Readers and Critics.

BY FELIX HOPE.

"*Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest*."

NO doubt there is a moment in everyone's life when something happens to turn him into the road which he is destined to follow; for all that it would be superficial to think that the fate of one's life is dependent upon accident. The accident that turns one into the road is only the means which Providence takes to procure the working out of certain ends. Accidents are many; life is as full of accidents as a fire is full of sparks, and any spark will suffice to set fire to the train.

The bookseller's shop used to play an indispensable part in the educational system of the British race. The part is still indispensable; but it is seldom played.

How seldom can one find a bookseller who makes any continuous effort to stock or to sell books of permanent worth! It will be said that bookselling is a trade like any other. A similar thing has been said about journalism, and by virtue of much repetition it has come to be almost true. The emphasis needs to be shifted. The bookseller, like the journalist, should be told again and again that his trade is different from any other; that he has responsibilities and potentialities that are given to few; that in any provincial town he has the opportunity to be the centre of an influence equal to that of the schoolmaster or the parson. He has to resist the tendency that would make of him merely a cog in the machine for distributing a commodity.

Let us make people like what they like, instead of pretending to like what they cannot possibly like. That is the essential preliminary to making them like what we like.

People were no longer contented to be amused; they craved for stronger meat. Who it was that first gave them blood to taste, we do not know. But after it they had to be told that what they liked was good and what they disliked

bad, and so room was made for the nominal man of letters who would appeal to "the good sense" of the general public, that is to say, for the man who would exploit the ignorant prejudices of the uneducated against work which he disliked.

How sad it is that so many people do not appreciate a glorious rhapsody from some classic, a tender lesson from Shakespeare or Browning, a deep and moving truth from Ruskin, a gentle admonition from the saintly à Kempis, a thrilling exposition from Conan Doyle, or a problem of life from Ibsen or Galsworthy! How many alas! are content to remain within the range of the fatuous and mediocre.

The age in which we live is strangely fond of criticism. It takes all things to pieces for the mere pleasure of examining their nature. It studies forces, not in order to obey them, but in order to understand them.

All that humanity sees in this world bears with it and betrays the influence of time! Our other senses tell us little of them. Touch may reveal the decay of a fabric, the gnawings of rust on a metal, the tinderiness, worm-pockedness of a piece of wood, the smoothness of a stone, the lines and hollows of a face, but it surrenders, except possibly to the blind, scanty direct evidence of the actual age of a thing. Sounds and odours are but the offspring of the passing

moment. Instant though their appeal to the memory may be, they carry with them only the faintest revelation of the past.

Taine long laboured to demonstrate that events play the pipe, to which the poets must dance. But events are only one of many methods of expression the spirit uses; literature is another, and if the art of words runs a parallel course to the art of action it may be because the movement of each is determined by the same underlying necessity. The historian would not be too fantastic who termed certain of his happenings classic and others romantic. The invitation to William of Orange, a reasonable, polite, and formal action, might be distinguished by the former term, while the outburst that was the French Revolution is more easily conceived as romantic. But the difference between the impulse behind each of these events will not be made entirely clear by this terminology—may, indeed, be obscured by the
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associations aroused; and there is the same objection to its use in literary criticism. I had rather have been Lovelace than Sainte-Beuve, and write one immortal lyric than twenty-five volumes of the acutest discrimination.

The writer of a single good book is soon forgotten, now-a-days, by his contemporaries; but a writer of a series of bad books is sure of reputation and emolument. Indeed, a good book and a bad book stand, so far as the general public is concerned, on precisely the same level, as they meet with the same fate. Each presents the attraction of a new cover; each is glanced through and turned aside.

Criticism, which is the study of the aims and methods of literature and art in general, has not as yet turned with concentrated energy to the study of its own aims and its own methods. The omission is natural but unfortunate. Natural, because such considerations are properly the concern of the philosophers. All through, critics have had to beg, or, more often, to steal, their tools, the notions with which they work, from the workshops of philosophy. Unfortunate, because tools so acquired are easily misused. Criticism has always suffered, and suffers more than ever, from misuse of its principal instruments. Instances in even the best available criticism are not hard to find. In some cases the usage is so far sanctioned by custom that no experienced reader is in doubt as to what is meant. In these cases the usage does perform the fundamental function of speech; it does say something. But it is precisely these cases which are the most unfortunate.

Technical criticism may have its defects, but at any rate it is more imaginative, closer to the original work, and more pungent and alive than a biographical survey and the kind of floating appraisal which, as a revelation, is just dead. The more people know about art and craft, and the more they can understand about their essential nature, the greater will be the appreciation of art in England. Fortunately, no reputation in art or letters rest on the verdict of magnitudes—it is the opinion of the few which finally triumphs.

Critics do not exist for artists any more than palæontologists exist for fossils. If both critics and artists could recognise this, how much poorer the world would be in malice and rancour! To help the artist is no part of a
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critic's business: artists who cannot help themselves must borrow from other artists. Critics, again, are apt to condemn what they cannot classify; it does not appear to them that classes consist of objects and that the object exists even if one cannot find a class for it: prejudice is the

name we usually give to those with whom we disagree. The critic's business is to help the public. With the artist he is not directly concerned; he is concerned only with his finished products. So it is ridiculous for the artist to complain that criticism is unhelpful, and absurd for the critic to read the artist lectures with a view to improving his art. If the critic reads lectures it must be with a view to helping the public to appreciate, not the artist to create. To put the public in the way of æsthetic pleasure, that is the end for which critics exist, and to that end all means are good. The quality of skilled work depends on the standard required by the workman.

The artist's instinct is the sail that carries the boat along, and his reason is the rudder that keeps the boat's head to the wind; without a rudder the sail loses the wind. The simile seems to hold good. An instinct will carry the artist some distance, but if he have not reason he will drift like the rudderless boat, making no progress at all. If his judges and patrons belong to the discerning few who, knowing what is excellent, are intolerant of anything that falls short of excellence, the standard required will necessarily be a high one.

For, just as a Hegelian is not so much a follower of that philosopher as an expounder, one who has an interpretation of his own, and can tell you what Hegel would have said if Hegel had been endowed by The Absolute with the power of saying anything, so of those admirable people who agree, for the moment, that significant form is what matters, no two are quite agreed as to what significant form is.

There are two kinds of criticism—the written and the spoken. The first, when it gets into print, is said to be the cause of much suffering to those whom it concerns; but the second, we are inclined to think, is the only form of criticism that should make an author wince. Even for a writer who is consciously and deliberately preoccupied with the question of style, there is something awkward and unnatural

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in confronting his problem under that name. It is as though he had to put on his dress-clothes to talk about a job he does habitually in his oldest jacket. This is the criticism which is expressed when, upon finishing a book, you toss it into the next armchair with an exclamation of horror or delight, adding a few phrases by way of comment, which lack polish and ignore grammar but contain the criticism which an author should strain all his forces to overhear. If criticism can ever help, he will be helped; if it can ever please, he will be enraptured; the pain, even, is salutary, for it will be severe enough either to kill or to reform. One or two writers there are who can put this criticism into prose; but for the most part the adjectives, the grammar, the logic, the inkpot—to say nothing of humanity and good manners—all conspire to take the dash and sincerity out of it, and by the time speech becomes a review there is nothing left but grammatical English.

Criticism implies a double process—of subjection to the work of art and of detachment from it. It is, like poetry, emotion remembered in tranquillity. It is for each of us, writes Mr. Frank Swinnerton, "the thing we have made for the preservation of our own self-respect. Art is only one of the aspects of life with which it is concerned. With moral and æsthetic theory we can occupy ourselves for generations; but in the application of improvised moral and æsthetic theory we spend all our thoughts upon life and the arts. Something tells us when a piece of music is sentimental, when a poem is more than a lozenge of words, when a novel is the result of a conception or a recipe. It tells each of us, perhaps, a different thing; but there is not a great deal of difference in estimate, as we may see by the way in which (for example) writers achieve

a sort of equilibrium, half-way between the position claimed for them by idolaters and the neglect dictated by the superior spirit." The superior spirit may be anæmic and affected; and the idolater may be a fool; but only an inferior artist will be deceived by either, and if he is deceived he will unquestionably fall into insignificance. That is what time does; it waives aside all reviews, good or bad, friendly or indifferent. The leaven of real criticism works all the time. The mischief is that it works in spite of printed opinion. It will not be possible
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for printed opinion to regain (or attain) authority until it becomes the expression of imaginative sympathy; and as imaginative sympathy is a rare and precious gift, to be found at its highest only in the truly creative artist, we must not expect it to penetrate literary criticism at any time. The world has lived through ages when criticism all went by rule of thumb and the love of literature was lost in a maze of life less [sic] regulations. The fact that there is now undue insistence on originality and personal vision does not excuse a critic from falling into the opposite extreme. If a choice is necessary, it is better to be chaotically alive than methodically dead; but, after all, the chief function of criticism is to avert the need of such a choice and hold us to the middle course. We think it of the greatest moment that in all critical work, especially when undertaken by teachers, the balance should be held, and that a persistent loyalty to the spirit and the life of literature should be exhibited as well in the method as in the results.

Writing to one of the literary reviews, Mr. A. Clutton-Brock clearly defined the work of criticism in the following words: "most actual histories of art are misleading because they treat of expression as if it were invention. Histories of Italian painting, for instance, are apt to speak of Giotto as the first of a succession of inventors, each one improving on the past; and I have read histories of music in which the symphonies of Haydn and Mozart were treated as preparatory to those of Beethoven. But they are not; nor is Giotto a predecessor of anyone. Haydn is Haydn; Mozart, Mozart; and Giotto, Giotto. Their works are of interest because they are works of art and not because they lead up to other works of art. Think of any one artist in terms of some other artist and you will be unable to experience his art at all.

"The aim of historical criticism should be to remove obstacles to our experience of works of art, not to set them up. We are apt to expect of all works of art what we are used to; and so historical criticism should try to remove these expectations. It should teach us, when we look at Giotto's frescoes, to think of them and not of the works of his successors. Giotto, being a great artist, cannot be classified, for no works of art can be classified. He was not a Florentine of a certain age—at least that is irrelevant to his
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art—he was Giotto; and each one of his frescoes is itself. We are always, in modern criticism, practising a mistaken scientific method; and the worst example of it known to me is Taine's *History of English Literature*. Taine thought that what is interesting about an artist is not his art but his environment; and so he told us much about environment and little or nothing about literature. He saw a work of art as something moulded by circumstance, and so as something to be classified with other works of art moulded by the same set of circumstances, just as if it were a member of a genus of beetles. But in fact, we learn nothing about the poetry of Pope if we are told that he lived in the "age of reason." If you want to know something about the "age of reason" read Pope—though it is best to read him for his poetry; but don't read about the "age of reason" if you want to know something of Pope. Taine would almost have us believe

that if we knew all about the circumstances of an artist we could reconstruct his art. But art itself defies this nonsense. It is always unique because it insists upon the uniqueness of things as being their reality. If an artist paints a man, he paints him as himself and not as a specimen of any class of men. So to classify the man, or to classify the work of art, is to miss the point of both. There is scientific criticism of art, but it is scientific when it knows, to begin with, that art is not science and so does not confuse it with any scientific process."

Words are not coins which have an interchangeable value. A scientific term is capable of international exchange. The idea that it conveys can be passed from land to land, uncoloured by emotion, untouched by association. Each people can express it in exactly equivalent form. A cube root is the same thing to an Englishman as to a Russian. But the language of literature is totally distinct. The words stand rooted in the soil of national life, they are nourished from a people's history. Around them have gathered the accretions of thought of successive generations. The associations of poetry and eloquence cling about them. Words whose nearest equivalents are for us dead and prosaic stirred the pulses of a Greek and vibrated with memories of Troy and Salamis.

At the present time criticism in its method is practi-

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cally what it was one hundred years ago. Books of criticism, with the one or two exceptions which prove the rule, are to-day of two kinds; volumes of amiable gossip about writers, full of comparisions, [sic] quotations, anecdotes and great names, and volumes of professional analysis. An atmosphere more dismally *post mortem* it would be impossible to imagine. In every case both the subject and the critic are dead. But every movement in imaginative art in the last century was, at least in intention, towards life; a greater faithfulness to reality was the object alike of the romantics, the realists, and the symbolists. Criticism alone remained apart from this general movement. It accepted the one school after the other, and while itself worlds away from reality, condemned with a good conscience any imaginative writer who dared to be in the same case. Criticism apparently expected everything to express life—except criticism. There is no decalogue in letters, "we must needs love the highest when we see it." But we don't always see it in the same way.

Few of us will take the trouble to comprehend a work of art. Critics either wish to think of brilliant things to say about it, or they remember the author or his successes and failures. They sacrifice a personal imagination to a false regard for opinion or their own dexterity. And in both of these weaknesses they are abetted by editors, who, to a man, dread a tedious sincerity of estimate as much as they dread the law of libel.

The critic is regarded by the general public as mothers are regarded by the hypothetical State: he is to produce the finished article for the general good, and is not to discuss his organism or his rights as an individual. We do not want to hear about them, although we have a furtive interest in his private life, much as we have in the doings of monkeys, or those of dirty promiscuous little flies. If he has views on his craft not generally held by those who use the results of that craft as a relief from *ennu*, [sic] he becomes intolerable. He finds himself ruffled and displeased by the general attitude to all but the moral and sentimental aspects of his work. The poor craftsman, resentful and contemptuous though he may be, is firmly told in reply that works and not theories are his part in life.

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It has become a part of the critic's business to inquire what books an author is likely to have read; by what process his work formed itself and reached completion; and even with what diligence he corrected his manuscript or revised his book for a future edition.

To read a piece of fiction constructively, is to observe in passing every plastic device of its creation, and even in the act of pursuing its crescent shape and design to attempt the conception of that ideal form at which the book may be assumed to be aiming but which it may ultimately miss. The process is an inversion, so to speak, of the process which created the book. Out of his intense inane the novelist produces his character, portrays him in words. Not even the offices of death could seemingly be more destructive. But the reader's mind is like the Valley of Jehoshaphat; he breathes, and the dry bones live. "Nothing is simpler," Mr. Percy Lubbock remarks, "than to create for oneself the idea of a human being." The operation depends, however, on one's material (actual or imaginary) and on the kind of human being—Tess or Anna Karénina, Beatrix or Little Nell.

Primarily, a critic is a sign-post. He points to a work of art and says—"Stop! Look!" To do that he must have the sensibility that distinguishes works of art from rubbish, and, amongst works of art, the excellent from the mediocre. Further, the critic has got to convince, he has got to persuade the spectator that there is something before him that is really worth looking at. His own reaction, therefore, must be genuine and intense. Also he must be able to stimulate an appreciative state of mind; he must, that is to say, have the art of criticism. He should be able, at a pinch, to disentangle and appraise the qualities which go to make up a masterpiece, so that he may lead a reluctant convert by partial pleasures to a sense of the whole. And, because nothing stands more obstructively between the public and the grand æsthetic ecstasies than the habit of feeling a false emotion for a pseudo-work-of-art, he must be as remorseless in exposing shams as a good schoolmaster would be in exposing charlatans and short-cuts to knowledge.

(*To be continued*).