

Criticism in America

Its Function and Status

Essays by

New York

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Irving Babbitt, Van Wyck Brooks, W. C. Brownell,
Ernest Boyd, T. S. Eliot, H. L. Mencken,
Stuart P. Sherman, J. E. Spingarn,
and George E. Woodberry

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Prefatory Note

IN the last twelve or fifteen years, side by side with the so-called "poetic Renaissance," there has developed what is probably the first fundamental discussion of the nature of criticism in American literature. The purpose of this volume is to bring together some of the more important essays representative of this discussion. The collection is not intended to be representative in any other way. The first essay dates from 1910, the last from 1923, and virtually every critical point of view is given a hearing. For permission to reprint, thanks are due to the authors of the various essays and to Messrs. Henry Holt & Co., Charles Scribner's Sons, Alfred A. Knopf, B. W. Huebsch, the Columbia University Press, and the editors of the *Nation*. The essays, several of which have been revised by their authors for this collection, are here arranged in chronological order.

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Criticism in America

*The New Criticism*¹

By J. E. SPINGARN

"WHAT droll creatures these college professors are whenever they talk about art," wrote Flaubert in one of his letters, and voiced the world's opinion of academic criticism. For the world shares the view of the Italian poet that "monks and professors cannot write the lives of poets," and looks only to those rich in literary experience for its opinions on literature. But the poets themselves have had no special grudge against academic criticism that they have not felt equally for every other kind. For the most part, they have objected to all criticism, since what each mainly seeks in his own case is not criticism, but uncritical praise. "Kill the dog, he is a reviewer," cried the young Goethe; and in an age nearer our own William Morris expressed his contempt for

¹ A lecture delivered at Columbia University on March 9, 1910; first published by the Columbia University Press in 1911; reprinted in *Creative Criticism: Essays on the Unity of Genius and Taste* (Henry Holt & Company) in 1917.

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those who earn a livelihood by writing their opinions of the works of others. Fortunately for Criticism, it does not live by the grace of poets, to whom it can be of small service at its best, but by the grace of others who have neither the poet's genius nor the critic's insight. I hope to persuade you this evening that the poets have been mistaken in their very conception of the critic's craft, which lives by a power that poets and critics share together. The secret of this power has come to men slowly, and the knowledge they have gained by it has transformed their idea of Criticism. What this secret is, and into what new paths Criticism is being led by it, is the subject of my lecture to-night.

I

At the end of the last century, France once more occupied the center of that stage whose auditors are the inheritors of European civilization. Once more all the world listened while she talked and played, and some of the most brilliant of her talk was now on the question of the authority of Criticism. It is not

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my purpose to tell you (what you know already) with what sober and vigorous learning the official critics of the *Revue des deux Mondes* espoused the cause of old gods with the new weapons of science, and with what charm and tact, with what grace and suppleness of thought, Jules Lemaître and Anatole France, to mention no others, defended the free play of the appreciative mind. Some of the sparks that were beaten out on the anvil of controversy have become fixed stars, the classical utterances of Criticism, as when Anatole France described the critic not as a judge imposing sentence, but as a sensitive soul detailing his "adventures among masterpieces."

To have sensations in the presence of a work of art and to express them, that is the function of Criticism for the impressionistic critic. His attitude he would express somewhat in this fashion: "Here is a beautiful poem, let us say Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. To read it is for me to experience a thrill of pleasure. My delight in it is itself a judgment, and what better judgment is it possible for me to give? All that I can do is to tell how it affects me, what sensations it gives me. Other men will

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derive other sensations from it, and express them differently; they too have the same right as I. Each of us, if we are sensitive to impressions and express ourselves well, will produce a new work of art to replace the work which gave us our sensations. That is the art of Criticism, and beyond that Criticism cannot go."

We shall not begrudge this exquisite soul the pleasure of his sensations or his cult of them, nor would he be disconcerted if we were to point out that the interest has been shifted from the work of art to his own impressions. Let us suppose that you say to him: "We are not interested in you, but in *Prometheus Unbound*. To describe the state of your health is not to help us to understand or to enjoy the poem. Your criticism constantly tends to get away from the work of art, and to center attention on yourself and your feelings."

But his answer would not be difficult to find: "What you say is true enough. My criticism tends to get farther and farther from the work of art and to cast a light upon myself; but all criticism tends to get away from

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the work of art and to substitute something in its place. The impressionist substitutes himself, but what other form of criticism gets closer to *Prometheus Unbound*? Historical criticism takes us away from it in a search of the environment, the age, the race, the poetic school of the artist; it tells us to read the history of the French Revolution, Godwin's *Political Justice*, the *Prometheus Bound* of Æschylus, and Calderón's *Mágico Prodigioso*. Psychological criticism takes me away from the poem, and sets me to work on the biography of the poet; I wish to enjoy *Prometheus Unbound*, and instead I am asked to become acquainted with Shelley the man. Dogmatic criticism does not get any closer to the work of art by testing it according to rules and standards; it sends me to the Greek dramatists, to Shakespeare, to Aristotle's *Poetics*, possibly to Darwin's *Origin of Species*, in order that I may see how far Shelley has failed to give dramatic reality to his poem, or has failed to observe the rules of his *genre*; but that means the study of other works, and not of *Prometheus Unbound*. Esthetics takes me still farther afield into speculations on art and beauty.

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And so it is with every form of Criticism. Do not deceive yourself. All criticism tends to shift the interest from the work of art to something else. The other critics give us history, politics, biography, erudition, metaphysics. As for me, I re-dream the poet's dream, and if I seem to write lightly, it is because I have awakened, and smile to think I have mistaken a dream for reality. I at least strive to replace one work of art by another, and art can only find its *alter ego* in art."

It would be idle to detail the arguments with which the advocates of the opposing forms of Criticism answered these questionings. Literary erudition and evolutionary science were the chief weapons used to fight this modern heresy, but the one is an unwieldy and the other a useless weapon in the field of esthetic thought. On some sides, at least, the position of the impressionists was impregnable; but two points of attack were open to their opponents. They could combat the notion that taste is a substitute for learning, or learning a substitute for taste, since both are vital for Criticism; and they could maintain that the relativity of taste does not in any

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sense affect its authority. In this sense impressionistic Criticism erred only less grievously than the "judicial" Criticism which opposed it. Each in its own way was inadequate and incomplete.

But these arguments are not my present concern; what I wish to point out is that the objective and dogmatic forms of Criticism were fighting no new battle against impressionistic Criticism in that decade of controversy. It was a battle as old as the earliest reflection on the subject of poetry, if not as old as the sensitiveness of poets. Modern literature begins with the same doubts, with the same quarrel. In the sixteenth century the Italians were formulating that classical code which imposed itself on Europe for two centuries, and which, even in our generation, Brunetière has merely disguised under the trappings of natural science. They evolved the dramatic unities, and all those rules which the poet Pope imagined to be "Nature still but Nature methodized." But at the very moment when their spokesman Scaliger was saying that "Aristotle is our emperor, the perpetual dictator of all the fine arts," another Italian, Pietro Aretino, was in-

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sisting that there is no rule except the whim of genius and no standard of judgment beyond individual taste.

The Italians passed on the torch to the French of the seventeenth century, and from that day to this the struggle between the two schools has never ceased to agitate the progress of Criticism in France. Boileau against Saint-Evremond, Classicists against Romanticists, dogmatists against impressionists,—the antinomy is deep in the French nature, indeed in the nature of Criticism itself. Listen to this: “It is not for the purpose of deciding on the merit of this noble poet [Virgil], nor of harming his reputation, that I have spoken so freely concerning him. The world will continue to think what it does of his beautiful verses; and as for me, I judge nothing, I only say what I think, and what effect each of these things produces on my heart and mind.” Surely these words are from the lips of Le-maître himself! “I judge nothing; I only say what I feel.” But no, these are the utterances of the Chevalier de Méré, a wit of the age of Louis XIV, and he is writing to the secretary of that stronghold of authority, the French