

A Letter to the Editor

From Max Beerbohm

DEAR SIR,—When THE YELLOW BOOK appeared I was in Oxford. So literary a little town is Oxford that its undergraduates see a newspaper nearly as seldom as the Venetians see a horse, and until yesterday, when coming to London, I found in the album of a friend certain newspaper cuttings, I had not known how great was the wrath of the pressmen.

What in the whole volume seems to have provoked the most ungovernable fury is, I am sorry to say, an essay about Cosmetics that I myself wrote. Of this it was impossible for any one to speak calmly. The mob lost its head, and, so far as any one in literature can be lynched, I was. In speaking of me, one paper dropped the usual prefix of "Mr." as though I were a well-known criminal, and referred to me shortly as "Beerbohm"; a second allowed me the "Mr." but urged that "a short Act of Parliament should be passed to make this kind of thing illegal"; a third suggested, rather tamely, that I should read one of Mr. William Watson's sonnets. More than one comic paper had a very serious poem about me, and a known adherent to the humour which, forest-like, is called new, declared my essay to be "the rankest and most nauseous thing in all literature." It was a bomb thrown by a cowardly decadent, another outrage by one of that desperate and

dangerous band of madmen who must be mercilessly stamped out by a comity of editors. May I, Sir, in justice to myself and to you, who were gravely censured for harbouring me, step forward, and assure the affrighted mob that it is the victim of a hoax? May I also assure it that I had no notion that it would be taken in? Indeed, it seems incredible to me that any one on the face of the earth could fail to see that my essay, so grotesque in subject, in opinion so flippant, in style so wildly affected, was meant for a burlesque upon the "precious" school of writers. If I had only signed myself D. Cadent or Parrar Docks, or appended a note to say that the MS. had been picked up not a hundred miles from Tite Street, all the pressmen would have said that I had given them a very delicate bit of satire. But I did not. And *hinc*, as they themselves love to say, *illæ lacrimæ*.

After all, I think it is a sound rule that a writer should not kick his critics. I simply wish to make them a friendly philosophical suggestion. It seems to be thought that criticism holds in the artistic world much the same place as, in the moral world, is held by punishment—"the vengeance taken by the majority upon such as exceed the limits of conduct imposed by that majority." As in the case of punishment, then, we must consider the effect produced by criticism upon its object, how far is it reformatory? Personally, I cannot conceive how any artist can be hurt by remarks dropped from a garret into a gutter. Yet it is incontestable that many an illustrious artist has so been hurt. And these very remarks, so far from making him change or temper his method, have rather made that method intenser, have driven him to retire further within his own soul, by showing him how little he may hope for from the world but insult and ingratitude.

In fact, the police-constable mode of criticism is a failure. True that, here and there, much beautiful work of the kind has
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been done. In the old, old *Quarterlies* is many a slashing review, that, however absurd it be as criticism, we can hardly wish unwritten. In the *National Observer*, before its reformation, were countless fine examples of the cavilling method. The paper was rowdy, venomous and insincere. There was libel in every line of it. It roared with the lambs and bleated with the lions. It was a disgrace to journalism and a glory to literature. I think of it often with tears and desiderium. But the men who wrote these things stand upon a very different plane to the men employed as critics by the press of Great Britain. These must be judged, not by their workmanship, which is naught, but by the spirit that animates them and the consequence of their efforts. If only they could learn that it is for the critic to seek after beauty and to try to interpret it to others, if only they would give over their eternal fault-finding and not presume to interfere with the artist at his work, then with an equally small amount of ability our pressmen might do nearly as much good as they have hitherto done harm. Why should they regard writers with such enmity? The average pressman, reviewing a book of stories or of poems by an unknown writer, seems not to think "where are the beauties of this work that I may praise them, and by my praise quicken the sense of beauty in others?" He steadily applies himself to the ignoble task of plucking out and gloating over its defects. It is a pity that critics should show so little sympathy with writers, and curious when we consider that most of them tried to be writers themselves, once. Every new school that has come into the world, every new writer who has brought with him a new mode, they have rudely persecuted. The dulness of Ibsen, the obscurity of Meredith, the horrors of Zola—all these are household words. It is not until the pack has yelled itself hoarse that the level voice of justice is heard in praise. To pretend that no generation is capable
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of gauging the greatness of its own artists is the merest bauble-tit. Were it not for the accursed abuse of their function by the great body of critics, no poet need "live uncrown'd, apart." Many and irreparable are the wrongs that our critics have done. At length let them repent with ashes upon their heads. Where they see not beauty, let them be silent, reverently feeling that it may yet be there, and train their dull senses in quest of it.

Now is a good time for such penance. There are signs that our English literature has reached that point, when, like the literatures of all the nations that have been, it must fall at length into the hands of the decadents. The qualities that I tried in my essay to travesty—paradox and marivaudage, lassitude, a love of horror and all unusual things, a love of argot and archaism and the mysteries of style—are not all these displayed, some by one, some by another of *les jeunes écrivains*? Who knows but that Artifice is in truth at our gates and that soon she may pass through our streets? Already the windows of Grub Street are crowded with watchful, evil faces. They are ready, the men of Grub Street, to pelt her, as they have pelted all that came before her. Let them come down while there is still time, and hang their houses with colours, and strew the road with flowers. Will they not, for once, do homage to a new queen? By the time this letter appears, it *may* be too late!

Meanwhile, Sir, I am, your obedient servant,

MAX BEERBOHM.

Oxford, May '94.