

## Editor's Easy Chair

AN author so important in many kinds, in poetry, in fiction, in philosophy, in science; a man of such varied experience that it would be hard to equal him and impossible to surpass him in any world of ours; a scholar widely acquainted with the literature of the time, and generously ambitious of the excellence of our own: this admirably qualified and peculiarly authorized censor of the needs and qualities of criticism has invited the Easy Chair to a study of "the functions of the critic," as it knows him, or rather as it does not.

Such an invitation from such a man is like one from royalty or presidentiality, and implies acceptance upon the face of it. No smooth regrets for a previous engagement, or intended absence from the city, or confinement to the house from serious indisposition, will avail. It is not only an invitation but a command; yet it is not wholly imperative, and it offers a pleasure as well as urges a duty. Probably no writer living (for we will not explore the realms of oblivion for the consciousness of writers no longer living) but feels an actual or potential critic of high order in himself, and must hear the alluring call to autobiography in such an appeal. What he has always thought, if he has not often said, concerning criticism is so and so; and round about the theme stretches a faery realm of personal instance, in which his self-satisfaction may endlessly play, and feel no sense of shame, or dread the blame of any just spectator.

But is not the Easy Chair always, covertly or overtly, censuring the censorship? When it was *The Study*, in the years before that department became the haunt of a benigner and wiser spirit, was not it perpetually thundering at the gates of Fiction in Error, and no more sparing the dead than the quick? Did not it unfailingly outrage the sensibilities of that large class of dotards who believed

that they read Walter Scott all through once every year? Did not it say things of Thackeray and Dickens and Balzac that sent shivers of horror down the spines of the worshippers at those sacred shrines? Did not it preach Hardy and George Eliot and Jane Austen, Valdés and Galdós and Pardo-Bazán, Verga and Serao, Flaubert and the Goncourts and Zola, Björnson and Ibsen, Tourguénief and Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, and Tolstoy, and ever more Tolstoy, till its hearers slumbered in their pews? The tumult of those strenuous days yet fills our soul, and shall we again unseal their noises? This, we think, can hardly be the desire of the friend who lays his command upon us in the form of a request, and whom we are but too eager to obey. Therefore no stormy reverberations from that sulphurous past, no echoes of that fierce intolerance, that tempestuous propaganda which left the apostle without a friend or follower in the æsthetic world. Prudence, if no more magnanimous motive, shall rule us in the deliverance of our belief that there never was a time when the critics more needed a critic than now; when criticism was more the sanctuary of the unprincipled, the citadel of the imbecile and immoral. If this opinion will not conciliate the critics themselves, if it will not win the favor of all moderate-minded and well-meaning men, we have no arts to captivate them, and must make the truth our sole defence against their hardness.

Naturally, we do not mean all we have said, even in those gentle terms. We do not mean that criticism, the great mass of it, was not always so, or will not always be so bad. Critics, like the rest of us, are men (when they are not women), and they are unhappily too often young men, who can have nothing to learn in the nature of the case, who were born knowing it all and have not forgotten any of it at school. We say this autobiographically, because it was so when

we ourselves began to write criticism, and were as richly endowed for the work as any actual youth. Where our omniscience gave out, we supplied the defect with infallibility, and the author under review never knew how nearly we came to realizing our danger.

But it seems to us that in this day the average critic has often superadded a specific wisdom on points which knowledge has lingered in reaching. He has often been an interviewer, and has acquired a skill in misconception not to be won except in the interviewer's university of disqualification. Bringing to his task an accumulated ignorance not inconsistent with congenital or acquired knowingness, he is able to praise or blame impartially even after reading the book in hand. But the cause of polite learning has no longer to dread the blame of such criticism so much as its praise. In its praise Criticism has sat at the feet of Advertising, apparently, which it emulates in both the simplicity and the elegance of its style and the unsparing use of superlatives. We all know these, and criticism seems resolved that we shall not know them less but more. Yet there is no reason to doubt the reviewer's incorruptible sincerity; if he does not really admire the book so much, he admires the genius of the advertiser in praising it, and wishes to emulate him in an art which has now been carried to the extreme of force and beauty.

After music, advertising is the most modern of the arts, and its advance upon criticism has been indefinitely great. It has become a school in which we may all learn, in the measure of our ability, a habit of shrewd analysis, a lightning swiftness of thought, a diamond brilliancy of diction, and an adamantine poignancy of application, together with an unfailing divination of the public's mental possibilities. It is notorious that more than one professional ad-writer earns ten thousand dollars a year, and with this fact held dazzlingly before the eye, the ardent young reviewer cannot go amiss. Some of the older critics may linger in the superstition that it is they who have taught the advertiser his trade, but let any unprejudiced reader compare the lifeless comment of the old reviewer

with the pulsing and sparkling announcements of the ad-writer, and there can be no question on this point. No, if our criticism is ever to achieve perfection, the book-noticer must continue to sit at the feet of the ad-writer.

We do not mean, necessarily, that the critic must be biassed by the ad-writer's dicta; these are the ardent appeals of the advocate, rather than the verdicts of the juror or the sentences of the judge. But he must feel more and more that the ad-writer's manner and matter are what the people want, and what the critic of the future must study to supply. If the reader will turn to the book-announcement in any magazine page or newspaper column, he will find convincing proof of this condition. Sentence after sentence reads like the unpaid applause of the reviewer, and yet all is the work of the publisher's employee, and it is really work and not play, as the reviewer finds when he comes in his turn to say the same things.

In the mean time, what is the state of the criticism among us which may be called static, if that of the book-noticer may be called dynamic? In the order of critics, to which the different nations contribute here and there a talent, we have our fair if not our full share. We suppose that there will scarcely be more than one mind as to the primacy of Mr. W. C. Brownell among these. To our own thinking he deserves to rank with the French masters, who have no peers among the English, and with the sole German who may match them, Georg Brandes. The Russians could not have so great a fiction as theirs without critics of as fine make, but their names persist in escaping us. Next to Mr. Brownell, and not necessarily lower, we should put Mr. Brander Matthews, of a like ethical and æsthetic conscience, of due information, and of keen intelligence. Then for the sympathetic and appreciative criticism of authors still too remote from our average, we must recognize Mr. W. L. Phelps's varied performances. Whatever he says is worth minding, though it may not always be admissible. When he says, with his generous fervor, "Russian fiction is like German music, the best in the world," one wishes he had distinguished and said that in Tolstoy it was

the best, but that in Dostoyevsky, in Gorky, in Gogol, even in Tourguénief, it was perhaps not better, or not so good as the best Norwegian, Italian, French, and Spanish, or even the best English, fiction of to-day or yesterday. Yet in spite of Mr. Phelps's temptation so to give himself away without stint, he is a good third with the two we have named, and with whom we should like to name some other if we could think of him.

But three are enough for any nation in this sort, though the trio leaves us without any critic who may approach Sainte-Beuve in active usefulness, in an equal concern for current literature and for literature which no longer flows. Our friend mentions the courageous and able reviewing of Miss Margaret Sherwood in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and we should like to recognize the excellent work of Mrs. Louise Collier Willcox in the *North American Review*. We are not excluding others in naming these, and we are far from explicitly ignoring the honest and capable book-noticing in other magazines and newspapers, though we might grieve that honesty and capability took rather regrettably often the airy form of flippancy in one of the cleverest of our newspapers. Flippancy is good enough in many cases of current literature, but not in all, or not even in most. This feeling, in an author who has suffered it, becomes a poignant conviction. He believes that he would like a little more seriousness; but perhaps he would not, if he got it.

When, in fact (and this brings us to another point in our friend's letter), was an author ever pleased with the form of a critic's censure? He could point out a dozen places where he was at fault, but to be touched in a virtue, as if *it* were a fault, that is really too much. The trouble with *all* critics, good, bad, and indifferent, is not their naughtiness, but their superfluity of naughtiness. We have ourselves exercised their function from time to time for more than fifty years. Whole battalions of authors have passed under our pen as under a yoke; poets, novelists, essayists, historians, political economists, have fallen captive to our omniscience in every department of letters, and have been relegated to lasting oblivion, or, to their great surprise, no

doubt, have been crowned with unfading bays, and dismissed to the plaudits of the multitude always waiting to honor our verdicts. Yet we could not lay our hand upon our heart and say that we had done the least of them the least good, though we had hailed him true poet, novelist, essayist, historian, political economist, or the reverse. Nay, more (and here we are making the reader the greatest confidence, a secret known to a constantly dwindling few), we have been ourself poet, novelist, essayist, historian, and political economist, and have been brought in all these capacities before many judgment-seats. Yet never once do we remember to have profited by any judge's charge, that fixed our fate for extinction or distinction.

The critic is disabled by the very conditions of his function. He comes to the exercise of it upon the *fait accompli*, the *corpus delicti*, when he cannot avail. He could have availed only if he had offered his help before the deed was done, the crime committed. But instead of him it was some unknown friend who came to the author's help, his wife, or his brother or sister, and saved him from such folly and shame as he escapes. All the surer of escape is he if he accepts the counsel of such a friend unwillingly, if he disputes it and defies it and rejects it with despite and contumely for the giver; if he comes back and declares again and again that he will have none of it. In the end, unless he is a much greater egotist than even most authors, he will accept it and save his soul alive. In any case, however, custom now brings him before the austere and polite tribunal of public criticism. The critic appears in print, and judging the irrevocable performance, sends the author from him maddened by his contempt for his virtues, or reeling away drunk with the praise of his faults.

We do not say this is always the case. We do not deny that a critic sometimes praises an author's virtues and blames his faults; but there is constant danger of the other thing, and the fact of the practical inutility of criticism remains. The critic is often quite right, but he is right too late; he comes on after the play is over, after the statue has been founded in perdurable bronze. In our

whole long and varied experience of book-noticing did we ever, save once, have an author own up that the blemish we blamed was really a blemish, and not a beauty in disguise? This single and signal instance was that of a great Spanish novelist, who not merely wrote to say our stricture was just, but in the preface of his next book printed this acknowledgment and promised never to err in that sort again.

We should not ourselves have had so much courage in his place, we confess it. As a critic we should have expected no less of ourself; as an author we should have known it was too much. The case of this large-minded Spaniard is indeed so rare that reflection upon it has latterly brought us question of the justice of our censure. It is a fearful doubt, and we hasten to leave it.

Apparently, then, from what we have been saying, criticism of a thing published is idle, and we are left to imagine in the place of the present individual reviewers a critical trust, or, say, board of criticism, before which the typewritten but unpublished work of an author could be brought for the effect of such censure as he does not get from unsparing friends. The scrutiny of the work could be entirely secret; if adjudged worthless it need not be printed, but if found hopefully defective, amendments could be suggested that would fit it for submission to the public. At present the public gullet seems to engulf anything flung to it from the press; things are tried on a dog, as the actors say of the country audience before which a play has its first performance, and is then revised; but in the case of poems the dog's taste seems to be final.

In New York we have, we believe (we are certain of nothing), a board of fine arts which can forbid the erection of a statue or monument on municipal ground; which can authorize the city to refuse any mendicant abortion or monstrosity the hospitality of its parks or squares. Even under this strong constraint we have several *chefs-d'œuvre* of their authors which we could wish well back in the smelting-furnace. But these are mainly pensioners of an earlier date, and our fine arts board, or commission, or whatever, discharges its duty so faith-

fully, so intelligently, that the popular taste is in far less danger now than formerly. Why, then, cannot we have a Belles-Lettres Commission which should peremptorily forbid the publication of abortive or monstrous poems, novels, essays, histories, and works on political economy? Such a commission might be fitly composed of the professional readers for the different publishing houses. It may be urged that these readers already perform some such public duty, but we answer that they do it in the way of business, and that they are constantly under the temptation to commend a manuscript because it is of that peculiar trashiness which will command a wide sale; to give the public what it wants instead of what it ought to want. If these readers were all united in such a commission as we have supposed, they would form a check upon one another. One would not dare to promote the publication of an unworthy big seller, for fear of shame before the others who, he knows, would instantly detect his base business motive. He would be compelled to a wholesome hypocrisy, and obliged to a zeal in the cause of good literature which would perform the effect of high principle. Certainly no publisher's reader who cared for his standing with other publishers' readers would dare to pass the indecent fictions which now appear under honored imprints. Perhaps if these good men and true came to talk the manuscripts sanely over, they would condemn many books of butcherly heroism, realizing that the act of "running a man through," or "cleaving him to the chine," is an act as bestial, as abominable to the imagination as any suggestion of sensual violence or allure of lust.

The author would not be tried unheard by this high court. He might be condemned, but there would be reserved to him the high privilege of back-talk, so priceless in the case of that friendly or family criticism which is the only criticism worth having at present. Before the judge sentenced him to the bonfire or the waste-basket, he must ask him, as the judge now asks the vilest criminal, to say why not. That would be the convicted author's opportunity; and what an opportunity to teach the court something of true criticism!



## Editor's Study

WE were saying, at the close of the preceding Study, that human nature has a kind of recrudescence with each successive generation. It is thrown back into its elemental state, as an indispensable condition of its going forward, and the racial development seems to be beginning all over again.

For a year at least the child is reduced to wordlessness, and is restrained from assuming that upright carriage which by Dr. Ernest Klotz, as by many an eminent biologist before him, is held to be unnatural to the human animal. It is true that in the procession of generations human progress is cumulative, gathering momentum in aspirations; but, in order to keep up with the ever-quickenening procession, the child in every successive generation must develop after its birth new physical brain processes, in response to increased stimuli.

Physiologically man is as inseparably linked with physical nature as any other animal, and at his nativity there is no apparent indication in his bodily structure — whatever invisible implication there may be — of his special distinction as a being who in capacity and faculty transcends the animal plane, a being to whom science, philosophy, art, society, and the humanities, as we have come to know all these in human civilization, are possible. Of everything which we count distinctively human there is no visible sign or one that the most powerful microscope could detect. With this blank complexion does every human child enter the world.

Yet the entire human evolution is bound up with this nativity. If we could suppose that a human race had from the beginning occupied the earth and had continued without procession of generations, we should at once give humanity an immense reversion to an epicene estate, sexless, deathless, and

in no feature of it, indeed, recognizable as human.

We can conceive of, though we cannot define in any known terms, such an estate as coming to us in a future life, when there should be a new earth as well as a new heavens, and we should be as the angels of God, neither married nor given in marriage, nor should die any more; indeed we must thus conceive of it if it is to be immortal and content with immortality. But, in any perspective of organic life familiar to us, the conception is anomalous and literally preposterous, since it would relegate our race back to the rank of unicellular organisms — to an estate of singular simplicity and unrelieved monotony. Curiously, as seen from this point of view, it is the very estate from which we are extricated by nativity, and we are pleased to accept mortality as the price of that emancipation. Birth is a rare chance, missed by a vast majority of the whole number of possible souls, while to all that are born death is a certainty; and surely 'Tis better to be born and die than never to be born at all.

And this much-misapprehended death, which, according to our faith, is finally a divesture of mortality itself, distributes through the whole mortal term priceless advantages not usually placed to its credit. The first, or earliest, is the advantage of nativity. Not only is it true that a seed is not born except it die, but obviously the passing of generations alone gives place for generations to come. Autumn, passing into winter, not only leaves behind its largess of ripe harvests, but permits the spring-time. These matter-of-course things, if the course be that of nature, like the procession of the seasons and of generations, disclose the great miracle of life — which is *new* life, *erescence* and *increase*; and, as we are constituted, we cannot grow without growing old.