

ARTICLE IV.

CRITICISM.

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VALUATION is not the whole, nor even the best or finest part, of criticism; it is, however, that part of criticism which impresses man with peculiar energy. In letters and in art as in things of slighter value, the competitive instinct of mankind will always assure, to questions of precedence or priority, an unapproached and overpowering interest. Who is ahead, who takes the first place, are the poignant questions in the field of criticism as on the race track, the diamond, or the gridiron. Authorship is a stately dinner party in which the anxiety and the stimulus of the hour is to assign each guest to his proper station below or above the classifying salt. An interest in literature is often little more than a pleasing variation of the interest in success; and it would be curious to watch the shrinkage in the numbers of the applauding company that follows in the train of a popular writer like Masefield, if he were suddenly brought into competition with an author of half his worth and twice his reputation. Interpretation, therefore, the humbler but at the same time the nobler and more salutary task of criticism, is made subservient to the award of prizes. The reader, oddly enough, is often less concerned with his own gain than with the author's triumph; for it is one of the apparent anomalies, though real consistencies, of human nature, that another's good if it be, like wealth or fame, exciting to the unrefined imagination, is more interest-

ing even to selfish men than personal benefits of a less stimulating order.

I propose to assume for the time being that the estimate of values, the weighing and the stamping of literary treasure, calculation for every work of its chance of permanence and universal currency, is the distinctive purpose of literary criticism; its other purposes, their nature and the laws of their fulfillment, will transpire, I hope, in the progress of the discussion.

It is obvious that every man who has read a book and seeks to gauge its merits is possessed of two distinct, though closely interwoven, kinds of data. He has the book itself, a complex aggregate of parts, of elements, of qualities and methods, which appeals distinctly to his powers of observation. He has again his own experience, his sensation in the reading of the book, he has the effects, from which the properties of the book may be deducible as causes. Now it would naturally seem that, since merit in literature is merely the capacity to produce effects, effects themselves would be its proper measure. It would seem that of literary greatness — hardly otherwise definable than as the power to diffuse pleasure of a given intensity over given breadths or sections of mankind — pleasure itself was the appropriate gauge. Feeling, in a word, is the judge of the power to awaken feeling. Why not, then, adopt as the standard of literary values the sensibility or pleasure of the schooled and seasoned mind; for so many units of delight in the cultured and appreciative reader, so many units of greatness in work that induces this delight? The test is readily applied, makes the act of judgment simultaneous, almost identical, with the act of reading, and supplies a precision which, though far from mathematical, suffices for the purposes it is called upon to meet.

It turns out, here as elsewhere, however, that the adjustment of theory to practice is a process hindered by emergent difficulties. Literature is not so much a class of things as an affection or property which attends and modifies them. Every book has extra literary attributes; every reader has extra literary sensibilities; and while the literature in the book is settling its account with the reader's taste, the extraneous or — may we use the word? — secular elements of the work are entering into correspondence with his other sensibilities; the servants fraternize in the court while the masters argue in the chamber. The result is that the feeling I entertain toward a book is neither a product nor a measure of its purely literary value; it is a product and a measure of the value of a sum of forces of which literature is only one. The delight I felt in the book I finished yesterday is partly the response of my taste to the distinction of its thought and style, partly the response of my sportsmanship to its pictures of dogs and of horses, partly the response of my Calvinism to its author's Presbyterian bias, and partly the response of my patriotism to its dominantly national tone. This braid of sentiments would occasion no perplexity, if every strand retained its proper color; but the union of feelings is like the union of streams in which the parts are imperceptible in the uniform result. Literary sensations have a peculiar faculty of appropriating and assimilating sensations of other kinds; the effect of congenial doctrine is credited to force of thought and phrase; the effects of temporary moods are identified with properties of the work; the most opposite elements merge into an indistinguishable conformity. If our theory needed the aid of verifying induction, the diversity of cultivated judgments would supply the missing proofs.

Feeling, then, as a test of literary greatness appears to be

disallowed and subverted by experiment. But we are very far yet from having fallen into any destitution of resource. Let us grant that it is hopeless to relate the aggregate of feeling to the aggregate of performance, — the whole mind to the whole book. Is not each of these totals divisible into its own factors? And may not fortune favor the attempt to trace each filament of experience to its corresponding nerve or threadlet in the tissue of the literary work? A book separates almost as easily as an orange into distinct and manageable portions: not only into obvious parts such as paragraphs, chapters, and volumes, but into elements such as character, plot, and style; into attributes such as clearness, vigor, and beauty; into relations, such as unity, symmetry, and proportion. Feeling is perhaps not quite so readily divisible; but we can usually isolate the effect of a single factor by withdrawing our attention from the correlate factors and noting in our feelings the result of the withdrawal. Now if we could only establish an unvarying relation between feelings of such and such degrees and kinds and certain properties in the book which appeal directly to the intelligence or observation, it is evident that we could ascertain the worth of a composition without reference to feeling by the mere perception of external and intelligible traits. In other words, we might learn the value of a book from inspection rather than experience.

This is the kind of method that is strongly and instantly attractive. To obtain the touchstone that is at the same time tangible and invariable, to test literature by facts which, like the size of the print or the number of the pages, are inaccessible to controversy, to escape from all the haziness and all the ambiguities of feeling, is recognized at once as progress and deliverance. We experience the satisfaction that a man might feel who, in seeking to compute the pitch of sounds,

should betake himself at length to the measurement of vibrations and relieve himself by this step from all further liability to the illusions of a distracted and fallacious ear. Inspection is elsewhere competent to the prevision of experience; there seems no reason to suspect a greater stubbornness in literature. Let us seek the cloudy and impalpable effect by way of the definite and measurable cause; let us get at the dim reality from the fixed and solid indication.

It turns out, however, on the briefest trial, that feeling is not susceptible of such prompt elimination. We will assume, for example, that a book is good, not because we like it, but because it is good in character, in description, and in style. We exclude the evidence of sensibility; the merits we admit are positive and demonstrable. "But," says the objector, "how do you know that the description, or the style, or the character is good? What are the symptoms of this excellence, the tests of this superiority?" Alas, it is too evident that we are back again in the old difficulty; we have no standard but feeling; we must filter our filtrate; the solid ground on which we had so gladly sought relief from the instability of the quaking marsh turns out to be only the shallow covering of another section of the same bog. The truth is that while some of the sources of feeling, such as unity, simplicity, proportion, and climax are perceptible and even measurable by the unaided judgment, the larger part, and the better part, of these pricks and stimulations are quite unresponsive to the probe of intelligence. Up to a certain not very distant line we can trace the origin of our sensations to causes which appeal in other ways to other faculties; beyond that line, the form of analysis may linger, but its substance melts and disappears; the things we specify as the sources of our feeling—beauty of style, strength of character, depth of passion—are not the

grounds, but only the names and measurements, of our sensations.

The difficulty heightens when we come to see that the best and strongest things in literature are all included in the unexplained residuum; in art as in religion the highest elements are the least demonstrable. Moderate merit can be ascertained, accounted for, and reproduced; greatness is equally impregnable to analysis or imitation. In the neither very wide nor very narrow territory that is bounded by worthlessness on the one side and mediocrity upon the other, rhetoric, the guidance of composition by rule or principle, is effectual and salutary. In the same narrowly limited and not too highly favored territory, criticism, the judgment of composition by rule and principle, is effectual and salutary. It is a remark not quite so commonplace as its obviousness would seem to imply, that the spheres of each are substantially identical; the boundary of our ability to analyze is the limit of our power to impart.

One may tell then why a book is fairly good, but he cannot account for striking excellence. The judgment cannot forestall the verdict of the sensibilities. The eye in the body may enable us to see the effect of a given substance upon the taste or touch, but the eye of the mind, the perception or intelligence, cannot calculate the effect of a book upon the feelings. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. No cook would base an opinion of the excellence of a dish on the minutest recital of its constituents and preparation. It might be seen that many things had been rightly done; it might be surmised that the result would be tolerable: but the palate alone could pronounce on the fullness and conclusiveness of the success.

Another perturbing circumstance is the fact that not only is the best in books impervious to analysis, but that we cannot

measure the force of the part we fail to analyze. We are not only unable to define the quality of its power; we cannot estimate its limitations. It is therefore very hard to say that there are any conditions of literary achievement which are final and imperative, for we cannot tell how far the absence of the most useful of the known utilities may be offset by perfectly incalculable quantities of unspecifiable merits. It requires some courage to name even one trait that is quite indispensable to literary greatness. It would be audacious to say that good English or good sense or intelligibility is *not* essential to the fashioning of master works; and it would be audacious also to affirm that they *are*. The wiser course is to adopt the wary diction of the English catechism with reference to the sacraments and to speak of the great demonstrated helps and advantages to literature as "generally necessary to salvation." The perverseness of the circumstance is that it debars us from negative as well as positive assurance: it not only makes it impossible for cold intelligence to discover that a book is good; it makes it equally impossible for the same power to affirm its want of goodness.

The attempt at an equation between perception and sensibility, the hope of a critical standard that should be at once facile and definitive, has been long maintained and grudgingly abandoned by the leaders of historic criticism. The desire to simplify both literature and criticism has furnished this course with a reason and an apology. The respect for majestic and established models, the ascription to the forms of the glory and the sacredness of the genius which they temporarily enshrine, the spirit which preserves and consecrates the emptied beaker for the fragrance of its vanished contents, have converted the worship of the spirit into a narrow idolatry of the form. Under this comes the sway of the antique unities,

the ascendancy of classical styles, the propensity of criticism to make the past — and usually the mere accidents and costume of the past — the law and limit of the future. The bane of those judgments which merely graduate emotions is a wide and indiscriminate inclusiveness; the bane of intellectual appraisals is their arrogant and all-excluding narrowness. They supplant an untenable laxity by an inadmissible precision. Excellence must be hemmed in, impounded, circumscribed; taste must conform itself to practice; enjoyment must be disciplined and servile. Such is the destination which awaits a blind and narrow confidence in external or perceptive criticism.

On both sides, then, we meet with disappointment. The criticism that rests on feeling, the criticism that rests on observation, seem equally disqualified for trust. But here, as in so many cases, the hopelessness of the first impression is dispelled by a longer scrutiny. The combination of the two methods may effect the object which has overcome the isolated strength of each. Let us note some helps that may forward our researches.

We shall find, in the first place, that the division of feeling into separate strands or parcels, each duly correlated with an element or portion of the book, is itself a great step toward the elimination of alien and irrelevant sensations. It offers much the same security for the genuineness and rightfulness of the included feelings that an itemized account affords for the honesty of expenditures. Our sensations are audited, as it were, when they are resolved into separate particulars and each related to its proper object.

Our researches have supplied us with another mitigation of the first crudity of instructive feeling. We have found that there is a class of forms or qualities, occupying a large

though not preponderating space in the field of criticism, which are operative on the feelings, and yet are recognizable through other marks than those of the evoked sensations; in a word they affect the intelligence and the emotions separately. They are limited in the range of their prevalence; they have no relation to the life and potency of thought or to the inmost sanctities of style; they lie rather in a broad middle territory, which is much concerned with form, with treatment, and with structure, the sphere of whose authority may expand to the largeness of a plot or shrink to the contours of a sentence. It works largely in the region of identities, similarities, adaptations, and proportions. Art which, in its character of a reduction of matter through the increasing affluence of relation, has much to do with correspondences, equalities, and adaptations, falls largely under its authority, and technique, which is merely art in its unimaginative phases, is altogether subject to its power. It includes, in short, those literary tools and instruments which are wielded by intelligence for the enhancement of feeling. It covers even the characteristic of so much moment as the close or distant faithfulness to life; it can test the validity of the process, though not the worth of the result. In all these cases we can be certain not only that we feel, but that our feeling is healthy and legitimate; our emotion is established and confirmed by the discovery, through other processes, of forms and qualities which should rightfully move us. Within limited areas, but with tolerable certainty, intelligence corroborates emotion. Feeling, then, not in its first unripeness, not in its raw inception, but purged and chastened by analysis, and justified in a part of its range by the confirming evidence of other faculties, is the proper test of literary excellence.

The other functions of criticism, the separation of good and

evil in the same work, the ascertainment of quality, as distinguished from degree of merit, the revelation of occult beauties, will all naturally find their places in the work of sifting and analysis. They are in part the basis of the verdict, and to all minds to whom a book presents itself in the light of a public benefit rather than in that of an individual distinction, they are more momentous than the verdict itself.

We have so far assumed that the judgments of the critic are solely the results of his isolated activity. An assumption of this kind excludes the consideration of the simplest and most powerful of all verifying processes, — the comparison of different judgments. The concurrence of two men on the value of a literary work is inconsistent with any biases or partialities except those which are common to the two. The area of common prejudice, and with it the liability to partial judgment, diminishes, or is likely to diminish, with each new accession to the body of admirers. Prejudices, unluckily, are of all widths — from those which are bounded by the scope of one intelligence to those which reach through time and are ribbed rather than terminated by the lines which part the centuries. The elimination of prejudice is, therefore, a process which can never reach its completion in the lifetime of a single critic. He may have traversed the world to extinguish localism, but he remains the inhabitant of a district or section of time. Even if the judgments of the ages were accessible, if the court of time, however wide its jurisdiction and infallible its awards, did not wear out the vitality of the suitors by the length of its unwearable sessions, there would still be something illicit, something self-destructive, in the dependence of criticism on its ratifying sentence. The concurrence of posterity could hardly be called in to the support of critical appraisals whose value rests mainly in the fact that they

are, or pretend to be, previsions of such concurrence. The corrective process is therefore unsusceptible — for contemporaries at least — of full accomplishment; but its usefulness, where it is feasible, is indisputably great. We may accordingly conclude that the exercise of feeling in the estimate of literary worth is safeguarded and supported by three guarantees or checks, i.e. the rejection of extraneous feeling, the concurrence of the perceptive intelligence, and the assent of other minds.

The last of these securities suggests a question as to how far the practice of the methods we have specified is likely to promote the harmony of critical opinion. It is obvious that the standard which is narrowest in scope and plainest in quality is most likely to unify the opinions of its followers. Now in this particular the superiority of the method of inspection, of judgment by definite externals, admits of no debate. It is open to the feeblest understanding to discover that the drama which begins in Rome concludes in Naples, and the acceptance of the unities as the foundation or as one foundation of dramatic excellence is certain to result in coincidence as well as in facility of judgment. A method of this kind has much the same effect that a written creed would have on the theological harmony of its disciples. It is obvious also that pure and uncorrected feeling, with its easy assent to all demands on its receptiveness and hospitality, looses every restraint on the tendencies to diversity. If we praise simply what we like without question or analysis of our likings, our opinions may diverge to the full extent of the divergence of pure sensibilities. The path which we have sanctioned, the middle ground between the chalk and yardstick method of the narrow intellectualists and the mere blur and fog of unreduced sensation, is intermediate also in its

influence on critical accord. Every step towards correctness is a step towards unity; as, in the smelting process, different ores in approaching a common purity approach also an identity of composition. The progress of criticism is from the discrepancies and contradictions of our first crude thoughts to the unity and concord of our final estimates.

It is easy to make too much of the critical disparities of men. When we consider the natural result of a collision between that multifarious object which we call a book and that still more multifarious object which we call a soul, it is the commonness rather than the rarity of agreement that seems the fit subject for admiring exclamation. Men are prone to make much of their differences of opinion, to widen discrepancies, and to deepen chasms. An opinion which we hold to be true, if we can persuade ourselves that it is peculiar, comforts our self-love with a sense of prerogative. In cases where we are clearly right, difference is the meter of superiority; and we emphasize our sanity by the detection of anomalies in others. These are things that may tend to the exaggeration of disparity, but sympathy and intelligence, when once brought into play, invariably tend to convergence and harmony. The divergence between cultivated and uncultivated opinion is felt at once to be quite immaterial. It is as natural that authors should rise and sink in the critical estimate as one evolves from brutishness to culture as that the stars should shift their elevations as one ascends from low to higher latitudes. The boor's indifference to Dante or to Shakespeare is as void of moment as the infant's or the puppy's. Nor is the diversity which springs from grades of culture at all coextensive with the scope of those grades. A little schooling unseats Bayly and Mrs. Hemans and installs Wordsworth, Milton, and Goethe; but no subsequent matur-

ing or expansion results in similar displacement. The position to which Shakespeare and Homer are exalted by the advance of our personal culture is unassailable by the continuance of that advance. Vulgarity changes all its ideals in rising into moderate culture, but moderate culture may evolve to genius, and preserve its own intact.

Other differences, however, of more serious aspect, insist upon a fuller treatment, but there is much to be said in mitigation and abatement even of these. Two persons stand up for and against a certain book, and their difference, thus boldly and obtrusively expressed, seems basic and unchangeable; but a book and the feeling for a book are both, as we have said, large aggregates and medleys, assemblages of multifarious traits, and the moment we proceed to analyze and specify, the difference begins to be slit and punctured with innumerable lines and dots of unforeseen and possibly unwished agreement. It often happens that men like and dislike precisely the same things in a book, but they like and dislike them in unequal proportions, and differences of this kind, though quantitative merely, are often decisive in the final result. The lover and the hater of Thackeray may repudiate his alleged cynicism and admire his characters and style; but if the hate of cynicism preponderates in the one, and the love of style and character in the other, their final judgments may be separated by the whole interval that parts condemnation from delighted approval. Men as a rule are pleased and pained with the same qualities: when they bicker over works of art, their likes and dislikes, it will often be found, differ not in objects but in energy. It often happens that nothing more is needed to make the feelings of our adversaries intelligible than simply to reduce or magnify our own.

Difference of view which is nothing more than a difference in point of view, is in no way inimical to fixity of opinion. The difference of time between Boston and Minneapolis becomes a proof of coincidence rather than discrepancy, a sign of correctness and identity in the measurements, as soon as it is associated with the difference in their longitudes. That conclusions should separate where premises divide is no ground for adverse inferences as to the truth of either syllogism. The reader himself is one of the premises. The impression consequent upon a book is a multiple in which critic and author are constituent factors; divide the critic into this impression, and you get the author; divide the author into this impression, and you get the critic: if the one is known, the other is attainable. The difficulty is that in most cases both are more or less unknown; the author is the sought-for x ; the reader, even if he be one's self, is like enough to be a mere conjecture. We get most profit out of criticism when we compare our own views with those of critics whom we partly know and whose relation to our own mind we can approximately measure. Differences of effect when regarded as products of differences of combination are not subversive, but demonstrative, of the unity of the cause. As the nature of a material object is more clearly and fully illustrated by each new association into which it enters with other objects of known properties, so the quality of a book should find its clearest demonstration in the new relations into which it enters with each new school or family of minds. The truth is that a difference of opinion with respect to an author should be regarded not as a controversy to be settled, but as a variation to be explained; and if the divergence between the two estimates is found to be coördinate with the general divergence between the characters and tempers of

the critics, the rightness of both views is in a certain way confirmed. If ab is to ac as b is to c , a is proved to be a constant factor; if my feeling toward Emerson bears to your feeling for him the ratio that my character sustains to yours, it is clearly the same Emerson that has influenced us both.

I spoke just now of the rightness of certain views, and of divergent views as both right in a certain way. It might seem, at first sight, as if the thoughts we have just been unfolding interdicted any notion of right or wrong in the results of critical appraisals. If the relations between men and books are certain and inevitable, if each is the normal consequence of the contact of two ingredients, is not one relation as good, as sound, as valid, as another? That ten men hold ten opinions on a designated book would seem to be merely a record of the historical fact that ten men have been acted upon in ten ways, and it might appear as baseless for any one of these opinions to call itself right in distinction from the others as 'for the sulphide of iron to maintain that it was right in distinction from the sulphide of zinc.' It may be said, in reply to such objections, that the word "right," as applied to criticism, is used in a perfectly precise, though in no way in a glorified or transcendental sense. The key to it lies in the meaning of the word "greatness." The critic who dubs a composition great conveys, first, a report that the work has furnished him with deep and noble pleasure; and, second, a prediction that it will perform the same service for the great majority of competent readers. When this prediction tallies with the event, we call the criticism right. Greatness is the power to diffuse an influence of considerable depth through a circle of considerable diameter. It would be foolish to suppose that effects of the highest class are assignable only to the greatest writers. The works of authors of the second

rank are constantly achieving for the smaller groups of less normally constituted persons the same beneficence and vigor of result which the masters achieve for the great constituency. With every change in the network of thought and feeling which forms an individual character, comes an associated change in the combination of literary properties which is best adapted to move that character. That the combination which aids and pleases more people is intrinsically better, is the offspring of a closer union with the power and beauty of the universe, than the combination which aids and pleases fewer, it would be presumptuous to assume. But we know that width of adaptation, if it cannot make a thing more precious, can render it at least more valuable; it multiplies its use, if it cannot raise its quality. We therefore reserve the epithet of great for those persons whose abilities are directly conformed and related to that particular association of traits and interest which is normal or customary in human nature. The criticism that foresees and foretells this conformity is acknowledged to be right, but rightness in this case presumes a concurrence, not with truth, but with the ultimate majority.

The basis of criticism is the identity of men, and the result of criticism is fresher illustrations and clearer proofs of that identity. The survival of Job and Isaiah, of Homer and Sophocles, is perhaps the strongest attestation we possess of the permanence of man, of the unity of human nature: the nearness of the Odyssey in all its distance, the adaptation of the mind of a wandering harper two thousand years ago to the capacities of persons who vote and trade and telegraph and read printed books on the theory of evolution, in democratic and industrial America, is the best support and consolation to any wavering faith in human brotherhood. The disparities in our daily trivial estimates are overpowered in this larger

concord. That neighbors and schoolmates should differ seems little in comparison with the circumstance that nations and centuries should agree. The immortality of Homer and Shakespeare and the other members of that glorious fellowship is the proof and index of another and perhaps even greater immortality,—the everlastingness of man.