

The Critical Attitude.

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ONE of the most noticeable tendencies in the average man of to-day is that which leads him into the critical spirit. And by the critical spirit is meant, not the spirit which is alive to real fault and frankly indicates it, but the spirit which takes for granted, when any case comes before it, that there will be more to blame than to praise. It is quite true that precisely the opposite mood prevails with some; and certain people "enthuse" hotly over every new idea, so to say falling upon it with a wildly frantic hug, and petting it without considering whether it may not be a monstrosity after all. But, leaving these easily intoxicated folks on one side, it remains true that the majority of sensible men and women are often in danger of letting suspense of judgment go so far as to become prejudice, and of looking upon anything new (in religion, in literature, in individual persons, in social enterprise, and many other things) as "guilty" until its innocence is proved. The attitude is always one of warning and defence; there is a fear of uttering any word in the way of warm approval; examination is always cross-examination, and that of a distinctly hostile kind. The first question is, "What can be found *against* this person, this doctrine, this programme, which seeks an introduction to my favour?" Most of us, though we resent this attitude when it is adopted towards ourselves, fall into it at once when we have to judge and try. We are so sensitized beforehand as to take (and to exaggerate) the impression of the bad features alone.

It may be said that the adoption of this attitude is in some respects natural enough, and even that some justification for it exists. It is not by any means always under the pressure of mean motives that the attitude is taken up. Sometimes, indeed, it may be so motivated; and eagerness to scan any person, or any idea, or any system, for faults, may merely signalize the critic's

fear that he is himself going to be excelled. But very often the critical attitude marks a reaction from many disappointments, the disillusionment of a nature which was once ready, not with criticism, but with commendation, and which has found that many of the things for which at different times it has enthusiastically voted have turned out hollow. It is one of the saddest elements in a growing experience of life that so many promising theories prove delusive, and that so many loudly recommended enterprises, hopeful as at first they appeared, are found to be unsubstantial as the mirage. The percentage of novel ideas and novel programmes which are proved really to have anything in them is so lamentably small! And it is little wonder that any man, after being disillusioned again and again, becomes slow in the welcome he offers to any fresh suggestion, and is ready to see only a new trap in each new doctrine or scheme which claims his regard. In fact, it is no matter for surprise that some go farther than the critical spirit, and fall into a cynicism which declares that all men are liars, and that all is vanity under the sun. Certainly, the critical attitude can excuse itself in part by pointing to the shattered fragments of hastily adopted ideas and ideals which lie upon the path behind. It may be added, also, that the prevalence in certain circles of the too indiscriminate faddism previously alluded to is quite sufficient to drive many people to the opposite extreme, and to the wearing of a much more complete suit of critical armour than they otherwise might. All this, admittedly, has to be reckoned into the account.

Nevertheless, the maintenance of the critical attitude—when pushed to the indicated length—brings about more evils than it avoids, and does harm both to those who persist in it and to the good and great causes of the world. To those who persist in it, because its inevitable result is a narrowing of soul and a loss of sympathetic faculty. It is not to be denied that a dryness of nature, a withering of some of the fairest flowers of personality, befalls him who makes a habit of restraining the upward leap of his heart for fear that reaction should afterwards set in.

The critical spirit does much to petrify the finer constituents of character in him who yields to it; and, while he may guard himself against falling, he does it at the price of losing the power to move. It is so easy to overstep the precise line at which the spirit of criticism turns from a virtue to a vice. It really comes to this—that we spoil ourselves for distinguishing the worthy applicants for our encouragement and help if we insist on *absolute* security against the unworthy. If we are to be certain of rising to the occasion when there comes to us a call which we ought to obey, we must be willing sometimes to make a mistake. The hardened critic will, in the nature of the case, avoid mistaking a bad cause for a good; but his habit of settling his features into a frown will often cause him to mistake a good cause for a bad. Yet it is better, surely, to spend one's ardour now and then for that which is not bread, than to be bankrupt of ardour and have none left to spend! And in thus harming the man himself, the attitude of stereotyped criticism harms, necessarily, many of the good causes of the world. For many a new thought and suggestion, having vainly sought for sympathy and encouragement, will turn away baffled and disheartened from the critic's coldness, and slink into a corner to die. If there are many new ideas and enterprises asking for favour, the loudness and persistence of whose clamour is out of all proportion to their real worth, there are many, too, which are scared back into silence by the first frown. And the prejudiced critic must reckon with this—that he is quite likely, in the due measure of his influence, to deprive the world of something it sorely needs, as well as to save it from something out of which no profit could come. It may be added, also, for a last consideration, that the critical attitude, when too fixedly adopted as a protest against faddism, overshoots its own mark and gives faddism its chance. It makes the faddist look more plausible as he launches himself against the unyielding rampart which the critic has raised; it causes the faddist to appear as the only possible saviour of the situation; and it thus delivers the whole thing over to the very extremists whom it is designed to keep back and to defeat.

All this does not, of course, amount to advocacy of the other extreme. The arms always open are as bad as the arms always raised up in guard. But criticism should become a real "appreciation"—in the sense in which Mr. Walter Pater, for instance, employed the word. Criticism should search into *all* the qualities of the thing to be judged, not seeking primarily for the censurable ones, and should reach its verdict at last only when it has made the complete circuit of the case. It should approach every matter in neutral spirit, not with a hostility which requires to be pacified before the real merits can be weighed. It should not be always as a challenging sentinel—certainly not as a sentinel who shoots first and challenges afterwards—but it should rather be as a host in a house with open doors, inviting each new idea to come in (on the understanding, of course, that it must give good account of itself if it is to stay), and in free converse to declare what manner of thing it is.



Ascension and Whitsuntide.

"The things above."—COL. iii. 1-4, 10-17.

ROLL back, heaven's everlasting gate,
 Move on thy shining grooves of gold,
 And where the flowery fields await
 Their King, to us, in low estate,
 The things above unfold!

Thy footprints, Lord, on Olivet,
 Upsquaring thence on cloud-borne wings,
 Faith sees in adoration yet
 Though the long suns still rise and set
 Over these earthly things.