


## LITERARY CRITICISM AND REVIEW

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ANTONINUS QUINN, O.P.

ITERATURE, like Philosophy, admits of a regular and measured cycle because it portrays the life and thought of man. The problems considered, the systems of thought followed, and the solution attained change with each turn of the cycle. In no two successive periods is there an exact similarity on all three points and every period has a place as definite as the spokes of a wheel. To examine and sift the problems, to reduce them to certain schools of thought, and to pass judgment on the solutions reached, all fall within the scope of the literary critic and, in a lesser degree, reviewer. Several articles treating the question of literary criticism have appeared in Catholic periodicals within recent months and their implicit conclusion connotes deep dissatisfaction with current conditions. Briefly, the critic is now receiving a dose of his own medicine.

Although the terms "critic" and "reviewer" are often used interchangeably, several important items make for a clear-cut distinction between the two. The obvious and primary difference comes from a consideration of the space for writing allotted to each. Whereas the critic has ample room for discussing a book, the reviewer is hampered by limitations of time and space. As one writer puts it: "When the plan of the work is grasped by the critic he tries to point out to the reader how well the writer has accomplished the purpose which he has set for himself. Beyond this the book reviewer *has seldom the room to go*, but the *more leisurely and spacious critic* can point out the relation of the work to the world of which it is presumably an 'imitation' in Aristotle's sense."<sup>1</sup>

A second and accidental difference arises from the above mentioned limitations. The reviewer is forced to adopt a brief form, to mention the bare essentials; while the critic can explain and include many more details. As the above quotation shows, the reviewer estimates the plan of the author and compares the final results with the original purpose. On his side, the critic goes further, delves more

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<sup>1</sup> *Commonweal*, vol. xxv, no. 6, Dec. 4, 1936, p. 156.

deeply into the work set before him and covers the question from a more profound outlook.

Thirdly, the difference in their respective growths also makes for distinction between review and criticism. The latter probably had its rise in the same period that witnessed the birth of the Essay. Without doubt, criticism and critics existed long before that period but the essayists were the first to use and develop it extensively. It is noteworthy that many of them were also excellent critics. The review, however, got a later start, in all likelihood seeing the light of day simultaneously with the introduction of the popular magazine.

Finally, though the field of the reviewer encompasses as much as does that of the critic, the latter is held to a more rigid outline. Whereas the reviewer can be said to be representative of a cross-section of the general reading public, the critic, on the other hand, holds a higher place and speaks for a more selective group. In the proper sense of the word he is a judge and we have every right to expect from him sane judgments: judgments based on norms universally recognized. Certainly we need not expect infallibility in his pronouncements, but we can demand some statements with an authority greater than mere opinion, even though a metaphysical certitude can not be claimed for them. The test of time still remains the best criterion.

The critic, then, is a judge and as such should properly sit in judgment upon the book and its author. This generic definition of the critic and of the raw materials for his art will serve to limit the extent of his endeavors. The element of comparison has already been cited. Other more specific determinations of the critic's work are many and varied. Thus T. S. Eliot maintains that the function of criticism, and of the critic for the same reason, "is the elucidation of a work of art and the correction of taste."<sup>2</sup> Benedict Fitzpatrick thinks that it is the function of the critic "to hold it [the book] up for contemplation in time and space, to disentangle its elements, to keep present at once both the beginning and the end."<sup>3</sup> Again, in *America* a correspondent writes: "The critic's function, undoubtedly, is to weigh and estimate what is written, but how it is presented must also concern. Because matter is more important, manner cannot be overlooked."<sup>4</sup> Anent this same subject we have the opinion of Kurt F. Reinhardt: "The

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, T. S., *Selected Essays*, p. 24. Quoted by Turnell, G. M., *Colosseum*, Dec. 1935, p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> "Mental Levels in Literary Criticism," *America*, vol. lvii, Sept. 19, 1936, p. 570.

<sup>4</sup> *America*, vol. lvi, Oct. 24, 1935, p. 65.

problem of the critic resolves itself into the question of the self-sufficiency of literary and artistic creations; or, in other words, the actual problem involves the validity of the doctrine of 'L'art pour l'art.'"<sup>5</sup>

These definitions of the critic's function are chiefly concerned with the artistic side of the question. There are other points also which should demand his attention; namely, the obligations of his own work of criticism, the estimation of the book and its author as forces acting on the culture of the times, and the possibly evil effect of immoral books or of certain passages in books. If he is criticizing merely for his own sake he could pass over the moral and cultural implications met with in a given work. But usually the critic's estimations reach a large number of readers who act upon his recommendations or condemnations. For their sake, if not for his own, he should strive for an adequate, honest, and moral appraisal of a work. This duty takes on an added element of importance where the susceptibilities of young readers are concerned. Unless the ground is surveyed beforehand by an intelligent criticism, one that clearly marks out the pit-falls, the mind of the youthful reader is open to influences the effect of which are positively evil.

Moreover, not a few circulating libraries, established with the prime intention of "making Catholic truth stand principles known to those outside the Church," choose their books upon recommendations to be found in Catholic periodicals and book lists, with the sad and too often repeated result that their choice is neither Catholic nor moral. In such cases some Catholic critic has failed to the extent of approving works that offend against principles of morality in one way or other. Just as he would refuse approval to a piece of writing which violates the prime tenets of literary form, so also ought he to reject works which smack of the pornographic. As yet there has been no agitation for adopting the methods of "the Legion of Decency," but with the clergy and laity sufficiently provoked in this regard the publishers might very well feel the effects of righteous indignation in the place where it most hurts—the pocketbook. At present the burden of such work falls to the critic; he must carry on a little longer.

Quite obviously the fight will be centered around the novel; books of a more serious nature rarely fall within the ken of the critic as critic, but rather as an authority on the subject matter which the books contain. Since the problem concerns the novel primarily it is up to the critic, and the Catholic critic in particular, to accomplish

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<sup>5</sup> *Commonweal*, vol. xxiv, Feb. 1, 1935, p. 393.

thoroughly the task assigned to him. That the Catholic can do a good job and is in a better position than his non-Catholic brother-critic seems evident when we consider the fact that he possesses more directive norms for his guidance and that, furthermore, his "philosophy gives him a completer picture of the universe than any other system without being in any way unscientific."<sup>6</sup>

The Catholic critic, owning up to a stricter code of ethics as he does, by the very fact is aided in the moral aspects of his work much more than the critic who does not enjoy the same benefit. Of course, both of them must start out to discover the value of a book as a work of art, to discover for the reader whether or not it provides him with a valuable experience. The point sought is one of style and not primarily one of morality. "It is only later that he can go on to pass judgment on the state of the mind behind the work."<sup>7</sup> This search for the style of a novel determines for the critic and for his reader the presence or absence of some valuable and interpretative experience of the author because his style "expresses necessarily this experience whatever other faults his book may have."<sup>8</sup> Here the Catholic critic receives help once more from his philosophy and religion since in them he has a "deeper understanding of the nature of sin and temptation"<sup>9</sup> which go to make up no little portion of human experience.

Style and the experience it portrays are inseparable in a certain sense because they are interrelated as matter to form. It is this very union which allows us to admire a book that on other counts offends us. It shows at least the author has something "to offer to the educated Catholic that is not incompatible with his Faith."<sup>10</sup> To discover the good, to point it out after clearing away the evil is the critic's task—his positive rôle. "To sift and test a writer in this way, to integrate what is valuable into his own system, is the function of the Catholic critic."<sup>11</sup>

Negatively, too, the critic has his guiding posts. "He can show how changes of style reflect changes of mind, how the disappearance, of the classic virtues of objectivity and personality point to profound disturbances in the spiritual life of a people. . . . He can show what has been lost, he can assert the need of Tradition, but he can

<sup>6</sup> Turnell, G. M., "The Function of a Catholic Critic," *Colosseum*, vol. ii, no. 8, Dec. 1935, p. 267.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>8</sup> Turnell, G. M., *Colosseum*, June 1936, vol. iii, no. 6, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> Turnell, G. M., *Colosseum*, Sept. 1936, vol. iii, no. 7, p. 231.

<sup>10</sup> Turnell, G. M., *Colosseum*, June 1936, vol. iii, no. 6, p. 139.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

do nothing to get Tradition back for us. . . . The literary critic can point all this out, he can diagnose but with his diagnosis his function comes to an end."<sup>12</sup>

Certainly in using these positive and negative norms the Catholic critic can adequately fulfill his duty to himself and to his reader. He can thus point out the good in a given work and admire it, while at the same time, he can refuse to condone its lapses from a high moral tone. Having accomplished this much he has not done the reader's work; rather he has removed the obstacles and has set forth the good qualities of the book. He has been constructive in his positive role by discerning whatever is worthy of praise; he has been instructive to author and reader alike by setting out in bold relief the bad features he has met.

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<sup>12</sup>Turnell, G. M., "The Function of a Catholic Critic," *Colosseum*, vol. ii, no. 8, p. 275, Dec. 1935.