

lar interest; that, indeed, is so much to the good.

Our most conspicuous contemporary literary criticism is highly differentiated from our most distinguished criticism in the days that were yesterdays. A commentator upon our present literary commentary might remark that in general its outstanding feature is a quality which may be most nearly defined as shrillness. It has vitality, no doubt. But the vociferousness of its tone at times reaches a point where it suggests the kind of vitality displayed by a woman screaming to the iceman down a dumbwaiter shaft. It is habitually pugnacious. It wears a chip on the shoulder. It appears very generally to be addressed to an opponent. It reminds one of the sort of uneasy character who constantly suspects that he is about to be attacked. It is the voice of the zealous attorney pressing his case, and so lacks the spirit of disinterested authority of the judge.

Further, our contemporary critic frequently seems to have his eye not so much on the thing itself — on literature, that is — as on some supposed opinion hostile to his own. Or, indeed, upon himself, and the brilliance and astuteness of his own judgments. He is not customarily, like the student of whom Hazlitt speaks, "wrapt in his golden studies".

Now a prime point about our elder American critics was that their first concern was with literature itself. Thus they were not pamphleteers but creative interpreters. In other words, in writing about literature they wrote literature. You may, for instance, today take down Mr. James's volume, "Partial Portraits", or his "French Poets and Novelists", and be charmed by the author's talent for literary portraiture.

CONTRASTS IN CRITICISM

By Robert Cortes Holliday

LITERARY criticism in the United States is supposed to be looking up. It used frequently to be said that we had no literary criticism. Still in the days that are bygone we had among others such commentators upon letters as W. C. Brownell, Royal Cortissoz, William Dean Howells, Henry James and James Huneker. At any rate, our criticism now certainly makes more noise than it used to do. And, presumably, it engages a more popu-

There are before us two books recently come from the press which have this old fashioned quality. They are both by Englishmen, and men rooted in a mellow tradition. Edmund Gosse's first book, "Northern Studies", (the record on the fly-leaf of his latest volume states) was published in 1879. ("Partial Portraits", by the way, was first printed in 1888.) Books, the dean of English critics remarks in his present preface, "are flowers that tempt into the sunshine bees, which I call memories, hived in the course of nearly sixty years of indiscriminate and insatiate reading". He continues: "When the infinite variety and charm of them fail to enchant me, it will be time for me to 'cease upon the midnight with no pain'."

"More Books on the Table" is a second series of Mr. Gosse's little essays contributed weekly to the London Sunday "Times", "Books on the Table" having met with an "encouraging" reception a couple of years ago. Mr. Gosse apologetically states that his little "sermons" are not to be regarded as "reviews" of the books which inspired them, by which he means that they do not pretend to give a full account of the contents of each book. His object, he says, is to pass on to others the pleasure which he has experienced. Would that we had in our magazines and papers more "reviews" comparable to these little causeries. They are the perfection of literary urbanity. Among Mr. Gosse's subjects are: "Queen Victoria", "A Shropshire Lad", "Edwin Abbey", "Yorick and His Eliza", "Burlesque", "The Art of Parody and Georgian Poetry". His suave irony finds delicious play about the "Home Life of Swinburne".

Arthur Symons also has been going on for a considerable length of time.

He published "An Introduction to the Study of Browning" in 1886. When this reviewer was a youth, he was very much the vogue among the "sophisticates" (as the term now is), as an evangelist interpreting the "symbolist movement" in literature. He has always been a "collector's author". "Studies in Prose and Verse", now re-issued, was first published in 1904, and has been long out of print. Epochal events which have transpired since that far away time give not a diminished but a heightened interest to some of the chapters, as, for instance, to the study of d'Annunzio.

More Books on the Table. By Edmund Gosse.
Charles Scribner's Sons Co.
Studies in Prose and Verse. By Arthur Symons. With eight photogravures. E. P. Dutton and Co.