

OF CRITICISM AND THE CRITIC

UNDER my window in the foggy, dripping street, those little imps, the newspaper-boys, are making the hour horrisonant with their yells. What voices the urchins develop, at what tender years! You and I, Mr. Editor, we could not advertise our wares so penetratingly, though we strove till our throats cracked over it. I hear there is a movement on foot for the suppression, or at least the discipline, of these too-raucous vendors of our news; and with all one's jealousy of the law's interference, it would be difficult reasonably, perhaps, to oppose this exercise of it. Yet, after all, how much are these rude and hideous cries of a piece with the thoroughfares they resound in, or, for the matter of that, with how much of our manners at large! You will remember a charming series of seventeenth-century engravings, by Hollar, portraying for us the street-cries of that day. Such picturesque gentlemen and ladies, they assuredly must have advertised and insinuated their goods with choice words and musical falls, daintily appropriate. Nay, I am, alas! old enough to recall out of the memory of childhood a lingering tradition of such things—the "Buy-a-broom," the "Buy my sweet, blooming lavender," girls. The latter cry may, indeed, yet be heard, now and again, actually here off Holborn, on an August morning; but its sweet strangeness has something almost too pathetic in it, so that its delicate melody seems to jar on one, as a Corot might on the hoarding of an underground station. I recollect running incontinent out into the street the first time it fell on my ears three years since. From a poor lad, painfully making way with his one leg and a crutch, came those musical tenor notes; and his apparently slight hold on life went far from amiss with that old-world fragrance, that old-world melody. Here, surely, was the last of a generation, a feeble relic, like a flame flickering

yet a moment or two, of vanished tastes and habits, an echo at its dying. Away, my poor fellow, out of this boisterousness and hurry; leave us, and flit away to the leisurely and quiet shades!

Not, indeed, that I would lend myself to the vulgarity of a mere shrewish scolding and belittling of our own day. That is a cheap indignation which leads a man to defame recklessly his age and country; nay, it is a scurvy trick, anyhow, to befoul one's own nest. When the tale of the centuries comes to be made up, I have little misgiving but that we nineteenth-century folk shall cut a decent-enough figure. But certainly it would be fanaticism, the drunkenness of a sheer conceit, to proclaim our time altogether, or indeed in some ways comparatively, as *in se ipso totus, teres, atque rotundus*. Those very providences which have been vouchsafed to give us our distinction, our scientific and mechanical advances, I mean, are, as yet, themselves the provocatives of certain blemishes in us, directly and indirectly. We have fed on strong and strange meat somewhat gluttonously, and suffer by consequence from an indigestion, as one might say. It is no sound appreciativeness, therefore, of our real condition, of our unquestionable virtues, which induces in some of us so determined a self-satisfaction, that either we deny the deficiencies detected in us, or treat them airily as of no moment. You shall have your friend Practicus hold you by the button in Shaftesbury Avenue, while he descants with enthusiasm on the improvements there of these past dozen years, and is moved even to some æsthetic fervour (for, somewhere in him, he, too, has a dormant sense of beauty) by that magical London atmosphere, which is for ever transmuting our world for us from mysterious glory to glory. Nor is it necessary, nor is it consonant with truth, to gainsay him; the most one can say is, that there seems to be another side to things. In some matters, Nature is the most indulgent mother imaginable; and however we deform our surroundings, she comes with her tender cunning and transfigures them into loveliness. To her effective resourcefulness there is, indeed, no end; she plays over our mean buildings, our reckless contrivances to secure convenience, or to trumpet our way in the world, and, as though she were saying to us, "You foolish little

creatures! you fancy beauty doesn't matter for you, and so it is in despite of you that I must work my miracles of grace," out of chaos she brings a charm unspeakable. Let us go down on our knees and thank her; but, also, let us have an eye to our own souls. The true citizen would fain see the thoroughfares of his town fine and fair of themselves, needing no trickery of light or mist to commend them. To-day it is pathetic to observe with what a makeshift we have come to be content. As we hurry to and fro 'twixt our paltry buildings, the last device we can hit upon to relieve their mean stupidity, to amuse ourselves amid their depression, to refresh ourselves amid the prevailing dirt and din, is to paper them with placards, staring, grotesque, salacious. How excellently with it all goes the ragamuffin yonder, shouting "Ixtree Speshall!" Dirty, ragged, cracked-voiced, impudent young scamp, how significant a product you are of our aims and methods! My poor, belated lavender-seller of the soft notes and the dulcet melody, your modesty is an anachronism, your tunefulness a discord, the ears that had leisure to listen to you have been dust this many a day.

But you remind me, Mr. Editor, that my title has something about "Criticism and the Critic." Ah! pardon me, I have been wandering afield; though not quite so far, perhaps, as you take it to be. However, I started on this communication with the thought of a newspaper in my head, a somewhat fresh variety of literary and artistic journal, the idea of which a friend suggests to me, and which it may be worth someone's while to consider. The characteristics of his adventure may be explained briefly. As the terms are ordinarily understood, this paper would have no principles and no policy. He proposes that the Editor should have no further care than to see that his writers possess individuality and can express it, and that they run him not into a libel-action. The writers shall have no further care than to say precisely what each of them thinks and feels on the matter in hand, unhampered by the least concern of supporting any tradition, or by a dread of contradicting, even flatly, what someone else, or their own selves, may have written in the same paper. Each of them, therefore, would have a free hand entirely, with that one proviso of blanching the

libel-court. He would write in the first person, and in the style his humour smiled upon at the moment. He would sign his article always, but sign it, as the whim took him, either with his name, or with a *nom-de-guerre*, or with an initial; and he would be free to change his signature as the occasion prompted him. Such, briefly, is my friend's proposal.

I conceive that the ideas working in his brain, and leading him to the above suggestions, are somewhat as follows; and though even to contemplate adding to the burden of our current journals is dangerously near to criminality, I confess to feeling some force in what I believe he would authorise me to set forth as the grounds of his position.

Somebody has somewhere said, that in criticism the great thing is for the critic to get himself out of the way. There is much pertinence in the remark; yet here, as so often, one may state precisely its opposite with a pertinence by no means less. Individuality is the one interesting, real thing in the universe. If a man is worth listening to at all (and, when one can get at him, I expect there breathes not a soul but is), let us hear what he thinks and feels, what he likes and hates, and let us hear it his own way. For the attainment of this end the tyranny of the editorial "we" is fatal; but fatal, too, is the antithesis, that on every occasion a man should write over his own signature, or over a signature known to be his. The ideal function of criticism is indeed to discern the true character of the thing criticised; but when we get off mere facts, as in the arts, such criticism is to mortals for the most part impossible; when we assume to deliver it we are ludicrously, irritatingly impertinent. To learn, however, how a man is affected by this or that specimen of the arts at the moment before him, entertains and stimulates me; and the entertainment, the stimulation, are heightened if he has time and opportunity to express himself to a nicety. In some ways, therefore, his written impression of such matters is of finer value and delight than even his conversation on them, for it is hardly less personal, while it is more considered, more clear and precise. My friend's insistence that in his proposed paper everybody shall write in the first person, but still over what signature or signatures he chooses,

seems to secure at once an individuality of utterance, and to allow a man that freedom in expressing himself which, on occasion, is in danger, if his real name must serve for finale. I do not deny that it is foolish in us to be so under the spell of a mere pronoun, and of the magnificent, magisterial air accompanying it, as to let them appal us by their authority, or fret us into a petulant rebellion. We are aware that it is but a Mr. Jones or a Mr. Briggs swaggering under that pretentious mask; and if these gentlemen gave themselves such airs when we sat together, they would impose upon us no more than any other coxcomb. But human nature is weak, and much at the mercy of appearances. When Mr. Jones and Mr. Briggs stand, stripped of their mystery, face to face with us, we meet them on equal terms; and their credit, their limits of attraction, or of irritation, are proportioned fairly enough to their naked worth.

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