opinion is his true opinion; he has to safeguard himself against accidental and temporary disturbances of his sensibility. Hence the need for a system of principles to control momentary enthusiasms and passing disgusts.

Moreover, he is concerned to elucidate the significance of the work before him, for his verdict is a verdict as to significance. A work of literature may possess significance of various kinds; it may have historical, ethical, or aesthetic significance; that is, it may have importance at a particular phase of the human consciousness, or it may be valuable as expressing a particular attitude towards human life, or it may have more or less of a certain kind of artistic perfection which compels a peculiar artistic emotion in the reader. A work may have significance of one of these kinds, or all of them, or any combination of them. A critic is bound to have a predisposition towards one of these kinds of significance; he will be predominantly a historian, like Sainte-Beuve, a moralist like Paul Elmer More or Irving Babbitt, or a technician like Dr. Bridges. He ought to be aware of his predisposition and alert to prevent it from running away with him. A perfect critic would combine all these predispositions in equal parts, but perfect critics are as rare as perfect writers. It is as much as one can ask that a critic should try to correct his predisposition by training his appreciation of other kinds.

Once criticism is accepted as an independent literary art, there need be no heart-searching among critics because they have so little practical influence on the sale of books. That is the fact in England at any rate. It is a hundred times more profitable to an author for the Daily Mail to declare "This book will be a success" than for the best critic on the Times Literary Supplement to give exact and convincing reasons why the book ought to be a success. Critical articles and essays are read for themselves; at their best they are perfectly self-contained; they do not demand that the reader should dash out and purchase the books which they discuss, and as often as not they are read with the greatest interest by those who are already themselves profoundly familiar with the subject.

Putting a valuation upon new books is perhaps the least valuable part of criticism. It is almost impossible for a