

THE NEW CRITICISM

NEW ESSAYS TOWARDS A CRITICAL METHOD.—By
John M. Robertson. 8vo. John Lane. \$2.00.

MR. ROBERTSON thinks that a universal system of criticism should supplant the individual and wayward methods hitherto in vogue; and in his opening essay he undertakes to set forth such a possible universal method, calling to his aid the resources of formal logic, psychology, and sociology. The primary object of the new critic, as Mr. Robertson conceives him, is to convince. He is to draw consistent conclusions from premises, advancing with elaborate caution and strategic skill. That there can be a reasoned science of criticism Mr. Robertson argues from the actual existence of a similar science of ethical judgment. Moreover, the new critic is to be not only increasingly systematic in his processes but more consistently thorough in his analyses and in the material of which he takes account. The critic, Mr. Robertson urges, should not only connect his estimates one with the other, he should also correlate them with his judgments on conduct and on social tendencies. He should do this not incidentally, as critics have often hitherto done, but systematically and with *malice prepense*. And he should do this, too, as a propagandist, with the view of making others share his views on the right ordering of life as well as his opinions on purely artistic matters. Lastly, Mr. Robertson maintains that progress in criticism, and the conversion of criticism into a science, depend on a more intelligent regard for consistency, alike in theory and practice. The critic must patiently consider questions of cause and effect. He must continually trace literary effects to their origin in the temperament and habits of work of the artist, and he must also watch his own literary judgments, and those of his fellow-critics, account for their variations as resulting from temperament and training, and reduce these variations to law. Critics who use these scientific methods may hope to escape from the uncertainties of the personal equation, and work together consistently for the establishment of scientific truth about literature.

Doubtless the critics who practice the art of delicate appreciation will find much to urge against Mr. Robertson's proposed innovations. In fact his great weakness lies on the side of æsthetic feeling, of which he appears at times to be totally devoid. The principle which he proposes, of limiting the appreciation of poetry to such poetry only as may be generally granted to possess metrical perfection, is at the start obviously unfair and impossible; this principle leads him, when he comes to follow it in practice, to various destructive conclusions. In his essay on Shelley, for example, he grossly underrates much of Shelley's poetry, wantonly overlooking all his ethereal loveliness and buoyancy, Shelley's longer poems, Mr. Robertson thinks, are simply

"rhyming verbiage" and "cerebral excitement inadequately controlled;" while of the twenty-one short stanzas of the *Skylark* not more than four, he declares, have any perfection of metrical quality. Keats, again, is subjected to an examination which, though more favorably intended, succeeds in wholly misrepresenting his special charm. In his essay on Poe, on the other hand, Mr. Robertson indulges in undiluted eulogy, constituting himself a champion for that somewhat disparaged poet. He is fatuous enough to find all that Poe ever wrote, whether in the direction of fiction, poetry, criticism, or treatise like the *Rationale of Verse*, invariably worth while. His final estimate of Poe as a poet, founded on the basis of workmanship, is correspondingly sweeping. Even Poe's "second-best verse," he says, "has a distinction of its own."

The new method may be found working in fullest perfection in the essays on Coleridge and Clough, peculiarly to Mr. Robertson's own satisfaction, if we are to believe the Preface, in the essay on Clough. Compared with the *Appreciations* of Pater or the critical essays of Matthew Arnold, the Coleridge and Clough essays lack artistic merit. Yet in both there is a certain evident gain on the purely literary method in the clearer exposition of the sociological conditions under which these poets did their work. The Coleridge essay, which offers Mr. Robertson an opportunity to apply the kind of scientific analysis which is based on medical research, is, however, undeniably disproportionate in its severity when compared with the sympathetic estimate of Poe previously reached by the same means; and the essay on Clough is notably disproportionate through its insistence on Clough's hitherto undiscovered gift for analytical fiction as well as its implied contradiction of the generally accepted opinion that Clough's talents as a versifier did not exceed mediocrity.

These shortcomings simply show that Mr. Robertson has not achieved the degree of success which those who share his views on matters of criticism could have desired for him. Yet, by his own confession, Mr. Robertson has in part expected to fail. He has merely taken his chances like all propagandists and opinion-makers. The practical objections to the final adoption of his new method, setting aside for the time the conflict of science and æsthetics, are twofold: the method for its successful application demands more ability than it can possibly take for granted in the petty practitioners; on the other hand the great critics will probably prefer theories of their own. In short, it is really just in proportion to its ability to arouse among critics a serious regard for their art, and so extend and fortify the field of criticism, that Mr. Robertson's new method contributes to literature.

