

IS THE TRUTH RESPECTABLE?

Problem for Critics

To the Editor—

Sir:—When a controversy flares up like the one you have just declared closed, over a piece of unafraid criticism, some people write to you as if they felt the world was getting wicked and wicked every day and nothing as bad as this had ever happened before. I look back over the letters that appeared, and I can't quite put a finger on what it is that makes them seem like that—but I think it's partly true, all the same. The offended ones, offended because for some reason or other they identify themselves with those criticised (in this case the new orchestra) seem to need to regard the critic's words as some new threat to their security. I get the same feeling when I hear people talk sadly (if they ever do) about the position of criticism in New Zealand. Both sides, in other words, tend to look on what they deplore as some modern depravity.

In this context, 40 years ago is ancient times, and therefore I think it would be a good thing (if it would give you any pleasure) if you would recall the fact that critical invective was freely splashed about the place here as much as 40 years ago, in C. N. Baeyertz's monthly paper, the *Triad*. I think you have once before quoted a sample of Baeyertz's musical criticism (when he called "Old John Fuller's" voice "a pig's whistle" and John Fuller took him to



C. N. BAEYERTZ
"A nice kind man all the time"

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me information about the snail. Several snail-watching societies are in process of formation in foreign countries, the latest being in Sweden. These are being federated to the British Snail-Watching Society; they will exchange information about the snail in their respective countries, and they will pool ideas for watching over the interests of the snail wherever it may be.

"I am sometimes asked what humanity stands to gain by all this. The first object of snail-watchers is to serve the cause of the snail; but in an age of size and speed, it is profitable for humanity to spare a little attention for a small creature, which effectively attains its ends, not by speed, but by slow and unhurried persistence.

"Of course we have our difficulties. I recently had to reply as follows to some-



This picture was printed with three captions: (1) JUDGING AT THE DUNEDIN COMPETITIONS, 1906. (2) "I have no joy of this contract to-night: It is too rash, too inadvis'd, too sudden." (3) "Strike, if you must, this old grey head, but spare my one dress suit, he said."

court over it, thinking a pig's whistle was some kind of offensive noise, and flatly denouncing the dictionary when he was told it only meant "a low whisper").

But if you would refer to the *Triad* of September 1908, you would find a paragraph in Baeyertz's *Obiter Dicta* which shows that it has for some time been necessary for a critic in New Zealand to spend much of his energy in defending his own position. Here it is:

"The critic must be discreet. You see, it is not enough to tell the truth merely: you must tell it luminously and wisely, not too much at a time. I don't think that I have ever yet been so unkind as to tell the whole truth about any performer who has pained me. None of us could live a week (or deserve to) if he went about the world telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about everything and everybody. The naked truth is really not respectable. Truth is kept at the bottom of a well because, despite the slanders of her fellow women, she is far too comely to be exhibited with decency to a grinning public in the nude. If her circumstances

one who wanted me to start a slug-watching section of my Society: 'Dear Sir,' I wrote, 'A doctor in Michigan wants us to exchange stamps with him. A gentleman in St. John's Wood wants us to play chess with him. A lady in Bexhill wants us to enrol in a number of societies for the protection of domestic animals. And now you want us to watch slugs. Admirable as all these things may be in themselves, I will not have my members diverted from their primary purpose, which is to watch snails.'

"One last word. Snails have a long history as a British article of diet. Snail-shells are found among food remains of the Early Bronze Age. Snail-watchers are content that this four-thousand-year-old custom should be continued, provided that before being eaten the snails are humanely slaughtered."

did not keep her cold and clammy, her embraces would be much more eagerly sought after. As it is, although you may have her company for nothing, there are few bidders at the price. As a rule, men leave her severely alone; but if you ever see a man leaning over the coping to pelt her with mud, you may take it that he is a professional reformer. And if you smite him violently on the mouth for such unchivalrous conduct, be sure that he will go forth in a mad world craving sympathy for one who has been assaulted by an infidel. When you hear a man boast of his intimacy with Truth, you can safely flout him for a liar. When you meet one who swears he has had issue by her, you must silently steal away and leave him yabbering, for his cloth protects him. If you have an attachment for her yourself, don't chortle about it; it is always wrong to compromise a lady, and a man must consider his own reputation."

It would also be entertaining if you would print the photograph the same Baeyertz had taken of himself when he was judging at the Dunedin competitions in 1906. This also, would be Consoling to Critics, I am sure. And you might put in the plain portrait of himself that was on the back of the same page, which shows he was really a nice kind man all the time. This might prove Consoling to Critics' Critics (if anything can).

And finally, for your own consolation, you might lift from the *Triad* of April 1906 the following little cry from an editorial heart:

"Editing a magazine is a nice thing. If we publish jokes, people say we are rattle brained. If we don't, we are fossils. If we publish original matter they say we don't give them enough selections. If we give them selections they say we are too lazy to write. If we don't go to church we are heathens. If we go we are hypocrites. Now, what are we to do? Just as likely as not someone will say we stole this from an exchange. So we did."

—C.E.G. (Auckland).



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