

*TOWARDS STANDARDS OF CRITICISM, Selections from The Calendar of Modern Letters. Edited with an Introduction by F. R. Leavis (Wishart, 5/-).*

Almost everybody would agree that the standard of literary criticism in England to-day, certainly in so far as this means the reviewing of contemporary publications, is lower than it has ever been before. An age in which the reviewer is the spoilt darling, if not the actual paid servant of the publisher ; in which an Arnold Bennett can spend two-thirds of an ostensibly critical article discussing women's make-up, and in which the reviewer of a book on Sobiesky can fail to notice that it is not about Pilsudski : such an age can hardly claim respect for its critical integrity. But instances are superfluous where the fact is patent. What is more interesting, what is certainly worth further investigation, is the complex of reasons for the existing state of affairs. And it is important here to distinguish, as Mr. Bertram Higgins insisted when discussing the subject in *The Calendar*, between those factors which refer to the *personnel*, the actual practitioners of criticism, and those which spring, directly or indirectly, from the social and economic system under which we live.

Let us take the latter first. Mr. Leavis puts his finger on the crucial spot when he speaks of ' the modern disintegration.' There is no need at this juncture to discuss the implications of that phrase, which have been elaborated ably and often enough in these pages. It is not only that the possible audience for a picture or a poem has decreased steadily with the disappearance of a homogeneous public : what Mr. Edwin Muir calls ' a central binding tradition ' ; but that it has been found profitable to exploit commercially the unformed artistic appetite of the numerous publics which have arisen instead. Books nowadays are ' news.' Why? Because ' news ' commands advertising revenue. And if the conversion of books from literature into ' news ' involves the substitution of hyperbole and social backchat for reasoned criticism—well, so much the worse for criticism. And for literature too, since the selection of books and their reviewers is no longer a matter of merit but of ' sales-value.'

And what of those who, like the critics of *The Calendar* whose work Mr. Leavis has selected, care enough about literature to want

to give serious work serious consideration, and are anxious to uphold the standards of criticism? Their plight is unenviable. Conscious of isolation, of an unwanted and embarrassing superiority, their path is hedged round with difficulties and dangers. To be intelligent without becoming academic, and profound without obscurity, to present a solid front without suspicion of coterie and be confident without inviting the charge of priggishness: all these they must be if criticism is to perform the double function of assisting the creative artist and defining the boundaries (never more necessary than now) for the common reader. Sixty per cent. of the reviews in *The Calendar* fulfilled these conditions—a proportion large enough to justify the present reprint many times over. To be all this and to be scrupulously honest, avoiding the social-literary racket which has disqualified so many potential allies, precludes the chance of popularity under the existing régime. *The Calendar* set itself this standard, and paid the price.

I. M. PARSONS.

*GOG-MAGOG*, by G. W. Stonier (Dent, 7/6d.).

‘A Lord Mayor’s procession jogs by; the band plays.’ (You can see some eagles. And hear the trumpets.). There is Hans Anderson hand in hand with Hopkins, Verdi cheek by jowl with Van Gogh (such a press of people), and, in the van, the big stuffed dummy of Mr. Stonier’s fancy, Gog-Magog.

Of course, time (=money) is short, art and criticism are any-way paupers, Chelsea pensioners; and the purveyor must establish his credentials. Hence this ritual of penning up the year’s blurbs, with an apologetic and ‘provocative’ leader, to swell a volume of chatter: a catchpenny treat for many in the street. Yet surely the silliest way to make a book. Selections of essays by Mr. Eliot, or Mr. Read, or Mrs. Woolf, however arbitrarily planned as books; or, equally, certain absolutely unsystematic critical works of Mr. Pound or Mr. Lewis; these are justified because their authors