

# The Anatomy of Criticism: A Trialogue



Henry Hazlitt

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THE  
ANATOMY  
OF  
CRITICISM

*A Trialogue*

BY  
HENRY HAZLITT

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## P R E F A C E

SOMEHOW I feel that I ought to apologize for having cast the present volume in dialogue. I do not know precisely why one should feel obliged to offer excuses for employing a form that goes back at least to Plato, that has been used by Hobbes, Hume, Berkeley, Voltaire, Diderot, Schopenhauer, De Quincey, Landor, and, in our own day, by Lowes Dickinson and Santayana. But the fact remains that a large number of readers have a tendency to shy off from a modern dialogue as they would from a modern tragedy in blank verse. Such an aversion is not without grounds. Most dialogue presents at least two obstacles to the reader, one superficial, the other more deep-seated. The superficial obstacle is the curious survival of the convention of endowing the speakers with Greek names—names which, for most present-day readers, are either annoyingly anachronistic, too long, too perilous to pronounce, too hard to keep in mind, or completely without meaning. Certainly it would not add to the popularity of the modern drama if the same convention had been retained there also. The deeper obstacle



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is the practice, in most dialogues, of confronting a too sapient speaker, obviously the author's mouthpiece, with a straw-man who is always raising the wrong objections and stating them in the feeblest or most vulnerable manner, while the author's mouthpiece keeps triumphantly knocking this dummy down until the latter can say nothing but "quite right" to propositions which are, in fact, quite dubious.

In the present dialogue I have tried to spare the reader with a sense of sportsmanship from the spectacle of so uneven a combat. The dialogue form, it seems to me, is not to be adopted for its own sake, or out of mere whim, but only for special reasons in each case. In the present instance I can say that if I had not written this book in dialogue I should not have written it at all. Some of my reasons for choosing the form will be apparent on the surface, and others are indicated by the speakers themselves in their concluding remarks. But I might supplement these with one additional hint. The dialogue dramatizes an approach to the persistent problems of criticism by a particular logical method. Had *Elder* been named Thesis, *Young*, Antithesis, and *Middleton*, Synthesis, the reader would not have needed any acquaintance with the Hegelian dialectic to appreciate one of my chief aims. The names that the speakers actually bear will, I hope, make it easy for the reader to distinguish them; but I do not wish him to assume that I myself suppose from the acci-

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dent of these names that older men are necessarily apostles of tradition or younger men of subjectivism and revolt. As a matter of fact, the position represented in the present dialogue by *Young* is nearer to that of the middle generation of present American critics than it is to that of the youngest group. But it seems to me that the nomenclature as it stands corresponds best with the relative logical positions of the speakers, and therefore allows the reader to follow the argument with the least possibility of confusion.

In a subject that has been so long thrashed over by so many minds, it is not wise to credit oneself with much originality. But I hope that some illumination will be found in the present method of approach itself. In all fields of thought the traditional dilemmas, on which thinkers have for a long time taken opposite stands, generally rest, as Morris R. Cohen has pointed out in his "Reason and Nature", on difficulties rather than on real contradictions, and positive gains are to be made not by simply trying to prove that one side or the other is the truth, but by trying to get at the difficulty and determining in what respect and to what extent each side is justified. The present book might be regarded from one aspect as the continuous application of that principle to the problems of literary criticism. The method is particularly fruitful, it seems to me, in dealing with a long-standing controversy like that between the impressionistic critics and their "objective" opponents.

So far as I am aware, the present book contains the first attempt to reconcile these two schools of thought by the consistent use of the concept of the Social Mind.

My speakers quote a large number—it may even seem an excessive number—of writers. They do this for several reasons. First, where they have derived an idea from a special source, and agree with it, they wish to give credit for it. Secondly, even when they might already have held a given idea anyway, they are glad to have that added feeling of confirmation which the same idea in another nearly always tends to give, and they like to cite those who have stated the idea well. Again, where their attitude is neutral, they are still interested in comprehensiveness, in tracing the history of an idea and of its various forms. Finally, even where they are opposed to an idea, and think it rubbish, they are determined to show that they are not knocking down a man of straw, that someone has actually held this belief, and they want also, in fairness (or maliciousness), often to state that belief in the precise words of its votaries. Sometimes they are obliged to refresh their memories by reading the remarks they quote. More often they cite them without such help. Their verbal memories will be found to be rather remarkable, though to avoid too great artificiality quotation marks are omitted wherever the context itself makes reasonably plain just where the quotation begins and ends.

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The reader will be mistaken if he assumes that any one of the speakers is consistently the mouth-piece of the author. Some readers may find this very lack of an official spokesman confusing and unfortunate, for it means that all of the speakers are more stubborn than imaginary dialogue speakers usually are in clinging to opinions after those opinions have been pretty thoroughly discredited. Their stubbornness may sometimes make the book seem repetitious, and it will sometimes compel the reader to decide for himself which speaker, if any, has run off with the victory. But it has also a not unimportant advantage: it compels every idea to run the gauntlet, to submit to a sustained critical barrage.

My indebtedness is to too many writers to make possible any special acknowledgments here; I hope that specific debts are sufficiently indicated in the progress of the dialogue itself. The essays on Literature and the Class War, and Marxism or Tolstoyism, originally published in *The Nation*, appear here as appendices written directly in the first person. There seemed little point in casting these in dialogue, and it would have been in any case impossible for any one of my three critics to assume, with any consistency, the Communist rôle. A Communist could not have been a subjectivist on the one hand, or a traditionalist on the other, and certainly he would never have been a reconciler.

H. H.

June, 1933.



PERSONS OF THE DIALOGUES

*Elder*, a professor of English literature, 50.

*Young*, book reviewer for the *Daily Press*, 25.

*Middleton*, editor of *The Hour-Glass*, a monthly philosophical and literary journal, 35.

*Arthur*, a popular novelist, 30.

The scene throughout is the library of *Elder's* suburban home.



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THE ANATOMY  
OF CRITICISM



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# I

## CRITICISM'S RIGHT TO EXIST

*Elder.* I am delighted, Arthur, that you were able to drive over for dinner. Young and Middleton here are spending the week-end with me, and I have been wanting for a long time to have you three meet each other.

*Arthur.* It was more than kind of you to ask me. Frankly, though, I feel as if I had fallen into the enemy's hands. Young, here, is not only a professional book-reviewer, which would make him an object of suspicion in any case, but he derided my last novel shamelessly. You yourself, while you occasionally write delightful essays on Goethe and Emerson, have not deigned to notice my work at all. And since Middleton here has become so immersed in philosophical problems in the pages of his high-brow magazine, I am beginning to suspect that he considers himself above mere literature altogether; yet he of course is a critic too. One author among three critics! Daniel in the lion's den was comparatively well off.

*Elder.* It will make you even more uncomfortable to learn that the whole thing is a prearranged

plot. I did not exactly bring Young and yourself together for the purpose of staging a fight; but I did, candidly, hope to hear what each of you might have to contribute to the baffling subject of criticism, for on some of its fundamental problems my mind of late has been less clear and certain than it used to be.

*Arthur.* On the whole I think it would be better if I didn't discuss that subject.

*Elder.* How so?

*Arthur.* Well, I'm afraid I could not, in the present company, discuss it candidly without causing offense.

*Elder.* Lack of candor in such a discussion would deprive it of nearly all value, and politeness by its very definition implies lack of candor. What I should like is not false assent, but healthy and even violent contradiction. I therefore propose that in any discussion of this subject neither the usual demands of courtesy nor the feelings of our opponent should receive the slightest consideration.

*Young.* Then we are all to be free to call each other scoundrels and fools?

*Elder.* Exactly.

*Middleton.* May I suggest that such epithets hardly seem calculated to advance the argument or to clarify the issues?

*Elder.* That is true; but each of us should at least feel *free* to call the rest scoundrels and fools. That is to say, we should never hold back an argu-

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ment merely because that particular argument necessarily implies that we have scant respect for our opponent's intellect, or even that we regard him as practically an idiot.

*Middleton.* In other words, you feel that where the interests of complete truth are paramount, good manners are the worst possible manners.

*Elder.* Precisely.

*Arthur.* Well, then, since you will have it so, I shall speak my mind freely. It so happens that the only suggestion I have to make about criticism is that it be discontinued.

*Elder.* Isn't that a rather violent suggestion?

*Arthur.* Violent? It rests on the highest authority I know of. It is an inescapable corollary from the reproof, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone."

*Elder.* I am afraid, notwithstanding its exalted origin, that we cannot act on that principle in daily life. If we adhered to it literally, no one would ever be put in jail, and no conduct, no matter how vile or outrageous, could ever be criticized. Mutual criticism, far from being an evil, is the greatest single force in the world for the maintenance of order and decorum and decency, for preventing careless work, for spurring us on to our highest efforts. I shudder to think what would become of civilization if a man could be criticized only by the perfect, who do not exist. It would be dangerous to contend even that a man should be criticized only by his superiors, or

even only by his equals, for then how could any of us presume to compare, say, the music of Beethoven with that of Bach? No, we must concede not only the right of inferiors to criticize their superiors, but the fact that they can often do so with justice, and frequently to the benefit of mankind—indeed, occasionally even to the profit of the superiors themselves. You may know a hundred facts about a subject and I but one, and yet your ignorance of that fact may lead you to a wrong conclusion. Should I, because I am your inferior, refrain from calling attention to the fact you have overlooked? No; criticism, as T. S. Eliot once said, is as inevitable as breathing. That being so, it is silly and futile to talk of its abolition; the only real question is whether and how we can raise its quality.

*Arthur.* But surely art criticism is futile. Tastes differ, and it is senseless to argue about them. Yet taste is the one thing that critics are always arguing about.

*Elder.* *De gustibus non disputandum* is an adage, I fear, more ancient than true. It is merely another form of the ignoramus's contention that he may not know anything about art, but that he knows what he likes. And Whistler once crushingly replied: "So do the beasts of the field." Taste is not an infallible guide even in the domain of food; as in literature, it must be supplemented by knowledge. That is why we have to keep so many things out of a baby's reach.

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*Arthur.* Well, when all is said, it is hard to think of a drearier or more hollow occupation than criticism. I was reading the other night the marvellous letters of Chekhov, and I came upon this: "To talk of literature? But we have talked of that already . . . Every year the same thing, the same thing, and all our talk about literature is usually reduced to discussing who writes better and who worse."

*Young.* That was merely the expression of a passing mood. It is an attitude that I imagine most intelligent persons fall into from time to time toward their own occupation no matter what it happens to be. But Chekhov's letters contain some admirable criticism.

*Arthur.* Well, when a real creator like Chekhov writes it, even criticism can occasionally become charming. But I think a writer in the late and lamented *transition* summed up the present situation accurately when he said that of all the dull things done in America today, writing about writing is the dullest and most futile. What this country needs, he pointed out, is sluggers more than coaches, and he suggested that the batting average of our literary aspirants would have to be raised considerably before there would be enough men on bases to require any additional advisers.

*Elder.* The obvious reply to those who call for more creation and less criticism, as Irving Babbitt has pointed out, is that one needs to be critical above all in examining what now passes for creation. If



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you succeed in driving criticism out of the world, what are you going to have in its place?

*Arthur.* Why have anything? Why not follow your Mr. Whistler, who demanded that art be received in silence?

*Young.* Ah, my friend, you are very cruel, and more so, I am afraid, to artists than to critics. If I go to a new exhibit, and see a remarkable painting there by a hitherto unknown artist, must I remain silent about it? Am I not to be permitted enthusiastically to tell my friends to go to see the painting? How else is the painter to emerge from obscurity? And if—for greater miracles have happened—I should admire a new novel of yours, am I not to have the honor of lauding it in public?

*Middleton.* We critics seem to be making pretty obvious replies to pretty obvious criticisms, yet perhaps that is not on the whole to be regretted. Euclid built up his geometry by frankly beginning with the obvious, and the theory of criticism would be much further advanced than it is today if critics had strained less to be original and had been more content to start with truisms. All of which is an introduction to pointing out that what Arthur has fallen into is the very common and painfully obvious fallacy of supposing that criticism means adverse criticism, fault-finding. The reply to that obvious fallacy is the childishly obvious reminder that etymologically, and in what is still its soundest usage, it means

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merely to judge, that is to say, to appraise; and this meaning includes appreciation.

*Young.* Didn't Swinburne once define criticism as the noble pleasure of praising? And isn't that, after all, what most reviewing nowadays consists of? Ah, these writers are an ungrateful lot. We poor reviewers spend our nights in reading and our days in ballyhooing for them; we exhaust our superlatives; we create their reputations; and then we get a kick in the belly for our pains.

*Arthur.* I have not noticed that reviewers squander much of their energies in admiration. An author may pour his heart's blood into a book; he may work ten years on it; and a reviewer comes along and condemns it in an hour. Your typical reviewer, as old Longfellow said, is like a boy with a gun; he often fires at every living thing he sees; he thinks only of his own skill, not of the pain he is giving.

*Young.* The reviewer cannot concern himself with the feelings of the author; his only duty is to render an honest report to the reading public. It does not make a bad book any better to know that the author's intentions were earnest; and it is certainly not the reviewer's fault if the writer has wasted ten years of his life. Do you expect the reviewer to *lie* to the public just to spare the author's feelings?

*Middleton.* It wouldn't do the author any good,

in the long run, even if a few of the first reviewers did lie. As Richard Bentley remarked, "No man was ever written out of reputation but by himself."

*Arthur.* But that overlooks the *immediate* and sometimes irreparable harm that the first reviewers may do. They practically murdered poor Keats.

*Young.* Not on any evidence that you could put into a coroner's verdict. It is time that ancient myth was buried, and it is hardly a compliment to Keats himself to assume that he was such a delicate flower. The evidence shows that he died of tuberculosis, and not of unflattering remarks. And why is it that when a handful of critics write asinine reviews of a book, *all* critics are forthwith condemned? No one dreams of damning all authors, even though there are thousands of asinine books.

*Elder.* As a matter of fact, the general tone of American reviewing is exactly the contrary of what Arthur asserts it to be. The American reviewer seeks to make his reputation today not by "savaging" somebody, but by "discovering" somebody. As Louis Bromfield has remarked, there is a kind of nervous anxiety for someone new on the horizon, someone who can be seized and quickly decorated with the "best writer" badge. The situation is even worse than that. In a wild and shameless scramble to get their names quoted in publishers' advertisements, reviewers do not hesitate to lavish on a new book encomiums so appallingly extravagant that even a blurb writer would blush to pen them.

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*Arthur.* Your remarks are true only of some of the smaller fry. In the so-called upper levels of his profession, the critic seeks to acquire his reputation and his ranking not by his enthusiasms and admirations, but by his aversions and disdains. When a critic likes very little, it is accepted as a sign that he must be a highly superior person. The generous critic is never as respected in his own fold as the sarcastic and condescending one.

*Elder.* Well, I am not sure that it isn't better so. As Schopenhauer has pointed out, most books are bad and ought to have remained unwritten. Consequently praise should be as rare as is now the case with blame, which is withheld under the influence of personal considerations. Politeness, which has its source in social relations, is, as Schopenhauer added, in literature an alien and often injurious element, because it exacts that bad work shall be called good. And we should not forget Coleridge's remark that praises of the unworthy are felt by ardent minds as robberies of the deserving.

*Arthur.* Well, if we are to have criticism, and if it is to consist mainly of blame, let it at least come from practitioners of the art criticized, and not from professional critics, who are necessarily incompetent. What a presumptuous and impudent crew they are, these parasites who make their living by writing their opinion of the work of other people! Legless men who teach dancing! Eunuchs who talk about what they can't do!

*Young.* Old and stupid taunts! I am half-tempted to quote Oscar Wilde, who replied that it is much more difficult to talk about a thing than to do it. Anyone, he pointed out, can make history, but only a great man can write it. Seriously, however, it is obvious that inability to do a thing in no way implies inability to criticize that thing when done. As even Bernard Shaw has conceded, it does not follow that the right to criticize Shakespeare involves the power of writing better plays. I can't lay an egg, but I can tell a good one from a bad one when I taste it.

*Arthur.* A hoary answer.

*Young.* For old objections, the old answers are good enough.

*Arthur.* But that isn't an answer at all. *Anyone* can tell a good egg from a bad one: we don't have to hire professional critics to tell us which is which.

*Young.* Suppose for the moment that you were right; there would still be a not unimportant function left for the reviewer. He is the first one to open the new eggs that the novelists lay. If one of them smells bad, then even if the reviewer's sense of smell is no better than anyone else's, he can at least warn others. The reviewer, in brief, is the guinea pig of literature.

*Arthur.* Unfortunately, the reviewer seldom takes enough of the novelist's egg to know anything about it. I happen to know that you almost never read through the books you pretend to criticize.

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*Young.* Why should I? One doesn't have to eat all of an egg to know whether it's bad.

*Arthur.* Let's drop this stupid analogy. We come back after all to my original contention—that the critics are simply the fellows who sit in the grandstand and tell the players what to do, though they have never mastered the players' technical skill.

*Young.* Even if your comparison were accepted, I do not see that it would be so very damaging. The spectators at a tennis match can at least see that the losing player is not as good as the winning player; they can even see some of the reasons why one player won and the other lost. The trained spectators, such as the sport writers, who correspond to some extent to the critics of literature, can often make a very shrewd analysis of the good and bad points of a player's game, without in the least implying that they could get out on the court and do better.

*Arthur.* But the only analysis that I would regard as worth anything would be that of another tennis player, preferably of someone who played better than the man whose game he was criticizing. In other words, only artists should write about art.

*Young.* That is merely a way of saying that a dentist cannot cure a toothache unless he has one. But as Aristotle has pointed out, the proper judge of the tiller is not the carpenter but the helmsman.

*Arthur.* Suppose we drop *all* these pernicious analogies, and look at the problem honestly. I don't

see how anyone can deny that the critic of art who is himself a painter is a better critic than one who is not. He alone knows precisely what technical problems the artist has had to surmount; he alone can give the artist any advice that will be of the slightest use to him.

*Young.* I think you confuse the function of criticism with the function of instruction, but we shall let that pass for the moment. Your assumption that the artist is necessarily the best critic of his fellow-artists is surely without historical support. The bitterest resentment evoked by the innovator anywhere comes from those working in the same line. Mutual jealousies alone may make judicial estimates impossible. Apart from this, the very concentration of vision that makes a man an artist, as Oscar Wilde has pointed out, limits by its sheer intensity his faculty of fine appreciation.

Suppose we glance at the actual record of the artist as critic. Sophocles hated the realism of Euripides, and Aristophanes derided it. Ronsard abused Rabelais. Corneille never understood Racine. Balzac compared "Monk" Lewis's novels with "La Charreuse de Parme." Victor Hugo was contemptuous of nearly all the French classics. Voltaire thought Shakespeare a barbarian. Richardson and Fielding ridiculed each other. Keats thought Pope and his school mistook a rocking horse for Pegasus. Wordsworth called "Candide" "a dull product of a scoffer's pen." Wordsworth and Shelley could see little

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in each other, and Byron never fully appreciated Wordsworth, Shelley, or Keats. Goethe enormously over-estimated Byron, thought him the greatest writer of his century, and comparable with Shakespeare. Carlyle dismissed Herbert Spencer as a "never-ending ass"; Nietzsche damned both Carlyle and Spencer. Schopenhauer had nothing but abuse for Hegel. George Meredith, as a reader for Chapman and Hall, turned down "The Way of All Flesh." Dostoevsky and Turgenev were repelled by each other's methods; Tolstoy denounced Shakespeare, and praised "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Neither Hawthorne nor any of his contemporaries recognized the real importance of Melville. When Whittier received a copy of Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" he burned it. Thackeray and Dickens had little respect for each other as novelists. Anatole France never understood all this fuss about Proust. Shaw ballyhooed for a blank cartridge like Brieux—

*Arthur.* Come, come; the evening is short. Even the best of us make mistakes of judgment, but your list doesn't alter the truth of Disraeli's remark—that critics are merely those who have failed at creative work.

*Elder.* One could say with much more justice that Disraeli went into politics because he failed as a novelist. But it will take more than the authority of that gentleman to dispose of men of the caliber of Aristotle, Sainte-Beuve, Taine, and Lessing. And two minutes' reflection ought to remind you that



most of the great critics have also been great creators. Goethe's criticism could hardly be attributed to the fact that "Faust" was a creative failure. To recall Dante, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Coleridge, Carlyle, Macaulay, Matthew Arnold, Dryden, is to recall men who were great in both fields.

*Young.* And may I add that I am fed up with this impudent distinction between critical and "creative" writing? Today every little poetaster, every hack who turns out a trashy novel, every man who daubs at a canvas, fancies he is doing "creative work," and the phrase gives him an excuse for a ludicrously swelled head.

*Arthur.* But creative work is any work that requires the use of the creative imagination: it includes poetry, fiction, drama, music, painting, sculpture, architecture. Non-creative work is work that does not require the use of the creative imagination, but merely records facts, opinions or ideas: it includes history, biography, science, philosophy, essays and criticism.

*Young.* What a tissue of absurdities *that* distinction would lead to! It would deny that Gibbon's "Decline and Fall" was creative; or Boswell's "Johnson"; or "The Origin of Species"; or "The Wealth of Nations"; or the revolutionary discoveries of a Newton, a Pasteur, or an Einstein; or Plato's dialogues; or Kant's "Critique"; or Montaigne's or Emerson's essays; or Taine's "History of English Literature"; or Sainte-Beuve's gallery of portraits.

But it would stick the creative label on every verse by Eddie Guest, every novel by Rex Beach, every play by Sam Shipman. God save us all!

*Arthur.* This discussion, it seems to me, might be conducted in a less emotional atmosphere. The object of each of us, after all, is not supposed to be victory, but truth.

*Middleton.* Quite. Allow me to resume it in a quieter vein. Coming out on the train this evening, I took with me one of John Watson's lectures on behaviorism, and by a curious coincidence, I came upon a footnote that is directly relevant to our present topic. While I do not believe that his argument is tenable, it has none the less worried me. May I read it to you?

*Elder.* By all means.

*Middleton* (*pulling a small pamphlet from his pocket and reading*). "There ought not to be any such person as an art or dramatic critic"—

*Arthur.* A Daniel! A Daniel! O wise and learned man! (*The others look at him reprovngly; he subsides.*)

*Middleton* (*resuming*). "Our visceral reactions—the final touchstone of our artistic judgments—are our own. They are all we have left in the way of response that hasn't been under the steam-roller process of society. My criticism of a picture, poem, or the playing of a piece of music, is as good as anybody else's. If I had to pass a critical judgment upon a work of art, a picture for example, I would

do it experimentally. I would arrange to let crowds of people from all walks of life wander one at a time into a well-lighted room. I would have rival stimuli about, such as magazines, knickknacks of one kind or another, two or three pictures on the wall, including the one I wanted to have judged. If the individual under observation spent time at this picture, if he showed some emotional reaction, grief, joy, rage, then I would put him down as reacting positively to it. At the end of the day I would be able to say, 'The so-called art critics will say your picture is rotten, the children will not look at it, the women are shocked by it, but the traveling salesmen chuckle with glee over it. It will be a failure if you exhibit it; I would advise you to send it to some sales manager and let him hang it over his desk! What I am trying to say is that there is a vast amount of charlatanism both in the making of art objects and in their so-called appreciation. Assuming that you are a real journeyman at the job, that is, that you have passed your apprenticeship at the trade, whether you are a good artist or not depends largely upon whether Mr. and Mrs. X have discovered you (and you may have been dead a hundred years or more before they do it) and made a hero of you. If the memory of every artist and every man and woman of the Sistine Madonna, 'Parsifal', and 'The Ring and the Book' were suddenly lost tonight, and those artistic creations had to be discovered anew tomorrow with no background and no history, all

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three would be allowed to journey to the ash can without regret." (*Looking up*). Well?

*Elder.* Why, the man's an ass!

*Arthur.* On the contrary, he is very shrewd; and I think what he says substantially true.

*Young.* Colossal inconsistency means nothing to our friend here. A little while ago he was arguing that criticism required so much knowledge and skill that only artists were qualified to criticize other artists; now he is prepared to defend Watson's proposition that one man's opinion of a work of art is as good as another's.

*Middleton.* For that matter, Arthur committed an even greater inconsistency at the beginning when he criticized criticism, for by that very act he necessarily conceded criticism's right to exist.

*Arthur.* My position is thoroughly consistent. I maintain that the only opinion that will do the artist himself any good is that of another artist who is his superior or at least his equal. But so far as liking or disliking a painting is concerned, every man is entitled to determine that for himself. What I object to is merely the professional critic, who has never mastered the technical skill of the artist, and yet presumes to tell other people what they should and shouldn't like.

*Elder.* Coming back to Watson, I don't see how argument with such a man is possible. One can only say that anyone capable of believing that the Sistine Madonna, if it were a new discovery, would quickly

be consigned to the ash can, must be pitied for his complete anaesthesia. It is true that the first estimates assigned by critics to a newly discovered Sistine Madonna, "Parsifal", or "The Ring and the Book" might be different from what they now are; such estimates, in fact, are constantly shifting to a certain extent. But the important point is that the change in these estimates is always confined within certain definite limits. No man of any intelligence or sensibility could fail to recognize that the Sistine Madonna was a masterpiece and not a chromo; differences of opinion would arise only in considering its precise rank among masterpieces.

*Young.* And may I add that Mr. Watson does not see fit to follow his own advice? I recently read an article by him called "Feed Me on Facts" (which shows that a man may still be a Gradgrind and proud of it), and in that article he did not hesitate to criticize adversely two novels and a play. I did not see the play nor read one of the novels, a detective story, as I remember; but the other novel was Julien Green's "The Closed Garden", which I had read. His comments sufficed to show that when Mr. Watson sets up as a critic, a being which he declares ought not to exist, he reveals himself to be a remarkably bad one. His critical canons are singularly narrow; he condemned "The Closed Garden" on psychological grounds, though he did not deign to point out wherein its psychology was false. My own opinion, after a reading of "The Closed Garden"

and a careful study of Mr. Watson's lectures on behaviorism, is that Julien Green is a far more profound psychologist than Watson will ever be.

*Middleton.* But may I point out that all these arguments are merely arguments *ad hominem*? Merely to declare that Watson is anaesthetic, or to show that he is inconsistent, does not lessen the force of his attack upon criticism. What we want are convincing arguments *ad rem*.

*Elder.* You are right: our object is not to make a fool of Watson—he doubtless takes care of that well enough for himself—but to arrive at the truth, and to do that we must answer the arguments he puts forward.

*Middleton.* Of course, certain points are clear immediately. To say, for example, that one man's opinion of a work of art is just as good as another's because our visceral processes are "our own" is plainly nonsense. Our brains—or as Watson would put it, our laryngeal processes—are our own too; but I have never known anybody to put that fact forward to justify an error of reasoning or of fact. We admit that for a person who is color-blind the difference between red and green does not exist, but that is not to deny that there *is* a difference between red and green. For a blind man the whole visible universe does not exist as such, but we do not admit that the blind man's view of the universe is as complete as ours, or even that his view of it is as good for him as ours is for us. There is aesthetic and

spiritual blindness as well as merely physiological blindness. Some good people can look at a Cézanne for an hour without ever really seeing it. When our brains—or laryngeal processes—are not infallible, and even our eyes and ears are not infallible, why should Watson be so superstitious as to regard our visceral reactions as infallible? What is so particularly sacred about them? As a matter of fact, it is notorious that our visceral reactions deceive us more often than our eyes and ears and brains put together.

*Elder.* In brief, if I understand you correctly, the fact that our visceral reactions are “our own” no more validates their responses than the fact that our brains are our own proves that the conclusions those brains come to on scientific questions are correct?

*Middleton.* Exactly.

*Arthur.* But you check up a scientific theory by showing either that it does or does not accord with certain observations or established facts. What facts are there to check my aesthetic judgments against? What facts are there to check my enjoyment against?

*Middleton.* The error that you and Watson fall into is the rather widespread one of supposing that the sole function of art is to give the individual spectator a sort of aesthetic “kick.” Now art does not exist in a vacuum; it is a reflection of life and a part of life. Novels, dramas and poems have references to alleged facts, and imply conclusions, or at least attitudes, on the part of their authors. Our reaction to a novel or a drama depends very largely

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upon whether we believe that the episodes or the characters in it reflect or illuminate "life" or experience. When Watson condemns "The Closed Garden" for its psychology, his criticism is precisely of this kind. Representative art, such as painting or sculpture, has similar references to actuality.

*Arthur.* Paintings are no longer judged by such standards. Your modern art critic calls upon us to admire nudes that are all out of proportion, or chaotic "abstractions" that do not represent anything in nature.

*Middleton.* Still, it does make a difference whether a bungler draws a misshapen neck because he does not know how to draw at all, or whether a master like El Greco deliberately elongates a neck in order to reveal "the inclination of the soul".

*Arthur.* Well, just what relation to facts has decorative design, or music?

*Middleton.* The relation is elusive, but it exists. We certainly recognize the relation of music to life when we apply to it such adjectives as "noble", "serene", "sentimental", or "vulgar". Decorative design depends for its attractiveness partly on an agreeable stylization of something in nature, like leaves or flowers, or on satisfactions connected with geometric balance or ingenuity—

*Elder.* I am not sure that it is necessary to establish a connection between art and objective fact in order to prove that one person's aesthetic opinion is not as good as another's. After all, the consensus of



qualified opinion ought to be enough to assure us that certain works of art are definitely superior to others.

*Arthur.* "Qualified opinion" begs the question. Each of us regards that opinion as "qualified" which agrees with his own. We do not appeal to "qualified opinion" to settle a scientific question, but to hard objective facts.

*Middleton.* No, perhaps Elder is right. Possibly what we call "facts" themselves rest merely on qualified opinion. Verification, as Charles Horton Cooley has remarked, is the assent of competent minds. When you get beyond precise and easily repeated experiment it involves interpretation and is never unquestionable. A. R. Wallace got into serious trouble by attempting to prove, on a bet, that the surface of the earth was curved. The referee apparently gave him the money, but the other man was never convinced. It all comes back, as Cooley remarks, to the verdict of the expert group, which is the best guide we have, but not infallible.

*Elder.* Watson, it seems to me, becomes most absurd when he argues that he can determine the value of a work of art "experimentally"—that is to say, by counting noses. Such a method may do well enough in politics, where the mob has to be humored, but it is wholly out of place in the domain of beauty and truth. To determine how many persons like a picture is not to determine how much it is aesthetically worth, any more than to learn how many per-

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sons hold an opinion indicates anything about the truth of that opinion. No one suggests, not even Watson, that a scientific question can be settled by taking a vote on it. The opinion of scientists, like the opinion of authorities on art, is often a minority opinion. Indeed, when Copernicus announced that the earth was round and revolved about the sun, he was initially in a minority of one.

*Middleton.* And Watson, who is still in a minority on the subject of behaviorism, and likely to remain in one, ought to appreciate the force of that argument. Watson is a democrat and an egalitarian in the field of art for no other reason than that he is an ignoramus in the field of art. But in the field of psychology, in which he has specialized, he is an aristocrat, even a snob and a despot. Here he not only doesn't believe that one person's opinion is as good as another's; he doesn't seem to believe that novelists are entitled to think about the subject of psychology at all.

*Arthur.* But it is senseless to talk as if aesthetic questions could be settled by the same methods as scientific questions. To go back to Elder's illustration: Copernicus began by being in a minority of one, but he convinced the world by pointing out that others could make observations that were the same for everybody, and draw deductions that were the same for everybody. There is no such universality, no such objective means of corroboration, in aesthetic judgments. It still remains true that a street-sweeper's

response to a painting by Cézanne is as good for him as yours is for you. His own honest response, indeed, is better for him than yours would be. Why should you seek to impose your opinion on him?

*Elder.* It is true that his opinion ought to be honest, and that it is better for him to have his own response than to be intimidated into professing a response that he does not really feel. But the trained critic's opinion, if expressed, may legitimately influence the street-sweeper's opinion. The critic may analyze the work and call attention to merits and beauties that the street-sweeper (whom I am taking throughout to mean the general untrained public) might otherwise have overlooked. The critic may, in brief, interpret the painting for the street-sweeper, enrich his response, enable him to derive a pleasure from the painting that he would not otherwise have derived.

*Arthur.* I have not observed that most criticism has that aim. On the contrary, most critics are fond of giving reasons why the street-sweeper should despise the things he really does admire. The street-sweeper derives real pleasure from jazz and the movies, and the critic seeks to make the street-sweeper ashamed of this pleasure, and holds up for his admiration unintelligible paintings and unintelligible poetry and unintelligible music that can never give the street-sweeper any real joy.

*Elder.* It is true that until his taste has been educated, jazz will give him more pleasure than

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Brahms, and Zane Grey more than Henry James, and Edgar Guest more than Wordsworth, and the philosophy of Arthur Brisbane more than that of Plato, and superstition more than science. But I feel that in each case education from these lower to these higher tastes would make his life fuller and richer, and open to him avenues of delight that he does not now even dimly suspect.

*Arthur.* Well, I am sure of this, that criticism will never change the street-sweeper's fundamental tastes. To begin with, he will never read the criticism.

*Middleton.* Arthur is right, and I think you have both devoted too much time to this aspect of the question already. After all, I hardly think that criticism's main effort, even if there were any chance of success, should be directed to uplifting the aesthetic appreciation of street-sweepers.

*Elder.* Of course you understand that in talking of street-sweepers I—and I assume Arthur also—was talking merely of Philistines generally, who may exist at any economic level of society. For all I know, there may be individual street-sweepers who, when they get home in the evening, find consolation in Proust and Chopin.

*Middleton.* Even so, it seems to me that criticism has other and higher aims than the rather hopeless one of trying to educate Philistines.

*Elder.* You are right. On a mere pleasure theory—pleasure in the material or pig-sty sense—I sup-

pose one visceral or emotional kick *is* as good as another, whether it is produced by a chromo or a Correggio, jazz or a Beethoven symphony, a trashy romance or "Madame Bovary", a Kewpie kid or the Venus de Milo, a service station or Chartres cathedral. But I cannot escape the feeling that a civilization that preferred the chromo and the Kewpie kid, no matter how happy it was, would be a starved and deformed civilization, and were better wiped out by some passing comet. Great literature, great paintings, great cathedrals, great symphonies, ennoble us; they enrich our lives, and make them immeasurably more complete and harmonious than they would otherwise be. For make no mistake about this: to say that the critic should not exist is to say that no aesthetic values exist; to assert that one person's opinion of a work of art is just as good as another's is, at bottom, to assert that one work of art itself is just as good as another; that if a chromo can excite a greater visceral kick in an ignoramus than a portrait by Rembrandt, then the chromo is better.

*Arthur.* But isn't it better for the ignoramus?

*Elder.* I no longer care about him. We have been all through that question.

*Arthur.* But after all, year in and year out the critics are praising one book and the public is reading another. The best sellers are seldom the books that receive the most laudatory critical notices; indeed, they are often the books that are most ferociously

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condemned. If the best sellers are so inferior, why do most people prefer them?

*Elder.* You are harking back to democratic, that is to say to merely quantitative, standards, which hold that that work of art is best which excites the greatest *number* of viscera—that the latest jazz tune is better than the Bach fugue, and the best seller better than “The Brothers Karamazov”. Why is the jazz melody preferred to the Bach fugue? I will tell you. Because it is cheap and tawdry, and therefore suited to a public that is cheap and tawdry. Why does the best seller sell better than “The Brothers Karamazov”? Because it reflects stereotyped sentiments and a stereotyped outlook on life, and because those are the only sentiments and that is the only outlook on life that the public is capable of appreciating.

*Arthur.* But that is mere snobbery.

*Elder.* If so, then the critic is compelled, by the very nature of his occupation, as I. A. Richards tells us, to be a snob. He must at least think of the public, if he does not say to it: “I know more than you do. I have more insight, more sensibility. My taste is sounder and more discriminating.”

*Middleton.* Would you agree with Poe in his contention that to appreciate thoroughly the work of what we call genius is to possess all the genius by which the work is produced?

*Elder.* Much depends on what Poe meant by “thoroughly”, but on the whole I think the state-

ment so extreme as to amount almost to nonsense. One can often recognize immediately the beauty of a new sonnet, though one may be utterly incapable of writing such a sonnet oneself. The gourmet is not necessarily a good cook. A man of sensibility can appreciate a sunset better than the Philistine without being a whit more able than the Philistine to produce one. But I should go so far as to say with Schopenhauer: "Just as the sun cannot shed its light but to the eye that sees it, nor music but to the hearing ear, so the value of all masterly work in art and science is conditioned by the capacity of the mind to which it speaks."

*Arthur (half-ironically).* Do you know, in spite of the lack of urbanity you reveal in your references to Watson, you almost convince me that there may be a place for the critic after all.

*Elder.* I am immensely relieved to hear it. Some of the questions we have been discussing are pretty elementary, and perhaps at times we have been laboring the obvious, but it seems to me important that certain fundamental points should be incontrovertibly established at the very beginning. And now I think dinner is about ready. Could you gentlemen stand a cocktail first?

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## II

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*Elder.* In discussing before dinner the question whether criticism had a right to its mere existence, we were compelled to discuss incidentally some of the critic's functions, because it is impossible to justify any human activity without pointing to at least a few of the benefits that it is supposed to confer upon mankind. But I am not sure that all of us have clear ideas concerning just what the critic should or should not attempt to do. It might be well to go into that question a little more thoroughly.

*Arthur.* I should like to join you, but I fear I should only be in the way in such a discussion. While I dislike to be leaving so soon after that excellent dinner, I have a long drive ahead of me tonight; tomorrow is Saturday, and I've got to get up at six to play in a golf tournament at the club. Before I go, I have only one contribution to make. It seems to me that the average critic regards his chief function as that of discouraging authors, or at least of preventing the production of anything likely to please the public. Reviewers are always either vaguely hinting or declaring outright that I am "prostitut-



ing" my talents. Their constant advice to me in effect is: "Write something fine and unmarketable." They assume that all I have to do to become Flaubert or Dostoevsky is to refrain from writing stuff that sells well. I'm sorry to say it, but they are mistaken. After all, I write to the limit of my own capacity; ideals do not confer genius; fame is beyond me, but a good living is not. Thank you, Elder, for a very delightful evening; Mr. Young, Mr. Middleton, I have enjoyed meeting you extremely. (*He goes out.*)

*Young.* A diverting fellow; I'm sorry to see him go.

*Elder.* Considering that he had to argue against three of us, he did surprisingly well.

*Young.* Yes; I wanted to take exception to some things you and Middleton were saying, but I held my tongue, because I felt it wise for critics to present a united front in the face of the enemy.

*Elder.* I am glad that you feel free again to speak your mind, for the subject of the critic's proper rôle is one on which I am not sure that many critics agree. Perhaps we can approach the matter best by discussing some of the traditional conceptions of that rôle. We might do worse than to begin with Matthew Arnold. He defined criticism, you will remember, as "a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world."

*Young.* That seems to me as poor a definition as one could well imagine. An "endeavor to learn" may be praiseworthy, but it is surely not criticism;

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at best it can be only the critic's preparation for criticism. "To propagate" is not criticism either; we can leave that to reformers and advertising men.

*Elder.* Your objections are pretty literal——

*Middleton.* But you must admit, Elder, that as a definition of the critic's rôle Arnold's phrase is at least vague, and might describe equally well the function of the schoolma'am. I think we could more profitably turn to Taine, whose theories of the critic's function seem to have fallen into undeserved neglect. Taine held (if you don't resent my summarizing what is probably so familiar to both of you) that every work of literature is the product of a particular race, a particular environment and a particular time, and that one cannot understand and interpret that work completely, or even adequately, until one has studied that race, that environment and that time. We must realize what characteristics distinguish the Germanic from the Latin races: if we are studying Norwegian literature or Italian literature, we must not forget that differences of climate and physical environment alone will create differences in the prevailing mood or tone of that literature. Again, we must recognize that a French work springs out of a French literary tradition, and an English work out of an English literary tradition. Finally, we must ask at just what stage in a nation's literary history the work we are studying was written—whether it reflects a period of experiment and bold emprise, or a period of decadence; whether it came in the

spring, the summer or the autumn of a literary movement; in brief, what preceding works influenced it, and what was the dominant intellectual and emotional atmosphere in which it was written. Only then are we prepared to understand the work or the author we are studying.

*Elder.* If Taine's critical theories have fallen into neglect, I hardly think the neglect undeserved. That theory has been demolished a number of times, and perhaps most fairly and most succinctly by Emile Faguet. Faguet pointed out that while the investigation of race, environment and time is interesting, it is also vain, because it is, as it were, external, and always remains external, to the real object of criticism. Certainly, Faguet concedes, Corneille is a product of the French race, of Norman soil, of the Rouen middle classes and of the circumstances which surrounded him from 1604 to 1624. Only, these various things explain everything about Corneille except his superiority, and the business of criticism is to account for superiority. These things describe a Rouen bourgeois of 1625, but not the difference between an ordinary Rouen bourgeois and Pierre Corneille; and, since this difference is the important thing, it follows that such considerations better describe Corneille's neighbor than Corneille himself. Hence, of what use are they?

*Middleton.* Well, I might reply that Rouen is a part of France, and that French culture is not English culture or German culture. Surely an under-

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standing of cultural environment explains, say, why Corneille's dramas are more like Racine's than they are like Shakespeare's or Schiller's. Faguet's criticism ignores the all-important fact that in each nation there are different *levels* of culture, and that these vertical differences, so to speak, of culture within a single country are vastly more important than the merely horizontal differences of culture between the corresponding levels in different countries. Faguet's conception of the meaning of "environment" was too narrow. He might, while he was at it, have urged that a female calf born in Rouen in 1620, and a product of the same environment as Corneille, would never have grown into anything but a cow. Now just as the cultural environment of the Rouen bourgeois was immensely richer than that of a Rouen cow, because the bourgeois could absorb more of it, so the cultural environment of Corneille was immensely richer than that of the average Rouen bourgeois.

*Elder.* I am tempted to ask whether you are really defending Taine's theory, or attacking it. In emphasizing what you call the vertical differences of culture within a country, instead of the "merely" horizontal differences of culture between different countries, you are surely insisting on something that Taine himself did not insist on. Practically his whole emphasis, if I remember rightly, was on the horizontal differences of culture between different countries. And when you point to the difference between a Rouen cow and a Rouen bourgeois, and the differ-

ence between the average Rouen bourgeois and Pierre Corneille, you are practically granting Faguet's point—that superiority is not environmental, but innate or hereditary.

*Middleton.* I am not sure that that *was* Faguet's point. He asserts that it is the business of criticism to account for superiority, and I should say that that is not the business of criticism at all, but the business of biology. Criticism does not account for superiority; it accepts it as a starting point: it may describe in what a writer's superiority consists, but it does not attempt to explain what makes one man innately superior to another. To know that we must study genetics.

*Elder.* Have you, Middleton, by any chance read Paul Valéry's essay, Adonis, in his book translated into English under the title of "Variety"? There is a passage in it that I want to read to you. I have the book here on my shelves. (*Reading*):

"Did Racine himself know where he found the inimitable voice, the delicate pattern of inflection, the transparent mode of discourse, all the qualities which make him Racine, and without which he would be reduced to that inconsiderable personage of whom biographers relate a great number of facts—hardly more true of him than of ten thousand other Frenchmen? It is seldom that the lessons which literary history claims to teach have any bearing on the secret of how poems are made. Everything takes place within the artist, as if the observable events of

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his life had only a superficial influence on his works. The one important fact—the very act of the Muses—is independent of adventures, of the author's mode of life, of incidents, and of anything that could figure in a biography. Everything which history can observe is unimportant.

“The essentials of his work are indefinable circumstances, occult encounters, facts visible to one man only, and others which are so easy or familiar to this one man that he disregards them. By examining ourselves, we can easily discover that these incessant and impalpable events are the solid matter of our true personality.”

Valéry continues for a page or so more, and then concludes, “Let us despair of having clear vision in these matters, and soothe ourselves with an image.” He then goes on——

*Middleton.* Just so. Valéry obviously belongs to that large class of writers who like mysticism, or mystification, for its own sake, and who prefer a paradox to an explanation. They hate naturalistic explanations of anything, and when they feel themselves on the verge of one they skitter off into a vague metaphor or an irrelevant piece of fine writing. What Valéry says is true, in fact, only of the crudest and most superficial sort of biography. The greatest single influence on most writers, *as* writers, is books, or, perhaps, other living writers with whom they become acquainted when young. That the greatest influence on most writers is so sedentary an occupation

as reading is a view highly distasteful to romantic souls, who are always looking for something outwardly adventurous and exciting. But a biographer who is willing to accept this perhaps prosaic view can often give us a history of his subject's intellectual and emotional development in the highest degree illuminating. Valéry himself, in the very essay you have just read from, if I remember rightly, voices his suspicion that Racine was deeply influenced by reading La Fontaine's "Adonis". And Professor John Livingston Lowes, in his brilliant work "The Road to Xanadu", has shown what real scholarship and understanding can do, even after a century has passed, to reveal the influences that went into one particular poem—of all poems, Coleridge's "Kubla Khan", which, having supposedly been composed mainly in a dream, should especially have been expected to take place wholly "within the artist".

*Elder.* Am I to take it, then, that you agree entirely with Taine's theory that literature is simply an expression of the age and of the race?

*Middleton.* Yes and no. It is an expression of the age, surely: a great work of literature both helps to make the age, by being an influence in it and a part of it, and is made by the age, because itself influenced by the works that preceded it. That it is an expression of the "race" is more dubious. Taine reasoned backward when he thought he was reasoning forward: he thought he saw quite clearly, for example, that certain characteristics of English litera-

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ture were the products of certain innate characteristics of the English temperament, whereas he was really deducing or assuming these alleged innate characteristics of Englishmen from the characteristics of English literature. The tendency among ethnologists is to put less and less confidence in supposed innate racial differences, and to ascribe the differences that we find in national characteristics to differences in tradition. It is better to say, then, not that a given work of art is an expression of the race, but that it is an expression of the tradition of the race; and these differences of tradition, of course, give "the age" a distinctive color in each different country.

But the individual also expresses himself. To ask to what extent a work of art expresses the man who created it, and to what extent it expresses the age and the national tradition, is much like asking what are the respective rôles of heredity and environment in forming the individual. Indeed, one might almost say that the first problem is merely another aspect of the second. A work of art is *both* the expression of the individual's genius and of the genius of his race and time. A country must have innate geniuses, and they must have the right environment in which to flourish. Unless the two conditions are fulfilled we cannot have great creative works.

*Elder.* But which factor do you regard as the more important?

*Middleton.* Of course from one point of view



environment is much less important than innate capacity. Even the most favorable environment cannot do more than permit a man to grow to the full spiritual stature that his inheritance allows him: limitations, in short, are imposed upon him pre-natally. Mice, even under optimum conditions, cannot grow to the size of elephants. But when we consider the possible *negative* effects of environment, its enormous power to veto, it becomes immensely important. A bad environment may not only stunt growth; it may altogether prevent it. You can plant coconut trees in Alaska, but they will not grow there. Now it is clearly the American environment rather than a dearth of innate genius that has prevented great literature and great art from developing or flourishing here. The fact that we do have plenty of innate ability is proved by the wealth of inventive and business genius and the brilliant charlatanism that our environment encourages.

*Young.* But don't you believe that genius, by its own inner force, will overcome obstacles and thrive in *any* environment?

*Middleton.* I assuredly do not. A Napoleon, born in Polynesia, might make a small local reputation for himself; but a Goethe or an Einstein born in Polynesia would die unheard of. Sociologists have made it clear that there can be no highly developed individuals without highly developed groups. One fact alone should be enough to show us the enormous influence of environment and time on literature

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and art. If innate genius were the sole factor, we should naturally expect, particularly within one given country, to find approximately the same number of men of developed genius or talent in each generation, producing literary or artistic work of not widely varying merit. We find, instead, that great writers and artists appear in widely separated clusters—in the Athens of Pericles, the Florence of the Medici, the Paris of Louis XIV, the London of Elizabeth. In sum, I am willing to admit that Taine's theory of race-environment-time was only a half-truth, but I hold it to have been an enormously important half-truth.

*Young.* Your discussion, by itself, was extremely diverting, but how many leagues we are from our base! We start to discuss the function of the critic, and before we know it we are listening to a lecture on heredity and environment.

*Elder.* We shall permit you to bring the subject back to its base.

*Young.* I do so with the highest pleasure. Neither you nor Middleton, I am afraid, can be expected to discuss a theory of criticism seriously until its author has been a long time dead. But the most sensible and forthright discussion of the critic's function I have ever read is H. L. Mencken's. The motive of the critic, Mencken insists, is not the motive of the pedagogue, but the motive of the artist. It is no more and no less than the simple desire to function freely and beautifully, to give outward and

objective form to ideas that bubble inwardly and have a fascinating lure in them, to get rid of them dramatically and make an articulate noise in the world. No critic worth his salt can be reduced to a mere appraiser in an intellectual customs house, a gauger in the distillery of the spirit, and it is impossible to think of a man of any actual force and originality who spent his whole life in appraising and describing the work of other men. The first-rate critic, like any other artist, Mencken concludes, is simply trying to express himself. His criticism becomes a fresh work of art, and only indirectly related to the one that suggested it. Does it make any difference, in the long run, whether his judgments are just and infallible? Macaulay was unfair and inaccurate, Carlyle was full of prejudices and biles—yet their essays live. They could make the thing charming, and that is always a million times more important than making it true.

*Elder.* That doctrine is romantic and even plausible, and I can understand how it would make a profound emotional appeal to you. But it will not withstand very serious scrutiny. For what is Mencken really saying? He is saying merely that a man who starts out as a critic, if he is a first-rate man, ends by bulging over the critic's confines and becoming something else. The truth of that assertion we do not need to discuss. The point is that even if it is true it is not a definition of criticism. To assert that the first-rate critic often steps out of the rôle of

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critic is not to tell us what the rôle of the critic is. To say that it is the function of the critic to be charming is precisely like saying that it is the function of the fireman to be brave: that is not his function, but merely a quality necessary to perform his function well. Just as physical courage is a quality that the fireman must share with men of vastly different functions, such as policemen, soldiers and gangsters, so charm is a quality that the critic must share with novelists, poets, essayists, biographers, historians, scientists and every other type of writer. So while it is perfectly true, of course, to say that the critic must be charming, it is also obvious and just a little beside the point. To return to my comparison, the *specific* function of the fireman *as* fireman is to put out fires; and our present question concerns the *specific* function of the critic *as* critic.

*Young.* Come, wouldn't you rather read a book review that was interesting but not critical than one that was critical but not interesting?

*Elder.* That is not a relevant question. Anyone, of course, would rather read something that was interesting to him than something that was not——

*Young.* Then what earthly difference does it make whether or not we call a charming essay criticism? You college professors have an incurable fondness for pigeonholes and meaningless labels. "A rose by any other name"——

*Elder.* You are practically saying that it makes no difference whether we define the function of criti-

cism or not. But it does make a great deal of difference. Rival theories of the function of history—of whether it is primarily an art or a science, whether its first aim is to delight or to instruct, whether it should be a charming narrative or a careful study of causes and origins—have enormously influenced the writing of history in different periods; and the same is true of criticism. Let us admit that the critic should be as charming as his talents permit him to be; but let us ask what is primarily required of him *as a critic*.

*Young.* Well, it would not be unwise to turn to Mencken again. In an earlier essay, which he somewhat too hastily repudiated in the one I was just discussing, he suggested that the function of the critic was that of a catalyzer. A catalyzer, in chemistry, is a substance that helps two other substances to react. For example, consider the case of ordinary cane sugar and water. Dissolve the sugar in the water and nothing happens. But add a few drops of acid and the sugar changes into glucose and fructose. Meanwhile, the acid itself is absolutely unchanged. All it does is to stir up the reaction between the water and the sugar. The process is called catalysis. The acid is a catalyzer. Well, says Mencken, this is almost exactly the function of a genuine critic of the arts. It is his business to provoke the reaction between the work of art and the spectator. The spectator, untutored, stands unmoved; he sees the work of art, but it fails to make any intelligible impres-

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sion on him; if he were spontaneously sensitive to it, there would be no need for criticism. But now comes the critic with his catalysis. He makes the work of art live for the spectator; he makes the spectator live for the work of art. Out of the process come understanding, appreciation, intelligent enjoyment—and that is precisely what the artist tried to produce.

*Middleton.* The analogy is an admirable one, though it should not be pushed too far. For in the process of making the spectator and the work of art live for each other, the critic, unlike the chemical catalyzer, is himself changed. If he reads and really absorbs a great book, if he sees and really appreciates a great picture, he cannot emerge from the experience without being, at least to some extent, a different man. If the experience is really worth anything, it has either added to his knowledge, modified his opinions, or influenced his attitudes. That a great book should do this is obvious; that a great painting should do it is less obvious but not less true. You will sometimes hear a receptive and open-minded critic say that as he stands before a new picture of importance the picture changes. Of course the picture does not change at all. It is the critic who is changing as he looks at it. The picture is educating him.

*Young.* But doesn't that change in the critic occur prior to the actual act of criticism, that is, prior to the written criticism?

*Middleton.* On the contrary, changes in the critic's opinion—in other words, changes in the critic

himself—may occur in the very act of writing. But I do not see that the exact time at which the change in the critic occurs is important. The act of allowing the book or the painting to influence or educate him is itself an essential part of the critic's total act of criticism. If a work of art has not been able to change or move him, how can he hope to make it change or move the general spectator?

*Elder.* But isn't this whole analogy of the catalyzer a rather technical and pretentious way of saying merely that the critic is an interpreter between the artist and the general public?

*Young.* It is virtually saying the same thing, but I shouldn't call it a more pretentious way of saying it; it is rather a much more vivid and imaginative way of saying it.

*Elder.* But *is* interpretation the primary or final function of the critic? Interpretation is necessary only when a literary work is obscure or unintelligible, when the author has expressed his meaning clumsily or muddily. In fact, I incline to think that the greatest works of art do not require any interpretation at all. Does "Candide" call for any interpretation? Is there a single obscure sentence in it? Was not Voltaire able to express himself with more force and clarity than any of his critics?

*Middleton.* I'm afraid you're thinking of interpretation in too narrow a sense. To be sure "Candide" is clear enough as a story, and even its philosophy is unmistakable, but aren't the reader's enjoyment

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and understanding heightened by the knowledge that the book was an answer to and a satire of the optimism of Leibnitz? The critic may interpret even the clearest work of the past by revealing to the reader the conditions that brought it forth, the intellectual climate of the age in which it was written, the works that inspired or provoked it—in brief, the factors of race, environment and time upon which Taine insisted. Taine's own "History of English Literature" is a brilliant example of what such interpretation can do.

*Elder.* But that kind of "interpretation" is the function of the historian rather than of the critic; and it applies only to literary works of the remote past.

*Young.* No; what Middleton says of the past applies just as much or even more to the present. The more advanced a work is, the more interpretation it needs. How can a reader adequately understand "Ulysses" or "The Waste Land" or Ezra Pound's "Cantos" if he does not understand the intellectual climate of which they were both the products and the harbingers?

*Elder.* Your examples prove my point. Such works need interpretation only because they are obscure.

*Young.* But is obscurity necessarily a defect in a work? May it not merely indicate a defect in its readers? Just as *any* intelligent work is obscure to the moron, so the most profound works, groping



into new areas of experience and feeling, are obscure to the ordinarily intelligent. There are times, indeed, when a work is so original that it has to wait several generations before critics appear who are really capable of understanding it. That is why contemporary criticism understood neither William Blake nor Herman Melville. They, like Newton, voyaged "upon strange seas of thought, alone." So far from obscurity necessarily being a defect in a work, it may be a hallmark of greatness. Is Kant or Hegel altogether clear even yet? Or, for that matter, is Shakespeare's "Hamlet"?

*Elder.* Ah, there you put your finger on the futility of "interpretative" criticism. A hundred volumes of exposition have not succeeded in making Kant or Hegel completely intelligible. Three hundred years and ten thousand volumes of comment leave the enigma of Hamlet unsolved.

*Young.* But they do not leave it where it was at the beginning, and the response of the ordinarily intelligent reader to "Hamlet" is vastly richer and deeper than before the commentators began. The function of the interpretative critic is not always to clarify mysteries; it is often to show that there is a mystery behind what was previously supposed to be clear. Two generations failed to understand "Moby Dick" precisely because they were sure they did understand it. To them it was only a sea story, a romance of whaling. It was not until critics saw that the huge white whale was not merely a white whale,

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but a symbol of Nature, or of the principle of evil, or what you will, that the greatness of "Moby Dick" was recognized.

*Elder.* Yet most authors could, if they wished, interpret their own work better than any critic. And their interpretation, unlike the critic's, would not be dubious, but authoritative and final.

*Young.* The artist can often interpret his own work only with the risk, and sometimes with the certainty, of ruining it; and it often irritates him to explain in bald terms what he feels the intelligent spectator or auditor ought to see or hear for himself. Should Ibsen have had a character in his play remark that the wild duck was intended mainly as a symbol? Should Leonardo have pasted on the bottom of his Mona Lisa an explanation of what his sitter's smile meant? Should Beethoven have written a short speech for orchestral conductors to recite before playing each symphony, so that audiences would know precisely what Beethoven was trying to express? No, it is for the *critic* to unveil, if he can, the motive of the artist. It is for the critic to indicate the philosophic background or the unexpressed implications of the artist's work.

*Elder.* Bernard Shaw has shown, in his prefaces, that he can perform that function quite successfully for himself.

*Young.* The example of Shaw proves my point. The very fact that he felt he had to write prefaces, sometimes longer than the plays themselves, shows

that even he, with his gifts of brilliant clarity, did not feel that he could make the implications of his plays clear enough in the plays themselves. And in considering the success of his prefaces, we must not forget that Shaw got his training as a critic. The critic has to do for other playwrights what Shaw does for himself.

*Middleton.* And the critic, too, often understands the motives of the artist better than the artist understands them. We do not need to go to the commentators influenced by psycho-analysis; we need only read some of the portraits of Sainte-Beuve to recognize the existence of motives that an author himself would have had neither the candor nor the self-knowledge to confess.

*Elder.* Well, in the heat of argument I have found myself defending a view I do not really hold. I admit that interpretation is a necessary part of the critic's task. What I object to is the assumption that it sums up the whole of that task. Interpretation is merely a preliminary and incidental act of the critic. His real business is judgment.

*Young.* Ah, I thought we were coming to something like that. Stated baldly, that is what Huneker used to call the naughty-boy theory and practice of criticism, with its doling out of bad marks. No, the real function of criticism is the exact opposite of that. It is enjoyment and appreciation. Unless you appreciate a work of art, you miss the main motive of the artist in bringing it into being.

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*Elder.* Judgment, of course, implies appreciation as well as censure. But it does not imply uncritical appreciation, which, so far as I can gather, is what you seem to regard as the critic's duty. If doling out bad marks does not constitute criticism, let me remind you, to use a phrase of Lowell's, that neither do admiring italics. Yet the last is what we get in the main from most of our journalistic reviewers, who write of books, as Ernest Boyd once remarked, with the enthusiasm of auctioneers, and are utterly without a sense of values other than news values. I remember that one of these columnists even went so far once as to declare that all newspaper criticism *ought* to be "camp meetin'" criticism, "shoutin' Methodist" criticism.

*Young.* Yet it remains true that the critic should be, in Robert Lynd's phrase, primarily a virtue finder. He is not concerned with getting rid of the dross except in so far as it hides the gold. The destructive side of criticism is purely a subsidiary one. "Judgment!" What smug finality is in that word! What self-assurance and self-righteousness! Every critic who assumes his function to be that of a judge will inevitably write of books with the tone of the schoolmaster holding a birch rod in his hand.

*Elder.* But why should you balk at the word "judgment"? Great heavens, "criticism" *means* judgment. Must I tell you that it comes from the Greek *κρίνειν*, meaning to judge, to decide, to give an authoritative opinion?

*Young.* We cannot make the critic's function depend on the accidents of etymology. The word "assassin", for that matter, originally meant "hashish eater", but no court would hold a man innocent of assassination because it could not be proved that he took anything stronger than coffee before the act.

*Elder.* Etymology or no etymology, the duty of judgment cannot be evaded. You, of all men, who have to review the current books day in and day out, ought to be the last to speak as if the sole function of the critic were that of appreciation. There are ten thousand new books published in this country every year, and to say that a hundred of them are really worth reading is to make an exceedingly liberal estimate. I myself should put the figure nearer to a dozen. But say one hundred. That means that only one in a hundred of the new books is worth looking at, or "appreciating." If you were completely honest, above commercial considerations or the fear of making enemies, and if you could keep your sense of perspective in the flood, you would condemn the other ninety-nine. They are the products of feeble minds, of bunglers, charlatans, spiritual prostitutes pandering to a tawdry public taste. As a matter of fact, you do condemn many of them; you do judge most of them. And I find, indeed, that all these persons who would shy at the very word "judgment" are continually making judgments themselves, though they lack the candor to admit it. Why do they hand down very definite judgments and dislike

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to be regarded as doing so? The reason is probably emotional. A judge, in literature, is, so to speak, a self-appointed judge; he confers authority upon himself; he assumes that he is a superior person. Now many critics do not like others to think that they give themselves this authority and assume this superior air, so they ridicule "judgment" and pretend that they are not judging, when, in fact, they are doing almost nothing else. Let us, in heaven's name, at least have the candor to admit what we are doing. Judgment must be, when all is said, the final act of criticism. The critic is a judge or he is nothing.

*Young.* You will pardon me if I am reminded of what Jules Lemaître said of Brunetière. But I see you have his essays in your library. Here, let me read you the passage. Brunetière, writes Lemaître, "touches nothing which he does not class, and that for eternity. I admire the majesty of such criticism, but look at what it costs. To judge always is perhaps never to enjoy. I should not be astonished if M. Brunetière had become really incapable of 'reading for his own pleasure.' He would be afraid of being a dupe, he would even be afraid of committing a sin." For us, continues Lemaître, "it matters not if we make a mistake in liking what pleases us or amuses us, or if we have to smile tomorrow at our admirations of today. Our errors are without consequence; they only concern particular cases. If M. Brunetière, on the other hand, made a mistake, it would be frightful; for besides the fact that he would

have had no pleasure in his error, it would be without help or remedy; it would be total and irreparable; it would be the wreck of his whole being."

*Elder.* Lemaître, I fear, was somewhat more brilliant in ridicule than sound in logic. Even if it were true that the task of judgment were a joyless one, it would no more prove that task unnecessary than the fact that the coal miner's work is unpleasant lowers the need for coal. But, of course, the critic who judges derives quite as much enjoyment from a work of art as the critic who does not. There is just this difference: that the first critic, after he has had his enjoyment, begins to analyze the quality of that enjoyment, or to ask himself, perhaps, why it was not greater. The acts of appreciation and of judgment are not necessarily either simultaneous or mutually exclusive. As for the possibility that some of his judgments may be mistaken, the critic will have to take that risk, just as a judge must in a court of law. Critical judgment means, at bottom, appraisal: the essence of criticism is judgment of a book's *value*. If criticism does not give us an idea of what a book is worth, what earthly good is it?

*Young.* In other words, you would have us return to the notion of criticism as mere "ranking"; you would have us come back to what Chekhov complained of—a tiresome exchange of opinions on who writes better and who worse. The critic, in your eye, is just a humorless pedagogue marking papers, handing out percentages.

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*Elder.* Criticism at least teaches the mob that there is some difference between "Abie's Irish Rose" and "The Cherry Orchard", which it is doubtless well for it to know; and if I may presume to quote Brunetière, who was after all nobody's fool, criticism avenges talent for the successes of mediocrity, which are humiliating in some way or other to everybody.

*Middleton.* But that remark assumes that the criticism is sound. What, however, is the usual situation? Isn't it, as Oscar Wilde once remarked, that of mediocrity weighing mediocrity in the balance, and incompetence applauding its brother? For when you contend that the critic is a judge, *Elder*, I hope you do not overlook the relativity, or, if you prefer, the mutuality or reciprocal nature of criticism. Spinoza pointed out that Paul's opinion of Peter tells us less about Peter than it does about Paul. When a minor critic writes of Shakespeare, he may think that he is judging Shakespeare, but the truth is that Shakespeare is judging him. We learn from the criticism very little about Shakespeare, but we learn a great deal about the limitations of the critic.

*Elder.* Yet even a bad critic is not without his value, particularly when he is dealing with new books, because once you have taken his measure, you can guess pretty well from his judgment of a book what your own is likely to be. Many a savage review has convinced me that the book under review was worth reading, and many a eulogy has led me to suspect that it was trash.



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*Middleton.* We have spent enough time over this question of judgment. Has not criticism other, and perhaps more useful aims? Judgment, *per se*, can come only after a work of art is finished and complete; it cannot alter it. But may not criticism try to mold and guide the future work of the artist?

*Young.* A thousand times, no! In the words of Clive Bell, critics do not exist for artists any more than paleontologists exist for fossils. To help the artist is no part of a critic's business: his business is to help the public. For him to attempt to "mold and guide" the artist's work would be as futile as it would be presumptuous. Such an aim not only assumes that the critic knows more about the technical elements of the artist's work than the artist himself, but it assumes that the artist is capable of doing better work than he does do, and Mencken has expressed himself very strongly on that subject. "In all history there has never been, to my knowledge," he says, "a single practitioner of any art who, as a result of a 'constructive' criticism, improved his work."

*Elder.* I still agree with Middleton that criticism can do a great deal to mold and guide the future work of the artist. If what Mencken says were true, then a man would be incapable of absorbing instruction; he could not learn to paint even at an art school, and it would make no difference who his teachers were, or what masters he sat under.

*Young.* I am not speaking of the artist's funda-

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mental groundwork, but of what can be done for him by the critic after that groundwork has been absorbed. Frankly, has criticism ever done any artist any real good? Can it raise him above the level of his talents? Can it make a Rex Beach into a Dreiser? And have thirty years of criticism helped Dreiser in the slightest? Doesn't he write as badly as he ever did?

*Elder.* I have allowed you before to drive me into defending a point of view that I do not really hold, and I am not going to let you do it again. To a certain extent I agree with you, and to a certain extent I do not. You yourself told Arthur, before dinner, that he was confusing the function of criticism with that of instruction, and we must keep this distinction clear. The critic may say that the coloring of a painting is false, though he may not have the ability, and he is certainly not under the necessity, to tell the painter precisely how he could have made it right. That is clearly the task of the instructor or of the fellow-artist. It is the function of the critic to discuss the completed product, not the process.

Now when we come to the question of "guidance", we must recognize that there are several different forms of it, and that the critic may properly undertake some and not others. There are, of course, certain limitations in an author's work that lie in his very nature; it is part of the critic's function to indicate these, but it doesn't help the author, except indirectly, to have them pointed out. Yet if the

author has false aims and false ideals, if he is imitating someone else when he ought to be expressing himself, if he is doing a type of work for which he is not fitted and neglecting a type of work for which he is fitted, then criticism may conceivably be of help to him. For many men of great talent have not realized in which direction their real strength lay. H. G. Wells, as we all know, spoiled a good novelist to make a bad prophet. Goethe took more pride in his theory of colors, later discredited, than in his poetry and dramas. And one of the most remarkable historic examples is Haydon. Here is a man who thought himself a great painter, who flew at his canvas, who gave himself to painting with passionate devotion—and his work today is seen to be simply grandiose and ridiculous. Yet what gusto, what exuberance, what a gorgeous literary talent is revealed by his autobiography, which he regarded as a merely incidental work!

*Young.* So far as I can see, we are practically in agreement on that question. I take it you are willing to admit that no amount of sound criticism could have made Haydon a great painter. It so happened that Haydon did have another talent, but most bad painters or authors have no talent at all. Yet even so, all competent and honest criticism, no matter how severe, is a service to the man who gets it. If a man cannot write, and had better be laying bricks, you do him a favor by telling him so.

*Elder.* Still, we must not overlook that there

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are times when criticism can help a man to improve the work he is doing. You asked me earlier whether criticism could raise a man above the level of his talents. Of course it cannot; but many men are writing *below* the level of their talents, and criticism can help them to express or utilize their talents to the full.

*Middleton.* One need merely recall the rôle of the editor, who is nothing but a businesslike critic, and who, month in and month out, through personal correspondence, private discussion, and actual editing, does guide writers and help many of them to improve their work as they go along. I am willing to admit, of course, that very little can be done with a creative writer unless he is caught quite young.

*Young.* Of this I remain convinced, that we do not go to the critic for cure, but for diagnosis.

*Elder.* Yet even diagnosis is sometimes of great benefit to the patient. Where the untrained reader can feel only a vague sense of dissatisfaction with an author's work, and where the author himself may feel only the same vague dissatisfaction with his work, a skilled critic may be able to tell exactly what the trouble is. And sometimes the author can correct the trouble immediately it is pointed out.

*Young.* More often the correction is utterly beyond him; the defect is inherent, and he cannot transcend his own limitations. But that is none of the critic's affair.

*Elder.* I feel that we have been treating this

whole subject too narrowly. Let us stop asking what a particular critic can do for a particular author, and let us ask instead what criticism as a whole can do for art and literature as a whole. This is the real problem with which the foremost critics have concerned themselves. This is what Brunetière meant when he said that the province of criticism is to give direction to art, and that even if criticism does not act directly upon an author, it may act on opinion and on the reading public; it can modify the intellectual milieu, and so inevitably alter the work of artists generally. This is what Matthew Arnold meant when he said that the business of the critical power is to "make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself." This is what Van Wyck Brooks meant when he said that the task of American criticism is to discover a new faith, to formulate a new technique, to build up a program for the conservation of our spiritual resources. This is what Lewis Mumford means when he says that "literature needs a 'frame', a body of working doctrines and beliefs related to the experience of our place, our activities, our generation", and that "little books will be produced without the aid of such criticism, but we shall not have great writers until we give them a coherent framework for their own experience." Finally, this is what Lowell meant when he said, "We cannot have an American literature until we have an American criticism."

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*Young.* That is surely an impressive array of authorities, and yet I presume to think that they are all mistaken. If someone were to say that we cannot have a criticism until we have a literature, I could understand it; but what is this nonsense of saying that we cannot have a literature until we have a criticism? It is like saying—and indeed, this is what some pedants seem to believe—that we cannot have a language until we have a grammar. Criticism comes after literature, not before it. Who supplied the critical atmosphere for Homer? Who for Chaucer and Shakespeare? Who for Michelangelo, for the builders of the Greek temples and the great Gothic cathedrals? Criticism is everywhere a late development. This is not only historically true, but in the nature of things inevitable. Always creation must precede analysis: language before grammar, thinking before logic, art and literature before criticism. Lowell's dictum is a perfect instance of putting the cart before the horse; it is, in the strict etymological sense of a much abused word, preposterous. No, much as I dislike as a professional reviewer to say it, it seems to me that criticism always appears, at best, in the silver and never in the golden age of a literature.

*Elder.* All that is dangerously close to the remark of Louis Bromfield that "critics are usually the product of periods of creative inertia." Historically, of course, that is rubbish. Lamb and Coleridge and Hazlitt were the contemporaries of Scott, Words-

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worth, Keats, Shelley and Byron; Arnold was the contemporary of Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti, Swinburne, Dickens and Thackeray; Sainte-Beuve of Victor Hugo and Balzac; Taine of Zola, Flaubert and Nietzsche. I cannot at the moment think of a single great critic who thrived in a time of "creative inertia".

*Young.* That is perhaps a sufficient answer to Bromfield, but it has little to do with my own assertion. Even the periods you indicate seem to me at best silver ages. But leaving that point aside, it is clear that it is not great criticism that produces great creation; on the contrary, it is great creation that inspires fine criticism. If creation in any period is stagnant, criticism of the writers of that period will probably be stagnant too. As Livingston Lowes once remarked, "You can't steer a boat that isn't moving." Criticism is the rudder; creation is the wind. The faster the boat is going the more effective the rudder can be, the greater the satisfaction of the helmsman, and the greater the necessity for him. But perhaps even that analogy grants too much to the critic. For to say, as Lewis Mumford does, that literature needs a "frame", a body of working doctrines and beliefs, and that it is the function of the critic to supply this, seems to me more than a little presumptuous. It is to say that the author needs to have the critic to do his thinking for him. It evokes in my mind a picture of an author sitting humbly at the feet of a critic who says to him loftily: "You have some

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talent, my boy, but you're on the wrong track. Now this is the sort of thing you ought to write——” To begin with, as Emerson once remarked, “To implore writers to be a little more of this or that were like advising gunpowder to explode gently.” But aside from that, a first-rate author, it seems to me, is capable of doing his own thinking and evolving his own technique.

*Elder.* Really, Young, I marvel that a man of your humility should continue to be a critic at all; I had not realized that Arthur's arguments had so impressed you. But perhaps an example that Mumford gives will make his position clear to you. Who, he asks, is to play the part today that Emerson played in setting a task for Whitman and Thoreau?

*Young.* I concede that Emerson deeply influenced Whitman and Thoreau, but it was as an example, as a fellow-artist, and not as a critic. Young writers do not follow the advice of critics; they emulate other writers. When a man is learning to paint he does not go to an art critic to master his technique; he goes to a painter.

*Middleton.* May I suggest, diplomatically, that the truth lies somewhere between you? Elder is right in asserting that criticism both ought to have and does have an influence in guiding literature, and Young, I think, is correct in holding that it is easy to exaggerate that influence. Every nation and every race, as T. S. Eliot has pointed out, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind, and



is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius. Now it seems to me that Elder, and the critics whose opinions he cites, tend to look upon the critic as a much more detached person than he actually is. It is more than dubious to talk of the critic's guiding a culture or a set of literary tendencies; because in practice the critic is just as much the child and victim of his age as the creative writer. If a period of decadence sets in, the critic's standards become decadent: he praises whatever is decadent and derides whatever is not. Haven't we witnessed this very thing recently in painting, sculpture and music, as well as literature? Picasso, Epstein, Brancusi, Antheil, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, E. E. Cummings, Ezra Pound, the Sitwells—all these artists have been encouraged by critics. Indeed, they may almost be said to have brought into existence the critics, or at least the critical theories, that justified them and found them admirable.

*Young.* Your belief that we are now in a period of artistic decadence is silly, but your implication that critics are not leaders of movements in art and literature, but rather camp followers, mere hangers-on, is entirely correct.

*Elder.* But the critic has at least more detachment than the artist; he can separate puerile revolt, mere perversity and wasteful exhibitionism from experiments that are sound or likely to prove fruitful.

*Middleton.* Yes, the critic has his contribution to

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make, but we must recognize in all candor that it is a minor one. It is true that literature and art must have a "frame", and can reach their highest levels only when accompanied by a propitious time-spirit or world-outlook. We have already noted the truth of that in the case of the Athens of Pericles, of the Florence of the Medici and of Elizabethan England. But this world-outlook, this dominant philosophy of life, cannot be formulated by art or literary critics alone: it is formed by philosophers, by scientists, by statesmen, and more importantly by the artists themselves. And even these ideas from all quarters that influence each other do not do so in any self-enclosed or insulated mental world; the ideas have their origins and applications, in turn, in the material environment. I should not go so far as to assert, with some of the followers of Karl Marx, that it is the economic conditions under which the great masses of men live and work that fundamentally determine what the age shall think—in other words, that this time-spirit is a mere passive ideological mirror of those conditions. Rather, the economic conditions and the ideas *interact*, one in turn altering the other, and the time-spirit emerges from this material-mental complex. But, of course, regardless of who ultimately collaborates in formulating it, Elder is right in implying that the great critic must have not only a theory of art and literature, but behind that, supporting it, a definite *Weltanschauung*.

*Young.* Let us come back to earth. I can under-

stand how to you and Elder, in your ivory towers, criticism can seem to have exalted aims, and I hope you will forgive me, a workaday reviewer, for conceiving its usual purpose in a more humble manner. The most useful function of criticism, as I see it, is to recognize rising talent as promptly as possible.

*Middleton.* Certainly that is *one* of its functions, and a not unimportant one. But the critic should not stop there: he may hope to direct rising talent as well as recognize it.

*Elder.* Well, I incline to agree with Lemaître at least in his remark that criticism of contemporaries is merely conversation. For sound judgments we must wait for posterity.

*Young.* Ha, exactly! The typical academic attitude, summed up in brief! Take artists and authors seriously only when they are dead. Ignore, loftily and smugly, all living writers; leave them to their struggles, without recognition or sympathy. Never raise a finger to help or guide the literature that is in being; act and write as if there were no such thing. Compose your textbooks as if English literature stopped with Robert Louis Stevenson and American literature with William Dean Howells. Never discuss any subject that does not come either from the museum or the graveyard. Your academic critic is like a biologist who spends all his time dissecting corpses of dead animals and has never once looked upon those animals alive. The criticism of contemporaries mere conversation? It would be more just

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to call the criticism of our predecessors a mere coroner's verdict. I say the criticism of contemporaries is the most valuable criticism there is; I sometimes think it the *only* valuable criticism there is. We shall put aside the question of justice to living writers of talent, of giving them that recognition without which it may be impossible for them to continue their work. We may merely imagine what the state of affairs would be if competent and discriminating critics deserted the current scene and left it to the chaos of popular taste. The men of real talent would be trampled under by the hordes of mediocrities and charlatans. You yourself, Elder, said a little while back that of the ten thousand books published in this country every year, it is generous to believe that one hundred are really worth reading. Well, who is to pick that hundred, if not the professional critic? We cannot dump the whole ten thousand on posterity, and say blandly, "This is your job." Posterity would simply throw up its hands and go about other business. Just as an individual publisher often has a series of manuscript readers—first readers who send back all the manuscripts that are obviously impossible, then readers who send back manuscripts after a more careful reading, and at length a reader or readers who make the final decision on what is to be published—so published books and literature as a whole must have a series of readers and judges, with more and more elimination as time goes on. But the contemporary critic must do the major

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work of elimination to make the work of the later academic critic even possible. If contemporary critics do not call attention to a work of major importance published in their generation, the chances are enormously against posterity's hearing or knowing about it at all.

*Elder.* That was a very long speech, Young, to be provoked by my very short remark. The contemporary critic, I dare say, is not without his usefulness, but I still cannot feel that his judgments are to be taken very seriously. The handicaps he labors under are too serious. He cannot stand far enough back from the book he is criticizing to see it in its proper perspective. As Edmund Gosse pointed out, he is likely to be either dazzled or scandalized by its novelty; he has formed a pre-conceived notion of the degree to which its author should be encouraged or depressed; and he cannot appraise the intellectual climate of his age because he is himself a part of it. Moreover, the contemporary critic finds it much more difficult than do critics of later generations to separate, say, an author's character or conduct from his work, and he is also much more likely than are later critics to be influenced by prejudices, jealousies and envies. The kind of treatment meted out in their lifetime to poets like William Blake and Keats is not such as to increase one's confidence in contemporary criticism.

*Young.* What you have done is merely to describe bad contemporary criticism, and to point to

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the pitfalls which the contemporary critic must avoid. But do not fool yourself into believing that academic criticism is without pitfalls of its own. To my mind criticism of new books is not only more interesting than criticism of old ones, but more to be trusted. When a critic reviews a classic or a long established author, his predecessors have taught him what it is correct to think and say about that author, and even when he thinks the opinion he expresses is his own he is probably deceiving himself. The critic who ignores the work of living writers, I cannot help thinking, is at bottom a man who lacks confidence in his own unsupported judgment, who suspects his own critical bankruptcy, and dares not risk the exposure of that bankruptcy. The critics who applaud Lemaître's offhand remark that the criticism of contemporaries is merely conversation are simply trying to justify and rationalize their own timidity.

*Elder.* As you are by profession a book-reviewer, you would naturally come to persuade yourself that book-reviewing is very important.

*Young.* It is; and academic critics would be well advised to abandon the condescending and faintly contemptuous attitude they habitually take toward it. I will go so far as to say that book-reviewing, in some respects, is a more difficult task than academic criticism. For the ideal book-reviewer must be not only a sound critic, but a first-rate reporter. A new book is news, just as much as a murder, a prize fight or an election, and it is more important that a reviewer

give an adequate description of a book and convey something of its tone and quality, than that he merely comment upon it. As Robert Lynd has pointed out, a good review is essentially a *portrait* of the book reviewed. That portrait need not be flattering, nor is there any reason why it should be bald and colorless. Just as a visual portrait may range all the way from the flat and depressing literalness of a passport snapshot to the beauty and insight of a painting by Rembrandt, so a verbal portrait may be anything from a dull police description to a masterly character study by Sainte-Beuve. And the example of Sainte-Beuve reminds us that it is his graphic and felicitous portraits, rather than his explicit judgments, that have earned him the title of the prince of critics. Lynd, indeed, has suggested that not only the humble book reviewer, but the "pure" critic would do well to think of himself as a portrait painter rather than as a judge, and I agree with him wholeheartedly. The skillful and honest portrait painter reveals the character of his subject: the judgment is always there, even if it is implicit and not explicit.

*Middleton.* If we go on like this, I'm afraid you and Elder will never have done. Isn't it rather pointless, after all, to argue endlessly over the precise function of the critic, as if he could have only one? If this talk has convinced me of anything, it is that the critic may legitimately have more than one function—indeed, almost an endless number. He may be

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historian, psychologist, catalyzer, gossip, reporter, portrait painter, judge, prosecuting attorney, counsel for the defense, diagnostician, first recognizer of talent, destroyer of charlatans, sifter, mentor to the writer, guidepost to the reader, or artist in his own right. He may be apparently anything to which his talents and inclination lead him.

As to the qualifications of an ideal critic, what is one to say about them? He must have above all else, like the writer in any other genre, an interesting mind: what he writes must be worth reading for its own sake. The criticisms of Sainte-Beuve, Taine and Macaulay have this quality: the reader is fascinated by them even if he has not previously read a line of the author or book under discussion. Such criticism has a value wholly apart from the justness or soundness of its judgment. The critic cannot have too much knowledge: he should be acquainted with the major writers of his own generation and with the great writers of the past, not only in the literature of his own country, but of the world. He should know something not only of "pure" literature, but of economics, science and philosophy. He should be a man of the widest sympathies, able to understand and respect points of view other than his own. He must be sensitive to beauty, and to fine shades of feeling and mood. He should be gifted with intuitive insight, logical acuteness, analytic penetration. His taste should be at once sound, robust, and delicate, able to appreciate, say, both Rabelais and Pater.



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He must have good sense, a judicial temperament, absolute probity. He must have enthusiasm and gusto, but he must not let himself be carried away by them, or confer them on unworthy objects. He should write always with flavor and with charm, and he ought to have a flair for the striking and memorable phrase. Perhaps a critic who combined all these qualities has never existed and will never exist. The ideal critic would be close to the ideal genius and even to the ideal man.

*Elder.* Really, Middleton, I had not dreamed you could be so eloquent. After that speech, it would be an anti-climax to continue the discussion this evening.

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### III

#### OBJECTIVITY OR SUBJECTIVITY?

*Elder* (*entering the library with Middleton, and discovering Young there with half a dozen books in his lap*). What, Young, up so early? And so diligent?

*Young*. To make a clean breast of it, I'm priming myself to continue our argument of last night. And I must congratulate you on your admirable library; it seems to have every book in it that I need. Yes, and I've found the passages I've been looking for.

*Elder*. You frighten me; I'm to be utterly annihilated.

*Young*. Well, the point is simply this—that criticism seems to me so inescapably subjective, so much the expression of merely personal tastes and prejudices and limitations, that I cannot see how it can have any *objective* value at all. Anatole France has expressed his doubts on the subject with great force and eloquence. Listen (*reading*): “There is no such thing as objective criticism any more than there is objective art, and all who are pleased to think that they put something else than themselves into their

work are dupes of the most fallacious illusion. The truth is that one never gets out of oneself. That is one of our greatest misfortunes. What would we not give to see, if but for a minute, the skies and the earth with the many-faceted eye of a fly, or to understand nature with the rude and simple brain of an ape? But just that is forbidden us. We cannot, like Tiresias, be men and remember having been women. We are shut up in our personality as in a perpetual prison. The best we can do, it seems to me, is to recognize this sorry condition with a good grace and to admit that we speak for ourselves every time we have not the strength to be silent."

A poem, France pointed out at another time, like a landscape, becomes transformed for every eye that sees it, for every soul that apprehends it. The thought is expressed even more emphatically by Thackeray in "Pendennis." Here (*reading*): "Ah, sir, a distinct universe walks under your hat and under mine—all things in nature are different to each—the woman we look at has not the same features, the dish we eat has not the same taste, to the one and to the other; you and I are but a pair of infinite isolations, with some fellow-islands a little more or less near us."

Remy de Gourmont was still another of the same belief. "Contrary to common opinion," he said, "criticism is perhaps the most subjective of all literary forms; it is a perpetual confession; while we think

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we are analyzing the works of others we are unveiling and exposing ourselves to the public." We come upon the idea once again in Jules Lemaître. "Criticism," he said, "varies infinitely according to the object studied, the mind that studies it, the point of view which that mind occupies."

To my mind, criticism is even more subjective than all these quotations imply. It is not merely that each of us must see literature, as he sees life, through a particular temperament, and that none of us can look upon a book with the eye of another. Our own personality at any time is never quite what it was before, or will be in the future; and if we read the same book at widely different intervals, we will have held two different opinions of it. "Once I adored Corneille and despised Racine," confessed Lemaître; "today I adore Racine and Corneille is almost indifferent to me. Once the verses of Musset threw me into raptures; I can find those raptures no more." Who has not had that experience? "We rarely change our tastes," says I. A. Richards, "we rather find them changed. We return to the poems which made us weep tears of delight when we were young and find them dusty rhetoric. With a tender hurt inside we wonder what has happened."

And finally William James gives the whole view a scientific imprimatur in his "Psychology". Here (*reading*): "It is obvious and palpable that our state of mind is never precisely the same. Every thought we have of a given fact is, strictly speaking, unique.

. . . When the identical fact occurs, we *must* think of it in a fresh manner. . . . Often we are ourselves struck at the strange differences in our successive views of the same thing. We wonder how we ever could have opined as we did last month about a certain matter. We have outgrown the possibility of that state of mind, we know not how. From one year to another we see things in new lights. What was unreal has grown real, and what was exciting is insipid. . . . And as for the books, what *was* there to find so mysteriously significant in Goethe, or in John Mill so full of weight?"

To sum up, or rather to go further, what rubbish it is to talk even of the possibility of "objective criticism" when every critic's opinion of a play, for example, depends not only on the limitations of his own education and temperament, but on his particular mood on the particular evening when he sees the play! If he is feeling genial, the chances are two to one, even before the curtain goes up, that he is going to write a genial review; if he is feeling sour, the chances are three to one that he will roast it. All these influences of mood are only slightly less marked in book criticism. If I may quote Jules Lemaître again: "Criticism, whatever be its pretensions, can never go beyond defining the impression which, at a given moment, is made on us by a work of art wherein the writer has himself recorded the impression which he received from the world in a certain hour."

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Criticism, in brief, as Oscar Wilde said tersely, is the only civilized form of autobiography.

*Elder.* Really, Young, you amaze me by your scholarship and your uncanny verbal memory. Your array of authorities is formidable; their arguments are clever and persuasive, and no doubt you even think they settle the matter; but I derive the courage to question them from one or two reflections. First, it occurs to me that each one of your authorities is, so to speak, an authority against authority. The very fact that their arguments convinced you, and that you expect them to convince not only me but everyone, proves beyond question that you feel those arguments to have *objective* validity. For if you really believed, as Thackeray has put it, that a distinct universe walks under your hat and under mine, I don't see how you could logically expect me to be converted, or even impressed, by the same arguments that satisfy you. Indeed, if you really accepted Thackeray's doctrine, with all its implications, you would logically have to regard our entire present controversy—and, for that matter, any controversy on any subject—as necessarily futile; for minds must have a certain fundamental likeness to be persuaded by each other's arguments.

Come now, let us stop talking nonsense. Do you honestly believe this silly talk of Anatole France's about a landscape's being different for every beholder? Objective criticism has also had its able defenders, the most notable of whom was Brunetière,

and if I borrow some of his arguments and phrases now, I at least have a clearer logical justification for borrowing at all than you had. Red, Brunetière pointed out, is always red, and green is always green. Similarly, if what is square is not round, what is round is not square. To deny the possibility of objective criticism is to deny the possibility of any science whatever. What flies or apes are capable of, no one knows, but we are not flies or apes, we are men, and we are so chiefly from the power we have of going out of ourselves to seek and find and recognize ourselves in others. The deception is to believe that we cannot come out of ourselves, when, on the contrary, life is taken up with nothing else. Otherwise, there would be neither society, language, literature, nor art.

To come a little closer to the question: if we are capable of deriving impressions at all from a book—and even the most extreme subjectivists admit at least that—must there not be some qualities in the book itself to cause them? Must there not be in Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" or in Anatole France's "La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque," for example, certain qualities to arouse these impressions? And isn't it true that those qualities, whatever they are in themselves, are not to be found, say, in a novel by E. Phillips Oppenheim or by Temple Bailey? That, I think, is all that is necessary to establish objective criticism.

When we have made every allowance for preju-

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dice, limitations, timidity and the influence of authority in our impressions, there remains the work itself and its author. We cannot refuse to put Shakespeare above Ben Jonson, or Emerson above Alcott—or, to come down to our own time, John Dewey above Bruce Barton, Bernard Shaw above Owen Davis, Dreiser above Zane Grey, Hemingway above Harold Bell Wright, T. S. Eliot above Edgar Guest, and so on.

*Young.* Your examples are not very fortunate—though that is perhaps not your fault when no examples could be. We must put Shakespeare above Ben Jonson, you say. Well, those are historic reputations, and where reputations are historic we are nearly all too intimidated by established or “correct” opinion to attempt to reverse them. But, if I am not mistaken, in their own day Jonson was considered the superior of Shakespeare. As for your contemporary examples, the simple fact is that not only *some* people but *most* people—if volume of sales and the respective income of the writers mean anything—do prefer Bruce Barton to John Dewey, Zane Grey to Dreiser, Harold Bell Wright to Hemingway, and Eddie Guest’s poetry to T. S. Eliot’s.

*Elder.* But frankly, don’t you think those people fools?

*Young (smiling).* Of course; but who am I against so many?

*Middleton (adopting Young’s ironical tack).* Well, an author’s volume of sales and income seem



to me to supply not only a definite and very objective standard by which we can judge an author's merit, but one that has the immense advantage of being *quantitative*, so that we can not only tell whether one author is better than another, but exactly *how much* better.

*Elder.* Let's not be facetious——

*Middleton.* Facetious? But I am merely putting forward an argument that has been put forward quite seriously, for example, by the behaviorist Watson. Just a moment: I've clipped it out (*reading*): "In my opinion one of the most important elements in the judging of personality, character and ability, is the history of the individual's yearly achievements. We can measure this objectively by the length of time the individual stayed in his various positions and the yearly increases he received in his earnings. If the individual is a writer, we should want to draw a curve of the prices he gets for his stories year by year. If from our leading magazines he receives the same average price per word for his stories at 30 that he received at 24, the chances are he is a hack writer, and will never do anything but that."

*Elder.* In other words, the more a writer is paid for his work, the better writer he is: the quality of his work is measured exactly by the price he gets for it?

*Middleton.* I presume that to be Dr. Watson's view.

*Elder.* So that any writer for the *Saturday Eve-*

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*ning Post* or the *Ladies' Home Journal*, say, must necessarily be better than any writer for the *New Republic*, the *Criterion* or the *Mercure de France*?

*Middleton* (*smiling*). Quite so.

*Elder*. And as Goldsmith received only sixty pounds for "The Vicar of Wakefield" Dr. Watson would logically conclude that nowadays there are hundreds of novels turned out every year that are superior; and he must believe that "Paradise Lost"—for which Milton obtained, I think, altogether only ten pounds—is not as good as anything published in the better-class magazines today.

*Middleton*. That's right.

*Elder*. Well, to return to serious argument——

*Middleton*. But before you do, I don't want you to think that that sort of thinking is confined to Watson. Only a few days ago I was glancing through a book called "Psychology for the Writer" by a man named Nixon. "The ubiquitous scientists," he remarked, "have of late been poking into many new fields, among them those hitherto held sacred to the artist and the critic." He then proceeded to cite enthusiastically "A Statistical Study of Literary Merit" by an F. L. Wells—published, mind you, in the Columbia University Archives of Psychology. Nixon quotes a passage from Wells which he thinks shows "considerable insight." I could not resist copying it. Here it is (*reading*): "It is not, however, to be anticipated that the introduction of a scientific method into this field should contribute markedly to the

principles of accepted critical procedure; the main function of literary criticism having hitherto been to serve rather as a convenient vehicle for individual expression than for the empirical determination of actual literary relationships."

*Elder.* That sounds slightly overwhelming. What happens next?

*Middleton.* This man Wells selected ten writers for his study. These were Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, Irving, Longfellow, Lowell, Poe and Thoreau. These he turned over to a group of judges to be ranked for "general literary merit". The judges were twenty university graduate students in English.

*Elder.* Let me understand you. You mean to say that the final "ranking" of these ten writers was determined by the average of the rankings assigned to them by the twenty students?

*Middleton.* Exactly.

*Elder.* And because it was the average of twenty estimates—even though there is no reason to suppose that the critical opinion of any one of those graduate students was worth anything—this man Wells regarded the resultant ranking as necessarily more "scientific" than would be the ranking, say, of a single competent critic, such as Henry Seidel Canby or Van Wyck Brooks?

*Middleton.* That's what I gather.

*Elder.* But if his method has any validity, then if he had taken the average opinions of a hundred

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students instead of twenty his result would have been five times as "scientific"; and if he had taken a thousand students it would have been fifty times as "scientific"; and so on.

*Middleton.* True enough.

*Elder.* And I suppose he would think he was obtaining an absolutely scientific and indisputable ranking if he took the average estimates of the whole voting population, including its millions of ignoramuses! Was ever anything more naive and preposterous? Well, it is merely another form of these democratic standards that we rejected altogether last night.

*Young (grinning).* All this gives me great joy, for this application of "scientific" methods by the Messrs. Wells and Watson, one based on counting noses and the other on counting dollars, shows what the belief in "objective criticism" logically leads to.

*Elder.* The application of silly objective standards does not prove that there are no real objective standards. And mere difference of opinion does not prove that objective truth does not exist. If there are differences of opinion about authors, there are also differences about historic fact. But where there are differences of opinion about an historic fact—such as, for example, the question of which if any of the many claimants was the real Lost Dauphin—none of the disputants denies that there *is* a definite, objective historic fact, existing independently of anyone's opinion. And the objectivity of criticism, I be-

lieve, is merely a part of the broader and deeper question, the profoundly important question, of the objectivity of all judgment, all observation, all truth.

*Young.* The two kinds of difference of opinion are not in the same category at all. Men do not differ on the question of whether the Empire State Building is taller than the New York City Hall, but they do differ on the relative importance, say, of Sinclair Lewis and Dreiser. One is a question of fact and the other a question of value. It is the latter, I hold, that must always be subjective.

*Elder.* If that is so, how do you account for the fact that there does exist a definite body of literary judgments—that regarding the merits of writers of the past, at least, agreement is well-nigh universal?

*Young.* That is the weakest of all arguments. You will let me begin, I hope, by pointing out that universal agreement is not a proof of objective truth, even on those questions of fact where such a thing as objective truth is obtainable. Before Copernicus nearly everybody agreed that the earth was flat. Does the fact that several hundred million people today believe in Buddhism prove the objective truth of Buddhism? Critical opinions agree for the same reason that a Wall Street broker does not come downtown wearing bright red pantaloons. The answer is conformity, timidity, docility. The first reviewers of a book are relatively free; thereafter we have mainly parroting—hence the uniformity of critical opinion.

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*Elder.* I should be the last to deny that this docility exists, but it appears mainly among those people whose critical opinion does not count, and as a serious explanation of prevailing critical estimates I think it absurd. You may argue as long as you wish that criticism can have no objective value, but whenever you find any critic's opinion of an author differing violently from your own, you will continue to find it difficult to refrain from thinking him a fool. If the critic is to confine himself to discussing merely his own personal tastes and preferences, what grounds has he for thinking that his opinion is of any real service to anybody else? In brief, if the impressionist critic were thoroughly consistent, if he had the courage to carry his doctrines to their logical outcome, he would be hard put to it to explain why he wrote criticism at all. Certainly he could not excuse himself on the ground that his judgment was "true", for objective truth is the very thing whose existence he denies. What reason can he have to suppose that his judgment can have any value for anyone but himself? Indeed, if he is thoroughly consistent, he cannot assume that his critical articles are even interesting. If no two minds are alike, if a landscape is "different for every beholder", how does he know that what interests him will interest anyone else, except by a sort of happy accident?—and even that accident would at least imply a certain similarity in the two minds that shared it. No; there *must* be objective criticism—otherwise all so-called criticism

would be a delusion and a farce; otherwise one man's opinion would be as good as another's, a soda-fountain clerk's as good as Herbert Read's or T. S. Eliot's; otherwise there would be nothing but chaos.

*Young.* What you are saying is merely that if objective criticism is not obtainable, then we are in a very sorry plight. But the fact that a given state of affairs would be embarrassing is not evidence that it cannot exist. It is stupid to contend that a conclusion is false simply because it is unpalatable.

*Elder.* Well, I do know this—if we do not admit that criticism can have objective validity, I see no way in which, to use a phrase of Renan's, we can prevent the world from being devoured by charlatanism. At the very least the critic must take into consideration not only the importance of a book for himself but its importance for people like him—of his general type of mind and education. Mere personal preference, no matter whose, can never be a final standard. Even Sainte-Beuve says somewhere that our liking anything is not enough, that it is necessary to know further whether we are right in liking it. The whole object of criticism, according to Brunetière, is to teach men to judge often against their own taste. As I. A. Richards has put it, a critic should often be in a position to say, "I don't like this, but I know it is good."

*Young.* And do you think that would be honest?

*Elder.* Certainly. Any honest person knows fairly well the points at which his own sensibility

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is distorted, at which he fails as a normal critic and in what ways.

*Young.* But does he? He knows wherein he differs from the majority, or from the cultured majority, but that doesn't prove that his judgment is wrong. I doubt whether anyone *can* allow for his own bias.

*Elder.* I do not see that it is difficult for the critic to take into account his own peculiar perspective, type of mind, prejudices, nationality, training, and try to correct them. Not only can he do so, but his standing as a critic will depend upon the degree of his success in doing so. When he shoots at his target he should allow, so to speak, for the winds of his own time and his own deficiencies.

*Young.* No, that is the last thing the critic should do. It is true enough that each of us sees things from a private perspective, through the lenses of a special education and temperament, yet if we try to allow for these we shall end by not even reporting honestly what it is that we see or think. It is impossible for us to be objective in any case, and in trying to be so we may fail to be even candidly subjective. If our private perspective needs to be corrected, we may leave the task to others, who can do it much better.

*Elder.* But what validity can a private perspective have?

*Young.* The validity of honesty. There is no higher validity. It is absurd for a man to tell himself that he must not derive pleasure from a book



until he has assured himself or been assured that it is correct to derive pleasure from it.

*Elder.* But people are capable of deriving pleasure from the worst possible trash, and if a man does derive pleasure from a book, it might at least be well for him to ask himself what the quality of that pleasure is.

*Young.* In other words, he must never trust his own honest and spontaneous feelings. It comes down, I think, to this: The kind of mind that seeks "objective criticism" is the kind of mind that is afraid of being left to its own impressions; it is afraid of going wrong, of betting on the losing horse, of having posterity against it. It wants "principles", "rules", tape measures, meat scales—anything that can be called "objective", i. e., that will not force it to rely on its own judgments and take its risks with posterity. The chemist can tell gold from brass by splashing on some acid, and your "objective critic" yearns for some such acid in the realm of art and letters; but alas, it will not be found because it does not exist. Meanwhile your objective critic is not content to see the work of art and to love it; he is not content to tell others of this love; no, he must be sure that he *ought* to love it before he risks loving it.

*Elder.* And meanwhile your subjective or impressionist critic is content to belong to the I-do-not-like-you,-Dr.-Fell,-the-reason-why-I-cannot-tell school of criticism. When the impressionist alleges that a correct judgment of a work of art depends ulti-

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mately upon feeling, we are quite justified, as the late W. C. Brownell pointed out, in requiring him to tell us *why* he feels as he does about it.

*Young.* And do you really think that would help? Bad taste, I suspect, could give as plausible reasons for its decisions as good taste could. What would such reasons be but a mere rationalization of prejudices? No, I do not see that giving reasons is necessary; I am not even sure that it is possible. How can a man tell *why* he likes porterhouse steak and dislikes liver, except to say that it is so? It seems to me that literary taste, like physical taste, is a final criterion as far as the individual is concerned.

*Elder.* The only similarity in the two kinds of taste is in the word. The subjective critic's impressions are not, as he imagines, spontaneous; they are dictated the greater part of the time by the traditions in which he has grown up, the literary education he has received. This education influences him unconsciously when it does not do so consciously. You yourself insisted a while back that there was a tendency for all later judgments of an author to follow the earlier judgments rather timidly. What makes you think that an impressionist critic escapes from this general docility?

*Young.* I am not sure that he does, but in admitting the existence of this general docility you destroy one of your own arguments for objective criticism. At the risk of repetition, I must come back to this: that literary criticism, unlike, say, economics,

does not deal with questions of fact, but with questions of taste. If I want to prove that the strict quantity theory of money is untenable, I can prove it by appealing to statistics, i. e., to unquestionable facts of record. But if I want to prove that Thomas Mann is a genius or that Cosmo Hamilton is a fool, there are no facts—at least there are no *objective* facts—by which I can support my conviction. My only hope of getting others to share my opinion—or delusion—is to describe Mann's work in terms so caressing, or Hamilton's in terms so corrosive, that the inarticulate reader will be ashamed of not agreeing with me. Literary criticism, at bottom, is the art of finding the most effective epithet. The man in the street simply knows what he likes. The professional critic not only knows what he likes but he knows how to put his likes and dislikes into such lovely or burning phrases that they seem for the moment to have objective validity. They have, in fact, nothing of the kind. These doctor's degrees, these diplomas, these rankings, which the objective critic regards as universally recognized, have, as Anatole France remarked, little authority save for those who confer them.

*Elder.* I notice that even those who deride "rankings" make their own rankings. When they are shouting for their own geniuses, or hooting the academic gods, they are trying to alter rankings. What they really object to is any attempt to make these rankings precise. They would prefer that they remain vague.

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*Young.* Let me ask you one question: Shouldn't *anything* in literary criticism be left to individual opinion, individual temperament? Surely something must be.

*Elder (hesitating).* Well——

*Young (triumphantly).* Ah, you cannot deny it! But if something must be left to the individual's own opinion, if he cannot, as J. W. N. Sullivan has put it, make himself into an epitome of the human race, where are you going to draw the line? Are you going to say: Thus far shall the individual think for himself, feel for himself, be true to his own temperament, thus far and no further? No, it is impossible, as Anatole France has said, to foresee the time when criticism will have the rigidity of an exact science, and one may reasonably believe that that time will never come. Let us, as he so wisely suggested, reconcile ourselves to the irremediable diversity of opinions and ideas.

*Middleton.* It seems to me, if I may put in an oar after so long a rest, that you two have argued each other to a standstill. Both of you have been inconsistent; each of you has used arguments that have cut both ways. I fear that you have both been wrong.

*Elder.* But surely criticism must be either objective or subjective?

*Middleton.* Isn't that very much like saying that whatever is not white must be black?

*Elder.* Oh, come! Between white and black there

are an infinite number of shades and colors, but between objectivity and subjectivity there can of course be no middle ground.

*Middleton.* I think there *is* a middle ground—or perhaps it would be better to say, a different ground. Yet it would take me a little while to explain myself. Do you and Young feel that you could stand for a rather long monologue?

*Elder.* By all means! But first of all let us fortify ourselves with a little breakfast. I sniff the coffee.

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## IV

### THE SOCIAL MIND

*Middleton.* If I were tempted by epigram, I should begin by saying that the difference between you two, or between “impressionists” and “objective critics” generally, is largely verbal—that one side calls its judgments impressions, and the other thinks its impressions judgments. So far as actual practice goes, at all events, I have observed that whether critics call themselves impressionistic or objective, they come in the end to pretty much the same estimates of particular authors. But it remains true that for a *theory* of criticism the issue is a fundamental one. You, Young, if I understand your argument rightly, believe that the value of a book lies not in itself at all, but merely in a relationship, that the book has a different value for every individual who reads it, and that it has no permanent value aside from these widely varying individual values. And you, Elder, seem to hold that the value of a book is something inherent in the book itself, regardless not only of the opinion of any individual reader, but even of all readers taken together. Neither notion will bear close scrutiny.

To present my own idea I fear I shall have to digress into fields that seem strangely remote from the present discussion. What I propose to do is to introduce into the realm of literary and aesthetic criticism a basic conception or point of view that, to my knowledge, has never hitherto been applied there—at least never consciously or consistently. This point of view has been elaborated only in the sciences of sociology and economics; even there its introduction has been comparatively recent—so recent, indeed, that it may still be said to be confined to a rather small group. For the development of my own ideas on the subject I am chiefly indebted to two writers—C. H. Cooley in sociology, and B. M. Anderson, Jr., in economics—particularly to the latter. As Dr. Anderson has presented his view with great clarity and force, I am going to draw quite freely on both his ideas and his phrases.

Let us begin with the opinions of Anatole France and of Thackeray as quoted by Young. Is it really true that a landscape is different for every beholder, or that “a distinct universe walks under your hat and under mine”? Well, if it were, we should have to doubt not only the value of every literary judgment, but the conclusions of all the sciences, physical as well as mental. Certainly psychology would be impossible on this assumption, except in so far as the psychologist claims only to be working out a science of his individual soul, a science which, so far as he knows, has no meaning for any other individ-

ual. But the whole of our everyday life is, in fact, based on the assumption that our minds are pretty much alike—and our everyday life would be impossible if that assumption were not true. The very fact that we can sit here together, that we can communicate with each other and understand each other, proves this to be true. We all use the same vocabulary, and the words mean the same things to each of us. There are minor differences, shades and nuances of meaning, to be sure, but they can be said to be minute when compared with the deep similarities of meaning. None of us invented his own language or his own vocabulary; even James Joyce's word formations are superficial changes, made from traditional roots, or understood by aural or visual associations with conventional words, and conveyed by the conventional alphabet. Our language and our logic are part of the social inheritance of all of us. Not only would it be impossible for us to communicate our thoughts without this language; it would be practically impossible for us to think at all. The thought process within the "individual mind" is a social process—we think in words, and, indeed, in conversations.

And with all these deep underlying similarities on the intellectual side, there are still deeper similarities on the side of desires, feelings and emotions. We all have back of us millions of years of evolution in the same general environment. We are born in the same society; we do get along in society; we laugh



and play together, share each other's sorrows, love and hate each other, in a way that would be wholly impossible if we did not in practice assume the correctness of our "inferences" about one another's motives and desires. And the fact that these "inferences" are in the main correct is the one thing that makes social life possible.

Of course there are differences between individuals—and Young, and behind him Anatole France and Thackeray and the whole impressionist school, have made the most of them. But they seem large to us only because we are trained to detect these differences. Even the proverbial two peas in a pod, if put under a microscope, would show great differences. To the average American all Chinese look alike, and he does not stop to reflect that to the average Chinese all Americans look alike. When we see a flock of sheep, we do not ordinarily observe the differences between one sheep and another; and we are even less on the lookout for individual differences when we see a hill of ants. Yet the individual ant, were he gifted with human intelligence, would pride himself on the fact that he was not as other ants; he would be vain about his "individuality" and his little idiosyncrasies, and the female ant would feel confident of her unique beauty and her incomparable legs. And, indeed, each ant would see that differences actually existed among other ants, even if less pronounced for each individual than that individual himself fondly imagined. In fact, nearly all the con-

versation of the ants would be about these differences—for the simple reason that the vastly greater, the all but universal similarities, would be taken for granted.

To return to humanity. The individual monad is a myth. Not only is his very machinery of thought, his language and logic, socially given to him, but his ideals and interests, his tastes even in matters of food and drink. Even the “I” feeling is something that only social influences can develop. The human *individual*, in brief, is found, not in primitive life, but late in the scale of social evolution. Some historians hold, indeed, that we can even point to the first real “individual”—the pharaoh Ikhnaton. However that may be, it remains true that apart from social intercourse the individual’s human-mental life would be a mere potentiality. He is a social product.

We are now prepared to go further. Society is in a sense a unitary organism, and there is a social mind. By this I do not mean that there is any social “oversoul” which transcends individual minds, or that there is any social “consciousness” which stands outside of and above the consciousness of individuals. I certainly do not mean that all men agree with each other. But every individual mind is a part of a larger whole; every thought in the individual mind has been influenced by processes in the minds of others; every process in the individual mind influences, directly or indirectly, processes in the minds of others. The minds of all of us, in brief, are in such intimate

*functional* interrelation that they may be said to constitute one greater mind. Professor Cooley, in his "Social Organization", has conveyed this idea in a vivid analogy. I was delighted to notice last night, Elder, that you have the book in your library here. Wait, I must read you the passage:

"Mind is an organic whole, made up of coöperating individualities, in somewhat the same way that the music of an orchestra is made up of divergent but related sounds. No one would think it necessary or reasonable to divide the music into two kinds, that made by the whole, and that of the particular instruments, and no more are there two kinds of mind, the social mind and the individual mind. The view that all mind acts together in a vital whole from which that of the individual is never really separate, flows naturally from our growing knowledge of heredity and suggestion, which makes it increasingly clear that every thought we have is linked with the thought of our ancestors and associates, and through them with that of society at large. . . . The unity of the social mind consists not in agreement but in organization, in the fact of reciprocal influence or causation among its parts, by virtue of which everything that takes place in it is connected with everything else, and so is an outcome of the whole. Whether, like the orchestra, it gives forth harmony may be a matter of dispute, but that its sound, pleasing or otherwise, is the expression of a vital coöperation, cannot well be denied."

## THE SOCIAL MIND

We might supplement this view and this image in one respect. As I remarked at one point in our discussion of the critic's function, the reciprocal influence of minds does not occur in any self-enclosed social-mental realm, but in a material environment. We may think of the social mind as having a relation to this material basis somewhat like that which the individual mind has to the human body, or like that which the music of an orchestra has to the actual instruments used in producing it. One of Karl Marx's leading contributions to social thought was of course his emphasis upon the influence of economic conditions, particularly as regards the means of production, on social attitudes and social thinking generally. He pointed out that changes in the first invariably brought changes in the second. Some of his disciples have interpreted him to mean that these economic conditions form a matrix from which a given "ideology" is rigidly molded. But ideas are never of course of this merely passive nature. They reciprocally help to determine the economic institutions and the material conditions. We must think of the ideas of the social mind, in other words, not as simple resultants of material conditions, but as active forces constantly *interacting* with material conditions.

We are now ready to consider the question of values. Values are determined by the social mind. The value of a good is not inherent in that good; it is not independent of the mind and desires of men. But it is in large degree independent of the mind

and desires of any particular man. This fact is most clearly seen in the economic field, if only because values there are expressed quantitatively, and with mathematical precision, in monetary prices. To a given individual in the market, the economic value of a good is a fact as external, as objective and stubborn, as the weight of an object. A man may attach no value whatever to a diamond bracelet; so far as he is concerned such baubles could sell at \$5 and he would not buy one; but this fact does not prevent diamond bracelets from selling in the market for, say, about \$3,000 each. On the other hand, if the same man should step on a rusty nail, he might be willing, if forced, to pay several hundred dollars for carbolic acid or iodine rather than run the risk of infection, yet he would probably get his iodine for less than a dollar at the nearest drugstore—

*Young.* But from what I know of economics, the relative market value of diamond bracelets and iodine is not determined by any "social mind", but by relative costs of production.

*Middleton.* If I argued that question at length it would carry us too far afield. It would be better to refer you to some good economic textbook. Not even all economists, of course, think clearly on the subject, but you will find an excellent discussion of this particular point in Wicksteed's "Common Sense of Political Economy." It is enough to say here that what a thing *has* cost to produce cannot determine its

value, but what it *will* cost may determine whether or not it will be made. There is therefore a constant tendency to equality between price and cost of production, though not because the latter directly determines the former. However, all this applies merely to reproducible commodities. Suppose we take something that is not reproducible. As a connoisseur of art you might personally prefer Rivera to Gainsborough, yet if you wished to acquire for yourself a painting by either artist, you would find that you would have to pay a staggering sum for the Gainsborough but that you could acquire the Rivera for a relatively moderate figure. Regardless of your personal likes and dislikes, you are obliged to adjust yourself to the values placed on goods by the community as a whole, in its organic functioning.

*Young.* But doesn't all this apply only to economic valuations?

*Middleton.* The whole point I am making is that it applies just as surely to moral and aesthetic values. Shakespeare, by the way, came very close to stating the social theory of value in "Troilus and Cressida." Hector and Troilus are quarreling over the question of what to do about Helen. Hector is all for letting Helen go, for the sake of ending the war. "Brother," he says, "she is not worth what she doth cost the holding." But Troilus, a subjectivist, asks: "What's aught, but as 'tis valued?" And Hector replies:

THE ANATOMY OF CRITICISM

*But value dwells not in particular will;  
It holds his estimate and dignity  
As well wherein 'tis precious of itself  
As in the prizur. . . .*

And so let us come to the question of aesthetic and literary valuations. The individual is under the impression that he forms his own independent aesthetic and literary judgments, but it should be clear to every candid person that at least nine-tenths of the time this belief is an illusion. He is born and grows up in a world in which there already exists a definite hierarchy of literary reputations. At the top, as the popes of literature, he finds such awe-inspiring names as Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe. Not far below them are the cardinals—Montaigne, Cervantes, Molière, Racine, Voltaire, Bacon, Milton, Balzac, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, etc.—naturally a far longer list. Then come the archbishops—Dickens, Thackeray, Carlyle, Keats, Shelley, Flaubert, Hugo, Taine, Sainte-Beuve, Turgenev, Chekhov, Ibsen, Shaw, etc., etc.—a still longer list. And so on down through the bishops, the common priests and the laity of literature, who are legion.

Of course these ranks and titles and dignities are not so sharply divided nor so definitely awarded in literature as they are in the army or the church; there is a vague irregular fringe about each reputation; but that the hierarchy of reputations itself exists in the social mind only a fool would deny. And

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what it is important for our immediate purposes to notice is this: that the individual, except in the rarest instances, is thoroughly intimidated by this hierarchy; he takes it over almost bodily, as soon as he learns what it is; he sneers at people whose estimates vary too widely from it. And when a rare soul does arise here or there to attempt a fresh and independent estimate of a particular writer, his estimate usually affects the hierarchy very little.

*Elder.* Do you mean to say that literary reputations, then, are at bottom formed by the majority?

*Middleton.* Far from it. In the world of literature, as in the economic and ecclesiastical worlds, there are, thank heaven, only the faintest traces of democracy. For though reputation is socially created, it does not follow that it is arrived at by a counting of noses. In the literary as in the economic world, the opinions and actions of some persons count for vastly more than those of others. If I think that the stock market is going down, and say so, my opinion will not affect the level of security prices at all, but if J. P. Morgan or Owen D. Young were to declare publicly that the stock market was due to go down, the very expression of his opinion would help to send it down. That is because these men are centers of prestige and power in the economic world.

Likewise, certain men are centers of prestige and power in the world of art and letters. Think what enormous influence the judgments of Samuel John-



son had upon the reputations of the English writers of his age! The same thing, of course, happens to-day. If an obscure layman reads a first novel by an obscure writer named X, and praises it to his friends, nothing, practically speaking, happens to X's reputation; if Young here were to read and praise the novel in his paper, it would have some slight effect; and if Edmund Wilson were to read it and hail a new talent, X would be put on the map, and all his subsequent work would receive the most respectful attention. Or again, if T. S. Eliot were to intimate that author Y was greatly overestimated, Y's stock would drop a bit. The price of wheat all over the world, the price that everyone is forced to accept, is fixed by the judgments of an astonishingly small number of speculators, and in the same way the literary reputations that the world in general acquiesces in are fixed by the opinions of an astonishingly small number of critics.

*Elder.* Do you believe, then, that a small group of critics could deliberately impose a great but undeserved reputation on the world if it wanted to?

*Middleton.* Oh, I don't mean to say they could act arbitrarily or irresponsibly. The comparison with the speculative markets is useful again. The individual speculator cannot afford either to overestimate or to underestimate the future value of wheat, for if he does he will lose directly in proportion to the badness of his estimate. And the individual critic who has any regard for his own reputation cannot

afford either to overvalue or to undervalue the work of creative writers. If speculators as a whole overvalued wheat, then speculators as a whole would ultimately lose. Of course the literary market, like the stock market and wheat markets, can be manipulated; cliques and "pools" can produce a temporary overvaluation of writers as they can of stocks, but such overvaluation cannot be permanent.

*Elder.* But isn't that tantamount to admitting that neither speculators nor critics fix values, but merely determine what real values are?

*Middleton.* That depends upon what you mean by "value". And for you, I think I am right in assuming, value means something "intrinsic" in a book itself. Now in economic thought the idea that any commodity has an "intrinsic" value—that is, a value apart from the needs and desires and institutions of men—is almost medieval; it has long been abandoned. The idea anachronistically persists in the judgment of aesthetic and intellectual products; but it must be abandoned there also. A book has only the value that the social mind gives it; and when we say that a critic has appraised a book "rightly", we mean merely what we do when we say that a speculator has rightly appraised the value of wheat—that is, that he has correctly *anticipated* the ultimate verdict of the social mind.

*Young.* And that is also what we mean when we say that a critic has made a "definitive" judgment of a writer?

*Middleton.* Exactly; we mean that the critic has at last "placed" the writer where general critical opinion—that is, social opinion—either has already or will ultimately place him.

*Young.* In brief, what gives pedants so much satisfaction in what they call "definitive" judgments is the fact that such judgments imply the existence of a consensus, i. e., of practical unanimity of opinion, regarding an author's merits. After all this pretense of "reconciliation", Middleton, I see that you are on Elder's side. Must it be pointed out again that unanimity of opinion does not necessarily imply that the real truth has been found? The sole merit of unanimity—i. e., of the support of the opinion of everyone around—is that it gives one a feeling of mental security and comfort, and that is what the yearners for "definitive judgments" really want.

*Middleton.* I fear you wholly misconceive my argument. I have not contended that the verdicts and valuations of the social mind are necessarily "right". I am merely pointing out that they are the nearest thing we have, or can hope to have, to the "objective" values that Elder was seeking to establish. And the valuations of the social mind do not necessarily rest on unanimity of opinion. They are not even the "average" valuations of different individuals; they are not in fact formed in any arithmetical or mechanical way, but in an organic way. But if a mechanical analogy will help, we may say that, like the market prices of wheat and stocks and

everything else, they are the *resultants* of conflicting opinions—the point at which those opinions find their equilibrium. No matter what the market price of wheat may be, there are always some speculators who think it too high and others who think it too low; the like is true of literary reputations. For living writers the range of difference of opinion may often be extremely wide; for authors long dead the range of difference of opinion is usually rather narrow. But in any case, just as differences of opinion about the value of wheat, no matter how violent, result not in many simultaneous prices in a given market, but in only one market price, so differences of opinion about an author can be said to result not in many reputations for that author, but rather in one reputation. Our common speech recognizes this fact. We speak of *the* reputation of James Joyce: we may refer to *opinions* about him in the plural, but we practically always talk of his *reputation* in the singular. And no matter what the individual critic's opinion may be, this social reputation is for him as "objective" a fact as is the existing price of wheat for the speculator.

*Young.* But I don't see that the individual must *acquiesce* in that reputation, any more than the individual speculator acquiesces in the current price of wheat. The rank and file do, of course, timidly submit to existing reputations (provided they know what they are) and the results are amusing enough. You will find men who have read everything written, say, by Edgar Wallace, and who would as soon

spend a week in jail as read "Paradise Lost", but if you asked them whether they thought Wallace or Milton the greater writer, they would unhesitatingly say Milton, and even think your question a silly one.

*Middleton.* But won't you admit that it is really fortunate that the greater number of men do not form judgments of their own, but merely take them on authority? The average man's opinions, as Bertrand Russell has reminded us, are much less foolish than they would be if he thought for himself. What sort of criticism should we have on Plato and Kant, Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe, as Schopenhauer asked, if every man were to form his opinion by what he really has read and enjoys of these writers, instead of being forced by authority to speak of them in a fit and proper way, however little he may really feel what he says?

It is both fair and necessary to add, however, that acquiescence in existing reputation does not always spring from mere timidity or absence of thought, but sometimes from a genuine modesty combined with broadmindedness. The reputations and "rankings" of authors, the hierarchy that I spoke of a little while ago, reflect the judgments of the composite mind of society. An individual may recognize in himself limitations of temperament or of range of interest: he may have his own definite and intelligent choices and rankings, but he may tell himself that his inability to read Milton, for example,

is not Milton's fault but the result of his own shortcomings in taste. In brief, he is willing to grant that the hierarchy of literary reputations existing in the social mind is on the whole probably quite sound, but merely that it is not *his* hierarchy, for the simple reason that he does not pretend to be a spiritual epitome of the human race.

Each of us, even the greatest, has these limitations of taste, temperament, knowledge, interests; a Shelley is not a Newton nor a Newton a Shelley, and neither is a fit judge of the other's achievement. You are right, Young, in believing that the individual critic should at least be candid with himself. If, in spite of the social hierarchy of literary reputations, you find that Dante has little to say to you, and simply bores you, while you find Aldous Huxley exciting, you should frankly acknowledge the fact both to yourself and to the world. Yet at the same time, if you will forgive my repeating the idea, you should have the humility to suspect that the limitation is in yourself, and not in Dante; you should reflect that Dante would never have had his great reputation if thousands of readers, including scores of the finest minds, had not found in him something of exalted value. You should, as I have said, grant the probable validity of the social valuation, at the same time that you have the independence and candor to confess that it does not represent *your* personal valuation.

*Young.* But that is simply an ignominious way of accepting established opinion. For if each critic

acknowledges the validity of existing reputations, no one is ever going to change them; they would remain petrified and unalterable, instead of being in the constant state of healthy flux that they ought to be.

*Middleton.* I was about to go on to say that the individual critic must try to distinguish, in his judgments, between his personal limitations and the limitations of preceding critics.

*Young.* Oh, it's as simple as all that, is it? And do you really think that the individual critic is the best judge of his own limitations?

*Middleton.* Nearly all of us, as a matter of fact, make the distinction I have spoken of in practice, whether or not we acknowledge it in theory. You, let us say, have neither knowledge of nor interest in mathematical physics; books on the theory of relativity you find either tedious or incomprehensible. But if you are a man of sense, you do not therefore dismiss Einstein's revolutionary concepts or a work like Eddington's "The Nature of the Physical World" as valueless. You are willing to assume at least provisionally that these achievements are as important and admirable as specialists in the subject believe them to be. In doing that you are frankly confessing your own limitations of knowledge and judgment; you are, in short, acknowledging that what has little personal value for you has none the less a high social value. On the other hand, you do feel yourself equipped to judge novels, or at least

the majority of them, and if you happen to think William Faulkner overrated—if you believe, that is, that the “social mind” is mistaken in its judgment of him—you do not hesitate to say so. The critic, in brief, must be able to sense when his failure to appreciate a given author is the result of limitations in himself and when it is the result of limitations in the author.

What I am suggesting is merely that the individual do in criticism what he actually does, if he is sensible, in every other branch of knowledge or activity. He presumes to judge in those subjects in which he is an expert; he does not presume to judge in subjects outside of his field. The only difference is that in criticism he must not only recognize the limitations of his knowledge, but, what is much more difficult, the deficiencies of his temperament, his tastes, his capacity for appreciation. You are right, Young, in suspecting that the critic is seldom the best judge of his own powers and limitations; self-knowledge is proverbially the most difficult of all to acquire. Nevertheless, every critic should make the attempt; and, as I have pointed out, nearly every critic already does so in practice in extreme cases. What I am contending is simply that he should aim to do regularly and conscientiously what he now does rarely and haphazardly.

*Elder.* But your critic will usually end after all in greatly overestimating his own powers.

*Middleton.* That is true. When a critic of force



has a definite opinion about an author, it is next to impossible for him to escape the feeling that this is not only *his* opinion, but the *right* opinion; and if his opinion does not coincide with the author's reputation, he proceeds to do battle against that reputation. And this, after all, usually results in more good than harm. It prevents the hierarchy from petrifying; it means constant re-examination of credentials; it leaves the heaven of the elect open to all fresh talents, and in particular it keeps reputations always in that healthy state of flux of which Young spoke.

At the beginning reputations move in wide swings; a writer greatly overestimated in his lifetime tends to be correspondingly underestimated shortly after his death; by a law of psychic action and reaction corresponding to that in physics, the pendulum swings up again, but not so far, and finally comes to comparative rest. Thus the further back an author is in time the stabler is his reputation: Plato's is more stable than Milton's, Milton's than Dickens's, and the reputations of contemporaries are the least stable of any. This constant reevaluation applies not only to individual authors, but to whole "ages": because of changes in the intellectual climate, we now rank the eighteenth-century writers as a whole higher than the Victorians did.

And this brings us to a further point. There are fashions in literature and in critical standards as there are in clothes; both types of fashion are subject to much the same psychological laws, change for

the same reason and are subject almost to the same time influences. There are literary vogues of the year, vogues that run for a decade, and vogues that prevail for a generation. A society with the backless one-piece bathing suit will obviously have different literary and critical standards from one with ankle-length bloomers and the leg-of-mutton sleeve.

In truth, it may be said that it is not the individual who criticizes; that is merely his illusion; it is the society. The individual critic applies the social standards of the time and thinks he is applying his own. It requires little courage to be "advanced" now, for the general atmosphere is "advanced". The "advanced" critic, in short, like the modern girl with her cigarettes, clothes and language that would have flabbergasted the 'Nineties, is today merely conforming.

Of course, in literature as in clothes, there are the groups that seek to be "different", to lead new movements, to be distinguished from the mob. One of their assumptions is that a best-seller must necessarily be devoid of merit. Another is that revolt from any convention, whether that convention be sound or unsound, is in itself laudable. As C. H. Cooley has said, there is nothing more sheeplike than a flock of young rebels; and a "radical" movement, by the time it is widely known, has already become the convention of a sect, propagated by imitation and the ridicule of nonconformity.

Literary forms and patterns change for the same

reason that fashions change, because people grow tired of the old forms. It is not that the old forms were bad in themselves, but that their possibilities have been more or less played out, so that intelligent readers demand more novelty. But the change from the old to the new forms in literature is always accompanied by a great deal of unjust abuse of the old forms, just as a change in fashion leads to unjust ridicule of the former fashion. The abuse that critics shower on the old forms is merely a rationalization of restlessness. We deride Victorian authors for no better reason than we deride Victorian styles. When we are far enough away from styles, so that they are no longer "old-fashioned" but "historic", we see their true beauty, and time even increases our admiration, as of anything that is lost forever.

It is amazing, indeed, how little real argument or reasoning there is about our critical standards—or about anything else, for that matter. Santayana, referring to some of the persistent problems of metaphysics, says somewhere: "We no longer answer our predecessors; we simply bid them goodbye." That in fact is what we have always done, and in every branch of (as we call it) thought. In a period when realism or "classicism" is dominant, it is merely necessary to describe a book or a doctrine as "romanticism" to ensure its removal from the field of serious consideration. It is always implicitly assumed that any doctrine in vogue a generation or two ago must by

this time be discredited. To show that a man's point of view is logically untenable may be to damage it only slightly, but to prove that it is *out of date* is devastating.

*Young.* Well, Middleton, your long-winded discussion comes down to this—that art criticism, at bottom, is like politics, and that that critic finally wins who succeeds in getting the biggest crowd to yell with him. It may be true that most literary reputations are formed in that manner; I do in fact concede that you have given a very realistic account of the actual process; but I prefer to ignore the established social judgments in arriving at my own opinions. It has been said that a man's taste is his literary conscience, and it is by my own taste that I purpose to be guided.

*Middleton.* Alas, has my whole argument been in vain? You talk of your taste and your conscience, and do not seem to realize that both are social products. The “dictates of conscience”, it is true, used to be thought innate in a man, the product of an independent and insulated “moral faculty”; but just as it was recognized long ago that a dog's conscience is in the eye of his master, so it is recognized now that a man's conscience is in the eye of society, and has been formed by unconsciously watching that eye. And literary “taste”, which you and so many others apparently regard as purely individual, is itself determined to an enormous extent by environmental factors—by the social and literary and artistic tradi-

tions and influences to which a particular person has been subjected.

*Elder.* I for one am willing to agree, Middleton, that the literary and artistic judgments of what you call the social mind are likely to be at least superior on the whole to that of any given individual, yet I cannot see that the judgments of the social mind are sacrosanct, and they are certainly not infallible. History and anthropology combine to show how glaringly wrong, and indeed grotesque, the consensus, habits and institutions of whole societies can be.

*Middleton.* But when you point out how mistaken some of the opinions of the social mind were in the past, you forget who it is that judges those opinions to have been mistaken. It is the social mind of the present. It is not you as an individual who have decided that the medieval belief in a physical hell was silly; it is the social mind. Had you lived in the thirteenth century, your belief in a physical hell would probably have been as unshakable as anyone else's. And as it is the social mind of the present that judges the social mind of the past, so it will be the social mind of the future that will judge the social mind of today. In the last analysis, the social mind must be its own arbiter and umpire.

*Elder.* No man and no society can be the ultimate judge of itself. It is true that society applies its standards to judge the individual, but we need a standard to judge society. Things are what they are, regardless not only of what any individual, but of

what society as a whole, thinks or believes about them. That part of the social mind which is interested in physics might alter its theories a hundred times in regard to the nature of the atom, and still be wrong each time.

*Middleton.* I fear we are getting rather far from our base. None of us here, I take it, is a Berkeleian idealist, and I am willing to concede that an objective world would continue to exist—and that, as you say, it would be what it would be—even if all human beings, all perceiving minds, were wiped out. But it is impossible for me to imagine our world of *values* existing without human beings. Values are possible only where there is intelligence and feeling. Humanity creates values, and it alone can judge or alter them. Our immediate concern is with social aesthetic and literary values, and my contention, in brief, is this: that these values are *objective* so far as the individual is concerned, just as economic values are; but that they are *subjective* for society as a whole, and beyond this *social subjectivity* it is impossible for us to pierce. Literary criticism, if it were as individual and subjective as Young has contended, would be not only chaotic but incommunicable. It cannot, on the other hand, be objective in the way you seem to imagine; it must remain inescapably subjective in the sense that values can exist only in human minds.

*Elder.* Yet the human scale of values, whether we consider that of the individual or that of the

mass, is forever altering, fluctuating, subject to error. I cannot seriously concede so fickle a thing to be the ultimate standard. What would become of our physical measurements if the standard yardstick varied as widely and frequently as the human scale of values? I cannot escape the feeling that there *are* objective values, intrinsic values, inherent values. At whatever point the social mind may at any time "place" a given author in the literary hierarchy, I cannot but feel that it is possible that its judgment may be mistaken. None the less, I feel that that author really does belong somewhere. I feel that Robert Frost, for example, really *is* a better poet than Edgar Guest, and *intrinsically* so, regardless of what the social mind may now or hereafter think about the matter. It may be that in the realm of values no physical measurements are possible, but that fact does not lessen the need for some higher and more stable criterion than society's belief. It is necessary, perhaps, to concede the existence of an Omniscient Being, an Absolute Valuer. Because what I think I really ask myself, when I view existing literary reputations, is, to resurrect a magnificent phrase—How do these authors really stand *in the sight of God?*

*Middleton.* You mean that to have a sound theory of literary criticism we must drag in theology?

*Elder (half-ironically).* Well, something of the kind. Does not Milton somewhere make "All-judging Jove" the one supreme critic of literature? It is

a pity that our age is irreligious. We must assume the existence of God, or reinstate Him, if only that we may have a hypothetical standard for assessing literary and aesthetic accomplishment. For only on the assumption of His existence and His infallible judgments is it at all possible to think of *absolute* values and an absolute standard.

*Middleton.* I am not sure that your God would be particularly flattered if He felt that His existence depended solely on his usefulness as a Working Hypothesis, and in the narrow field of aesthetic criticism at that. Moreover, I do not see that your hypothesis gains you anything after all. For even if your God or your Absolute Valuer exists, He will never reveal to mortals the real standing of the classics. No, Elder, criticism will have to reconcile itself to the fact that it has human limitations. The literary opinions of your God will remain forever inscrutable, and humanity—or, if you wish, posterity—must be both for the author and his critic the court of last appeal. But the concept of a social mind and of its valuations at least clears the air. You are mistaken in your notion that a book has an “intrinsic” value, regardless of anyone’s opinion. Young is right in holding that the value of a book lies primarily in a relationship, and he is right too, in seeing that in a sense the value of the book is different for each individual who reads it, but he is wrong when he goes on to assume that the book has no value aside from these widely varying individ-



ual valuations. What gives it its comparatively permanent value is not its importance to any particular individual, but its importance to the social mind as a whole.

And each individual reader, regardless of the value of a book *to him*, is bound to respect its social valuation. At the very least he must recognize that a scale of such social valuations exists—as objective, so far as he is concerned, as the scale of monetary prices of things. He is as much obliged to adjust himself to the first as he is to the second. Even the most extreme impressionist, for example, must recognize that he writes his criticism of an author against a background of existing opinion about that author; and knowledge of what that existing opinion is must inevitably determine the *emphasis*, if nothing else, of the critic's article. I agree with you, Young, that the critic should frankly acknowledge his personal likes and dislikes; but Elder is sound in contending that we should not confuse our merely personal likes and dislikes with our valuations. That, at least, is what I think Elder really meant when he remarked that the critic will often have to say, "I don't like this, but I know it is good."

*Young.* I still think that such an attitude is either excessively humble or a rather complicated form of hypocrisy. It would lead us to accept established reputations in the face of our strongest convictions of their falsity.

*Middleton.* No, it means simply that the critic

should ask himself what part of his response to a writer is merely personal and what part is likely to be shared by others. This attitude is not radically different from that which we take, for example, toward food. A doctor may not like carrots or spinach, but he does not feel that to be any reason for condemning them; and he may relish strong cigars and cocktails, though he would not feel justified in recommending either to his patients.

*Young.* Oh, now you're raising the entirely different question of immediate enjoyment versus ultimate good—

*Middleton.* Very well, I shan't insist on the analogy. I'll return to belles-lettres, and I hope you will forgive my citing my own case as an example. I think Addison a greatly overrated writer; I feel reasonably convinced, in other words, that the judgment of the social mind in this instance is mistaken and that my own is correct. On the other hand, though I derive a more sustained delight from Pope than from Keats, I do not insist that Pope be ranked above Keats, for I have reason to suspect that my preference is the result of personal peculiarities of temperament. Or, to take a more extreme instance, I should much rather read Hume than Wordsworth, but I recognize that this is mainly the result of the fact, not that Hume is the more important writer, but rather that I have a strong philosophic bias and am slightly anaesthetic to poetry.

*Young.* Well, you're an engagingly modest fel-

low—too modest, I'm afraid, not only for your own good, but for that of a healthy and vigorous criticism. Critics with so little self-confidence rarely make any noise in the world. You are in fact advocating a form of inferiority complex that we already have in excess. For whenever a man's thought differs profoundly from that of the overwhelming majority, he is inclined to dismiss his own feeling as "purely personal"—and he may later find, to his chagrin and shame, that someone else has given his feeling persuasive utterance. No, I'm with Emerson here: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense."

*Middleton.* Yes, it is easy to carry self-distrust too far; but that merely points to one of the dangers in the practical application of a principle, and not to any lack of soundness in the principle itself. When I listened to the long argument between you and Elder, I was reminded of Luther's comparison of our human nature to a drunkard on horseback: prop him up on one side, and over he topples on the other. You imagine that because criticism cannot be universal and exact, there can be no common ground for agreement at all. And Elder fancies that because objective qualities must exist in all criticism, subjective qualities must be rigorously ruled out. The plain truth is that the best criticism can neither be wholly "subjective" nor wholly "objective". If

the critic sinks into complete impressionism, if he is content merely to give us a record of his likes and dislikes, he will succeed only in telling us about his own temperament, without giving us any real insight into the author he is discussing. Purely objective criticism, on the other hand, is, as we have seen, beyond any individual's reach. Even the greatest critic has his blind spots, his points at which his sensibility, his knowledge or his sympathies fall short. The best he can do is to try to recognize his own limitations, and to allow for them. The critic, in brief, should strive for universality, even while he sees that he can never hope completely to attain it.

*Elder.* Well, we cannot continue on this phase of our subject interminably. Lunch will soon be served, and I am sure we are all sufficiently exhausted to relish a Martini.

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## V

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*Elder.* If a little candor is not going to weaken my position too greatly, I am willing to confess, Middleton, that in the course of this discussion, and under the relentless criticism of Young and yourself, my views have been modified, and I have several times uncomfortably glimpsed inconsistencies in my attitude. I began by attacking Young for presuming to set up his own mere personal opinion against that of the generality of mankind, and yet, when I insist that there is an absolute standard, higher than that of accepted reputation, I fear that in practice I am really, most of the time, identifying that "absolute" opinion with my own secret opinion. And even if we were to assume an Omniscient Being, an Absolute Valuer, it would not be of the slightest use to us, as Middleton has pointed out, for He is never going to reveal to humanity what His values are. However, it does seem to me that we have something very close to absolute valuation of literary works in the verdict of posterity.

*Young.* You mean to imply that you regard the opinions of posterity as infallible?

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*Elder.* Perhaps not infallible in the eyes of our hypothetical Absolute Valuer, but at least as near to infallibility as anything human will ever be.

*Young.* You hold, in brief, the common and well-nigh universal opinion about the matter. This faith in the infallibility of posterity's judgments is touching, but I do not recall ever having read any very convincing reasons in support of it. Almost everyone who believes it seems to regard it as an axiom—a thing too obvious to call for proof. But I presume to doubt it, and I should be grateful to you if you could offer me any reasons for supposing it to be true.

*Elder.* A full account of those reasons would, I fear, be extremely long; I can only indicate what they would be. In general, they rest on the fact that it is only posterity that can see works of literature in perspective. We do not see contemporary writers from a sufficient distance or height. As Stevenson has said: "The obscurest epoch is today."

*Young.* I submit that reasons for distrusting contemporary opinion, even if sound, are not reasons for trusting posterity's opinion.

*Elder.* Well, posterity's opinion is only rendered when, so to speak, all the returns are in. It is rendered only when each critic has had his say, when everyone has had an opportunity to give his reasons why we should admire this writer or dismiss that one; it is rendered only when successive ages, each with its own tradition, has tested a given work and

found it good. It is rendered when all meretricious glamor or novelty has faded, when solid qualities, with a permanent appeal, have remained untarnished, or, it may be, have even more clearly emerged with the passing of the years. Posterity's opinion represents what remains after the sifting and resifting of reputations through successive generations and the greatest possible variety of intelligences. The verdict of posterity, in brief, represents the consensus not only in space but in time.

*Young.* It all sounds very persuasive when you say it, but suppose we look at the matter a little more closely. You talk as if seeing a writer from a distance were in itself enough to make a judgment of him sound. Suppose we take an example. I think Newman a very much overrated writer; I have presumably had an opportunity to read as many criticisms of his work as anyone else; I certainly see him from as great a distance—or to use your question-begging word, "height"—as anyone else; but all this doesn't make me attach the usual estimate to his importance. Of course I may be wrong; I may even be a damned fool; but the point is that distance, or time, does not insure unanimity of judgment; and I feel as little nervousness in rejecting the current opinion of dead writers as I do that of living ones.

*Elder.* Now you are boasting, and I suspect you of lack of candor. Few men indeed have the courage to reject the verdicts of posterity, and when they do

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they are seldom taken seriously. When a living critic cannot see the merits of Dante, we instantly conclude that the defect is not in Dante but in the critic; it points to the fact that his taste or temperament or outlook is in some way limited. He has thought to pass a judgment on Dante, and has passed one on himself. It is different, of course, when a living critic questions the reputation of a living writer, but that is because most persons recognize—if I must repeat the quotation from Lemaître that so disturbed you last evening—that criticism of our contemporaries is merely conversation. It is idle to pretend that we can pass definitive judgments on the writers of our own generation.

*Young.* Your attack on the criticism of contemporaries is always the attack of those who do not care to risk criticizing their contemporaries. Criticism of living writers has at least the merit of being itself alive; criticism of the works of the dead is itself dead, a post-mortem, a coroner's inquest. There is nothing more dreary than the so-called "definitive" judgment. As a matter of fact, really definitive judgments are impossible; we have no more right to expect them than we have to expect the tides of the sea to stand still. The persons who yearn for definitive judgments, as I have said before, are merely the academicians, the chronic pigeonholers and cataloguers. The only criticism in which there is any genuine zest is *first* criticism. It is dangerous, of



course, but in its very danger lies part of its attraction for adventurous spirits. Criticism of the dead is simply a rehash.

*Middleton.* It seems to me that whether criticism is living or dead or mere conversation depends almost entirely upon the critic, and hardly at all upon whether the author he is considering happens to be in his grave or walking about. One critic, obviously, may write live criticism about a dead author, and another may write dead criticism about a live author.

Another point: when we talk of the judgment of posterity, it seems to me vital to ask, *Which* posterity? The generation immediately succeeding? That is usually the most unjust of all: we have only to think of the fall of Shakespeare's reputation in the period immediately after him, or our own glib mockery of the great Victorians, though we have produced few men of their stature. Is the posterity we are talking about that which comes two generations later? or three? or ten? Young is right in contending that there are no absolutely definitive or final judgments of authors, but in that very contention he is admitting that criticism of the authors of the past cannot in itself be useless or "dead."

*Young.* I agree that such criticism is not *necessarily* futile, but it is nearly always futile in practice because a critic who deals with an author of the remote past is usually intimidated, however unconsciously, by the preceding criticism of that author

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and by a reputation that has long endured. This prejudice in favor of work which has "stood the verdict of the centuries", is, as Richards has pointed out, equivalent to saying, "If we cannot decide ourselves, let us at least count hands and go with the majority."

*Elder.* Well, whatever it is that forms the reputation of authors of the past, it is certainly not "the majority". There is no popular vote or anything analogous to a popular vote. It much more nearly resembles a dictatorship, though it differs from that because its verdicts can never be merely arbitrary. Great reputations are fixed, rather, as Middleton has shown us, by a handful of eminent critics in each generation, and it is not their number that counts, nor even, finally, their individual weight or prestige, but our recognition of the justice of what they have to say. Who has fixed the present reputation of Spinoza, for example? Has it been in any sense a "majority"? Has it not been rather a few outstanding critics of acute perception—Goethe, Coleridge, Heine, Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Santayana? It is, at bottom, because our judgments of the writers of the past have been formed in this way that the highest glory a critic can have, as Emile Faguet has put it, is to say of his contemporaries what posterity will one day think of them.

*Young.* In other words, we assume with unquestioning faith that posterity's judgments are infallible, and we are not even disturbed by the fact that

these infallible judgments are being constantly altered. If a famous critic of the past praises three of his contemporaries and condemns a fourth, and we happen to think the fourth great, we call the critic's judgment in that instance an error. What makes us so sure that the error is not ours? The joke of the whole thing is that we ourselves are posterity, so far as every writer of the past is concerned; and this blind faith in posterity's omniscience and infallibility turns out, on examination, to be nothing more than a brazen piece of self-flattery.

*Middleton.* Of course it is not quite correct to imply, as Faguet does, that the good critic merely *anticipates* the verdict of posterity; he may actually succeed in *imposing* his verdict *on* posterity. In making a legal decision on a given case, a higher court cannot help having its opinion influenced by the previous decisions of the lower courts; it is usually more inclined to sustain those opinions than to reverse them. "Posterity", in itself, does not form judgments; rather it acquiesces in those it finds existing. When its judgments are changed, they are changed through the influence of individual critics, and not of the masses. But few critics venture to treat with disrespect the opinions of their predecessors.

*Elder.* Then how do you account for the complete reversal of critical opinion on such writers as Blake and Melville, or the faded reputation of Southey and scores of others?

*Middleton.* My point is not that such reversals

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are impossible, but merely that they are rare. Contemporary critics, it is true, cannot create a permanent reputation, but they can permanently kill one. They exercise, in brief, a highly effective veto power. If a genius is utterly ignored during his lifetime, it may be impossible for posterity to pass upon the contemporary verdict, because the genius's books may all have been lost or forgotten. We hear of geniuses whose works went unrecognized for a generation, or who took years even to find a publisher, but what of those who never found a publisher at all? Posterity has simply nothing to base a judgment upon. Like the Supreme Court, it can deal only with the cases that the lower courts have passed along to it. It is of course possible, and it has occasionally happened, that a stray copy of some completely forgotten work has fallen into the hands of a later critic of discernment, but such things happen only by the rarest chance. When posterity does "discover" an author, it is usually because he has previously had at least enough reputation to keep his books alive, and then later critics are able to raise him to a higher level in esteem. None of Melville's contemporaries, for example, realized that "Moby Dick" was a great epic and a profound allegory, but many of them thought it a very good sea story for boys, and that modest reputation carried it along. If it had not been for that, it might have gone completely out of print, and there would have been nothing for later critics to "discover".

*Young.* Ah, it does my heart good to hear such candor from so realistic a mind. As you say, the critics of posterity haven't time to start ransacking everything. They naturally tend to reexamine merely what their predecessors have praised; they may rearrange the ranking of these works, but they cannot put into the ranking what their predecessors have left out altogether. There can be little question, if we have any regard for the law of probabilities, that works of genius are frequently lost or forgotten. The belief that this is not true is akin to the superstition of the immortality of the soul. It is a mere case of wishful thinking, of substituting our desires for an examination of the evidence. We feel that it would be too dreadful if great work were ever lost, and therefore we deny that it can be. "Of the number of books written in any language," wrote Schopenhauer, "about one in 100,000 forms a part of its real and permanent literature. What a fate this one book has to endure before it outstrips those 100,000 and gains its due place of honor!" Schopenhauer assumed that this one surviving book would be the best of the 100,000, yet even a slight reflection on the size of the figure and the laws of probability makes this extremely dubious. That the surviving book will probably be a very good one I do not doubt, but when we think of the enormous rôle played by luck and accident in the world it is hard to dismiss the possibility that the very best book of all the 100,000 may have fallen into oblivion. It is true that a thor-

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oughly mediocre book cannot live, but this does not mean that a great book cannot die. With books as with human beings, the highest mortality rate is in the first year, but after a certain number of years the situation is reversed, for the longer a book, unlike a human being, has survived, the greater are its chances of further survival. Yet survival does not necessarily correspond with merit. When a poet acquires a great reputation, even his bad verses live; when he fails to acquire a reputation, even his good verses die.

*Elder.* Well, I am willing to concede that posterity depends to a large extent upon the opinion of a writer's contemporaries, yet I incline to think that on the whole such contemporary judgments are remarkably just. One critic, perhaps, cannot "place" a given author of his own day, and two critics cannot place him, but a hundred critics can place him, particularly after he has written three or four books. Contemporary criticism, on the whole, has placed such writers as Proust, Thomas Mann and Spengler, remarkably well; and though one may not agree with the estimates of any particular critic, one must accord a high degree of accuracy to the *composite* estimate.

*Young.* What inconsistency! Aren't you the man who began by dismissing contemporary criticism as mere conversation? It is true that contemporary critics come to agree more and more with each other on the merits of a given author, but that is for the same reason that posterity settles into even greater

unanimity—to wit, timidity and imitation. The greatest diversity of opinion about an author occurs in the criticisms of his first book. After the reviewers have read each other's criticisms of that first volume, and been mutually influenced by them, they come to closer agreement on the same author's second book, and so on. There finally emerges a certain estimate which it is proper to hold of each author, and the reviewers hold it. Everybody around the circle then has the same view; the critics support and reinforce each other like the stones of an arch, and no one has reason to suspect that they may all be wrong. Yet the opinion of contemporary critics, for all its faults, is at least more candid than the opinion of the rank and file of later critics. For the longer an opinion has been held, and the greater the number of respectable persons it has been held by, the more courage and originality it requires for any individual critic to question it.

*Elder.* You can hardly expect me to accept that as a serious explanation of why we still hold, generation after generation, by certain immortal names—

*Young.* Please, I wish you wouldn't use that word "immortal." Of course it's all right if you realize that you are using it in a purely rhetorical and grandiloquent sense, but if we cease to talk like orators, and assume the attitude of scientists, the adjective immediately becomes absurd. When we say that a work is immortal, all we mean, speaking realistically, is that it seems likely to last for a com-

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paratively long time—long, that is, from a human standpoint, but not, say, from a geological one. The oldest literary reputations today, such as those of Homer and Confucius, go back barely 3,000 years—a mere tick-tock in time as measured by astronomers.

Come, let us be honest. Posterity can carry only a certain amount of baggage from the past; it is compelled continually to lighten its load; every time we add a new book to the list of what we call the world's classics, we silently drop an old one. We may piously profess otherwise, but that is merely polite or hypocritical pretense. Literary values are not absolute, in spite of the fact that nearly everyone talks as if they were; they are relative. Old work is crowded out by new, good work by better. If that were not so posterity would simply drown itself in a sea of "masterpieces". To borrow a term from economics, there are always certain "marginal" classics, and when posterity adds some new classics to its cargo, it is compelled to jettison a few of these old ones. I do not deny that there has been a certain *net* increase in the number of living classics in historic time; we have been taking on more than we have been throwing overboard; but unless our descendants constantly find new ways of lengthening the span of life of each generation, even this net increase cannot continue indefinitely; it must grow constantly smaller, until a sort of cultural saturation point is reached.

As I say, we refuse to admit to ourselves this necessary economy of effort, and as a result we fail to



recognize some of the many ways in which posterity's judgment is distorted. In reading the work of a past generation we are compelled, for example, to ignore the secondary writers of that period, and to concentrate on a few primary ones. The result is that these primary writers assume in our eyes not only a far greater eminence than they enjoyed in their own day, but a far greater eminence than they really deserve.

But even the selected few begin to suffer the ravages of time. It is instructive to follow the history of great literary reputations. First everybody is advised to read all the great author's works, and many persons do. Then the critics begin to concede that the gist and essence of that writer can really be found in three or four of his works; the others appear only in occasional "complete" editions, and in time slide quietly into oblivion. Still later it is almost universally admitted that the greatest work of the author in question is such-and-such a book, and as the best of the author is to be found in that book, people soon cease to concern themselves with his others. One might make a roll-call of authors who have already reached this stage or seem destined to reach it in a generation or two. Run over a list of our American writers alone, and see how they tend more and more to be represented by only one book: Melville by "Moby Dick", Thoreau by "Walden", Mark Twain by "Huckleberry Finn", Henry Adams by the "Education." It is a process of erosion that

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even the greatest do not escape. Voltaire is read chiefly through "Candide", Goethe through "Faust"—especially Gounod's "Faust"!—while I doubt whether more than a half-dozen even of Shakespeare's plays are really known except by persons who might almost be called scholars.

And then we are ready for the penultimate stage, that period during which even the great author's masterpiece is read less and less, though it continues to be advisable for people who seek reputations for culture to pretend to have read it. For we continue to pay lip homage to great names long after we have ceased to read their work. Indeed, it is more than lip service: the names of Homer, Aristotle, Confucius, Sophocles, Dante, Kant, awaken responsive chords in the breasts of millions who have never read a line of the works of these men and never expect to.

*Elder.* I did not realize that my innocent use of an adjective like "immortal" would inspire so lengthy a dissertation. But tell me, Young, can you name a single really great author whose work has actually died?

*Young.* I could name a score who are obviously dying, but when you ask which are actually dead you raise a question difficult to answer. The difficulty lies in the fact that so many authors lead a thoroughly false and factitious life, a sort of living death, in the schools and universities, where they are forced down the throats of bored students.

*Elder.* I begin to detect that you are applying these vicious democratic standards: you are judging an author's life by the *number* of persons who read and enjoy him, whereas the only genuine standard is the *intelligence* of those who read him. As long as one intelligent person remains who is capable of spending ecstatic evenings over Plato, Plato will live.

*Middleton.* That raises the question of what it is finally that makes a great book great. John Erskine holds that a work becomes a classic because it is more interesting to more people than ordinary books are.

*Elder.* And that is precisely the very widespread and very vicious fallacy that I am attacking. The mere number of an author's readers, either during his lifetime or after it, has simply nothing to do with his standing. Surely, a thousand people read Arthur Brisbane to one who reads Santayana, but I have never heard anyone suggest that therefore Brisbane is the more important writer.

*Middleton.* But now you are talking of the *contemporary* audience. The situation would be reversed if we considered the probable audience over future generations.

*Elder.* Are you so certain of that? Has Plato, over twenty-five centuries, had as many readers as, say, Alexandre Dumas? Has Spinoza, after three hundred years, been read by as many persons as the author of "Tarzan" in his own lifetime? No, the public of philosophers, as Schopenhauer pointed out,

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is always extremely small, and their fame is more remarkable for its length than for its breadth. I not only concede but insist that permanency of appeal is a test of greatness; but that is something very different from width of appeal.

*Young.* Well, I am *not* willing to concede that permanency of appeal is necessarily a mark of greatness. The jingle "Thirty days hath September" will endure as long as the present calendar, but I cannot believe that it is therefore a great poem. On the contrary, I am convinced that many things float down the stream of time because of their very lightness. Certain volumes which have no mark of greatness in them continue to appeal to persons at a certain level of intelligence for generations.

And, on the other side, work of genuine greatness may sink because of its sheer profundity. For the more profound a work, the narrower the audience there is to appreciate it. The more original it is, beyond a certain point, the greater are the chances of its being passed over. William James makes some acute observations on this point in his "Psychology". If you don't mind—(*He goes to the shelves, and finds the volume and passage.*) Here (*reading*):

"This victorious assimilation of the new is in fact the type of all intellectual pleasure. The lust for it is scientific curiosity. The relation of the new to the old, before the assimilation is performed, is wonder. We feel neither curiosity nor wonder concerning things so far beyond us that we have no concepts to

refer them to or standards by which to measure them. The Fuegians, in Darwin's voyage, wondered at the small boats, but took the big ship as 'a matter of course'. Only what we partly know already inspires us with a desire to know more. The more elaborate textile fabrics, the vaster works in metal, to most of us are like the air, the water, and the ground, absolute existences which awaken no ideas. It is a matter of course that an engraving or a copper-plate inscription should possess that degree of beauty. But if we are shown a *pen*-drawing of equal perfection, our personal sympathy with the difficulty of the task makes us immediately wonder at the skill. The old lady admiring the Academician's picture says to him: 'And is it really all done *by hand*?' "

*Elder.* Your argument would be more convincing to me if you could cite a few great works that have been ignored because of their sheer profundity.

*Young.* Don't you think your question is a bit unfair, and even a bit absurd? The fact that they have been ignored is the very reason why I cannot cite them. If I could tell you which they were, and if you could recognize them, that alone would mean that they had acquired at least a certain degree of fame.

*Elder.* That answer is more ingenious than persuasive. You are at least conceding that your argument must forever remain *a priori*. And even as an *a priori* argument it is bad, for it overlooks the real way in which reputations are formed. Take, for ex-

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ample, Einstein's great discoveries in mathematical physics. His original papers are incomprehensible even to highly intelligent laymen with a broad general culture. But they are not incomprehensible to his fellow mathematical physicists, who, if they have not the genius to make the discoveries, have at least the intelligence and the specialized knowledge necessary to understand and appreciate them. It is this very small group that assures the rest of the world of Einstein's greatness, and even those of us who have not the remotest understanding of the theory of relativity, or any direct way of assuring ourselves whether it is false or true, accept Einstein's greatness without question.

*Young.* How do you convince yourself that the small group of Einstein's colleagues has not deceived you?

*Elder.* I feel assured of it by the very way in which the reputation of Einstein, like the reputation of any other profound thinker, is formed. Middleton could probably describe the process more lucidly than I could, for I have really been taking my idea from him.

*Middleton.* Why, yes, I think Elder is justified. It is possible that Einstein is in some respects mistaken, and that his colleagues are likewise mistaken, and that future scientists will discover this. But though the possibility of error exists, I do not believe that the possibility of fraud exists. It would not be possible for a small band of scientists deliberately

to conspire to "put over" a great reputation without a very genuine basis. We may picture the intellectual world as made up of persons existing on a series of intellectual levels. Each level or stratum is capable of understanding and appreciating the ideas of the stratum immediately above it, even though it is incapable of originating or formulating those ideas in the first instance. Now in the realm of mathematical physics the intellectual world is a pyramid. At the top is Einstein, alone. On the stratum immediately below him are not more than a score of scientists, including such men as Eddington and Weyl, capable not only of a pretty thorough understanding of Einstein's theories, but of verifying and amplifying them, and of detecting errors. Below them in turn is a stratum of several hundred, perhaps a thousand persons (my figures are merely expository and my strata partly arbitrary) who, while not capable of making contributions of major importance, are capable of understanding the theory in its main implications and of explaining it to a still wider audience. And so on. We get down finally to the intellectual stratum which understands only that Einstein is great, and that he has made some great discovery, though it has not the faintest idea of what that discovery is. But as at least no intellectual stratum can be imposed upon by the stratum immediately above it, the faith of the people at the bottom is justified.

*Young.* But you are admitting that at the bottom

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appreciation, to say the least, becomes extremely indirect. It is a false, not a genuine admiration. People admire because they have been told that they should, and not because they really and spontaneously do.

*Elder.* Isn't that what happens not only in science, but in the whole field of literature and art? Thousands of people admire a symphony by Beethoven because they do not dare do anything else, though as far as genuine response is concerned, they get a great deal more from "Carmen", or from "The Blue Danube", or even from the latest jazz tune. Yet all that does not affect the validity of Beethoven's reputation. Reputations, like mountain streams, never run uphill, an extremely fortunate fact which you seem to have overlooked.

*Young.* Fame is never real fame unless it is widespread, and I still contend that the smaller the number of persons there are capable of appreciating a writer, the more insecure his fame will be. The amount and kind of knowledge possessed by the general "cultured" public is of tremendous importance in determining the amount of attention that a given writer will attract, and the quality of appreciation he will receive. The scientist is particularly unfortunate in this respect. Aristotle's mind was vastly superior to Plutarch's, yet Plutarch's biographies still form part of our living literature, while Aristotle's physics and biology have only an antiquarian interest.



*Elder.* That is simply because his science was bad science.

*Young.* Bad science is simply another name for yesterday's science. Recall the great scientific classics that have revolutionized the thought of the world—Harvey's "Circulation of the Blood", Newton's "Principia", Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations", Malthus's "Treatise on Population", Darwin's "Origin of Species". Who reads either of the first two today? All of them tend rapidly to acquire a merely historical and antiquarian interest. The student of physiology, of physics, of economics, of biology, nearly always gets his knowledge of these authors at second hand; he does not read them in the original because too much of their work has been superseded, whereas no one can supersede "Don Quixote" or "Tom Jones" or "Paradise Lost", or even works of much inferior caliber. No, fame among writers of books does not exist in proportion to merit, nor is permanence of appeal the real test of a book's greatness. The length of time during which a book continues to be widely read depends on many circumstances which have nothing to do with the genius of its author. What happens in the sciences is merely an extreme instance of the rapidity with which great work may be superseded by an advance in knowledge. A good history or a fine biography may be rendered obsolete by the discovery of new letters, diaries, and other documents. Philosophies are less directly but not less surely discredited by the ad-

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vance in science or subtle changes in ways of thought. All in all, fiction is today the easiest road to fame for the writer of talent, for it is least likely, with the possible exception of poetry, to be rendered obsolete by the advance of knowledge, and it has a tremendous advantage over poetry and every other form of writing in the size of the audience that it immediately encounters.

*Elder.* I do not agree with you. Fiction can become obsolete even more rapidly than other forms of writing, if it deals with transitory externals and not with the eternal verities of the human heart. No, the chief reason for the obsolescence of books is not an advance in external knowledge, but something more profound. Ordinary books, as Schopenhauer pointed out, arising as they do in the course of the general advance in contemporary culture, are in close alliance with the spirit of their age—in other words, with just those opinions which happen to be prevalent at the time. But those rare works which are destined to become the property of all mankind and to live for centuries are, at their origin, too far in advance of the point at which culture happens to stand, and on that very account are foreign to it and to the spirit of their own time. One could cite innumerable instances of the failure of great work to make any impression at its first appearance. I have already spoken of "Moby Dick". When "Leaves of Grass" was published in its first edition by the author, twelve copies were sold. At its first appearance

"Thus Spake Zarathustra" sold just twenty copies.

*Young.* But I do not see that you can draw any general conclusions from those instances. That a book fails to sell at its first appearance does not prove it to be a good book, and, on the other hand, for a book to meet with an instantaneous success does not indicate any lack of real greatness. "Don Quixote" was an immense success, and so were the histories of Macaulay, and Dickens's novels, and "Gulliver's Travels", and the plays of Shakespeare and Molière and Racine and Ibsen. To come back to my original point: A book may not be read by future generations, it may seem to have no value for future generations, but that does not necessarily mean that it might not have had a very great and genuine value for its own age. A pamphlet or a tract may bring about a reform of the greatest importance, and be no longer readable through the very fact that it has accomplished its end.

*Elder.* I hope you are not confusing literature with politics.

*Young.* It takes great literary skill to write a great pamphlet, and Swift and Voltaire show what can be done in that line. When contemporary opinion declares that a certain writer is a great journalist, posterity will do well to accept that opinion, even though it can no longer read the journalist's articles, for contemporary opinion in this respect is far more trustworthy than future opinion. It is only the journalist's contemporaries who know what precisely was

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the state of public opinion when he began to write; it is only the contemporaries who know precisely what it is that he has achieved. The reputation of Bernard Shaw is bound to suffer greatly from the passage of time, for what were once his private paradoxes have already become public commonplaces. Likewise the reputation of Mencken: he himself has said that he does not believe anything he has yet written will be read twenty-five years from today; and he may be right. But in each case our own judgment will have been more reliable than that of our grandchildren. We alone know how Bernard Shaw has altered not only the conclusions of the intellectual world but its ways of thinking; we alone can appreciate the power and courage of such a pamphlet as "Common Sense About the War", a pamphlet already forgotten, for the sentences that seemed so perverse to many of us then seem so absurdly obvious now. And we alone know what a great personal force Mencken has been in American letters, and how much he has done to undermine the Puritan ethic, and to restore some measure of freedom of thought. And if our children will no longer be able to read "Main Street" and "Babbitt", because the types themselves may no longer be recognizable, we, at least, should not be so ungrateful as to forget that Sinclair Lewis, by his merciless mimicry and caricature, may have helped to make them so. At least he has made some of these people ashamed of themselves, and he has helped to free us from their

domination. By keeping so close to the contemporary scene, Mencken and Lewis, I fear, have limited the duration of their appeal; but their work has been a great deal more valuable for its own time than much of the work that is destined to live longer.

*Elder.* Well, I hope you will forgive my prejudice in favor of permanence of appeal as a standard for judging literary merit, but——

*Young.* Oh, and I forgot to mention one of the absurdities to which appeal to that standard leads. If we are going to judge literary worth by the length of time that a writer's fame has endured, it means that we are going to attach the greatest importance to the writers who have been longest dead. And that is precisely what the academic mind does. We might call this the sanctity-of-age fallacy, or the fallacy of inverted perspective: the further a writer is from us in time the bigger he looks. That is why the Greeks are so tremendously overrated. If one of the lost dramas of Aeschylus were suddenly unearthed, and published as by S. K. Jones of 52 Pacific Street, Brooklyn, it would simply be ignored by most of the reviewers and denounced by the rest as a feeble imitation and a silly anachronism.

*Elder.* I have no doubt that the judgment of the reviewers would be just as bad as you say it would be. But to return to my contention, I still believe that lack of permanent appeal, even in a controversial pamphlet, is a sign of some inferiority, some lack, in that pamphlet. Burke's speech on the American col-

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onies also dealt with a contemporary issue, yet through the nobility of its prose, its wide philosophic grasp, the beauty of its structure and its reasoning, it lives today. And Swift's great pamphlets, such as his "Modest Proposal", are also part of our living literature. "A classic," says Hubert Griffith, in the best definition of one that I have ever read, "a classic is simply a work of such intense vitality that it is always modern."

No, I am willing to concede that the judgment of posterity is not infallible. I am even willing to grant you that it may sometimes be unjust in its emphasis, that there is no Providence which prevents good books from dying, and that it is probable that posterity sometimes makes serious errors of omission. But on the whole the judgment of posterity is astonishingly sound and astonishingly comprehensive. It is a composite of the maturest judgments of the finest minds of all the ages. It is impossible for humanity to have anything better.

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## VI

### TRADITION AND REBELLION

*Middleton.* We have been devoting perhaps too much attention to our children; it is time, I think, that we thought a little about our fathers. If one of our incentives to write is that we may be read by the generations that come after us, we must never forget that the substance of what we write has been dictated by the generations that went before us.

*Elder.* That is putting the matter, I fear, a little too strongly. I could wish that the influence of the great writers of the past on the writers of our own generation were greater than it seems to be. The essence of culture, as Matthew Arnold so definitively put it, is to know the best that has been thought and said in the world, but our writers seem to show more and more indifference toward, and consequently more and more neglect and ignorance of, the masters of other ages; and the shallowness and vulgarity of so much of our present writing is one of the inevitable results of that ignorance. How many of our present writers have their roots deep in the past? How many of them have actually read at first hand Homer, Plato, Euripides, Dante? As Norman Foers-

ter has remarked, nearly all our young writers and critics are in revolt against a past that they do not really know, often do not in the least care to know.

*Young.* As I might have expected, you express the academic attitude perfectly. The chief earmarks of that attitude are an extreme reverence for the past as such, and a corresponding tendency to deal condescendingly with the present.

*Elder.* One would think, from your tone, that you had a certain monopoly of living in the present. But the present is the child of the past; the present cannot be really known or understood except through the past. It follows inescapably that the more we know of the past the more we know of the present. As T. S. Eliot has so finely said, the poet is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.

*Young.* All that is very eloquent and ingratiating, but what happens, as a matter of plain fact, when a writer immerses himself in the past? What is the result, always and everywhere, when a man reads too much, i. e., when he knows too much about what has been done before him? His mind becomes overladen with inert ideas. It loses its resilience. His incentive to write oozes away. He imagines that everything has been said, or that the difference between what he has to say and what has already been said is too slight to be worth his saying it. He ends



in fatigue, stupidity, depression; he becomes subservient to the past. He becomes, in brief, the typical college professor. It is surely not without significance that the typical scholar is creatively sterile.

At bottom we lack the courage and candor to ask ourselves certain leading questions. Are we weighed down by the past? Does it give us too much to absorb, and leave us too little time or stimulus to create? Are there not already enough masterpieces in painting, music and literature? Could any one of us hope to read all the literary masterpieces already in existence—all the plays, poems, novels, histories, biographies, philosophies, criticisms? What in heaven's name is the point in adding to the mass? Take the single subject of sleep; take a single quotation from Shakespeare:

*the innocent sleep;*

*Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,  
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,  
Balm of hurt minds, great Nature's second course,  
Chief nourisher in life's feast . . .*

After that, what more is there to be said, poetically, about sleep? And isn't that true of all the great departments and aspects of our common life—that the main road has been travelled, and that our writers of genius, like Proust, are compelled to go to the dark unexplored corners, so that even these may be soon exhausted, while others, feeling suffocated, break out, like Joyce, in berserker rebellion, and

writers who do not happen to possess genius are forced into ridiculous poses, affectations and eccentricities in the hope of justifying their existence? There was recently a group of young men in Italy who advocated the destruction of the art of the past on the ground that it was in the way. That course sounds a little desperate, but it is hard to be wholly out of sympathy with the feeling it reflects. Isn't it the over-accumulation of masterpiece that causes the inevitable decadence that Spengler writes of? Isn't it an over-accumulation of tradition that creates stationary civilizations like those in India and China?

*Elder.* I don't know that I shall attempt to answer so naive an argument; that would be taking it far more seriously than it deserves. I cannot even convince myself, Young, that you have put it forward seriously. I return to my simple contention that all that we are and know we owe to the past; and the greatest need of the American writer today, as I see it, is to face in all candor the fact that independence of the past is forever delusive.

*Young.* But you do not distinguish between the different kinds of dependence on the past, nor even seem to realize that there *are* different kinds of dependence. The experimental methods now used by scientists, for example, are the result of a long evolution, the product of the past; but the results of a particular experiment—for example, that by Michelson and Morley—may be to upheave the conclusions of the past. True, the modern physicist, before he

begins speculations or experiments of his own, must acquaint himself with what is already known of physics, a knowledge built up in the past; but that does not mean that he needs to read the works of Galileo in the original. In brief, Elder, I agree thoroughly with you when you talk of the intimate relationship between past and present, but the recognition leads me to conclusions precisely opposite from your own. The present is not only, as you say, the child of the past; it includes and sums up the past. To me the natural conclusion seems to be that it is the present that we should study. Really to know the present is necessarily to know the past. The young medical student today learns what is at present known about disease and the human body. He does not need to read the original works of Hippocrates or Harvey or even of Pasteur, for all that is true in their writings is contained in the present body of medical knowledge. The study of the *history* of a science is something different from a study of the science; that history may be worth knowing on its own account, but it is of secondary importance. Indeed, the last thing the modern scientist can afford is to have too much reverence for the ideas of his predecessors.

*Elder.* Really, Young, your analogy from science is so hopelessly irrelevant that it seems almost a deliberate sophistry. The latest textbook on medicine, even if it comes from a mediocrity, is no doubt better than the best textbook of twenty-five years

ago; but what has this scientific illustration to do with art and literature? Is there any sense worth talking about in which the work of the best of our modern painters could be said to sum up and include Rembrandt or Titian or Dürer? Does the greatest of our poets today, do all of them taken together, "sum up and include" Shakespeare? The point is too absurd for serious argument.

*Young.* My examples were merely put forward to stress the fact that there are two different, and often radically different, methods of dependence on the past. This is as true in art as in science. Take architecture. Our designers of bank buildings that are imitations of Greek temples, of churches that are forgeries of Gothic cathedrals, of replicas of Italian villas, Colonial American mansions, Spanish bungalows, spurious half-timbered Tudor English houses—all these depend on the past, with a timid and servile dependence. But our genuinely modern designers—Wright, Oud, Le Corbusier, Gropius—also depend on the past. Their designs would not be possible without the forms, materials, and structural solutions bequeathed by the engineers and industrialists that came before them; they would not have been possible except as the fruit of preceding criticisms and aesthetic doctrines; they would not have been possible without the hints and stimulus of past architecture. Dependence on the past is as inescapable as you say it is; but that does not mean that we need reverence the past *qua* past, or that we must ape its

artists and writers. As H. M. Kallen—or was it John Dewey?—once remarked, the past is a tool for the making of a good future, not a perfect achievement of yesterday to be reproduced intact by tomorrow. But while I am quoting I cannot omit the admirable aphorisms on the subject scattered through the works of A. N. Whitehead. A race preserves its vigor, he reminds us, only so long as it harbors a real contrast between what has been and what may be, and so long as it is nerved by the vigor to adventure beyond the safeties of the past. It is for this reason, he points out, that the definition of culture as the knowledge of the best that has been said and done, is so dangerous. It omits the great fact that in their day the great achievements of the past were the adventures of the past. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, for example, were adventurers in the world of thought. To read their plays without any sense of new ways of understanding the world and of savoring its emotions is to miss the vividness which constitutes their whole value. The Greeks were speculative, adventurous, eager for novelty, and the most un-Greek thing that we can do is to copy the Greeks, who were emphatically not copyists. “The only use of a knowledge of the past,” as Whitehead so nobly sums up the whole question, “is to equip us for the present. No more deadly harm can be done to young minds than by depreciation of the present. The present contains all that there is. It is holy ground; for it is the past, and it is the future.”

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*Elder.* The opinions you apparently attribute to me are a travesty of my actual view. I have surely never advocated any blind or servile adherence to the models of the past. What I am insisting on is merely that, try as we may, we cannot escape from tradition, and that the wisest thing our young writers can do is candidly to recognize that fact. Most of us incline to look upon tradition as upon habit, as something that limits and enslaves us, but the view is mistaken in both cases. Psychologists point out that all manual skill, from the mere ability to dress ourselves without taking hours in the act, to the highest dexterity, is the result of the formation of habits. And tradition, likewise, if it often limits us, is also the chief force that sets us free. It has given us all the arts and sciences, and showered us with possibilities for self-expression in a thousand directions. If it has handed down errors, it has handed down also all the discoveries of mankind. We cannot escape it if we would. We reject one tradition only to accept another. Freedom of thought is a tradition; political liberty is a tradition; the scientific and experimental method, testing all things, is a tradition. Even revolt is a tradition.

*Middleton.* You will pardon me, Elder, if your argument begins to remind me of a point once made by Bertrand Russell. It may be laid down, he said, that every ethical system is based upon a certain *non sequitur*. The philosopher first invents a false theory as to the nature of things, and then deduces that

wicked actions are those which show that his theory is false. Russell cited as an example the traditional Christian, who argues that, since everything obeys the will of God, wickedness consists in disobedience to the will of God. Aren't you putting forward precisely the same form of argument? Aren't you holding that, since it is impossible for any of us to escape from tradition, those writers are wicked who do ignore tradition?

*Elder.* Ah, but to ignore tradition is not to escape from it. Let me put it this way: we inherit *some* sort of tradition no matter what we do, no matter how lazy we are intellectually. But if we are under the childish delusion that we are repudiating tradition, then the kind of tradition we will actually if unconsciously acquire is certain to be of an inferior quality. We must not forget Spinoza's dictum: all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare. If we want the finest tradition we must work diligently to master it. . . . But Young and I have discussed this subject long enough. What is *your* opinion?

*Middleton.* As usual, it seems to be midway between your own and Young's; and, of course, I flatter myself that it reconciles your two views in a higher synthesis.

*Young.* Ah, fancy that, Elder!

*Middleton.* But I do not flatter myself that my ideas on the subject are original. They are mainly derived from John Livingston Lowes's fine book, "Convention and Revolt in Poetry." Lowes discusses

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the subject with such penetration and good sense that all I shall do is to summarize his argument. Where we have been using the word tradition, he speaks of convention, which for our present discussion is very much the same thing. He begins by pointing out, as you have, Elder, that we cannot escape from convention. Our very language, our sole means of communication, is wholly a convention. The word "horse", which when spoken is a mere noise having no *natural* connection whatever with the animal it names, means what it means solely because everybody accepts it as meaning that. All conventions rest on acceptance.

Now the important thing about conventions is that they can be at once tyrants and servants; and the only real difference between you and Young, as I see it, is that Young has been talking of their sinister and you of their beneficent aspect. Both of you are right. Art moves from stage to stage, in fact, by the acceptance now of your view, now of Young's. When a given convention in poetry, for example, begins to get itself established, it acts as a stimulus to poets. It is plastic, life runs in its veins, the poets mold it into varied forms. But in time the convention becomes stereotyped, it hardens into an empty shell, like an abandoned chrysalid when the informing life has flown; until finally some poet or group of poets shatters the empty shell and begins afresh. Now the poets who mold the still ductile forms are following the way of creative acceptance; the poets who shatter



the empty shells are following the way of revolt, or constructive rejection.

Each process is necessary at certain periods, and each has its own dangers. A genius, for example, creates a set of conventions, and because he is a genius he is followed by a flock of imitators. But as the imitators lack his talent, the result is that only the *unfittest* of his conventions survive. What he transmits is the accidents, the idiosyncrasies, the mannerisms of his genius, not the quality that makes him what he is—

*Elder.* The late Lytton Strachey and his imitators in biography might be one example, I suppose.

*Middleton.* Quite. Now when any convention has hardened or degenerated, revolt becomes necessary, and it nearly always occurs. But revolt, in the nature of the case, suffers under a specific limitation. Its own character is in large measure determined by that against which it is directed. And in the majority of instances it is directed against the sound as well as the unsound elements in the existing convention. This results, for one thing, in a great deal of spurious originality. For the natural recoil from the commonplace is toward the freakish and the singular. Through all these writers in revolt there runs a certain more or less malicious satisfaction in throwing into as strong relief as possible the great gulf fixed between philistinism and the elect.

*Elder.* In other words, we have the same phenomena in literary fashions as we have in fashions in

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dress. First, some writer of prestige adopts a new form; then a few other persons begin to follow suit. When the crowd has become large enough, the new mode is recognized as the fashion. The former fashion is ridiculed; everybody hastens to abandon it for the new. Recent fashions in literature, under such leadership as that of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, expressed themselves through such childish devices as the omission of commas and capitals; intentional senselessness and obscurity, the invention of strange new words whose only value, so far as I could see, is that they sounded vaguely like the right words, but had the enormous advantage of not being the right words. The same fashion is still running through the other arts, particularly painting and music. Its motto seems to be, the cruder the better. Honest workmanship, scrupulous care, solid technical skill are dismissed as "slick"; everyone hastens to be rid of such vices. Crudity has become a cult: if the music is sufficiently discordant and formless, if the painting is sufficiently pointless and chaotic, if the written paragraphs are sufficiently unintelligible, then the work must be praised; the less it seems to mean the more it must mean.

*Young.* In short, whatever is new must be bad.

*Elder.* Not at all; but what I do insist is that some of the latest forms—if one may call them that—are silly, and what I am even more certain of is that form can never take the place of talent. In general, new forms are most eagerly embraced by per-

sons with nothing to say, for those with nothing to say can distinguish themselves only if they find a new way of saying it. If a man cannot attract attention by dressing with more distinction than his fellows in the current mode, he can try walking down Park Avenue with an Indian headdress. That, in spiritual terms, is what the new movement does. That is why the ranks of our writers are crowded with poseurs and exhibitionists. They neglect the plain warning that the work of the great masters in any art has never been marked by eccentricity or perversity.

*Young.* Which is your way of saying, I suppose, that you do not think the work of Joyce will live. But the simple truth is that nearly every great writer has been accused of being deliberately eccentric and perverse by his contemporaries. It was so, for example, with Whitman. And perhaps you can recall the remark of Dr. Johnson: "Nothing odd will do long. 'Tristram Shandy' did not last." It was perhaps unfortunate that the statement was made in the past tense, a hundred and fifty years ago. However, Elder, I do agree with you to this extent: though forms will change, they are of secondary importance: talent and genius will continue to distinguish themselves from mediocrity in any form.

*Middleton.* And I think Elder is right also in his suspicion that an attitude of conscious rebellion seldom results in enduring work. Writers with such an attitude not only tend to give too much attention

to form as compared with content, but they become the victims of what C. H. Cooley has called the "subservience of contradiction." That is, they after all get their cue from their imagined opponents, take the other end of the same rope. But after the pioneers, as Professor Lowes has reminded us, there follow others, when the strange has become no longer strange, who transmute what the adventurers have brought within the circle into something that is enduringly old and new at once. What we call originality does not so much consist in the creation of something wholly new, as in this *repristination* (to use Browning's word) of something old. And in the fact that it makes this ultimate transformation possible lies one of the outstanding glories of revolt.

Of course another irony of revolt, as Elder has hinted, lies in the inability of the new to remain the new for more than a fleeting moment. The less commonplace it is, the more eagerly it is seized upon, and the more swiftly and surely worn trite. The cliché is merely the sometime novel, that has been loved not wisely but too well. Yet none the less, the highest boon which the new can crave of the gods will always be the chance of becoming old. For the old will perennially become new at the hand of genius. That is the paradox of art, and likewise the reconciliation of conservatism and revolt.

As I say, all I have been doing here is to summarize, largely in his own words, the argument in Professor Lowes's admirable book. But the same

conclusion, essentially, has been reached even by so "modern" a writer as Edith Sitwell. The truth is, she tells us, that the great poet is, in almost every case, both a traditionalist and an experimentalist. He does not forget the discoveries made and the examples shown by his great predecessors, but, at the same time, he *must* bring some freshness into the language, some technical innovation, some new discovery of the world of sight or sound, else he is merely an echo, and will not take his place among his predecessors. And the conclusion both of Professor Lowes and Miss Sitwell was put in its most succinct form long ago by Emerson, when he wrote: "Poetry must be as new as foam, and as old as the rock."

*Elder.* Well, I don't see that we can add very much to this phase of our subject. Dinner is ready, and our brains and tongues are badly in need of a rest.

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## VII

### STANDARDS

*Elder.* So many people know how to write books that look as if they were good, as Rebecca West recently remarked, that the business of a critic is now a nightmare task like having to identify one genuine pearl that has strayed into Ciro's show-cases. I do not see how we can make that identification unless we have some definite fixed standards of criticism to go by.

*Young.* Why can't we depend upon the taste of the individual critic?

*Elder.* That dependence is precisely what has brought us to our present chaos. And without standards there *must* be chaos. As the late W. C. Brownell remarked, "There *is* no universal taste. And criticism to be convincing must appeal to some accepted standard."

*Young.* Isn't that rather self-contradictory? If there is no universal taste how can there be any universal standard? And to say that critical chaos would follow if we had no objective standards hardly proves that there *are* any valid objective standards. That a conclusion is unpalatable does not mean that it is

untrue. We went over that point once before, if I remember.

*Elder.* It seems to me reasonable to suppose that if a theory leads us nowhere at all there must be something wrong with it. If we depend purely on individual taste there is no way of deciding between the merits of two different judgments of a literary work when they happen to disagree; in which case criticism settles nothing, and becomes a completely futile occupation. Taste, of course, is a virtue that any critic worth his salt must have, but as Irving Babbitt has remarked, he will begin to have taste only when he refers the creative expression and his impression of it to some standard that is set above both.

*Young.* I should be very much obliged if you could tell me what that means. Where is this lofty and mysterious standard to come from—heaven? Or has Babbitt just found an impressive way of saying that the critic should deliberately disregard what his own judgment tells him about a work of art and acquiesce docilely in traditional opinion? And if that is what he means, what is the critic to do when he is confronted by a *contemporary* work of literature or art, on which no traditional rubber-stamp opinion has yet been formed?

*Elder.* It is at least clear that naked “taste” is not enough. The critic must have knowledge, learning, standards, in addition.

*Middleton.* It seems to me very dubious, Elder,

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to talk of taste *and* learning, taste *and* standards, and so on. A man's learning, knowledge and standards are an integral part of his taste: they make it what it is. Your taste does not tell you one thing and your knowledge another.

*Elder.* It surely does in food. Taste, as I have implied before, may tell a man that plum pudding is good and knowledge that he does not digest it. We come back constantly to this—that the central aim of criticism, as Norman Foerster has remarked, is the determination and the application of standards of value.

*Young.* Yes, Mr. Foerster even gave a recent book of his the ringing title "Toward Standards". It is obvious that in his private mind, as in the private mind of all the academic critics who are so fond of the word, Standards is always spelled with a capital. It is impressive exactly in proportion as it is undefined and vague. That is perhaps why the writers who employ it most frequently almost never pause to define it. They merely bemoan the absence of Standards, and imply that if these were recognized criticism would be rescued from its present intolerable anarchy. In brief, the word is nearly always used by academic critics honorifically, that is, with the intention of arousing a vaguely agreeable afflatus. Such usage must be sharply distinguished from that in any simple indicative sense. The distinction between these two meanings of "standards" is almost precisely the same as that between the two



meanings of "reality" so amusingly drawn by A. S. Eddington in "The Nature of the Physical World". The purely scientific use of "reality", he finds, need give the scientist little difficulty, but its traditional metaphysical use is surrounded by a celestial halo. He quotes a parliamentary report to illustrate this peculiar connotation: "The right honorable speaker went on to declare that the concord and amity for which he had unceasingly striven had now become a reality (loud cheers)." The conception which it is so troublesome to apprehend, remarks Eddington, is not "reality" but "reality (loud cheers)".

Now the troublesome conception in literature is not "standards" but "standards (loud cheers)". If we use the word in its simple indicative sense, it is obvious that the charge that a given critic or group of critics has no standards is never true. A critic's standards may be low, they may shift with every book he writes about or even in the course of a single review, but standards, in the sense of implied comparisons, he must have. If a play reviewer on one of the dailies remarks that a play is good, he probably means that it is better than the average play of the season; if he remarks that it is excellent, he may mean that it is one of the five or six best of the season; if he pronounces it superb, he may mean that it is the best of the season. Such standards are not high, but in view of the immediate setting and purpose of his criticism, they are sensible; all that is necessary is that we have a clear idea of just what

standard is implied in the reviewer's judgment. A recent musical comedy like "Of Thee I Sing" may have been obviously trivial and ephemeral when compared with the comedies of Molière or Shakespeare, but that is a poor reason for reproving the reviewers who praised it. The relevant question was how it compared with other modern comedies offered to the theatergoer of recent seasons. The standards that we apply to any dramatic or literary work, in short, must be relative to the pretensions of that work and to the purpose of our criticism. As Robert Lynd has put it, a man must judge linen as linen, cotton as cotton, and shoddy as shoddy. It is ridiculous to denounce any of them for not being silk. To do so is not to apply high standards so much as to apply wrong standards.

*Elder (ironically).* In other words, the critic must accept the author's standard, regardless of how low it is. If an author has aimed merely to write shoddy, and has succeeded, the critic must have nothing but eulogies for his success.

*Young.* No, the critic may make it as clear as day—indeed, he ought to make it as clear as day, if it is his opinion—that he regards the detective stories of Edgar Wallace as shoddy, but he ought also to make it clear whether they are the kind of shoddy that serves its purpose.

*Elder.* You mean whether it is the kind of shoddy that a large number of people will want to buy and read? But you don't need a critic to tell

you that. A publisher with a shrewd commercial sense is much better at it. The actual sales figures are better still; in fact, they are the real answer. Such a complete absence of standards as you advocate reduces criticism to mere sales prediction. It would be interesting to know what Emerson or Matthew Arnold would have had to say about it—Emerson, who called for an absolute criticism, a comparison of the particular work of art, not with inferior art, or even with superior art, but with supreme art—art that excels the best that has ever been produced.

*Young.* It would be interesting, also, to see the results of any consistent attempt to apply Emerson's standard. It would certainly not result in the approval of any living author. But waiving its disastrous practical consequences, it is an impossible standard even theoretically. No critic knows what perfection would really look like. Even to glimpse perfection would be half to have the power to achieve it.

*Elder.* But we must have absolute standards if only to compare and appraise relative merits. And if the critic has not the power to envisage an absolute standard, he should at least place his standards as high as he can.

*Young.* Such lofty standards, applied inappropriately, are likely to lead to some deplorable results. Achievement is rare in proportion as it is high, and the critic who compares every new dramatic or literary achievement with that of Sophocles or Homer

merely dooms himself to condemn everything that appears in his own lifetime. That there are critics who do not shrink from such a course is shown by the enchanting spectacle of Mr. Babbitt and his humanist followers, who disdain everything written in our day except, quite strangely, their own criticism.

*Middleton.* May I suggest, Young, that at least part of the differences between you and Elder are the result of the fact that you are thinking of some of the practical problems of the daily book-reviewer while Elder is thinking of the theoretical problems of criticism proper—criticism which includes the writers of all time in its possible scope.

*Young.* I can't admit that there is any radical difference in the two sets of problems. The Critic with a capital C, no less than the miserable worm of a daily reviewer, must work by relative and not by absolute standards. His standards, indeed, may often have to be relative in more than one sense. All criticism, for example, except that of first books by new authors, is made against the background of existing reputation. That is why it is permissible to praise a writer whom we consider underestimated, and dispraise one we consider overestimated, even though we may believe the overestimated writer to be inherently more important than the underestimated one. In writing about an established author, the critic simply cannot write as if he were criticizing for the first time an author newly sprung into exist-

ence: the current estimates and opinions must affect his emphasis if nothing else.

*Middleton.* A process which, unfortunately, is often carried to ridiculous lengths, so that a writer who has fallen off from his best work, or has merely become too popular for his own good, may be abused for his shortcomings or alleged shortcomings, while his merits are admitted grudgingly or even forgotten. This happens so often that it deserves a special name: we might call it the *aristidization* of old heroes, after its most famous victim among the ancients.

*Young.* Nevertheless, the principle remains sound within proper limits. Our standards for well-established writers may justifiably be more severe than those for writers just emerging.

*Elder.* If I thought, as you do, that we not only could but ought to apply a different standard to every work or every author we were judging, then I should truly begin to wonder whether criticism served any useful function at all. It may be true that the critic cannot hope to conceive adequately what a complete "perfection" might be, but this human limitation does not mean that he is forced to forgo even an *approach* to an absolute standard. Fortunately Matthew Arnold has given us an admirable working rule. "There can be no more useful help," he remarked, "for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in

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one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry."

*Young.* The possible results of such a standard are not difficult to imagine. The more original new poetry is, the less it is likely to bear any superficial resemblance to old poetry, and therefore the more likely the "touchstones" are to condemn it. What seems likely to come out best under such a test is successful imitation. That is what always occurs when classical canons are applied. Voltaire went so far as to define genius itself as "judicious imitation"; which in practice, as even Irving Babbitt has pointed out, meant imitation of the approved models according to certain rules and conventions.

*Elder.* I am afraid that you are not acquainted with Matthew Arnold's actual view. I'll have to read it for you. (*He finds the "Essays in Criticism" on his shelves and turns to the passage.*) Here. Arnold hastens to modify his touchstone suggestion very carefully. (*Reading*): "Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them" (the lines and expressions of the great masters); "it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them."

*Young.* Even with that qualification the advice is

bad. Its consistent application would merely breed an unhealthy respect for precedents and traditional patterns. And even if the test were sound, it might tell us whether poetry was of the first class or not—that is, whether it belonged with Homer and Dante—but I do not see how it could tell us whether it belonged to the second, third, or fourth class. And unfortunately, it is with these more modest orders of merit that the critic dealing with contemporary work is nearly always obliged to concern himself. For the critic of contemporary letters, even if he lives in a creative age, is necessarily occupied for the most part with what—from the standpoint of eternity—must be classed as second-, third- and fourth-rate work. If he is a certain type of prig he may, recognizing this, dismiss contemporary writing as beneath his notice. Wishing to place his superiority and high taste above suspicion, he may, like Paul Elmer More, devote himself to praising Plato and Homer and a few other of the worthy dead whose reputations are safely established, and then lump all the creative work of his own time in a general contempt that finds it pointless to draw distinctions. But he may discover in time that Homer and Plato can get along without his praise; and he may even come to perceive, when he inconsistently turns to the present—as he sometimes will—that he has not learned how to tell his first-rate contemporaries from the second-raters, and that he has been directing his anger mainly at those creative writers of his own

day who have had the impudence to become better known than their fellows.

*Elder.* That sounds to me more like personal abuse, Young, than a discussion of principles. For my part, if poetry is only third- or fourth-rate, I see no reason for discussing it at all. And I do not see how one can tell first-rate from second-rate poetry except through the application of some such touchstone as Arnold suggests. It is misrepresenting his view entirely to say that the new poetry to which the touchstone is applied must be imitative or outwardly similar to the old; the touchstone merely sets a standard of excellence.

*Young.* Perhaps; but only of a particular *kind* of excellence—a *familiar* excellence. Suppose an architectural critic of the Middle Ages had judged Milan cathedral by the Parthenon? Suppose such a critic today were to judge the Daily News Building in New York by the Capitol at Washington? Such “touchstones” would be simply irrelevant. A building must be judged on its own merits, not on its similarity to or its difference from any other building. These “standards” and “touchstones” you talk of so solemnly are simply the refuge of a man who is afraid to trust his own taste.

*Elder.* Well, I should certainly be afraid to trust the “taste” of any self-styled critic of architecture who had never seen a Greek temple or a medieval cathedral or any of the great structures of earlier ages—or at the very least some pretty adequate and



detailed pictures of them. You seem to forget that artistic and literary taste is not an innate quality; one acquires it, and the soundest taste is acquired only by long and patient study.

*Middleton.* Yes, Young, Elder is right: taste is largely the product of knowledge. And you are certainly mistaken if you assume, as you sometimes seem to, that acquaintance with the masterpieces of the past makes a man more hostile to original creation in the present. On the contrary, it usually helps him to distinguish genuine creative originality from a superficial or spurious originality. John Maynard Keynes, discussing some economic reform, once said that it was hard to tell which made a man more conservative—to know too much about the past or too little. The critic with some knowledge of literary history at least knows how often in the past real originality has been condemned because it was unlike the type of thing the critics were accustomed to. I of course agree with Matthew Arnold—though with the reservation made by A. N. Whitehead—that a man ought to know the best that has been said and thought in the world. Why is a professional wine-taster a better judge of wines than the layman? Because, having tasted nearly *all* of them, he knows what the best are like: from them he has acquired a standard of comparison, and will never be taken in by something cheap, as the man who has never known any better may be. You judge literature, at bottom, as you judge wine: you acquire taste by

tasting. People who have passed through the stage of enjoying Edgar Guest and Ella Wheeler Wilcox to that of enjoying the bulk of the contents of "The Oxford Book of English Verse" do not return.

*Young.* But what reason is there for supposing that our tastes always change for the better, never for the worse? A man who has passed through the stage of drinking nothing but beer to the stage of drinking nothing but brandy rarely returns either. Does that prove that brandy is the better drink?

*Middleton.* No; it merely proves that it is the more efficient intoxicant. I. A. Richards has anticipated your objection and answered it. In applying the test of changes in the individual's taste, he points out, we have to ask what the individual's responses in question are, and in the case of poetry they are so varied, so representative of all the activities of life, that actual universal preference on the part of those who have tried both kinds fairly is the same as superiority in value of the one over the other. No one who has repeatedly lived through experiences at the level of discrimination and coördination presupposed by the greatest writers, can ever, when fully "vigilant", be contented with ordinary crudities. Keats, as Richards points out, is by universal qualified opinion a more efficient poet than, say, Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

*Young.* Doesn't the adjective "qualified", before "opinion", rather beg the question? It seems to me that both of you are just a little too anxious to find

some objective standard, something solid and comfortable, something that is more than subjective, to cling to; but I fear you are doomed to disappointment. What lies behind this endless search for "standards"—as even Arnold betrays—is the pathetic yearning for infallibility, which, alas, is not to be attained by mortal man. There is no external or objective "standard" that can raise the judgments of a critic above the limitations of his own knowledge and taste. There is no touchstone that can tell him what he ought to admire if he is afraid to confess what he really does admire. A person who has genuine taste and enthusiasms definitely prefers one painting, say, to another, and doesn't need to ask the why and wherefore. But a person who lacks this taste and spontaneous enthusiasm, gazes helplessly from painting A to painting B, and wants some "principle of criticism" to tell him whether he ought to prefer A to B or vice versa. In place of genuine admirations and honest disdains, he has only a timorous anxiety to be "correct".

And what are these "laws" of criticism or judgment when someone actually attempts to lay them down? Like the "laws" of grammar, they necessarily come *after* the thing to which they are applied: they are merely generalizations from previous practice; they tell us what has given pleasure or displeasure in the past; they cannot in themselves reveal what is likely to give pleasure in the future. Examine the "Poetics" of Aristotle, the greatest of all critical law-

givers, and you will see how true this is: his generalizations are based on Homer and a handful of Greek tragedies. And what do we find when we come to critics who are less objective in temperament than he was? When we turn to Poe, for example, we find that his critical ideas are no more than a rationalized defense of the limitations of his own taste. And Poe is only a rather extreme case of what we find in the overwhelming majority of critics: their "rules" and "principles" are simply plausible generalizations from their own temperamental likes and aversions.

*Middleton.* But why should all this irritate *you*? Was it not one of your own impressionist friends, Remy de Gourmont, who said: "To erect his personal impressions into laws is the great effort of a man if he is sincere."?

*Young.* It ought to be obvious that he wrote that with his tongue in his cheek. It was his way of saying that such laws, like reflections on love and morality, are always the product of a temperament. I always make it *my* business to translate such "laws", whenever I encounter them, *back* into personal impressions. No, all these standards, laws, principles, rules, are obstacles, not aids, to the persons who use them most; they are stale dogmas which prevent a man from seeing the thing before him.

*Middleton.* I find myself in agreement with much of your point of view, Young, but I fear you are carrying it to an extreme. You are right, it seems to me, in contending that there is no infallible stand-

ard that can raise the critic above his personal limitations. Nevertheless, analysis, comparisons, standards, may prove useful tools of thought for the critic, provided always they are used with a sense of their limitations; provided, in brief, that they are servants and not masters. Thus Arnold's test by the great "touchstones" is sound only in the sense that the more a critic knows, the better critic, other things equal, he will be. If he has read the greatest literature of the past he will not be easily taken in by second-rate work in the present. He will have acquired a better *general* sense of what is excellent. But even so, he will be wise if he does not have *specific* "touchstones" in his mind when he approaches fresh work. Otherwise he will stumble into that most common of all critical errors—the denial of one sort of excellence because it is not another. We must judge art and literature with our whole personality, and not by any single critical maxim or any group of maxims, however plausible. And we cannot judge a fresh work of art or literature without personal discernment. This judgment, in most cases, not only precedes analysis; it comes so quickly that it seems to the critic himself to be an immediate act of *perception*: it is so that a music critic, for example, knows that a note is "false". Subsequent analysis is sometimes able to reveal the reason for this immediate response, and even to throw light on its validity; but analysis, rules, or so-called critical principles alone should not be allowed to *dictate*

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this response. All such maxims must be applied cautiously and indirectly, to guide and test the critic's personal judgment, and not to act as a substitute for it. It is the mistake of pedants and mandarins to assume that there are in literature rules or canons arbitrarily set off in a special compartment from the rest of life. What standards the critic has, it cannot be repeated too often, should be useful guides, not rigid finalities. All his experience, all his reading, all his knowledge of art, science, society, will enter into his judgment of a book as it enters into his judgment of a man. His standards in literature, in brief, will not be essentially different from his standards in life.

*Elder.* There is a note of rhetorical finality about that speech; if it is possible for the three of us to arrive at a compromise at all it must be along those lines. I confess that I still feel misgivings on one or two points, but I am becoming too sleepy to make them articulate now. Suppose we all go to bed? Tomorrow morning we can perhaps look at our questions with a fresh eye.

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## VIII

### VIVISECTING SIGNOR CROCE

*Young (entering).* I've just been out for a walk in the fresh morning air. As I looked at the trees and the lovely gardens you have around here, I thought of Goethe's lines:

*Grau . . . ist alle Theorie,*

*Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum,*

and I began to wonder what was the point of all our arguments about theory, anyway? After all, critical judgments regarding a specific work made by those who hold radically different theories of criticism often agree surprisingly; while, on the other hand, the specific critical judgments of those who hold apparently the same theories of criticism are often wide apart.

*Elder.* That is true; but it merely means that differences in theory are not the *sole* reason for differences in judgment, nor do they always point in different directions. In the long run it does matter practically, and matter very much, what theories we hold.

*Young.* Well, I am almost tempted to say that *every* theory of criticism is false, because it is essen-

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tially a plea that we should isolate only one aspect of a work of art, ask only a certain question of it, and judge it by the way in which that particular question is answered. As I have already hinted, most aesthetic and critical theories are attempts to surprise some "secret", to apply some formula that will show us whether or not a given work of literature is a masterpiece. This formula is thought of as if it were some acid that could separate pure literary gold from baser metals. And as Middleton agrees with me in believing, such a formula is by the very nature of the case unattainable. When I see people who believe in such formulas, I am always reminded of those quacks—some of them honest and sincere enough—who attempt to find one single cause for all bodily diseases, and one single cure: Christian Science finds it in the mind, chiropractic in the backbone. In the same way the single-taxer or currency crank has a single hand-me-down solution for all economic ills. All such doctrines and theories, of course, prevent one from examining the concrete and complex facts with an open mind, or even from examining them at all. Criticism, it seems to me, is as complex a study as medicine or economics. An actual book may be bad, just as an actual man may be sick, for any one of a thousand reasons.

*Elder.* Yet I should expect you to be sympathetic to *some* critical theories—Croce's, for instance.

*Young.* On the contrary, Croce's theory seems to me a perfect illustration of what I am talking



about. Its attempt to reduce art to "Expression" is exactly like the attempt of the old philosophers to reduce everything to Fire, or Water, or the Absolute, or the One-in-the-Many—just one more example of the unending search for Unity, or Order, or Law, or some other single word spelled with a capital that seems in some strange way to give these people intellectual satisfaction and emotional comfort. Papini has summed up Croce's theory so admirably that one cannot hope to improve upon it. I notice, Elder, that you have Papini's "Four and Twenty Minds" in your library. Let me find the passage. . . . Here (*reading*): "If you disregard critical trivialities and didactic accessories, the entire aesthetic system of Croce amounts merely to a hunt for pseudonyms of the word 'art', and may indeed be stated briefly and accurately in this formula: art = intuition = expression = feeling = imagination = fancy = lyricism = beauty. And you must be careful not to take these words with the shadings and distinctions which they have in ordinary or scientific language. Not a bit of it. Every word is merely a different series of syllables signifying absolutely and completely the same thing."

Naturally the result is hopelessly confusing. And it was bound to be so because the method of revelation-through-synonym is itself absurd. For if your synonym is really an exact synonym, the result is mere tautology, which does not advance you a step; and if the synonym is not a complete synonym, but

only a partial one, or perhaps not a synonym at all—if the meanings of the words, in short, merely overlap, or do not even do that—your statement of identity is false.

*Middleton.* I wish I could dispose of every theory so simply. Do you really feel that Croce's whole "Aesthetic", a book, as I remember it, of some five hundred closely printed pages, reduces itself to that?

*Young.* I do; but if you think a closer approach would help, let's get the book. Have you it, Elder?

*Elder.* I seem to have the good fortune to have every book that either of you ask for. Here. (*He hands the volume to Young.*)

*Young.* Now let me read you this. This is the first paragraph on the first page:

"Knowledge has two forms: it is either *intuitive* knowledge or *logical* knowledge; knowledge obtained through the *imagination* or knowledge obtained through the *intellect*; knowledge of the *individual* or knowledge of the *universal*; of *individual things* or of the *relations* between them: it is, in fact, productive either of *images* or of *concepts*."

Now you will notice that this opening paragraph makes at least five separate assertions, and also, by implication, the assertion that these five assertions are identical with each other—that they are merely five different ways of saying the same thing. Let us take the first statement. That there is in fact any clear-cut division between "intuitive" and "logical"

knowledge I presume to doubt, but the distinction has at least a long metaphysical tradition behind it, and we'll let it pass. Croce, as is his habit, doesn't define what he *means* by intuitive knowledge, but it seems fairly safe to assume that he is using the word in its most common philosophical sense of immediate apprehension or direct perception: that, at least, is the only sense that could be even partially justified in that context. But when he goes on to separate knowledge obtained through the "imagination" from knowledge obtained through the "intellect", any self-respecting modern psychologist would have to part company with him. That is merely a relic of a long discredited faculty psychology. It is impossible, of course, to separate the imagination from the intellect: both words are merely hypostatizations of processes; they are merely the nouns for the verbs "to imagine" and "to think", and it is next to impossible to think without imagining and certainly impossible to imagine without thinking. Does an inventor use his "imagination" or his "intellect"? Among people who know very little about either, Poetry is often supposed to be the product exclusively of the Imagination and Science of the Intellect. Such a notion fails entirely to see the intellectual content in the poetry of Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Browning, Eliot, or the brilliant imagination which it required to formulate the theories of Newton, Darwin and Einstein. As for Croce's implication that intuitive knowledge is the same as

knowledge obtained through the imagination—in other words, that to perceive is the same as to imagine—any self-respecting logician would leave the room when he heard it. And to go on: Is knowledge of “individual things” really and always different in kind from knowledge of the “relations” between them? Is a Gothic rose window, or even a common snowflake, an individual thing or a pattern of relationships? Can’t we have “intuitive”, that is, direct perceptual, knowledge of one man standing on another’s shoulders just as well as we can of one man standing alone? If we have a baseball diamond, and a man standing on each base, don’t the spectators at the game see the spatial relations between the five men as “intuitively” as they do the five men themselves? Do images differ so radically from concepts? Well, I could go on for a week if I wanted to make a line-by-line analysis of Croce, but his opening paragraph is enough to show the utterly foggy and irresponsible kind of thinking we have to contend with.

I turn a few pages and come to this sentence on page 4: “Intuition is the undifferentiated unity of the perception of the real and of the simple image of the possible.” What in heaven’s name does *that* mean? . . . Perhaps it might turn out to mean something, if you went over it again and again and tried various interpretations to see if any one of them made sense; but what are you to do when a sentence like this is followed by another just as muddled and

obscure, and that by others of the same kind, so that several possible interpretations can be made of each sentence, in no one of which one can have the slightest confidence? And suppose that, when one of Croce's remarks does happen to be clear, one finds it either some mere truism—often printed in italics as if it were Croce's own personal discovery—or some remark that is plainly absurd—such, for example, as this on page 120: "The activity which judges is called *taste*; the productive activity is called *genius*: genius and taste are therefore substantially *identical*." The italicized words are his. Suppose, in short, that his statements are always pontifical, and his manner arrogant; that he spends two-thirds of his time straightening out confusions that no one could possibly fall into; and that he reasons so badly that you could drive a horse and carriage through every page—can't one be excused for calling such a man a muddlehead or a charlatan?

*Elder.* Considerations of urbanity would prevent me from using such terms, though I find myself in agreement with your conclusion, an experience as pleasant as it is unusual. What astonishes me, however, is to find you taking this attitude. I had imagined that, as an impressionist, or at least as an anti-traditionalist and an anti-formalist, you would be sympathetic to at least some aspects of Croce's thought. How about you, Middleton?

*Middleton.* I'm afraid I have as deep an aversion to most of Croce's thought as Young has. There

seem to me to be one or two half-truths in his work, and here and there insistence on some points that ought not to be overlooked; but in general he discredits even what is sound in his theory by overstating it. However, it seems to me that Young ought to conquer his superficial irritation over Croce's arrogance and unintelligibility, and defend him for us. As Croce himself says at one point, "Error always contains an element of truth."

*Young.* He couldn't even get that straight. What is the element of truth in the theory that the arrangement of leaves in a teacup will tell a woman how many times she is going to marry and how many children she will have? Or in the theory that after death most of us will burn in eternal brimstone? If he had said merely that error *often* contains an element of truth he would of course have been stating a simple fact, but, alas, also a simple platitude.

But I am perfectly willing to act as the devil's lawyer, though as I am going to argue sometimes with my tongue in my cheek I hope you will not hold anything I say now too much against me later. But first you will have to excuse me if I take a couple of essays by J. E. Spingarn down from your shelves and use them as my text instead of Croce himself. Spingarn has been the leading American disciple of Croce, and has at least reduced the Italian's doctrine to a consistently intelligible form. Now, Spingarn points out, "literature is an expression of something"—

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*Middleton.* So is conversation an expression of something; but what of it?

*Young.* Just a moment. Croce, writes Spingarn, "has led aesthetic thought inevitably from the concept that art is expression to the conclusion that all expression is art."

*Middleton.* In other words, if I say "Hell", that's art?

*Young.* Please! The sole question the critic should ask himself, says Spingarn, is, "What has the poet proposed to himself to do, and how has he done it?"

*Middleton.* Well, suppose the poet's aim has been to make an ass of himself, and suppose he has completely succeeded; does he thereby prove himself a great poet?

*Young.* It seems to me that you could give your criticisms and questions at least a certain minimum of dignity.

*Middleton.* With the best will in the world, I find that difficult when dealing with the type of assertions I have just heard. As we all recognize, Art is a word that carries with it a great deal of prestige. And Expression, particularly in the sense of Self-Expression, is also a word that in recent years has come to carry with it a great deal of prestige. Both words, in short, have come to be used honorifically, and not in a simple indicative sense. They are used precisely as the word Standards is used—indeed, even more emotively—and the derision that

you yourself poked at the use of Standards in that sense should apply with double force here. Naturally, therefore, many persons, when they are told that Art is *identical* with Expression, feel that something very profound is being said; for the simple reason that they never trouble to attach any genuinely indicative meaning to either word, and two honorific words in such immediate juxtaposition give them a vague emotional glow which they mistake for an intellectual insight. The blunt truth, of course, is that everything that anyone does—talking, eating, sleeping, breathing—is an expression of that person. It is no *achievement* for an individual to express himself; there is no way in which he can escape it, even if he is the most servile imitator. Imitation is the imitator's form of self-expression just as truly as murder is the murderer's form of self-expression. And of course, even restraint and inhibition are forms of self-expression. The only way I can account for the present prestige of the word Expression is to assume that it appeals in some obscure way to a man's vanity and sense of self-importance.

*Young.* Of course, if you wish to give the word "self-expression" an entirely different meaning from what it has, you can win a very cheap victory. The point you seem to overlook is that some expressions are personal and individual, and others impersonal and lacking in individuality—

*Elder.* I hope you'll let me answer that, Middleton. Your reply assumes, Young, that an artistic



expression is valuable in proportion as it is personal and individual, and in voicing it you are voicing, I think, perhaps the most widespread as it is certainly the most vicious artistic fallacy of modern times. None of the ancient poets, sculptors and architects, none of the masters in the great age of painting, tried to "express his personality". The difference between ancient and modern poetry might be symbolized by the difference between Homer and Whitman. "The Iliad" is as completely impersonal as the "Song of Myself" is personal; and I do not think I need to point out to you which is the better poem. So little were the ancients interested in "personality" or "individuality" that they did not even have our neurotic modern fear of "standardization". Nothing was more standardized than the Greek temple; but the standard happened to be a very high one. It was principally *because* the Greek temple was standardized that the Greek architect did not fritter his energies and waste his strength among all sorts of conflicting ideals. The ideal was set and accepted; it was for him only to devote himself to the perfection of details. The same is largely true of sixteenth-century painting. And this, as I believe it has been remarked, is what explains the marvellous tranquillity and serenity of old art, as reflected, for example, in the paintings of Titian. It had none of the feverishness and restlessness, the personal exhibitionism, the excited effort to draw attention to

itself, that we find in modern painting, music, architecture and literature.

*Young.* But if you overlook the unique personality reflected in every great work of art or literature, you fall into the absurd ranking system of which professors are so fond. It is the view dear to all the textbook writers on literary history. It simplifies things so. It was this condition in his own country that led Remy de Gourmont to complain that French literature had become arranged hierarchically like a tenement house. "Having set up the great poet of the century as a standard," he remarked, "the critics thereafter value the others merely as precursors or as disciples." Of course the people who take such textbook hierarchies seriously must naturally come to feel that they ought never to read any other English author than Shakespeare; or at least that they ought not to turn to any of the others until each of the thirty-seven plays of Shakespeare has been read. Then they may come to Milton and work through him before consenting to step down the next rung of the ladder; and so on. That, it seems to me, can be our only logical course if we insist on regarding the differences of *kind* among authors as mere differences of *degree*. If the ranking system is valid among authors, why shouldn't it apply to colors? Is red aesthetically "superior" to green? Is purple "higher" than orange? Is lavender "better" than pearl? No one of sense ever talks that way.

Each color has its own individuality; it has its own value *because it is unique*. Isn't the personality of an author unique in the same way? Or suppose we turn to the sciences and arts. Is biology "better" than physics? Is music "higher" than painting? Well, it is true that you encounter people who participate in just such arguments, but anyone of intelligence knows that the arts and sciences are not really comparable in this hierarchical sense, because each gives you something that another cannot give. No real substitution of one for the other is possible. And the same is obviously true of writers.

*Elder.* But when we compare Tolstoy, say, with Rex Beach, your analogy breaks down. Rex Beach may have a "unique" personality, as in strict theory everyone has; but it is too undistinguished from thousands of others; it is, in a word, dull. When you dismiss the very idea of comparison, of superiority and inferiority, on the ground that each writer is unique, then every writer becomes as important as every other—a complete *reductio ad absurdum*. The poet has after all, as T. S. Eliot has put it, not a "personality" to express, but a particular medium. The best thing on this subject, however, has been said by Gilbert Murray, and I cannot forbear from reading it to you. (*He finds the book and reads*):

"Modern critics seem to hate the thought of 'imitation' or 'representation'. They are in love with the idea of 'self-expression', self-assertion, the revelation of personality, and the like. I might content myself

by quoting the answer of an eminent French artist who was head of the Slade school, to a student who defended careless drawing on the ground that she wanted to express her personality: '*La personnalité de mademoiselle n'intéresse qu'à maman.*' The truth seems to be that whatever you do, you will inevitably reveal your personality, but that, if your work is good, it will be an interesting personality, and, if not, not. Therefore you can safely concentrate on doing the work as well as possible, and let your personality look after itself."

*Young.* The fallacy in Mr. Murray's remarks, it seems to me, lies in his use of the word "good". That word begs the question. If an artist's work is good it is good for some reason. And that reason, at bottom, is the artist's personality: it is the peculiar flavor and impress of the work that only he was capable of giving to it.

*Elder.* Of course it is obvious enough that a work cannot be good unless there is at least one reason why it is good—though there may be a hundred. If you were asked why Shakespeare's work was good, you could not sum it up in any one quality; you would have to talk of characterization, imagery, vigor, profundity, technique, insight, verbal virtuosity, exuberance, and so on. But you would hardly say to anyone that Shakespeare's work was great because of his personality. That would be altogether meaningless, because you could say it of any other writer. It merely puts the real problem back one

step, because one has then to ask, What are the qualities which made the personality itself great or distinguished? And it happens that, biographically, directly, we know next to nothing of Shakespeare's personality; we can only *infer* the qualities of that personality from the work itself. The same is true of Homer. Why not, therefore, discuss the qualities of the work at first hand, and leave "personality" out of it altogether?

*Middleton.* You have put your finger, Elder, on the real weakness of Croce's theory. Entirely aside from the question of its truth or falsity, it is completely hollow. It takes one nowhere. "Art is Expression." Of course it's expression; such a definition is as unilluminating as it is obvious. Of course any given work of art is an expression of the artist who created it. But it is absurd to talk as if it were an expression of him alone. It's an expression of the nation of the artist, of the society, the time, the civilization in which he lived or lives. Every great work of art is at bottom the product of a whole civilization. The most "original" and "unique" artist, as any history of art shows, is indebted to the art that has gone before him, without which his own work would surely have been other than it was, and might not have come into being at all. Would Shakespeare himself have written as he did if he had not modeled his work on Marlowe? Surely there was no more daringly original painter in his day than El Greco, but he did not spring from no-

where. He was a pupil of Titian's, and was influenced by Tintoretto, the Bassanos, and the work of Michelangelo; in his early work these influences were obvious, and his later "distorted" work evolved naturally out of his early work. Would he have painted as he did if he had been born in China, or if he had been too poor to afford art instruction, or had taken it from a second-rater, or had failed even to come into vital contact with art at all? Personality is to a large extent the product of environment, and Taine, after qualifications, is a far safer guide than Croce. But we have been over most of this ground before.

*Young.* Well, let us drop the question. But the strength and value of Croce's theory, it seems to me (speaking as his newly appointed lawyer) lies in the fact that it insists that each work of art be judged on its individual merits. At one stroke it cuts through all the stupid, meaningless categories that critics have set up, those distorting lenses that stand between them and the individual work of art. It does not take a poem and say: "This is a sonnet. A sonnet must consist of fourteen lines of five-foot iambs, rhyming according to a prescribed scheme; it must be confined to an isolated sentiment or reflection; it must rise to a climax in the octave and ebb to a conclusion in the sestet. This poem fails to do one—or more—of these things. Therefore it is not a good sonnet. Therefore it is not a good poem." It does not condemn a play because the critic can say: "This is

not exactly a comedy nor is it exactly a farce. Therefore, because I cannot fit it into any of my ready-made pigeonholes, it is not a good play." The Crocean theory insists that every sonnet, every drama, every novel is *sui generis*, and must be judged by itself alone.

*Elder.* What you are saying is either a truism or an absurdity. Every sonnet is, of course, different from every other sonnet; but that is no reason why we should altogether forgo comparisons with other sonnets, or even with the possible requirements of a certain norm. Everything in the universe, so far as that goes, is in a sense unique, because there are always at least minute differences between it and anything else. Even the proverbial peas in a pod, as I think we have said before, reveal their individualities after careful and microscopic scrutiny. But if we took Croce's doctrine seriously we should have to throw out not only all literary classifications, but all classification of any kind, and that would mean mere chaos: we could not think at all. Similarities are even more important than differences: their existence, indeed, makes the discussion of differences possible. For mere convenience alone, it is immensely useful for a writer or a speaker to be able to refer to a certain object as a chair, to distinguish it from a piano, even though the chair has its own individuality. In the same way the critic may forgivably refer to some lines in a book as a sonnet, unique and *sui*

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*generis* though that sonnet may be. He may even call it a sonnet to distinguish it from a rondeau. More, he may even, as I have hinted, forgivably compare it with other sonnets, to indicate its merits and defects. It is literally impossible for him to describe it merely as it is in itself. All description whatever implies, at bottom, comparison. When we describe Cyrano de Bergerac as a man with a long nose, we necessarily imply comparison, even though the adjective is used in the positive and not in the comparative. We mean that Cyrano's nose was longer than the average nose—otherwise we should not have considered the detail worth mentioning. The adjective itself takes its meaning from a norm. And so for any quality whatever.

*Young.* Let's waive all this metaphysical quibbling. The Crocean critic, when all is said, is likely to come closer than any other to a consistent understanding of a work of literature, because his one question about it is this: "What was the author's intention, and how far has he succeeded in carrying it out?"

*Elder.* But the critic cannot *know* the author's intention. All he can know is the work of literature before him, and he can only *surmise* the author's intention from that. The critic's surmise may easily be wrong. A hunter may shoot at one duck, and bring down another. If he has not previously announced his intention, he will be credited with the



intention corresponding to his achievement. Just so the artist, striving for one result, may accidentally achieve a different result, but one just as pleasing.

*Young.* Art and literature are too complex for that; such accidents are impossible in them. A man may accidentally make a good pun, but he cannot accidentally write a great novel. And just as the better a marksman is known to be, the most justified are we in crediting him with aiming at what he actually hits, so are we justified in crediting a great artist with intending his result. Moreover the Crocean critic can tell the author's intent because he is at special pains to do so. First of all, he approaches the author's work sympathetically, and he attempts to make this sympathy so complete that it becomes *empathy*, a sort of self-immersion of the critic in the personality of the artist.

*Elder.* That is not self-immersion; that is self-delusion. If you criticize Goethe, you may imagine yourself to be Goethe, and if you criticize a fried egg you may, for that matter, imagine yourself to be a fried egg. But you no more enter into the real feelings of Goethe than you enter into the real feelings of the fried egg. You can no more place yourself psychologically inside Goethe than you can place yourself psychologically inside the egg. You can merely tell yourself, or others, that you are there; you can, in brief, very easily deceive yourself.

*Young.* Oh come now; you are trying to win a very cheap triumph by pretending to take a meta-

phorical statement literally, and then pointing out that it cannot be *literally* true—as if anyone thought it was.

*Elder.* I wish I could be confident that the Croceans take such statements as you have just made *merely* metaphorically, and that they recognize how dubious even the metaphor is. Now it may be fun to imagine oneself inside another man's mind, provided one does not take it seriously. But it is obvious that the Croceans do take it seriously. How otherwise is one to explain a sentence like this by Mr. Spingarn (*reading*): "Taste must reproduce the work of art within itself in order to understand and judge it; and at that moment aesthetic judgment becomes nothing more nor less than creative art itself." Now this, if you will pardon me, is pretty stiff. It means that anyone who reads "Faust" with understanding is as great as Goethe. The critic who believes this is not merely guilty of self-delusion, but of enormous presumption. Does he really flatter himself that he is able to reproduce the full vision of Goethe, with all the richness, all the unexpressed implications, that lay behind the *written* Faust? One may as well expect to hide a twenty-dollar gold piece under a penny. Even a critic himself as great as Goethe could never hope to reproduce completely and exactly the vision in the mind of the artist; for the mind of the artist and the mind of the critic would be, at best, like two circles which might widely overlap, but could never precisely coincide. And then

there are, in addition, all the losses, distortions and transmutations that occur in writing and reading. For writing and reading imply a double translation. First the artist must translate his vision into inadequate words and images, and then the reader or critic, using these words as signals and suggestions, must translate them into *his* vision. As the late Professor Woodberry once wrote in referring to images: "So far from realizing the image as it was in the artist's mind and receiving it charged with his personality merely, it is we ourselves who create the image by charging it with our own personality."

This "self-immersion" of the critic in the artist, finally, is not criticism; it is the deliberate abandonment of criticism. When Margaret Fuller—long anticipating Croce—wrote in 1846 that the highest critics "enter into the nature of another being and judge his work by its own law", she was virtually saying that they do not judge it at all; for judgment must come from outside. You cannot *share* the motives of an author and *judge* them at the same time. Emerson drew the natural corollary of the Croce doctrine—or ought one to say the Margaret Fuller doctrine?—when he told Alcott that he would not criticize his compositions because "it would be absurd to require them to conform to my way of writing and aiming". Emerson, of course, never followed any such principle consistently, and criticized his predecessors and contemporaries freely enough: one suspects that, whether he himself was fully aware

of it or not, he had merely found an ingenious excuse to give Alcott for not undertaking an embarrassing task.

But let us come back again to the one great Crocean question, the question which most Croceans insist is the only possible one that the critic has a right to ask: "What was the author's intention, and how far has he succeeded in carrying it out?" Suppose one grants, for the sake of argument, that the critic can know this intention, and suppose in a given case the author has carried out this intention completely. What then? The intention itself may be modest, or trivial, or even silly. A boy who shoots a paper dart at the professor's bald spot and hits it achieves his intent perfectly: it may be by mere luck or it may even be by skill; but as the intent is childish and clownish, we set down the act itself as childish and clownish. We may acknowledge the boy's skill fully, but that does not prevent us from observing that it is misdirected. In art as in the rest of life, it is not enough that we should ask what the creator aimed to do and whether he has fulfilled his aim; we must also ask, as Irving Babbitt has suggested, whether the aim itself is intrinsically worth while. But the critic should not stop even there. For it is just as possible and as necessary in art as in life to compare the *relative* values of different aims. Individual aims, however successfully attained, fall ultimately into place, as Livingston Lowes has reminded us, in a scheme of values.

*Middleton.* Exactly. So far as succeeding in what he starts out to do goes, Edgar Guest is perhaps more successful than William Blake; but what he has to communicate is only shop-worn, sticky and worthless sentiments, while what Blake had to communicate was fresh, profound, and vital. It could only result in hopeless confusion if we were to ignore, as the Croceans do, the essential distinction between an artist's ability to communicate and the value of what he has to communicate.

The Croceans seem to assume, further, that an artist always knows what his own aim is. That is surely not true. The aim of an artist is seldom simple, unequivocal and completely known to the artist himself before he begins his work; it is often confused, shifting, ambiguous, and nearly always complex. Further, it is frequently modified, and it grows and develops in directions unexpected by the artist, with the progress of the work itself. The artist's aim, in short, may be profoundly influenced *by what he finds himself doing*. And when the final result is unsatisfactory, it may not be primarily because the artist has fallen short of his aim, but because his aim itself was cloudy or full of self-contradictions.

Croce's theory is vulnerable from so many points, indeed, that it is difficult to see how it has ever imposed upon anyone. I suppose many readers are impressed mainly because so much of the "Aesthetic" is unintelligible, and among persons unaccustomed to philosophic thought, unintelligibility nearly al-

ways passes for profundity. Others, again, are probably flattered to be told that their taste is identical with the artist's genius, and that their criticism is itself an act of creation, or at least re-creation. This gives them a chance, never unwelcome, to indulge in an emotional orgy. "All art is lyrical", shouts Mr. Spingarn, and he apparently believes that all criticism should be lyrical too, and even all theories of criticism.

But, as I remarked at the beginning, we should guard against the danger of repudiating the Crocean theories completely simply because there is so much nonsense in them. Let us look for the few pearls of truth in the dunghill of error. The chief of them seems to be this: that the critic must approach a work of art or literature without any *preconceived* idea of what that work should attempt. In other words, the Crocean doctrine is most defensible when stated in its negative form: we must never condemn a writer for not writing something he never intended to write. We must try to *begin* with a sympathetic understanding of what an author has tried to do, though we should recognize that this is merely a preliminary step in the whole process of criticism. In judging poetry, for example, we must not forget, as I. A. Richards remarks, that the aim of the poem comes first, and is the sole justification of its means. We may quarrel, frequently we must, with the aim of the poem, but we have first to ascertain what it is. This, for one thing, will keep us, particularly

in the judgment of poetry, from falling into what Richards calls "technical presuppositions", which interfere whenever we make the mistake of supposing either that the *means* a poet uses are valuable for their own sake, or that they can be prescribed without reference to his aim. In so far as Crocean standards preserve us from this technical dogmatism, they are to be welcomed. Further, they may save us from that over-simple form of "comparative criticism" which assumes that what another poet did in another poem, for example, is in itself a good ground for deciding that this poet in doing differently has done wrong.

*Elder.* Precisely. But we have had enough of Croce and his theories. And our Sunday's breakfast is waiting.

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## IX

### SINCERITY, STYLE AND PURE ART

*Elder.* I begin to feel, my friends, that we have already spent too much time in destructive criticism, in the perhaps needless demolition and exposure of errors. It seems to me that we ought to attempt something more positive, and ask precisely what it is that the critic should look for in a work of literature or art.

*Middleton.* I don't see how you can make any clear-cut distinction between destructive and constructive thought. It is difficult to expose an error without betraying, or even elaborating, one's own point of view. And in the course of our criticisms and concessions we already seem fairly well agreed upon a respectable number of positive conclusions. I summarized some of them just before breakfast. Let us look at them again.

We have seen that the Croceans are right—though surely not altogether original—in their implication that we should beware of denying one sort of excellence because it is not another. And the point is worth insisting upon, because no error in criticism is more common than this. Open almost any of the



literary sections of our current magazines and newspapers, and you will find reviewer after reviewer lamenting, in effect, that apple trees do not bear cherries. The canary, they discover to their chagrin, cannot roar; the lion obstinately refuses to twitter. They point out quite seriously that Theodore Dreiser is not, alas, Willa Cather. That an author almost necessarily must have the defects of his qualities is the last truth that you can apparently get the average critic to see or admit.

*Young.* True; but bad judgment of that sort is not always the result merely of a mistaken critical approach; it may reveal some deeper bias of temperament or outlook on the part of the critic. You can hardly expect a Puritan to have a complete appreciation of Wycherley or Boccaccio, or a cynic to feel the full impact of Milton or Bunyan.

*Middleton.* I accept your contribution. Another error that I touched upon just before dinner, hardly less common than this, but one which the Croceans among others would be likely to avoid, is that of judging a whole work of art, whether a piece of music, a painting, a play, a novel or a poem, by one or more details, instead of the other way about. It is what Richards has called the error of mistaking the technique for the value, of exalting a mere method into an end. Perhaps, as a corollary from this, we may lay it down as a fairly general rule that there is no single specific quality the presence or absence of which is alone sufficient to guarantee the goodness

or badness of any work of art. We must be very cautious, in short, about condemning any work because it lacks the particular virtue which we may happen to have in mind at the moment. A writer's style alone, for example, may have any one of a number of merits that are not necessarily compatible with each other: it may have clarity or subtlety, simplicity or richness, caressing smoothness or stark power. It is unlikely to have all of these; yet it may lack one or two of them and still be superb. Further, we are not to forget that both the virtues and defects of any writer are organic; it is not possible to arrive at an intelligent estimate of his work by considering these virtues or defects *separately*, and then adding them up later to make some sort of quasi-arithmetical sum.

*Young.* But is there any real danger that critics would do anything so stupid?

*Middleton.* Well, you will remember that yesterday morning, in our talk on the possibility of objective criticism, I mentioned "A Statistical Study of Literary Merit" by F. L. Wells, which so fascinated me that I carry a clipping of it in my pocket. This Wells, you will recall, selected ten writers for his study—Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, Irving, Longfellow, Lowell, Poe and Thoreau—and turned them over to twenty university graduate students in English to determine their final literary "rankings" by the average of the rankings assigned to them by the twenty students. But I

neglected to tell you that this test was much more complicated, and hence much more "scientific", than a mere bald straightaway average. For Wells asked each of these students to rank each of the ten authors for each of ten literary qualities—Charm, Clearness, Euphony, Finish, Force, Imagination, Originality, Proportion, Sympathy, Wholesomeness. The final ranking, of course, was extremely "scientific", for it was based on an average of the ten writers' grades in each of the ten literary qualities.

*Young.* To relieve this almost unendurable suspense, tell us how the writers came out.

*Middleton.* Hawthorne, first; Poe, second, Emerson, third.

*Young.* Ah, didn't Thoreau even get a place?

*Middleton.* I'm sorry; your horse pulled in eighth, behind Lowell, Longfellow, Irving and Bryant. It seems he was very low in Clearness, Finish, Proportion and Sympathy.

*Young.* Low in clearness? I grow dizzy. . . . But from what little I know of statistics I believe I detect a flaw that even your Mr. Wells might acknowledge. These economists who make up index numbers, for example, which record changes in what they call the average price level, recognize that certain commodities are consumed to a very much larger extent than others, and so weight their commodities accordingly. Wheat counts for more than strawberries, iron and steel for more than zinc, and so on. Now even your Mr. Wells might

be brought to acknowledge that in deciding on literary standings, Force and Originality and Imagination ought to count for more than Clearness and Wholesomeness, which are within the reach of any careful mediocrity.

*Middleton.* There is a better course still, and that is to throw out the whole idea——

*Young.* Oh, I don't object!

*Middleton.* —for this same fallacy, in less obvious form, is continually making its appearance in criticism. There is the implication, if several things can be said in favor of a writer, that he is therefore a good writer, and that if many things can be said against him, he is therefore a bad writer. I do not accept this implication. A writer must be judged, I continue to insist, by *all* his qualities, but these qualities are in his work *organically*: they cannot be added together, or offset against each other, or "averaged" in any mechanical or arithmetical sense.

*Young.* I am not sure I agree with you that a writer cannot be judged by the presence or absence of any one quality. There is, for example, readability——

*Middleton.* I said *specific* quality. To say that an author is unreadable is merely another way of saying that he is bad. He is not bad because he is unreadable; he is unreadable because he is bad.

*Young.* But suppose we take some more specific quality, say Sincerity—which, by the way, does not happen to appear on the Wells list.

*Middleton.* You surely don't believe that sincerity or its absence can alone determine the importance of a writer?

*Young.* Well, it certainly offsets many more flashy qualities, and it appears to have a very high survival value. Curiously enough, posterity seems much better able to detect its presence or absence than the readers of the writer's own time. Many a writer who dazzled his contemporaries seems merely affected to us, and we completely neglect him for that reason alone. What seemed lofty eloquence at first now seems hollow bombast, what seemed an exquisite and enchanting prose now seems mere preciousness. We read the swollen banalities of famous orators, and are unable to account for their reputations or their influence. We read the pompous rhetoric of Johnson, a man "talking on stilts", or the careful and monotonous rise and fall of Gibbon's periods; Lyly has become merely a joke; we find ourselves losing our taste for De Quincey's prose poems, and for the meticulously "formed" styles of Ruskin and Stevenson and Pater. And all because we find—or think we find—in all this artifice a note of insincerity. On the other hand, what seemed extremely plain to contemporary critics may later touch the heart. It is this quality that does so much to keep Bunyan alive.

*Middleton.* Of course "sincerity" in literature may be thought of in a narrower and in a broader

sense. In the narrower sense it is a merely moral quality——

*Elder.* Merely moral, did you say?

*Young.* Yes, I think Middleton's adverb is justified, Elder. I believe Aldous Huxley says somewhere that sincerity in art is not an affair of will, of a moral choice between honesty and dishonesty, but mainly an affair of talent. There is surely a good deal of truth in that. It is part of my regular job, you know, to pick the verse that we run daily in our paper. Many of the verses submitted deal with such themes as unrequited love and the death of a lover or a son, and not infrequently they are accompanied by little notes telling me that the experience recorded in the poem actually happened to the writer. I have no reason for thinking these notes untruthful, but the verses they accompany are almost invariably bad—stereotyped, cheaply sentimental, bombastic, sometimes merely ludicrous. Professional poets, on the other hand, who may not have had at first hand any of the experiences they record, can acquire their feelings imaginatively, and present them so that they seem more convincing than the actual experiences of persons without poetic talent. The ordinary run of men, in short, as Remy de Gourmont said, think only thoughts already exhaled, experience only well-worn feelings and sensations as faded as old gloves. Their verse, when they attempt it, has a curious impersonality, and always a familiar

ring; they know just what things are "poetic" and what things aren't, because they have been taught just how to look at everything. All their responses, in brief, are stock responses. That is why "sincerity" seems so important to me as a literary quality, because its presence or absence means almost the same thing as the presence or absence of literary competence.

*Middleton.* I began to say, when I was interrupted, that there are two distinct senses of "sincerity", and I think you are in grave danger of confusing them. As Richards points out, sincerity may perhaps be most easily defined from the critic's point of view negatively, as the absence of any apparent attempt on the part of the artist to work effects upon the reader which do not work for himself—

*Young.* The adjective "apparent" seems to me particularly happy.

*Middleton.* He then goes on, however, to distinguish between that type of insincerity which we find when the writer *deliberately* tries to produce effects in his readers which don't happen for himself, and the type which we have when a writer cannot *himself* distinguish his own genuine promptings from those he would merely like to have, or those which he hopes will make a good poem, for example. When a writer mistakes his own motives and begins to profess feelings which are different from those that are in fact actuating him, he need not of course *state* those feelings or even express

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them openly; it is enough if they are hinted to us. And they need not be actual personal "real live feelings"; they may be merely imagined feelings. In this second sense, of course, we can hardly attach any *moral* blame to insincerity—unless we are to think a man morally reprehensible merely because he is not a good poet.

*Elder.* But how does your first definition hold up? When a writer indulges in irony his feelings are often the exact contrary of those he is overtly expressing. Is he therefore "insincere"?

*Middleton.* Obviously in that case he is neither mistaking his own motives nor is he *really* trying to deceive or mislead his readers regarding them. He deliberately intends his words to be taken in two senses, or to be given different interpretations by simple and sophisticated readers. As Richards remarks, many of the secrets of "style" could probably be shown to be matters of tone, of the perfect recognition of the writer's relation to the reader in view of what is being said and their joint feelings about it.

*Elder.* But all this shows that apparently simple literary qualities are extremely elusive when we try to analyze them.

*Middleton.* True, and it will help us greatly if we begin always by distinguishing clearly between what Richards calls the communicative and the value aspects of a work of art.

*Young.* That seems to me just another form of the familiar but dubious division between an idea and



its expression. Does that division really exist? I want to read you this from Croce's "Aesthetic":

"When we talk of books well thought and ill written, we cannot mean anything but that in such books are parts, pages, periods or propositions well thought and well written, and other parts (perhaps the least important) ill thought and ill written, not really thought and so not really expressed."

Arnold Bennett says the same thing, even more explicitly, in his "Literary Taste", on Elder's shelves here. . . . Let me read his passage also:

"Style cannot be distinguished from matter. When a writer conceives an idea he conceives it in a form of words. That form of words constitutes his style, and it is absolutely governed by the idea. The idea can only exist in words, and it can only exist in one form of words. You cannot say exactly the same thing in two different ways. Slightly alter the expression, and you slightly alter the idea. Surely it is obvious that the expression cannot be altered without altering the thing expressed! A writer, having conceived and expressed an idea, may, and probably will, 'polish it up'. But what does he polish up? To say that he polishes up his style is merely to say that he is polishing up his idea, that he has discovered faults or imperfections in his idea, and is perfecting it. An idea exists in proportion as it is expressed; it exists when it is expressed, and not before. It expresses itself."

*Middleton.* You and the writers you quote are

merely deserting one half-truth for another half-truth, one error for a greater error, and your position reminds me of the truth of Bradley's aphorism that the exact opposite of a false idea may be an idea equally false. The sharp division that the average man makes between "style" and "matter" is naive, but it is one thing to perceive this naiveté and another to assert that style and matter are identical. This is almost as bad as to hold that there is no difference between day and night because it is impossible to say at precisely what moment one becomes the other. There will always remain a distinction between the clarity of an idea in a writer's mind and his ability to convey that idea clearly to others. Recently, for example, I asked myself what it was that made John Dewey so hard to read. One of his worst stylistic faults, I found, was the indefinite reference of his pronouns. Now it is the *reader* who has difficulty in guessing to which noun or phrase a pronoun refers, not Mr. Dewey. And the same type of difficulty arises when an author uses words inaccurately—having himself a perfectly clear idea of their intended reference but giving his reader a misleading one. No one can browse through a book like H. W. Fowler's "Dictionary of Modern English Usage" without realizing how enormous is the amount of bad writing which results simply from the failure or sheer inability of writers to *say what they really mean*, that is, to convey a clear and unequivocal idea

of what they themselves seem to have clearly enough in mind.

Nor is inability to convey ideas solely the result of the failure of individual writers to master the existing resources of language. Those resources are often themselves inadequate. If there were no difference whatever between an idea and its communication, as Croce and Bennett profess to believe, it would be impossible to account for the origin or growth of language itself. If language were never inadequate to express the more delicate nuances in ideas, or the more elusive qualities of things, it would never need to grow, and, indeed, it never would have grown. For words and the ideas they stand for do not spring into existence simultaneously. It is nearly always the idea that precedes the word; if it were the other way round, we should have a mere sound without a meaning. We must have the idea before we grope for or invent a word to convey it. Even the poorest of us is conscious that his ideas are richer than the words he has to express them in. If—as extreme behaviorists like John Watson insist—all thinking were really verbal, then the Bennett-Croce doctrine might be correct, or nearly so. But we often think in images, clear enough in our own mind but difficult to describe. And each of us is subject to complex emotions and attitudes which no existing word exactly fits. Hence, when we try to convey our thought by speech or writing, each of us is

aware of an unexpressed penumbra of denotation or connotation. We are constantly obliged either to overstate or understate our feelings. Words are simply that part of thought which has become *socialized* and *crystallized*; and language is, so to speak, merely the greatest common denominator of thought: it holds and expresses merely that pool of ideas which we possess in common.

And, of course, in addition to the mere *meanings* of words, style includes all those aural properties, from the mere absence of cacophony to the most delicate euphony and rhythm, which are almost unrelated to an author's thought. Croce extends his theory into painting, and practically holds that the hand can draw what the eye can see. Yet every artist must know that this is not true, else why would an artist ever be dissatisfied with his result? The whole position is a flagrant violation of common sense. Arnold Bennett, I believe, somewhere remarks that Sir Thomas Browne is the greatest of English stylists, and elsewhere that Herbert Spencer is the greatest of English thinkers. But if style and thought were really identical, as he professed to believe, such a division would be impossible: the greatest stylist and the greatest thinker would have to be the same man.

*Elder.* That is true. A man's style is neither separate from his thought nor identical with it. It is, rather, one phase of his thought, just as his logic is another. A writer may be, like Kant or Hegel, a great logical, scientific, or philosophical thinker and

a very poor stylist, but it is impossible to imagine any writer who could be a genuinely fine stylist and still have a thoroughly commonplace mind. He might be wrong-headed and ill-informed; his logic might be grotesque; but unless there were some distinction in his thought, he could never achieve a reputation as a stylist. There would have to be something individual or unique in his manner of seeing and describing things—

*Young.* Precisely. As Remy de Gourmont put it, style is feeling, seeing, thinking, and nothing more.

*Middleton.* Well, we cannot begin to argue this point all over again. It seems to me more profitable to move on to fresh territory, or at least to some allied question. I think Elder and I have made it clear enough that there is at least an important *distinction* between style and thought, and both of us are not only willing to admit, but ready to insist, that there can be no *separation* of them. For the same reason that I do not believe in any such thing as “style” taken alone, apart from the thought of which it is, as Elder has put it, an aspect, so I do not believe in art for art’s sake, or “pure” art, or “pure” literature; and as for the late George Moore’s notion of “pure poetry”, it is simply pure nonsense.

*Young.* Then I take it that you don’t even agree with Poe when he insists that a poem should be written solely for the poem’s sake?

*Middleton.* Isn’t such a statement rather meaningless? If it means that the poem need not inculcate

some specific moral, or convey some specific piece of information, well and good; but if it means that the poem need not say anything of importance at all, it seems to me a pretty sterile formula. Poe himself came so close to carrying out his own critical theory—or, if you prefer it the other way round, his critical theory reflected so well the type of thing he was able to achieve—that Emerson was almost justified in calling him “the jingle man”. But even Poe’s poetry was much better than his theory. The cult of art for art’s sake, no matter what form it takes, whether of worship of pure beauty or pure poetry, is, one cannot repeat too often, meaningless; for pure poetry, as we have seen before, would be at best an empty music, mere sound, and nonsense syllables would do as well as anything else. As a matter of fact, when we say that a line of poetry is beautiful, we seldom mean that it is beautiful merely as a musical sound; we mean that it contains a beautiful meaning, a beautiful image, a beautiful thought; and when we say a thought is beautiful we mean that it is noble, or profound, or exquisitely true. It is in this sense that beauty *is* truth, truth beauty.

*Young.* That sounds to me like pretty fancy talk. Of course, in the absurdly narrow interpretation you give to the phrase, art for art’s sake *is* nonsense, but you are knocking down a man of straw. To begin with, we *can* admire a poetic line merely for its sound. Take, for example, Tennyson’s

*The mellow ousel fluting in the elm. . . .*

*Middleton.* What you admire even there is not merely the sound *as* sound, but rather the pleasant harmony between sound and sense. Lines that are delightful merely because of their sound are seldom regarded as the highest type of poetry.

*Young.* Of course anyone who defends pure poetry certainly includes in it beautiful images. Take:

*Her paps are like fair apples in the prime*

cited by Max Eastman as an example of pure poetry. It is, of course the image, and not the sound, that is so charming here——

*Elder.* Oh, please don't overlook the alliteration—the double *p* in *paps* and *apples*, and the *p* in *prime*; not to speak of the *r-p* sound in *fair apples* followed by the *p-r* sound in *prime*.

*Young.* Well, in any case, those who believe that poetry should be pure mean, to use a phrase of Cabell's, that it is not a branch of pedagogy. They mean—as Mr. Eastman certainly does—that it should not attempt to deal with ideas, which are extraneous to it——

*Middleton.* If that is what they mean, then I have certainly not misrepresented them. For “pure” poetry, in that case, would exclude most of the poetry written by Donne, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, and even, I fancy, by Shakespeare. No, I am afraid that most great poetry and great literature of other kinds is and will continue to be incurably impure, all tangled up with what you would call extraneous ideas, not existing in any self-contained compartment or ex-

quisite vacuum, but constantly referring and related to the rest of life and experience. The view of the arts as providing a private heaven for aesthetes, as Richards has pointed out, can only result in a narrowing and restriction of interests, in preciousness, artificiality and spurious aloofness. How, by the way, do *you* judge poetry and art? How do you know when you are in the presence of a great poem?

*Young.* If I have not given some hint of that by this time I have surely been talking in vain. But I should say that, for the purposes of your present question, I judge a work of art by the quality and intensity of the emotional response it arouses in me. The more intense that emotional response is, the greater I believe the work of art to be.

*Middleton.* Precisely; that is exactly what I supposed you believed. In other words, you hold what, borrowing a hint from J. W. N. Sullivan, I shall call the orgasm theory—the theory, that is, that a work of art is to be judged by the way it affects us emotionally at the moment of impact. The perfect work of art, under such a definition, is one that excites the aesthetic emotion to its maximum. Now such a theory is hopelessly inadequate, for it overlooks the after-effects, the permanent modifications in the structure of the mind, that works of art can produce. No one is ever quite the same again, as Richards has pointed out, after any experience; his possibilities have altered in some degree. And among all the agents by which “the widening of the sphere of sensibility” may be



brought about, the arts are the most powerful. The arts, Richards continues, are our storehouse of recorded values. They spring from and perpetuate hours in the lives of exceptional people, when their control and command of experience is at its highest. You quoted approvingly a little while back Cabell's remark that art is not a branch of pedagogy, which implies that it is never the function of art to instruct. Now such a notion is either obviously true or obviously false, according as we define "instruction". Certainly any poetry that attempts to enforce a specific article in the conventional moral code, to bring about a specific reform, to explain a specific scientific theory, or in any other way falls into didacticism, is likely to be abominable. But most great art does, nevertheless, *tell* us something. As Sullivan insists, art must rank with science and philosophy as a way of communicating knowledge about reality, and the feeling we indisputably have, from a great work of art, that a large area of experience has been illuminated and harmonized for us, cannot be wholly dismissed. Sullivan's discussion of this whole question is extremely interesting and acute, for it is concerned not merely with the question of how we should judge art, but with what art itself is and does. The artist, he tells us, gives us a superior organization of experience. That experience includes perceptions which, although there is no place for them in the scientific scheme, may none the less be perceptions of factors in reality. Therefore a work of art may communicate

knowledge; it may indeed be a "revelation". It is characteristic of the greatest art, moreover, that the attitude it communicates to us is felt by us to be valid, to be the reaction to a more subtle and comprehensive contact with reality than we can normally make. The reason that our reactions to a work of art cannot be adequately described is not that some unique and isolated faculty is involved, but that art is not superfluous, that it exists to convey what cannot be otherwise conveyed. Sullivan is speaking particularly about music. There is some music, he admits, that appears to exist in a moral and spiritual vacuum, and music more than any other art seems to lead a curiously independent existence. Yet all the greatest music in the world, as well as some of the worst, Sullivan insists, does suggest a spiritual context; in fact, it does more than suggest; its whole being is conditioned by this context, and it lives to express it. It is true that Beethoven, for example, does not communicate to us his perceptions of his experiences, but he does communicate to us the attitude based on them.

*Elder.* Young, I think you will have to confess that Middleton is right. If a "pure" art were possible anywhere, that art would surely be music. Poetry is always under the necessity of saying something, even if it says it very obscurely; it must at least use words with possible meanings, and not nonsense syllables—it must, in brief, refer to something beyond itself. Even the most "abstract" modern

painting and sculpture have remained half-representational; and architecture is subject to the laws of engineering and physics, and must serve practical purposes. But music, if anything, could be free. It could, perhaps, be a mere "pattern of sound", and possibly some of it is. Yet the mere fact, as Middleton once pointed out, that one can still convey something about most music by such terms as gay, playful, sentimental, cloyingly sweet, witty, solemn, noble, chaotic, tempestuous, serene, voluptuous, and so on, is enough to show that music is still connected by umbilical cords with our emotions and the rest of our experience.

*Middleton.* That is true, and I thank you for remembering it; yet we must also admit that the terms you have just used convey pitifully little about the music they are supposed to describe. And the point raises a more general question. All criticism rests on the curious and usually unquestioned assumption that an adequate description or analysis of a work of art can be conveyed in verbal terms. It is based on the implicit belief, in other words, that verbal language, if it is not the only language, can convey whatever any other form of language can convey. This belief needs only to be stated baldly and explicitly for its falsity to be evident. Music, for example, is a language of its own: it may convey certain complex emotional states, or certain quasi-intellectual interpretations of experience, or it may convey nothing but its sounds. Yet in any case, what it

has to say cannot be said verbally. You mention, say, César Franck's Symphony in D Minor. "Oh," says someone, "I've never heard that. Tell me about it." What can you say that would not be absurdly inadequate? You can only attempt actually to play it, or tell your questioner to hear it at the first opportunity. And if what music says can only be said by music, the like is true of painting, architecture, sculpture, dancing: they must be seen. Only prose can be adequately described in prose; that is why criticism of novels, biographies, and books of philosophy makes on the whole the most readable and satisfactory kind of criticism. Criticism even of poetry suffers from the fact that poetry is a separate language: the quality of a poem, when all is said, can be conveyed only by quoting from the poem. Yet the superstition of the omnicompetence of prose persists. Einstein's theory of relativity is at bottom a mathematical theory; it can be stated adequately only in mathematical terms; yet the layman cannot get it out of his head that the physicists ought to be able to tell him what it means in plain English. Prose criticism, alas, becomes more inadequate, less readable and wears a greater air of futility, the further the language of the art it describes is removed from its own language. That is why, in general, criticism of prose is most satisfactory, criticism of poetry less so, criticism of painting still less so, and criticism of music the dreariest and hollowest of all.

*Young.* Your discussion overlooks one or two

points. To begin with, prose has been created precisely for the purpose of conveying conceptions of actions, sights and sounds; if prose could convey nothing but other prose one would be justified in wondering just what the function of language was. The further the language of the art under consideration is from the language of criticism, the more inviting the challenge should be to a genuine critic. Any fool can retell the story of a novel, but it takes talent to describe the qualities of a painting or a piece of music. And I would suggest that you read some of Paul Rosenfeld's criticisms of modern painting if you want to see how remarkably well a notion even of "abstract" painting can be verbally conveyed.

*Middleton.* Of course I'll admit that even when a description of a work of art is difficult, a judgment need not be.

*Young.* But description and judgment are sometimes the same thing—as, for example, when Carlyle called John Stuart Mill's conversation "sawdust-ish"—

*Elder.* I'm sorry to stop you two, but dinner is waiting for us.

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## X

### REALISM VERSUS ROMANCE

*Elder.* I think it is time we brought our talk to a problem that seems to me of vastly more practical importance than some of the—shall I say metaphysical?—questions we have just been debating. Young, let me put the problem to you directly and perhaps even naively: How do you tell a good poem or a good novel from a bad one?

*Young.* Well, that *is* a large order. Of course there are any number of reasons why a poem or novel may be good or bad. But if you want me to begin with something specific, I should certainly condemn any poem or novel if I found it reeking with sentimentality.

*Elder.* And how would you define sentimentality? What would be your test for it?

*Young.* Well—if it were crude. Or, in a poem, if the response of the author were somehow inappropriate to the situation that called it forth. Or, in a novel, if the emotional response of the author were greater at any point than the occasion warranted; or if his characters—with his apparent approval—were too susceptible, if the flood-gates of their emo-

tions were too easily raised. Or if the book were pervaded with a silly optimism or "gladness".

*Elder.* Would you call Hemingway sentimental?

*Young.* Are you trying to be funny? He's the hardest-boiled writer we have.

*Elder.* Well, I *should* call him sentimental. If you will recall your own reply to my question, you will find that you gave at least three definitions of sentimental, all of which, I believe, are substantially those given by I. A. Richards. But Richards also goes on to point out that the man who, in reaction to the commoner naive forms of sentimentality, prides himself upon his hard-headedness and hard-heartedness, his hard-boiledness generally, and seeks out or invents aspects of life with a bitter or squalid character, for no better reason than this, is only displaying a more sophisticated form of sentimentality. And to my mind, such writers as Hemingway, Aldous Huxley and William Faulkner clearly answer that description.

*Young.* Well, you and I will have to disagree about who is and who is not sentimental, but at least we seem to agree that sentimentality is a bad thing.

*Elder.* Very well; now let us go further. Let us confine our present problem to novels and plays. What other tests have you for telling a good novel from a bad one?

*Young.* As a matter of fact, I usually tell a good novel from a bad one in the same way that I tell a

## REALISM VERSUS ROMANCE

pretty girl from an ugly one—to wit, by an act of direct perception.

*Elder.* Still, in your reviews you are always giving—or professing to give—specific reasons for liking this book and disliking that.

*Young.* True. Though, if you will keep the secret, those reasons are sometimes afterthoughts. But in general I should say that I condemn a novel principally when it is not true to life.

*Elder.* Then I should say that you would condemn every novel in existence. It is practically impossible, as Branch Cabell has pointed out in his admirable critical essay “Beyond Life”, for a novel to be completely true to life. For a book, to begin with, is structurally different from life, if only, were there nothing else, in that the book begins and ends at a definite point. Further, the book makes use of human speech, with its natural elisions and falsifications. Finally, even the most “realistic” fiction differs from life by the mere necessity for selection. Even Joyce’s “Ulysses” falls far short of throwing in *everything*. A novelist must first select his characters. The characters of even the most realistic novelists are usually in some way extraordinary: they have to be, to prevent the reader from going immediately to sleep.

*Young.* But why do they have to be? I read hundreds of realistic novels in which the characters are not extraordinary at all, and the novels are im-



pressive for that very reason. Look at George F. Babbitt. The whole point of the character lies in his complete American typicality.

*Elder.* That is just it. He is so appallingly typical that if he existed in real life he would be regarded as a monstrosity. As he is, existing in fiction, he has become a universally recognized symbol. But "Bill Jones, aged 31, of 382 Third Avenue" is not a symbol: he may be, and probably is, extremely commonplace; but he has so many minor quirks and eccentricities in his make-up, he has so many habits and peculiarities that, being untypical, are a source of amused comment to his acquaintances, that he is simply unfit to be a symbol even of the commonplace, and any novelist who wanted to "put him into a book" would have to touch him up and edit him considerably. But aside from the question of characters, the novelist must next select incidents, events, thoughts. Even a stream-of-consciousness writer like Joyce must decide on relatively artistic proportions; he must leave out a great deal that would be deadly dull, merely repetitious and monotonous. A skillful writer can *suggest* these qualities in his hero's consciousness or life without actually inflicting them on the reader. For example, you will notice that even the supposedly most uncompromising realistic or stream-of-consciousness writer will give relatively much more space to sexual events and day-dreams and relatively much less space to mere business and routine preoccupations than either occupy in actual life.

*Young.* That is not true of a fine trilogy like Henry Handel Richardson's "The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney", for example.

*Elder.* Well, quite apart from the question of whether "truthfulness to life" is possible in fiction or not, I don't see that it is even desirable, in spite of the fact that reviewers so incessantly prate about it. Enduring literature, as Cabell remarks, does not consist of reportorial work, nor are its materials to be drawn from the level of our normal and trivial doings.

*Young.* In other words, he allows no merit to realism at all?

*Elder.* None. If "realism" be a form of art, he points out, the morning newspaper is a permanent contribution to literature.

*Middleton.* I don't see why we should concede that the morning newspaper is realistic. It is not only deplorably inaccurate, but it chronically sensationalizes, i. e., romanticizes, the news. Its very principle of selection gives a terribly false picture, for its business is to report only the *unusual*, the *abnormal*, whether in individual or in social conduct. Its field is panic, revolution, war, fire, strikes, rape, murder. It does not blazon forth the announcement that the First National Bank has opened its doors as usual, or that the 7:23 arrived on time this morning. It carries no streaming headlines to report a "Strange Case of Virtue in the Bronx", or "Smith's Marriage Lasts Another Day".

*Young.* All this is mere quibbling. Let us admit that *complete* "realism", complete "truthfulness to life", is not possible. The *degree* of a novel's truthfulness to life is still important; and a novel is to be praised the more nearly it succeeds in approaching this truthfulness to life as an admittedly unattainable ideal.

*Elder.* A thousand times, no. If I may talk in your own language, Young, realism is the theory that a wax figure, painted in natural colors, with a fake wig and a suit of store clothes, is superior to a figure in white marble: it is the belief that the dummies at Madame Tussaud's represent an artistic advance over the Venus de Milo and the Winged Victory. Why on earth *should* fiction reflect life? Life, as Oscar Wilde pointed out, is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people. Its tragedies seem to culminate in farce. Things last either too long, or not long enough. No, the artist, as Cabell tells us, must create unhampered, and shape his petty universe with the fine freedom of omnipotence. The truth therein must be whatever he wills to be the truth, and not a whit more or less: and his observation of actual life is an account on which he ought, at most, to draw small checks to tide him over difficulties. No, Young, whatever the test of great fiction or great drama may be, it is not mere truthfulness to life.

*Young (ironically).* I see. I suppose you regard it as highly reprehensible that contemporary writers

should allow their art to be seriously influenced by the life about them?

*Elder.* I assuredly do. It was something that the great creators of the past very scrupulously avoided. For the dramatic characters of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and Marlowe and Shakespeare, and Racine and Corneille, and Goethe and Schiller, all spoke in verse, a language never used spontaneously by man, either for carrying on his routine daily affairs or in the midst of an emotional crisis. Nor did most of these writers trouble themselves a great deal about contemporary life: they preferred to depict the doings of great historical or mythological characters. But let us drop a rung or two and examine the comedies of Congreve. Now nowhere in any drawing-room, as Mr. Cabell reminds us, was ever spoken anything like Congreve's dialogue. And Congreve's plays take place in a care-free land, where life, untrammelled by the restrictions of moral codes, untoward weather, limited incomes or apprehension of the police, has no legitimate object save the pursuit of amorous pleasures. And so, too, when we come to Dickens, few persons would care to deny that he unfailingly misrepresented the life he pretended to portray. But what of it? He depicted a world infinitely more pleasant than the real world. Yes, I sometimes think with Oscar Wilde that lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art. Living, as Mr. Cabell holds, is a drab transaction, a concatenation of unimportant events: man

is impotent and aimless: beauty, and indeed all the fine things which one desiderates in literature—and in one's personal existence—are nowhere attainable save in imagination. To the problem of living, romance propounds the only possible answer, which is, not understanding, but escape. And the method of that escape is the creation of a pleasing dream.

*Young.* Well, psychoanalysis exists almost solely for the purpose of curing people who hold just that attitude; and perhaps, instead of reasoning here quietly with you, I ought to turn you over to Freud. I am astounded to find you of all people, Elder, taking the attitude you do on this question. I had hitherto set you down as a Humanist, a disciple of Babbitt and More, and whatever else may be said of the Humanists, they cannot be accused of a play-boy escapism. But I will pay you the compliment of assuming that you are tired, for the moment, of being so strait-laced and lofty, and that your present arguments are thoroughly insincere. You, as much as I, *do* condemn a novel because it is untrue to life. Why do I think Harold Bell Wright's novels, or the average run of movies, are rubbish? Because they are full of false situations, false sentiments, false emotions; because their characters are stuffed dummies whose counterparts are never encountered in real life. Because, to reiterate, there is nothing alive or convincing or *real* about them. And for all your ingenious pretenses to the contrary, that is your reason for thinking them rubbish too.

*Elder.* I assure you, Young, that you make yourself reasonably plain, and your anxiety on that score seems to me excessive. But somehow your reiterations do not convince me any more than your original statement. For Harold Bell Wright's novels, and the average run of motion pictures, are certainly more true to life than say, Aesop's "Fables", or "Alice in Wonderland", or "Gulliver's Travels", or even the plays of W. S. Gilbert. Think of the preposterous things that Jonathan Swift expected us to believe in! A nation of horses; men six inches high; giants seventy feet tall! Mr. Wright makes no such extravagant demands, nor does the average film. The actors and actresses *prove* that everything they do is possible in life by actually doing it. How can one disbelieve one's eyes?

*Young.* Middleton, I appeal to you, as a man of honor, to reprove the appalling sophistry and the gross insincerity of our host.

*Middleton.* Well, as usual, I don't agree with either of you, or, what is almost the same thing, I think both of you are right. The problem of "realism" or "naturalism" in fiction seems to me merely part of the more general problem of the function of art in any field—in painting or sculpture, for example. That problem is whether it is the function of art to portray reality or to idealize reality, to reflect experience or to transmute it. And if we decide that it is the function—or *a* function—of art to idealize, then we confront the further question, in what

respects should it idealize? What sort of idealization is valid or desirable and what sort invalid or undesirable? Now Elder has at least pointed out—and you have evaded the issue—that those who denounce Harold Bell Wright’s novels for being “untrue to life” do not dream of denouncing “Gulliver’s Travels” for the same reason. Those, again, who condemn advertising illustrations as not true to reality do not dismiss Picasso’s paintings or Brancusi’s sculpture on that ground, and so on. Perhaps “truth to life” is an ambiguous phrase, and we are using it in several senses.

Before I follow this hint I hope you will forgive me if I refer to the history of the question. For both you and Elder seemed to me to be discussing it as if it had not emerged clearly until our time. Elder, it is true, referred for support and authority to a volume published by Mr. Cabell far back in 1919, and even, now and then, quoted some pronouncements by Oscar Wilde made in the dim ’Nineties. But he gave no hint that Coleridge had struggled with the problem of art’s untruth to life a century ago, particularly as it applied to figures of speech, and spoke of “*that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith*”. Dryden, too, wrestled with the problem as it applied to plays: “We know we are to be deceived,” he concluded, “and we desire to be so.” But I am going to skip lightly over the answers of more than twenty centuries, and come to the prob-

lem as it was approached by the fountain head, the founder of literary criticism, the master of those who know, Aristotle of Stagira.

(*Young stands up and applauds.*)

*Middleton (bowing).* I thank you. Now Aristotle's comments on literature are perhaps less "profound" than from his immense reputation you might suppose them to be, but they are remarkably shrewd, full of common sense, very clear, and amazingly modern. You will find in him almost none of the dogmatism and rigidity that you find in those who supposed themselves to be his disciples in the eighteenth century, for instance—

*Elder.* Pardon me, but is this some lecture you are preparing to deliver—?

*Middleton.* I apologize. I'll waive the introduction and come to Aristotle. Now the first thing to be noticed about him is that he is much more tolerant than either of you, for he allows a place both for romance and for realism—

*Elder.* Neither of which existed in ancient Greece.

*Middleton.* Not, perhaps, in the present sense of the terms. But the *tendencies* in both directions were already implicit, and from a mere handful of tragedies and poems, Aristotle was able to arrive at uncannily sound inductions. Now in his "Poetics", which I herewith take from your shelves, Elder, so that I may quote from it extensively, he begins by admitting that the dramatist or poet may represent



men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. He recognized the almost universal pleasure felt in realism. "Objects which in themselves we view with pain," he wrote, "we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity. The reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he!'"

*Elder.* Obviously a low form of pleasure.

*Middleton.* Aristotle, however, lends little support to the cruder theories of realism. It is not the function of the poet, he reminds us, to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. Poetry, therefore, he concludes, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. I need not add that by "poetry", of course, Aristotle means in this context all imaginative creation, and that he would have applied his generalization to prose fiction if it had existed when he wrote. Tragedy, he continues, should follow the example of good portrait painters who, while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful. So too the poet, in representing men who are irascible or indolent, or have other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it.

*Elder.* Exactly, though perhaps "ennoble" is no longer the most appropriate word. But at least the

writer ought to make the character an archetype or universal symbol, as Molière did his misers and hypocrites and misanthropes and bluestockings, and, to come down to our own day, as Sinclair Lewis did his *Babbitt*, or Eugene O'Neill his *Marco Millions*.

*Middleton.* I might remind you that Aristotle is talking of tragedy. Comic heroes, perhaps, need not be ennobled, but tragic heroes still should be. Shakespeare certainly ennobled Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, Brutus and Lear, with all their defects, and even Shylock: and Ibsen, it seems to me, falls short of great tragedy precisely because his heroes are not ennobled. To get on, however. As we have seen, Aristotle concedes that the poet, like the painter or any other artist, may "imitate" or represent one of three objects—"things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be". If it be objected that a description is not true to fact, the poet may reply "But the objects are as they ought to be"—just as Sophocles said that he drew men as they ought to be; Euripides, as they are. And even if a story is neither higher than fact nor true to fact, Aristotle holds that the poet may justify it merely on the ground that "this is what is said".

So far, then, he seems extremely catholic. But you will find him very strict when he comes to the problem of *internal* consistency or probability or necessity. The tragic plot, he insists, must not be composed of irrational parts. Everything irrational should, if

possible, be excluded. Speaking of an instance in which this rule was violated, he says: "The plea that otherwise the plot would have been ruined, is ridiculous; such a plot should not in the first instance be constructed." But, he concedes, once the irrational has been introduced and an air of likelihood imparted to it, we must accept it in spite of the absurdity. In general, he holds, the impossible must be justified by reference to artistic requirements, or to the higher reality, or to received opinion. And he lays down this significant dictum: "With respect to the requirements of art, a probable impossibility is to be preferred to a thing improbable and yet possible."

Now here, it seems to me, is the hint that will help us to solve the problem of realism and romance, as well as the problem of why certain kinds of untruthfulness to life irritate us while other kinds delight us. "Gulliver's Travels", for example, is obviously concerned with those "probable impossibilities" that Aristotle would prefer to the "improbable possibilities" to be found, let us say, in Harold Bell Wright's novels. Obviously, of course, this is not the whole story. What is meant by a probable impossibility and an improbable possibility? Aristotle does not explain directly, but again he drops the necessary hint later on. "The element of the irrational, and, similarly, depravity of character, are justly censured," he writes, "when there is no *inner necessity* [the italics are mine] for introducing them." The test of fantasy, then, like the test of poetry, is one of its

*internal* coherence, its *internal* logic. The writer of a fantasy may start with as fantastic a premise as he wishes, just as the writer of a poem may be as bold in his imagery as he wishes, but what follows must follow plausibly, if not, indeed, inevitably from that premise, if we are to continue to accept it. A writer of fantasy or romance who permits discordant consequences to spring from his original premises, or who keeps shifting his premises, is guilty of a much greater artistic crime than the poet who merely mixes his metaphors. For an allegory, a fantasy or a romance is, so to speak, a developed metaphor. It escapes the rules of ordinary logic but not the logic of "as if". It is subject, so to speak, to a non-Euclidian geometry. Now one of the great merits of "Gulliver's Travels" is the rigor of the logic once the initial premise is granted. The logic in "Alice in Wonderland" or in the "Arabian Nights" does not appear to be so close, but it is there none the less. It is a logic of mood and tone and attitude, an *emotional* coherence.

We might state the distinction in still another way. The difference between a novel that is bad because it is not "true to life", and a novel that is good although—or even also because—it is not "true to life", is that the writer of the bad novel did not *know* his novel was untrue to life, while the writer of the good novel did know that *his* was—and the discerning reader is able to perceive the writer's attitude in each case. But this is merely another way of saying that

the writer of the second novel knew what he was about and the writer of the first novel did not. Which, in turn, is merely another way of saying that the writer of the good "untrue-to-life" novel respected the *internal necessities* of his work while the writer of the bad novel did not. We find an exact analogue in painting—the difference between a bad painter who distorts a face or a body through sheer incompetence and a great painter like El Greco who distorts it to produce a precise interpretation or effect.

We might state the distinction in still another way—or perhaps we might even consider this an additional distinction. Of two novels that idealize life rather than faithfully reflect it, the first may be irritating because the idealization is banal or shallow, while the second may be delightful because the idealization is original, illuminating, or profound. Finally—if I am not wearing you out—we may state the matter this way. It makes very little difference whether or not a novel is *physically* true to life; but it must be *psychologically* true, *emotionally* true. To make a final use of our two stock examples, "Gulliver's Travels" meets this test as it meets the others, and Harold Bell Wright's novels fail here as they did before. But perhaps this is merely another way of returning to the point that external correspondences are insignificant and internal coherences all important.

*Elder.* Well, you have made a noble effort, and

I think you have given as satisfactory an answer to the truth-to-life problem as we are likely to arrive at this afternoon. And regarding the relative merits of romance and realism you conclude, I suppose—

*Middleton.* I conclude that there is plenty of room for both, and that art may be praised either for its fidelity to nature or for transcending nature. But I may as well add that either pure realism or pure romanticism is impossible, and that the fight between their champions is sometimes nothing more than a mere battle of meaningless labels. Pure realism, as you pointed out so often in your own discussion, is impossible, if only because, as someone observed long ago, art is necessarily an expurgated edition of nature; and pure romance is impossible because all good romance must portray recognizable speech and action and in some authentic way interpret or illuminate the real life of man. The difference between romance and realism is one of degree, and sometimes the nuance is very delicate. If anyone thinks he can separate even one season's novels into those two pigeonholes . . . well, I wish him joy.

*Elder.* You are right. Let us conclude that the issue is an unreal one. The problem is not one of realism versus romance but simply of good novels versus bad ones. I certainly think that one of the tests of a good novel is whether and to what extent it has a general significance beyond the mere story it tells. And though Mr. Cabell himself seemed to

imagine in his "Beyond Life" that what he was engaged in was the enterprise of championing romance against realism, this was essentially the conclusion to which he was forced to come. What he was really defending, he began to glimpse in the end—unless I give him less credit than I should for perceiving his own drift—was not romance as opposed to realism, but the "timeless" as opposed to the "timely". I believe, he finally wrote, that the illusion of reality can be produced by the romantic or the "realistic" method, either one, or even by the two commingled, provided always that the artist, given insight, is sincerely striving to show fundamental things as he sees them, and thereby, perhaps, to hint at their true and unknowable nature. Even the most humble of us have our exalted moments, and these moments, he contended, it is the business of the artist, romanticist and "realist" alike, to interpret for us and, if he can, to evaluate in terms of approximate eternity.

*Young.* Well spoken. That is the view that I have been brought around to also in the course of this discussion, and it is extremely pleasant to find that there are at least a few points on which we all finally agree.

It may seem irrelevant, but the frequent mention by Middleton of "Gulliver's Travels" reminds me of another test of a great work of literary art. That test is universality of appeal. The adventures of Gulliver can be enjoyed by the most unsophisti-

cated child as well as by the most intelligent adult. We find the same universality of appeal in Shakespeare's plays, or in "The Pilgrim's Progress", or in "Moby Dick".

*Middleton.* Your argument is a very familiar one, but hardly very sound, and Richards, I think, has pretty effectively disposed of it. The sum of value yielded by a work of such "universal" appeal, he admits—the social value, that is to say, of such a work—is naturally greater than that yielded by a work which appeals only to a limited few. But it does not follow that the maximum value for the reader of the highest level need be greater. The common belief that it is necessarily greater, that the work of wide appeal must be in itself a more admirable thing than work which appeals only to those who discriminate finely, is due to the assumption that it appeals everywhere for the same reasons, and thus is shown to touch something essential and fundamental in human nature. But different people, Richards insists, read and go to see the same play for utterly different reasons. "Macbeth", for example, at one end of the scale is a highly successful, easily apprehended, two-color melodrama, at the other a peculiarly enigmatic and subtle tragedy, and there are of course any number of in-between stages. If we come back to your example of "Gulliver's Travels", it is obvious that a child enjoys the book simply because of its *untruth*, its superficial differences from the prosaic world of reality, while the



intelligent adult enjoys it for its *truth*, and sees that Swift, by the ingenious device of changing our ordinary perspective, has secured a more brilliant and merciless insight than could otherwise have been obtained into human folly, cruelty and vanity, and into the absurdity of our ordinary distinctions and pretensions.

*Young.* Then you do not consider that it necessarily indicates any shortcoming in a book whatever that it appeals only to a very narrow and select audience?

*Middleton.* Not at all. To use an illustration that Richards gives in another place, the non-mathematical mind cannot respond to a formula as the mathematical mind can. It is the use of responses not available without special experience, which more than anything else narrows the range of the artist's communication and creates the gulf between expert and popular taste.

*Young.* Well, your discussion of the point is valuable, but it does not seem to me convincing altogether. It is because Shakespeare is so great, has so many and such *varied* gifts, that he appeals at nearly all levels. As Schopenhauer has remarked, to gain immortality an author must possess so many excellences that, while it will not be easy to find anyone to understand and appreciate them all, there will be men in every age who are able to recognize and value some of them.

*Elder.* I do not believe it is possible for us to

advance any further than we have with that problem, and besides, I have been anxious for some time to bring the discussion around to a point we have sadly neglected—I mean the whole question of form and technique. It seems to me that the principal reason for the low state of letters today is the almost universal assumption that literature is not a trade to be learned but a mere outlet for spontaneous “self-expression”. Nearly all our writers have nothing but derision for rules and canons. Rousseau is their spiritual forefather, and sprawling and formless poets like Whitman are their models in so far as they have any models at all. They all aspire to “warble their native wood-notes wild”. They all think themselves geniuses, particularly “untrammelled” geniuses—and I am certainly ready to concede that they are unbuttoned. It is not so that the great writers of the past looked upon their work. “It is as much a trade,” wrote La Bruyère, “to make a book as it is to make a clock.” In short, as Irving Babbitt has remarked, literature is largely a matter of technique.

*Young.* Really, Elder, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Such a statement is almost too absurd to be worth contradicting. It would necessitate the removal from literary judgments of all references to genius, feeling, depth and sincerity of emotion, originality, force, flavor, insight into truth or character—to everything, indeed, but mere form. The standard you propose, in brief, would eliminate con-

sideration of nearly everything that really makes a work of art great. It would lead us to place Thornton Wilder above Dreiser, Maupassant and Flaubert far above Dostoevsky and Balzac. Let me get "The Author's Craft" from your shelves and read the confession of Arnold Bennett on this point: "It is a hard saying for me," he writes, "and full of danger in any country whose artists have shown contempt for form, yet I am obliged to say that, as the years pass, I attach less and less importance to good technique in fiction. I love it, and I have fought for a better recognition of its importance in England, but I now have to admit that the modern history of fiction will not support me. With the single exception of Turgenev, the great novelists of the world, according to my own standards, have either ignored technique or have failed to understand it." Bennett was driven back upon the conviction that what counts in a novelist is not technique, but the fundamental quality of his mind—the glass through which he sees things.

So far from its being true that technique is neglected in our day, the tendency not only of academic criticism, but of virtually all criticism, is still, as it has always been, absurdly to overrate the importance of mere form, or manner, or method. Criticism emphasizes these mere surface qualities, I suspect, because they are easier to see and grasp and to pin down than the inner qualities that really matter. Form is always easier to apprehend than substance.

You can tell from across the room whether an object is a watch or a ring, but you will have to be a little shrewder to know whether it is fourteen karat or just gold-plated. Further, insistence on form very easily becomes insistence on *familiar*, and, so to speak, *authorized* forms. The overestimation of technique soon becomes the overestimation of a particular technique: it degenerates, in drama, into the slick and shallow "well-made" play, or, in prose, into a style that is smooth, polished, and thoroughly empty. No, mere technical skill, however admirable, can never be more than a secondary virtue in a work of art. When one comes to think the manner of saying a thing more important than the thing said, one is headed for hollowness and affectation.

*Elder.* Good heavens! I had not realized that care and technical skill were such dangerous acquisitions.

*Young.* Come now, why can't you at least acknowledge this obvious fact—that a technique can determine only the particular mold into which a writer's talent will be poured. It cannot increase either the quality or the quantity of that talent. If a man has only a thimbleful of talent, no possible technique can make that thimbleful into a barrellful.

*Elder.* I hope you don't expect me to take so crude a comparison seriously. Obviously a good technique may release a writer's talents, and a bad technique may cramp or stifle them.

*Young.* I'll go so far as to agree with you that

a bad technique—and by a bad technique I probably mean what you mean by a “good” technique—may ruin a man; in fact, I could cite a score of writers that it has ruined; but a good technique, even the best technique, will not add a cubit to a writer’s stature. At best it will enable whatever native faculties he has to have free play.

*Middleton.* Ah, my friends, how I wish that the problem were as simple as both of you seem to regard it. One would think, to hear you talk, that a technique were something a writer could put on or take off or change like an overcoat. Well, I shan’t be harsh with you, for that is after all only the usual way of looking at the matter. I recently read a pamphlet by a communist critic, Mr. V. F. Calverton, who was laying down a program for the new communist writer. He admitted, as against other communist critics, that it is unwise to judge a writer purely by his attitude toward the class struggle. The writer must—and I call your attention to the adverb—*also* be judged as a “craftsman”. Mr. Calverton did not say how these two judgments were to be combined, or weighted, or averaged—whether a writer who got 40 on Class Struggle and 80 on Craftsmanship would get a passing mark of 60, or . . . well, we’ll let that pass. But he cited as an example what he thought the attitude of the communist writer should be toward Shakespeare. He should learn from Shakespeare’s “craftsmanship”, it appears, but repudiate his “ideas”. And I fell to

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wondering how Mr. Calverton thought he could separate the two. Take any passage at random. Take Macbeth's almost too familiar

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.*

Now what part of this is "craftsmanship", which Mr. Calverton's revolutionary critic would accept, and what part "ideas", which that critic would reject? Has the first any important meaning except in relation to the second? What becomes of the tidy bifurcation? A work of art is a unit; the critic's judgment of it must be based, not on any isolated quality, but on all its qualities taken together, in the organic relationship in which they are actually found.

*Elder.* Do you mean to say, then, that "technique" and "ideas" are *identical*?

*Middleton.* Not at all. The insistence upon the *identity* of Form and Content, which we find among the Croceans, for example, merely creates a good deal of needless mystery and confusion. But though we cannot identify technique and content, neither can we look upon them as separate entities. At most

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we can distinguish the technical aspects of a work from its ideational aspects. The distinguishing line is never a sharp one, but it exists for convenience of discussion. For example, Richards remarks quite acutely that to consider either the treatment or the content of a poem exclusively is a means of keeping at a distance from the actual poem, and he adds that the secret of Style in poetry is the close *coöperation* of the form with the meaning.

*Young.* I don't see that that differs so widely from my view. What I really objected to was the emphasis on technique to the exclusion of the ideas, spiritual qualities and human values in an author's work; for if art were a mere question of technique, then the greatest artist would be merely the greatest technician; and I don't think even Elder seriously believes that. My objection, however, to the critics who place so much emphasis on technique goes even further than that. For they are almost invariably *negative* critics. As I have already said, their insistence upon technique quickly becomes an insistence upon a particular technique. Instead of telling us why a certain sonnet is worth noticing at all, they point out wherein it is an imperfect sonnet, wherein it breaks one of the sacred rules. When they criticize the drama, they praise an author because *he has not violated* the laws of tragedy, or comedy, or farce. Their approval, as Thomas Hardy once said of Leslie Stephen, is disapproval minimized. This doling out of bad marks is the kind of criticism our

academic critics always practice when dealing with their contemporaries, and it accounts for much of the ill-natured abuse which our leading novelists receive at their hands. Jules Lemaître, writing for the Brunetières of his own generation, might have been writing for the Paul Elmer Mores and Irving Babbitts of ours. But I see, Elder, that you have Lemaître's charming discussion of criticism on your shelves here. Let me read a few passages from it. When Brunetière comes upon a new book, Lemaître writes, "his first impulse is to compare it to 'the models' and, while he is hastening to judge it, he forgets to enjoy it, to discover what, after all, is its peculiar beauty, and whether the author, despite his faults and prejudices, has not by chance some originality and power, some impressions, some view of things which belongs to him alone and distinguishes him."

And here is an even better passage: "Ah, my good and eminent professors, good taste, good sense, good order, morality, the ideal—any other decent man of letters could have put these into a book! I could do that much myself if I desired to. But the radiance, the sonorousness, the abounding lyricism, the brilliant profusion of images in the "Contemplations", and the strangeness and plastic perfection of the "Tentation"—these are the things of which Hugo and Flaubert alone were capable. It would have been better had they added good taste and good sense, but, after all, I do not attach so high an importance



to what I might possess or acquire like any other.”

*Elder.* It is apparently shockingly bad manners, at the very least, to mention a book's faults at all.

*Young.* Lemaître does not imply anything of the kind, and *I* certainly do not. Other things being equal, a perfect diamond is, of course, preferable to a diamond with a flaw in it; and the critic may properly draw attention to the flaw; but—and here is the glaringly obvious fact that so many critics seem to overlook—a diamond with a flaw in it is still immeasurably more valuable than a perfect piece of glass. As Lytton Strachey has put it, so complex and various are the elements of literature that no writer can be damned on a mere enumeration of faults: he may always possess merits which make up for everything. And even Schopenhauer, whom no one can accuse of having low standards or of being too generous in his judgments of others, made the same comment. In appreciating a genius, he wrote, criticism should not deal with the error in his productions or with the poorer of his works, and then proceed to rate him low; it should attend only to the qualities in which he most excels. For in the sphere of intellect, as in other spheres, weakness and perversity cleave so firmly to human nature that even the most brilliant mind is not wholly and at all times free from them.

Hence the secret of sound criticism, it seems to me, is for the critic *to ask himself the right questions* about a book. A helpful question for the contem-

porary critic sometimes to ask himself, for example, is this: Will this book be remembered five years from now? twenty-five years from now? a century from now? Not that asking himself these questions will enable him to answer them correctly, but the mere posing of them will almost automatically raise the *kind* of standards of judgment that he ought to employ. If the work in question is a novel or a play or a poem, he will see, for example, that it is of relative unimportance whether or not he agrees with the author's religious, political, economic, or social point of view, or whether the author is a scoundrel or a saint in private life, or whether the book is "moral" or "immoral", or whether it has taste, decorum, humility, order. With books of nearly every kind, the real questions of importance are: Has this book force, flavor, personal insight, originality? Has it—not the virtues that any dull professor could have put into it had he wanted—but the virtues that could have been put into it only by a man of very exceptional qualities? Or the critic might ask the two questions once suggested by Edward Garnett: "Does this talent open to us a new window into the world of men and the world of the mind? Wherein lies the difference between this new window and all the other windows?"

*Middleton.* Well, we have talked of standards of judgment so long that we must all be growing heartily tired of the subject, but before we end the discussion I should like to make one final point,

even if I have to repeat a few things that I said last night. William James once remarked that the chief object of a college education was to enable you to tell a good man when you saw one. Now you never judge men directly by abstract "principles" or, in fact, by *any* rigid measuring rod. You judge them with all your knowledge, experience and preferences; your whole personality judges their personalities. Well, you judge a work of art or literature in the same way. And, as on so many other questions, I cannot resist the temptation to quote Richards's comments. Any application of critical principles, he insists, must be indirect, and they are not any the less useful because this is so. Misunderstanding on this point has often led artists to accuse critics of wishing to make art a matter of rules, and their objection to any such attempt is entirely justified. But what Richards says under this head, particularly in his "Practical Criticism", is so well said that I shall not trust my memory. Let me get the book from your shelves, Elder, and read the passages. Here:

"Critical principles, in fact, need very wary handling. They can never be a substitute for discernment though they may assist us to avoid unnecessary blunders. There has hardly ever been a critical rule, principle or maxim which has not been for wise men a helpful guide but for fools a will-o'-the-wisp. All the great watchwords of criticism from Aristotle's 'Poetry is an imitation' down to the doctrine that 'Poetry is expression', are ambiguous pointers that

different people follow to very different destinations. Even the most sagacious critical principles may become merely a cover for critical ineptitude; and the most trivial or baseless generalization may really mask good and discerning judgment. Everything turns upon how the principles are applied. It is to be feared that critical formulas, even the best, are responsible for more bad judgment than good, because it is far easier to forget their subtle sense and apply them crudely than to remember it and apply them finely."

And, much later on:

"Thus no theory, no description, of poetry can be trusted which is not too intricate to be applied. . . . The differences between good and bad poetry may be indiscernible to direct attention yet patent in their effects upon feeling. The choice of our whole personality may be the only instrument we possess delicate enough to effect the discrimination. . . . There comes a point in all criticism where a sheer choice has to be made without the support of any arguments, principles, or general rules. All that arguments and principles can do is to protect us from irrelevancies, red-herrings and disturbing preconceptions. . . . They may preserve us from bad arguments but they cannot supply good ones."

And still further on, writing about the dilemma of a reader who is asked to judge a poem without critical presuppositions:

"Too sheer a challenge to his own unsupported

self seems to be imposed. The desire to condense his past experience, or to invoke doughty authority, in the form of a critical maxim, is constantly overwhelming. Without *some* objective criteria, by which poetry can be tested, and the good distinguished from the bad, he feels like a friendless man deprived of weapons and left naked at the mercy of a treacherous beast. We decided that the treacherous beast was within him, that critical weapons—unless too elaborate to be employed—would only hurt him, that his own experience—not as represented in a formula but in its available entirety—was his only safeguard, and that if he could rely sufficiently upon this, he could only profit from his encounter with the poem. . . . The lesson of all criticism is that we have nothing to rely upon in making our choices but ourselves.”

*Young.* Excellent; excellent! But it seems to me that Walt Whitman has said it all more briefly:

*Allons! from all formulas!*

*From your formulas, O bat-eyed and materialistic priests.*

And we mustn't forget Robert Burns's outburst when he was angered by a reverend gentleman's attack on Gray's "Elegy": "Sir, I now perceive that a man may be an excellent judge of poetry by square and rule, and after all a damned blockhead."

*Elder.* Alas, have we argued for two days and nights, only to hurl all critical principles out of the window?

*Middleton.* No—merely to recognize that their

application must be cautious and indirect, and that they must always be subordinated to, if not derived from, wider and deeper principles. For back of any philosophy of art, as J. E. Spingarn has reminded us, there must be a philosophy of life. Or, as Irwin Edman has put it, to criticize a book is to estimate a world.

*Elder.* Well, my friends, it is far past midnight, and tomorrow morning we must all catch an early train for the city. I am a miserable host: I bring both of you out here for the week-end, and all I offer you is endless talk.

*Middleton.* Surely not profitless talk for me, and surely not on a trivial subject. I have enjoyed it immensely, and I'm certain Young has too. Criticism, after all, is the one art that all humanity practices, whether well or ill. It enters at every stage into every other art: in the beginning, when the artist must fix his conception; during his work, when he must step back from time to time to judge of his execution, his approach to his ideal, when he must revise, alter, perfect; and at the end, when he must judge his own completed product. Criticism, in truth, is the final art.

*Young.* Perhaps only in the sense that it will continue to flourish when all the rest are dead.

*Elder.* Well, if this art is so important, then I cannot conceal from you a certain despair. For there seem to be no accepted principles about it anywhere. Here we three have been talking steadily through

two days and three evenings, and we seem almost as far from agreement as we ever were.

*Middleton.* No, we have been pretty stubborn, but this talk, I am sure, will cause each of us to revise his opinions in silent soliloquy. And even though we may all continue to disagree, will that prove that at least two of us must be wrong? I do not think so. For in the realm of literary criticism, there is probably no pure and complete truth and there are perhaps very few complete errors. All three of our points of view have elements of truth in them, and possibly Renan's remark that truth lies in a *nuance* is more applicable here than anywhere else, for a slight difference in emphasis, a little more to the right or to the left, and truth becomes error. Or perhaps we may say that we do not know what is truth or what error except toward the extremes. All of us, for example, barring the color-blind, know green from yellow, but none of us, looking at a spectrum, can draw the precise line at which one becomes the other. Always there is a region where, to take another illustration from physics, something equivalent to Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy seems to apply, and within that region men may continue to disagree for eternity.

*Elder.* So we are destined never to have a settled theory of criticism?

*Young.* But why should that disturb us? We have managed somehow to get along for several thousand historic years without a settled theory not

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only of criticism, but of politics, or of economics, or of what constitutes the good life. Remember Montaigne: "*Que sais-je?*"

*Middleton.* Let us not end in sterile nihilism or despair. We have arrived at some sort of agreement, really, concerning a great many things. We have decided that the much maligned activity of criticism itself is not only as inevitable as breathing, but almost as indispensable. We have decided that the critic's existence is justified not only by one function, but by an almost indefinite number—that if his final rôle is perhaps to appraise and to judge, he must be incidentally a merit-finder as well as a fault-finder, a discoverer of talent as well as an exposé of charlatanism, and he may be also a reporter, a psychographer, an interpreter and catalyzer, and an artist. We have seen that pure subjectivism and pure objectivism both come logically to an impasse, that the final arbiter of literary values is the social mind, and that the individual critic should strive for universality in his judgments even while he recognizes that his limitations of knowledge and of temperament must forever prevent him from completely achieving it. We have agreed that posterity's judgments are not infallible, that they are even in some ways inferior to contemporary judgments, but that they are none the less on the whole remarkably sound and comprehensive, and the best, from the nature of the case, that we can have. We have seen that neither complete conventionalism nor complete



rebellion is either possible or desirable, and that the great writer must be at once traditionalist and experimentalist. We have ended by rejecting the pretensions and the triumphant half-truths of the Croceans and a score of other schools. We have seen that the immemorial argument between the realists and the romanticists has been based largely on lack of understanding, that what is important in a novel is its psychological penetration and internal coherence rather than its literal "truth-to-life", that all art involves some interpretation or idealization of experience, and that what should concern us is not the fact of this idealization, but the nature of it. We have brought the chief critical positions into direct conflict with each other, and compelled the champion of each of them to face its implications and dilemmas. We have appeared to devote a good deal of our time to establishing the obvious, but perhaps we may be forgiven for doing that in a subject in which the obvious is so frequently overlooked. We have quoted freely enough, being content to take over any man's conclusions where we could find no objection to them, recognizing that it is sometimes better to aim at comprehensiveness and good sense than to strain after an originality that may turn out to be spurious. Where we have been unable to agree completely on final, definite solutions of problems, we have passed on, consoling ourselves with the Socratic thought that it may sometimes be as great a service to truth to raise questions as to "settle"

them. Finally, we have seen that we must judge a work of literature with the whole of our experience and knowledge; that the application of all standards, principles and rules of criticism must be cautious and indirect, and that nothing can take the place of personal discernment. In the words of Confucius, "A man can enlarge his principles; the principles do not of themselves enlarge the man."

*Elder.* Well, in any case we may at least say of the theory of criticism what John Stuart Mill said of logic—that whatever may be the practical value of a true philosophy of these matters, it is hardly possible to exaggerate the mischiefs of a false one. If our talk has helped us substantially to reduce these mischiefs—and I think it has—it has surely been worth having.



## APPENDICES



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## A

### LITERATURE AND THE "CLASS WAR"

The astonishingly rapid spread, in the last two or three years, of the application of so-called social standards in literary criticism, and particularly of so-called Marxian standards, makes it desirable that these standards should be submitted to a critical examination. In undertaking such an examination one is confronted at the very beginning by a formidable difficulty. One feels that few of the writers whose theories are being examined will trouble to weigh on their merits any of the specific objections offered. For most of the nouveau-Marxists know all the answers in advance. They know that any critic who questions any item in the Marxian ideology is a "bourgeois" critic, and that his objections are "bourgeois" criticisms; and from that terrible and crushing adjective there is no appeal. For the bourgeois critic, if I understand the nouveau-Marxists rightly, has less free-will than a parrot. He is a mere phonograph, who can only repeat the phrases and opinions with which he has been stuffed from his reading of bourgeois literature and his contacts with bourgeois science and bourgeois art. All these make up bour-

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geois culture, which is a mere class culture, i. e., an elaborate and colossal system of apologetics; worse, an instrument for class dominance and class oppression. The bourgeois critic, in brief, is a mere automaton, incapable of surmounting or of escaping from the bourgeois ideology in which he is imprisoned; and the poor fool's delusion that he is capable of seeing any problem with relative objectivity and disinterestedness is simply one more evidence that he cannot pierce beyond the walls of his ideological cell. (Of course it does seem possible for a few of the chosen, by an act of grace, to receive the revelation and jump suddenly into a complete acceptance of the Marxian ideology; otherwise it would be impossible to account for the bourgeois-Marxists themselves. But we may return to such miracles later.)

In such an atmosphere, I hope I may be forgiven if I begin with an *ad hominem* argument, for in such an atmosphere *ad hominem* arguments are the only kind likely to make any impression. Now the first article in the Marxian credo is that there is but one Karl Marx and that Lenin is his prophet. One would suppose, therefore, that the critics who call themselves Marxists would trouble to learn what their master and his greatest disciple thought on cultural questions. Did Marx himself reject the culture of his age on the ground that it was bourgeois culture? Did he flee from its contamination as from a plague? Did he repudiate it as mere apologetics? The evidence against any such assumption is over-

whelming. Wilhelm Liebknecht, in his delightful biographical memoir, tells us that Marx read Goethe, Lessing, Shakespeare, Dante, and Cervantes "almost daily", and that he was fond of reciting scenes from Shakespeare, and long passages from the "Divina Commedia" that he knew almost entirely by heart. Marx's son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, in his personal recollections (which appear in "Karl Marx: Man, Thinker, and Revolutionist", a symposium edited by D. Ryazanoff), confirms this and supplements it in more detail. Marx, he tells us,

knew much of Heine and Goethe by heart, and would even quote these poets in conversation. He read a great deal of poetry, in most of the languages of Europe. Year after year he would read Aeschylus again in the original text, regarding this author and Shakespeare as the two greatest dramatic geniuses the world had ever known. For Shakespeare he had an unbounded admiration.

Sometimes he would lie down on the sofa and read a novel, and had often two or three novels going at the same time, reading them by turns. He had a preference for eighteenth-century novels, and was especially fond of Fielding's "Tom Jones". Among modern novelists, his favorites were Paul de Kock, Charles Lever, the elder Dumas, and Sir Walter Scott, whose "Old Mortality" he considered a masterpiece.

He had a predilection for tales of adventure and humorous stories. The greatest masters of romance were for him Cervantes and Balzac. His admiration



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for Balzac was so profound that he had planned to write a critique of "La comédie humaine" as soon as he finished his economic studies.

Even more direct evidence of Marx's literary tastes is furnished by a "confession" which he signed at the insistence of two of his daughters. It was a game, popular in the early sixties, and still often revived, of answering a set of leading questions; and from what we know of Marx there can be no doubt that his answers, while in one or two instances playful, were fundamentally serious. Asked who his "favorite poet" was, he answered: "Shakespeare, Aeschylus, Goethe." He gave his favorite prose writer as Diderot, his favorite occupation as "book worming", and—what ought to interest those critics who seem to have decided that nothing outside of the class struggle is now worth discussing—he set down his favorite maxim as "*Nihil humanum a me alienum puto*"—"I regard nothing human as alien to me."

Lenin was as little disposed to reject bourgeois culture as Marx himself. In her biographical memoir, Lenin's widow, N. K. Krupskaya, tells us that "Vladimir Ilyich [Lenin] not only read, but many times reread, Turgenev, L. Tolstoy, Chernyshevsky's 'What Is to Be Done?' and in general had a fine knowledge of, and admiration for, the classics." We learn also that at one time he was very much taken up with Latin and the Latin authors; that he eagerly scanned Goethe's "Faust" in German, Heine's

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poems, and Victor Hugo's poems; that he liked Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya"; and that he "placed the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Nekrasov by the side of his bed, along with Hegel". Madame Lenin tells an amusing story of his encounter with some young Communists. "Do you read Pushkin?" he asked them. "Oh, no, he was a bourgeois. Mayakovsky for us." Lenin smiled: "I like Pushkin better." But he admired Mayakovsky, and even praised him once for some verses deriding Soviet bureaucracy.

If supplementary evidence is needed on this point, we have it in the list published by Joshua Kunitz in the *New Masses* of January, 1932, of the volumes which Lenin ordered for his library in 1919—"a year," Mr. Kunitz reminds us, "of economic disorganization, political counter-revolution, and impending civil war". Among the poets whose collected works were ordered were Pushkin, Lermontov, Tuitshev and Fet, and among the prose writers Gogol, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Alsakov and Chekhov.

Even when we pass from this record of the personal tastes of Marx and Lenin to questions of theory, we find that the author of the doctrine of Economic Determinism was far from applying it with the crude, rigid and dogmatic directness of many of those who now profess to be his followers. Unfortunately, Marx's views on the relation of literature to class are less fully set forth than we should

like, but in a paper published as an appendix to "The Critique of Political Economy" he makes this significant statement:

It is well known that certain periods of highest development of art stand in no direct connection with the general development of society, nor with the material basis and the skeleton structure of its organization. Witness the example of the Greeks as compared with the modern nations or even Shakespeare.

Here is a clear acknowledgment that a work of literature is not necessarily to be dismissed as inferior because it grows out of a society in which social injustice prevails, even if it is the product of an oppressing class or of a slave-holding class. To call a work of literature "bourgeois", in other words, would not have meant for Marx that it was necessarily not a great work. And as a corollary, to call a work of art "proletarian" would not have meant for him that it was necessarily admirable.

Now that Leon Trotzky is a political exile, his ideas on any subject are presumably not as widely popular among Communists, and certainly not among the party hacks, as they once were; but his remarkable volume "Literature and Revolution", published in America in 1925, was written when he still held office, and seems to me at bottom a development of the attitude already implicit in Marx. Like Marx himself, Trotzky is not free from inconsistencies. Certainly he often mistakes political for

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aesthetic criticism. He has a curiously ambivalent attitude toward the "fellow-travelers", at times praising, at times deriding them, and at times engaging in an unattractive heresy hunt. He insists, especially in the early part of his volume, on the essential class character of art. Social landslides, he says, reveal this as clearly as geologic landslides reveal the deposits of earth layers. But he has a genuine feeling for literature and brilliant analytical powers, and the common sense and courage to contradict the dogmas of the extremists in his own party. The italics in the following quotations are mine:

It is not true that we regard only that art as new and revolutionary which speaks of the worker, and it is nonsense to say that we demand that the poets should describe inevitably a factory chimney, or the uprising against capital! . . . Personal lyrics of the very smallest scope have an absolute right to exist within the new art. . . .

It is very true that one cannot always go by the principles of Marxism in deciding whether to reject or to accept a work of art. A work of art should, in the first place, be judged by its own law, that is, by the law of art.

Every ruling class creates its own culture, and consequently its own art. . . . Bourgeois culture . . . has existed five centuries, but it did not reach its greatest flowering until the nineteenth century, or, more correctly, the second half of it. History shows that the formation of a new culture which

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centers around a ruling class demands considerable time and reaches completion only at the period preceding the political decadence of that class. . . .

The period of the social revolution, on a world scale, will last . . . decades, but not centuries. . . . Can the proletariat in this time create a new culture? It is legitimate to doubt this, because the years of social revolution will be years of fierce class struggles in which destruction will occupy more room than new construction. At any rate, the energy of the proletariat itself will be spent mainly in conquering power. . . . The cultural reconstruction which will begin when the need of the iron clutch of a dictatorship unparalleled in history will have disappeared, will not have a class character. This seems to lead to the conclusion that *there is no proletarian culture and that there never will be any*, and in fact there is no reason to regret this. The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture. We frequently seem to forget this.

The main task of the proletarian intelligentsia in the immediate future is not the abstract formation of a new culture regardless of the absence of a basis for it, but definite culture-bearing, that is, a systematic, planful, and, of course, critical imparting to the backward masses of the essential elements of *the culture which already exists*. . . .

It would be monstrous to conclude . . . that the technique of bourgeois art is not necessary to the workers. . . .

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It is childish to think that bourgeois belles-lettres can make a breach in class solidarity. What the worker will take from Shakespeare, Goethe, Pushkin, or Dostoevsky, will be a more complex idea of human personality, of its passions and feelings, a deeper and profounder understanding of its psychic forces and of the rôle of the subconscious, . . .

The proletariat also needs a continuity of creative tradition. At the present time the proletariat realizes this continuity not directly, but indirectly, through the creative bourgeois intelligentsia. . . .

I apologize for these long quotations, but as I remarked at the beginning, the majority of our own so-called Marxists are so impervious to arguments from liberal and bourgeois sources that it is necessary to direct their attention at least to the tastes and opinions of the leaders they profess to follow. These leaders, obviously, dispose of a good deal of the nonsense about "proletarian literature". Those who seek to dismiss practically all existing culture by the mere process of labeling it "bourgeois" are not necessarily Marxists. They are simply new barbarians, celebrants of crudity and ignorance.

There is in most of the new American "Marxist" critics a deplorable mental confusion, and this mental confusion, as I have hinted, is not necessarily connected with Marxism. Marx himself would probably be distressed by the manner in which they abuse Marxian terms. A proletarian, for example, in Marx's use of the term, is an exploited manual

worker, a factory "hand", and he remains a proletarian regardless of his political or economic views. A Communist, on the other hand, is a person who, regardless of his economic position, holds a certain definite set of opinions. Most of the new "Marxian" critics use these terms interchangeably, as if they were synonyms, and as a result some very strange things happen. A Harvard graduate like Dos Passos, for example, is hailed as a great "proletarian" novelist. Still more abusive, in a double sense, is the use of "bourgeois" to mean either a person of a certain economic status or a non-Communist. Now it should not seem particularly disgraceful not to be a sweated factory worker. In this simple, descriptive, and Marxian sense of the word, Marx himself was a bourgeois economist. (As Trotzky remarks in "Literature and Revolution", "Marx and Engels came out of the ranks of the petty bourgeois democracy and, of course, were brought up on its culture and not on the culture of the proletariat.") If this economic-status meaning were adhered to, the adjective "bourgeois" would not seem particularly damning. But it is, as I have said, used also as an emotive word, a blackjack to describe non-Communists. Full advantage is taken of its historic, non-Marxian connotations—an uncultured shopkeeper, a provincial, a timidly conventional person, a non-Bohemian, a philistine.

This emotive use of words is bound to lead to

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mental confusion. It is impossible to make out, for example, exactly what the new Marxists mean by a "proletarian literature". Most of them, most of the time, appear to mean a literature *about* proletarians. Some of them, some of the time, seem to mean a literature *by* proletarians. Some of them, part of the time, mean a *communist* or *revolutionary* literature; and a few of them demand nothing less than a combination of all three of these. This hardly seems to leave much room for most of what used to be called literature.

It may be well at this point to ask just how much a culture is invalidated or suspect because it is a "class" culture. We are led to suppose, under extreme interpretations of the doctrine of economic determinism, that our economic status inevitably determines our opinions, that those opinions are mere rationalizations of our class status. Let us admit the element of truth in this; let us admit that our economic status influences the opinions of each of us, in various unconscious and subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—ways. Is it impossible for the individual to surmount these limitations? Is it impossible for him, once he has recognized this prejudice, to guard against it as he guards against other prejudices? Is the limitation of class necessarily any more compelling than the limitation of country, of race, of age, of sex? Because Proust was a Frenchman, his writing is naturally colored by his French environment; it



is different from what it would have been had he lived all his life in England. But does Proust's Frenchness diminish, to any extent worth talking of, his value to American readers? Shakespeare, as a seventeenth-century writer, was naturally limited by the lack of knowledge and many of the prejudices of his age; his age colors his work. Does that mean that he is of little value to the twentieth-century reader? Because Dreiser is a man, does he lose his value for women readers? Does Willa Cather lose hers for men readers? The answers to these questions are so obvious that it seems almost childish to ask them. The great writer with great imaginative gifts may universalize himself. If not in a literal sense, then certainly in a functional sense, he can transcend the barriers of nationality, age, and sex. And certainly he can, in the same functional sense and to the same degree, transcend the barrier of class.

Indeed, the barrier of class is perhaps in some respects less difficult to surmount than the barriers of nationality, historic era, personal age, and sex. This is no place to examine the entire basis of communism, but it can be said that it is simply not true that the modern world, particularly the American world, consists of just two sharply defined classes. Our class boundaries are notoriously vague, loose, and shifting. No doubt the contrast between those at the top and those at the bottom is just as great as the Communists say it is, but the division into just

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two contrasted classes is a child of the Hegelian dialectic rather than of objective fact.<sup>1</sup>

There is the further question, never satisfactorily dealt with and perhaps not even clearly recognized by most Communist critics, of the distinction between genesis and value. Every opinion, stated or implied, has a right to be dealt with purely on its own merits, and must be so dealt with if there is to be any intellectual clarity. The truth or value of an idea or an attitude must ultimately be judged wholly apart from the prejudices, the interests, or the income of the man who expresses it.

All this is not to say that the question of class bias is not important in literature, science, or art. It is simply to subordinate it to its proper place. It is silly and practically meaningless, for example, to say that we have a bourgeois astronomy, a bourgeois physics, a bourgeois mathematics. Here the class bias enters to so infinitesimal an extent that it is not worth talking about. But the elements of class bias may be larger in biology—as, for example, in its answers to problems of environment and heredity. When we come to the social sciences, particularly economics, the elements of class bias may be very large. In the arts they will be present less directly:

<sup>1</sup> Certainly that division would be completely arbitrary if made on the basis of income, for one may just as well divide the American population into seventy-four "income classes"—as the National Bureau of Economic Research actually has—into two. Nor can the division be made purely on the basis of employer and employed. A bootblack with one assistant is an "employer"; a railroad president on salary an "employee".

they will be smaller in poetry than in fiction, smaller in painting than in poetry, smaller in music than in painting. This distinction is clearly admitted by Trotzky. What must be decided in each case is the question of the *degree* of class bias and the real relevance of it. It may be sometimes relevant for the critic to point out the class bias or the class sympathy in any writer and just how it affects his work. It may be sometimes even more relevant, for that matter, to point to his religious bias, his nationalistic bias, his sexual bias, or the influence upon him of the particular historic era in which he writes. There is no reason why any one of these should receive exclusive or constant emphasis. The greatest danger, in short, of so-called Marxian criticism in literature is that the critics who make a fetish or a cult of it will in time become infinitely boring. When we are told that Emerson was bourgeois, Poe bourgeois, Mark Twain bourgeois, Proust bourgeois, Thomas Mann bourgeois, we can only reply that this may all be very true, but that we knew it in advance and that it tells us nothing. It is like telling us that Rousseau was an eighteenth-century writer, that Goethe was a German, and that atheists are not Catholics. What we are interested in is what distinguishes the great writer from other persons of his class, what gives him his individuality—in brief, what makes him still worth talking about at all.

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## B

### MARXISM OR TOLSTOYISM?

It was one of Professor Irving Babbitt's favorite contentions that in all aesthetic movements America lags thirty years behind Europe. That thesis must receive disturbing support for anyone who turns to a re-examination of Tolstoy's "What Is Art?" which appeared in 1898. Here is Edmund Wilson, in a book not two years old,<sup>1</sup> introducing us to the symbolists, to Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Huysmans, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and all the rest. Here is Max Eastman, in a book still more recent,<sup>2</sup> deriding "the cult of unintelligibility". Both volumes are highly intelligent, and both attracted wide and deserved attention. Yet there was Tolstoy, thirty-five years ago, introducing the symbolists, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Huysmans, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and all the rest, to the Russian public of his day, and denouncing them for their dogma of obscurity.

What makes Tolstoy's views on art particularly interesting at the present moment is their striking similarity in some respects to those now held by the

<sup>1</sup> "Axel's Castle."

<sup>2</sup> "The Literary Mind."

so-called literary Marxists. In some of their views, indeed, the new Marxists are probably much nearer to Tolstoy than they are to Marx. There are, of course, quite important differences. The ultimate criterion of the Marxist critics, as they see it, is an economic one. The criterion of Tolstoy is economic only in a secondary and derived sense; primarily it is ethical and quasi-religious. The final aim of art, Tolstoy held, was to promote "the growth of brotherhood among men," to "unite men with God and with one another." In so far as Tolstoy looks forward to a classless society, he is on common ground with the Communists; yet he is sharply opposed to any class war, or to that art which aims at "uniting the people of one cult only to separate them yet more sharply from the members of other cults, and even to place them in relations of hostility to one another". He did not believe, in other words, that the way to bring about "brotherly love of all men" was to begin with a prolonged period of bloodshed and hatred.

Yet Tolstoy, like our present-day Marxists, was opposed to what he constantly calls "upper-class art", as well as to "upper-class science", and many of his phrases are strikingly Marxian: <sup>1</sup>

What the members of the upper classes who are occupying themselves with science most want is the maintenance of the system under which they retain

<sup>1</sup> The quotations throughout are from Aylmer Maude's translation.

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their privileges. . . . Therefore one side of science, including theology and philosophy adapted to the existing order, as also history and political economy of the same sort, is chiefly occupied in proving that the existing order is the very one which ought to endure; that it has come into existence and continues to exist by the operation of immutable laws not amenable to human will, and that all efforts to change it are therefore harmful and wrong.

His denunciation of upper-class art is even more scathing. It is a mere amusement-art; it reflects an appallingly narrow range of feelings, and those feelings are nearly all contemptible:

The range of feelings experienced by the powerful and the rich who have no experience of labor for the support of life is far poorer, more limited, and more insignificant than the range of feelings natural to working people. People of our circle, aestheticians, usually think and say just the contrary of this. I remember how Goncharev, the author, a very clever and educated man but a thorough townsman and an aesthetician, said to me that after Turgenev's "Sportsman's Notebook" there was nothing left to write about in peasant life. It was all used up. The life of working people seemed to him so simple that Turgenev's peasant stories had used up all there was to describe. The life of our wealthy people, with their love affairs and dissatisfaction with themselves, seemed to him full of inexhaustible subject matter. One hero kissed his lady on the palm of her hand, another on her elbow, and a third somewhere else.

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One man is discontented through idleness, and another because people don't love him. And Goncharev thought that in this sphere there is no end of variety. . . . In reality almost all the feelings of people of our class amount to but three very insignificant and simple feelings—the feeling of pride, the feeling of sexual desire, and the feeling of weariness of life. These three feelings, with their offshoots, form almost the sole subject matter of the art of the rich classes.

In denouncing upper-class art Tolstoy did not, like the Marxians, contrast it with "proletarian" art but with what he called "universal" art. His conscious objective was not an art that would reflect the ideals of one class rather than of another, but one that would reflect the universal ideals of mankind. But here he fell into several confusions. He rejected the upper classes as essentially perverted; he looked upon their education as at bottom a mere indoctrination with false and base ideals; he dismissed all professional critics as "erudite, that is, perverted and at the same time self-confident individuals"; and he ended by taking as his real critic, in effect, the Russian peasant. Tolstoy in his youth had been tremendously impressed by the works of Rousseau, and it is obvious that Tolstoy's peasant is the exact equivalent of Rousseau's noble savage, the "unspoiled" and "natural" man. Strict adherence to this ideal compelled Tolstoy to glorify ignorance, and he did not shrink from the logic of his choice. "To say that a

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work of art is good but incomprehensible to the majority of men is the same as saying of some kind of food that it is very good but most people can't eat it." The analogy is unfortunate, for nothing makes clearer than geographic and historical comparisons the extent to which the taste for certain foods is a matter of habit and custom and palate-training. And what of, let us say, the differential calculus? Is it any less valid because it is difficult to understand? Tolstoy comes almost to the point of facing this question. "A speech delivered in Chinese may be excellent, and yet remain incomprehensible to me if I do not know Chinese; but what distinguishes a work of art from all other mental activity is just the fact that its language is understood by all." This begs the entire question, and violates all plausibility. Just as, if we do not understand Chinese, we cannot appreciate what is excellent in Chinese, so we cannot appreciate what is excellent in our own language until, after years of growth and training, we have learned that language. And we cannot appreciate what is excellent in art until we have mastered the language of art.

How did Tolstoy come to make his cardinal error? It goes back, I think, to his original definition of art. "Art," he holds, "is a human activity consisting in this, that one man, consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that others are infected by these feelings and also experience them." This defi-



dition holds a valuable truth, for it is obvious that the effectiveness of all art depends upon this infectiousness: indeed, "infectious" and "effective" are here almost synonyms. But while infectiousness is an indispensable condition of art, it soon becomes evident that it is not the essence of it, though Tolstoy clearly believes that it is. "There is one indubitable sign distinguishing real art from its counterfeit—namely, the infectiousness of art. . . . And not only is infection a sure sign of art, but the degree of infectiousness is also the sole measure of excellence in art." It immediately occurs to one to ask how one is to measure degree of infectiousness. Degree in whom? As a criterion, infectiousness by itself is both relative and subjective. It may reflect no more than a relationship between a particular work of art and a particular spectator. A callow youngster who might be deeply infected by a dime novel would not be infected at all by "Paradise Lost".

Tolstoy never really confronted this problem. He denounced all the Wagnerian operas as counterfeit art, but he never explained how they came to infect the Wagnerites. When he did touch on the question, he begged it. The people who liked "upper-class art" were "perverted" (and "perversion", in Tolstoy, often seems to mean precisely what most of us would call education), while the peasant's sense of smell in such matters was as sure as a hound's. And Tolstoy's peasant, as I have hinted, was never the real peasant, but an idealization: he was, in fact, a small

edition of Tolstoy himself. "Such feelings as form the chief subjects of present-day art—say, for instance, honor, patriotism, and amorousness—evoke in a workingman only bewilderment and contempt, or indignation." Well, I for one presume to doubt that the depiction of amorousness evokes either bewilderment or indignation in the average workingman; and I do not believe that that workingman would refer, like Tolstoy, to "odious female nudity" or "women's naked bodies and all sorts of abominations". The movies, burlesque, and the tabloids get along quite well today by working on precisely the opposite theory. Moreover, if "infectiousness" were really the surest sign of art, then art depicting amorousness and women's naked bodies ought to stand very high.

Tolstoy's judgments of actual artists were appalling, and shortly after the middle of the book the reader's interest declines as the argument moves from the relatively plausible to the clearly absurd. Tolstoy begins by dismissing the symbolists for their affectation and obscurity. Then he throws out such writers as Rémy de Gourmont, Pierre Louys and Huysmans for their "erotic mania." Soon one becomes aware that he is calling Goethe's "Faust" and Shakespeare's "Hamlet" "simulated" art. He rejects all of Wagner and finds Beethoven's later symphonies "artistic ravings". He condemns the work of the Greek tragedians, of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, as well as that of Dante, Tasso and Mil-

ton, as "brain-spun" and "invented". And in a mere footnote he consigns practically all his own artistic productions to the category of bad art. What is saved from the wreckage? What art is admirable? Some peasant songs, Millet, and a few obscure paintings portraying poverty, brotherly love, or pity, Schiller's "The Robbers", Hugo's "Les Misérables", Dickens's "The Tale of Two Cities" and "A Christmas Carol", Eliot's "Adam Bede", Dostoevsky's work, and "Uncle Tom's Cabin".

What had happened? A doctrinaire had had the courage of his doctrines. And what was wrong with those doctrines? Is not "to unite all men" a noble aim to set for art? No doubt. But such an end, like that of happiness, may often be more successfully achieved obliquely than directly. And it is not the sole end of mankind. The ends of man are irreducibly pluralistic, and so, likewise, are the ends of art.

The appalling conclusions of Tolstoy's "What Is Art?" should serve as a warning to some of our present "Marxist" critics. The proletarian for whom they want literature hereafter to be written is not the actual proletarian, any more than Tolstoy's peasant was the actual peasant; he is merely an idealized creature, a potential creature—the proletarian as he might become if they could edit him, if they could transmogrify him, if they could vaccinate him with just those elements in bourgeois culture which they approve of, and withhold those of which they have

## MARXISM OR TOLSTOYISM?

come to disapprove—if, in short, they could make  
n into a little copy of themselves. If they think  
the aim of art should be primarily to arouse  
the masses to a class struggle, they are giving it a  
very dubious mission. If they think, more broadly,  
that the aim of art should be to speed the day of a  
just and humane and classless society, they are giv-  
ing it a very noble mission. But they should never  
forget that art may do this in ways at first glance  
far from obvious. And they should never forget that  
even such an aim cannot sum up all the ends of art  
and man.

Nor from Tolstoy could the new Marxists learn  
only the weaknesses and pitfalls in their approach;  
they could learn, also, part of its possible strengths.  
A sincere and powerful mind like Tolstoy's could  
not write a book, no matter how wrongheaded its  
main conclusions, without filling it with many pene-  
trating incidental truths. He was right in seeing in  
the cult of unintelligibility a sign of decadence, and  
in the obsession with new forms a symptom of anae-  
mia. For when writers have something genuinely  
fresh to say, something that they vehemently desire  
to communicate, they do not engage in these little  
games of half-revelment, half-concealment. It does  
not occur to them, as it did to Mallarmé, that "to  
name an object is to take away three-fourths of the  
enjoyment of the poem, which consists in the happi-  
ness of guessing little by little". When they have  
something real to say, they let the matter dictate the

form, not the form the matter. Tolstoy was right, too, in condemning the obsession with sex in art, not for the superstitiously prudish and ascetic reasons that he sometimes gives, but on the wiser ground that this obsession is a sign of a narrowing of the circle of feelings and interests covered by art, a warning signal of impoverishment. He was right in his analysis of so much "upper-class art" as the work of idle and satiated men. He was right, finally, in rejecting the view that the function of art is primarily to amuse, and in holding, rather, with whatever mystical and religious confusions, that art must reflect the entire range of man's values, the whole sense of his destiny. Amusement-art might give us "The Mikado"; it could never give us "Macbeth". "Art is not a pleasure, a solace, or an amusement; art is a great matter." And to that perception the author of "War and Peace", and of Anna Karenina", always held fast.

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The present book might be regarded from one aspect as the continuous application of that principle to the problems of literary criticism. The method is particularly fruitful, it seems to me, in dealing with a long-standing controversy like that between the impressionistic critics and their "objective" opponents. So far as I am aware, the present book contains the first attempt to reconcile these two schools of thought by the consistent use of the concept of the Social Mind.

—Henry Hazlitt

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