

"The Arts Are Acquired Tastes"

(A Talk by A. R. D. FAIRBURN from IYA, Auckland, the first in a Winter Course Series devoted to various aspects of criticism)

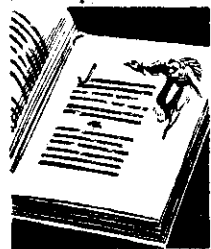
MY subject is criticism, the nature and purpose of criticism. We're all, in a sense, natural critics. We all form opinions about things, and people, and events—about pretty well everything that comes our way. I want you to brace yourselves for a bit of heavy going just for a start.

We can say that the tasks of criticism are these: first, to establish the nature of the thing we are dealing with, and, secondly, to assess its value. We ask ourselves first—what is this? Is it prose, or poetry—or neither? Is it music—or merely a collection of noises? Is this painting art—or just a mess on a bit of canvas? Having decided that there is such a thing as art, or music, or literature—and having agreed that the material we are dealing with comes under one of these headings, we can then go on to assess its value. Of course, the two processes often merge into each other. We could, perhaps, use the word "quality," because that seems to imply both the nature of a thing and its value. But "value" will serve our present purpose very well. It is this judgment of value that is the really important business of the critic. So let's look into it.

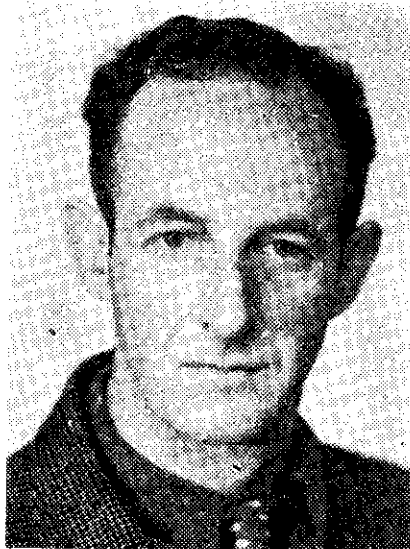
Standards of Measurement

The first point I want to make is this: when you set out to estimate the value of anything, that implies that you have something with which to measure it. There are some things which are so simple that the untutored judgment of the individual is quite capable of assessing them. If you sit on a tack, you don't need to go to any books, or to check your judgment against that of authority, in order to form an opinion. Nor do you need much help in deciding whether your breakfast egg is fit to eat or not. Your standard of measurement, your criterion, is based on the direct evidence of your senses, and is your own private business. But when we come to deal with such complex matters as literature and art, the position is rather different. These things are inseparable from the traditional life of society. They have grown out of the lives of generations of men. They have been developed and refined through long ages. Art is a very highly-organised form of experience; and each of the specialised forms of art has a tradition, without which it is almost meaningless—and this tradition is in turn related to the general tradition of society. The savage, hearing a Beethoven sonata for the first time, is quite unable to comprehend its meaning.

So, in making judgments about art and literature, every individual is thrown back upon the accumulated . . . and



more than accumulated—the organised knowledge and experience of the past. He absorbs a good deal of traditional knowledge—not just facts, but ways of thinking and feeling—in process of being educated and growing up in society. But if he is to come to a proper understanding of literature and



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"Our garden must have bees in it"

the arts, as they exist in civilised society, some specialised training is necessary. Only in that may he get the fullest enjoyment from them—the greatest pleasure, and the greatest enlargement of his experience.

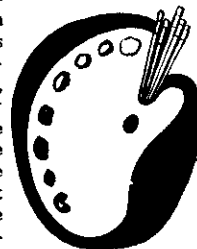
Building a Tradition

Now, in this long and complex development of the arts, criticism has played a vital part. Every important artist or writer (except perhaps those we call the "naive") needs to be in some sense of the word a critic. But art is not the private property of artists. It belongs to the living traditions of society as a whole. And it can't exist without its public. Conversely, I think it can be said that no society can live for long in a state of civilisation without a fairly widespread appreciation of the arts—that is to say, without well-organised aesthetic sensibility. And it's not possible to maintain a high degree of sensibility without the aid of systematic criticism. By systematic criticism I mean the building up, and the elaboration and refinement, of a tradition of taste and judgment. The purpose of criticism is to maintain traditional standards—and to guide their development; to increase and to sharpen our awareness, so that the experience of each individual may be enriched.

Systematic criticism is like the collection of implements we use to cultivate our plot of earth and turn it into a garden. There's one point I'd like to make in passing: we shouldn't be afraid of introducing a few new cuttings from time to time. And if we find a strange plant growing, we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that it's a weed. It may be something very good—or it may be a useful hybrid. Like every other garden, our garden must have bees in it.

Now, I want to make one thing quite clear. I said a moment ago that the standards of criticism we use in understanding and enjoying the arts are social and traditional. But I don't want you to think that the individual doesn't matter. Humanly speaking, he's all that does

matter, when you work it all out. It's quite obvious that the actual experience of enjoying a work of art is always, necessarily, something that happens to the individual. So we see that, underneath all the traditional standards that have been established—underneath all the assumptions we work on, ignorantly or wisely, when we form our opinions—lies the foundation—stone of all our experience of the arts, and that is, quite simply, the appetite of the individual. Not his taste



—for that's something that needs to be developed—but his appetite, his simple love of rhythm, and colour, and design, and sound, and so on. You know the type of man who says, "Well, I don't know what's good, but I know what I like." His attitude is sound, as far as it goes. The only trouble is that it doesn't go far enough. Very often this man doesn't want it to go any further—because of some perverse twist in his temperament. Or he may be merely complacent, he may suffer from the illusion that he's getting all there is to be had from painting, or music, or literature. If his natural appetite were to be educated and disciplined by knowledge, he could get a great deal more of enjoyment, of a sort he has never dreamt is possible.

The Academic Vice

Among the experts of criticism—the academic people—you'll find a sprinkling of the opposite type of person, the man who has read and studied intensively, and knows all the answers—but who's never really experienced the good and the bad for himself, because he has little or no natural appetite, no palate to be educated. When I run across one of those fellows I always hark back to that comment Edgar Allan Poe made about a certain literary critic. He said this man "knows no more of literature than a poulterer does of a phoenix." And then there's that (I think, quite memorable) poem by W. B. Yeats, which he called "The Scholars."

Bald heads, forgetful of their sins,
Old, learned, respectable bald heads
Edit and annotate the lines
That young men, tossing on their beds,
Rhymed out in Love's despair
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.
They'll cough in the ink to the world's end;
Wear out the carpet with their shoes
Earning respect; have no strange friend;
If they have sinned nobody knows.
Lord, what would they say
Should their Catullus walk that way?

Of course, academic critics—of the good sort—are vastly important in the scheme of things we're discussing. The only ones we have any right to abuse are the dull and stupid ones—the ones who have become victims of the academic vice. And what is the academic vice, you may ask? Well, I think it's simply the tendency to make criticism an end in itself; to dispense altogether with living artists and writers, and to let critical standards become petrified.

You see, the enormous importance of tradition in the arts—the importance of

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"They were dull old things when I bought them..



... and now they brighten the whole room."



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"Where's my BOURNVILLE COCOA?"



It's
CADBURY'S
so it must
be good