PORTRAIT OF A CRITIC

By Ernest Boyd

With Sketches by Dwight Taylor

THE size of his brief case is the measure of his estimate of his own importance. He rarely goes far without this imposing piece of impedimenta, with adjustable locks, heavy straps, and an attractive array of compartments, containing manuscripts, review books, and volumes deserving a place in every gentleman's library. Lest he be mistaken for a mere journalist, he is careful to encumber himself simultaneously with his bag and his walking stick. The former alone might denote the presence of a common newspaper man, the latter unaided might suggest dramatic criticism, whereas our Critic is nothing if not a scholar, and his most casual notice of a book assumes the portentousness of a contribution to learning. Not that he has fitted himself for his career by the attainment of the qualifications necessary for criticism. He learns while he earns, and like the education of George Moore, his is also conducted in public, but not with such happy effect. He is either engaged in displaying the knowledge which he should have quietly digested in his nonage, or he strenuously exhibits his emancipated indifference even to the rudiments of that elementary learning. His pedantry is as depressing as his philistinism.

The Critic of the strictly up to date model manages amazingly to combine these two elements, and it is this amalgam which best symbolizes the type under whose ægis a new era in literature has developed. For his pedantry, his defective college education must be held responsible. At college he must have acquired those undigested slabs of knowledge upon which he now ruminates. Had they been properly assimilated, some sustenance might have gone into his style, and a sounder and riper judgment into his criticism. But he is a species of critical Peter Pan who never grows out of his tutelage to the pedagogue upon whose verbal or written counsels he relies to the end. The gerund grinder is presumably so charmed at finding a pupil in whom all interest in literature was not stifled, that he encourages his protégé in the ways of the New Solemnity. So the latter becomes publicly a book reviewer but privately nurses the sacred ambition to become a critic.

To this end he proceeds to make up for the lost reading more appropriate to his college days. Dusting off his literary manuals, he discovers the names and works of the august dead, to whom he turned a rather inattentive ear before he realized that the call to criticism had been vouchsafed to him. He determines to make these his companions, and to refresh his soul after the daily trivialities of current book reviewing with those masterpieces which have stood the test of time. If he were on the far side of fifty, instead of hovering uncertainly about thirty, he would assuredly say that, every time a new book appeared, he reread an old one. As it is, he has his moments, as when he can dismiss conversation

about some contemporary by reverting to the sermons of John Donne or to Hobbes's "Leviathan". One gathers that his great consolation is the fact of his being so cultured that, when he has solemnly criticized the inadequacies of "The Sheik" or "Flaming Youth", he can retreat to the blessed company of Montaigne and Aristotle. He deprecates the time wasted upon the contemporary American realists, and ingenuously urges the superior claims of Fanny Burney and Mrs. Aphra Behn.

His technique is of the simplest. Being too old to avow his ignorance and not young enough to admit his inexperience, he feels compelled to give constant reminders of his wide reading and cultured tastes. Thus he will begin: "I was looking through 'A Mirror for Magistrates' last night for the hundredth time, when I came across a passage . . . "; or "I have just been rereading 'The Diall of Princes', it is really far better than 'The Mirrors of Downing Street' "; "Don't you think that Eugene O'Neill is very much less worthwhile than Vanbrugh?" He will establish parallels between Fielding and Sherwood Anderson, to the latter's disadvantage, and establish charges of plagiarism against "Ulysses" by means of quotations from Jacobean divines. He is charmed when he catches a friend tripping in some matter which he himself has picked up second hand through Professor Saintsbury or Charles Whibley. Although he professes the utmost scorn for reprinted critical articles — until his own are collected — he combines this with an unbounded admiration for Hazlitt and Arnold. These have been hallowed by the benediction of the classroom handbooks. Their journalism has now become criticism, his professors have told him.

His own practice as a critic presents few departures from the norm of mortals who deem themselves less gifted. He shows a becoming discretion where the works of editors are concerned, and the elucubrations of his teachers fill him with becoming humility. When he

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finds a book of criticism in a field where he has aspired to disport himself, he will conscientiously expose all its weaknesses, if the author happens to be a person of little editorial consequence. He will pronounce judgment upon the excellence of translations from languages of which he is ignorant, with an air of the profoundest expert knowledge. He regards these utterances with a pontifical earnestness, and believes that his being asked to write a review is an event of considerable importance to the author in particular and to the public in general. Any work of arresting quality excites him to denigration, and his fault finding is filled with echoes of the platitudes of the type leveled against George Meredith, to the effect that his style was obscure, and that his characters spoke a language never overheard in buses. He is just a little vague in his mind as

to this question of realism. He finds that all his professors seem to agree that realistic fiction is reprehensible, but whenever there are no romantic stereotypes, and phonographic reproductions of speech make way for genuine writing, then the poor fellow is distressed and puzzled. In short, in his premature desire for balance and perspective, he generally achieves priggishness.

When the Critic's aim, on the other hand, is to astonish the bourgeoisie, he usually succeeds in giving the educated an astonishing exhibition of his own ignorance, real or assumed. In this phase of his evolution he has simply reversed the order already described. He will not, on any account, admit that a classic, ancient or modern, is worth reading. To suggest merits in Thackeray is somehow to detract from the fame of Waldo Frank. The idea that the full flavor of Ring Lardner is enhanced by contrast with one's appreciation of Goldsmith or Bacon, is one which his ultra modern mind refuses to entertain. The consequence is that the victim of this obsession begins his career as an æsthete and ends as a reporter, incapable of any judgment other than, "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." In his æsthetic stage he is a source of not altogether innocent merriment; in the reportorial, he is the most potent force in modern criticism.

Who can resist the humor of the baubles that bedizen the prose of the æsthetic critic, who declares swooningly: "The breath of a rare aptness informs every rectangle of canvas or glass decorated by Marsden Hartley. . . . Like a warm flower half hidden by lush grasses, the presence glints from his clamant shields of color, meeting with light reassurance the eye when first it falls upon the great drooping curves, the prim angular shapes, and flaunting areas of this simultaneously stiff and violent and whimsical art." One is suffused by grammatical blushes when one reads: "Lyric substance has gotten a novel acidulousness of him", or "The sharp things make gay dangerous guerilla upon the alkalis coating the brain." Another blush is produced by such obstetrical images as "Known in the body of a woman, the largeness of life greets us in color", or "What men have always wanted to know, and women hide, this girl sets forth. Essence of womanhood impregnate color and mass." It is more in joy than in anger that one discovers that these sweet phrases are those of a critic who believes that the great auk is the bird known as the great roc in the "Arabian Nights" — after all the "Arabian Nights" were not written last year at the MacDowell Colony. They don't belong.

When he forsakes these exotic jungles of words, so appropriate to the art with which they purport to be concerned, the Critic is then liable to lapse into the genial or conversational manner, which has a potency that can medicine booksellers and readers to the sweetest of sleeps. Genial, when the arbiter of our literary destinies addresses his readers in general by fanciful names, and his personal friends in the "literary game" by nicknames and affectionate diminutives. We learn what he found in the icebox last night, after an evening's toil, how his dog bit the baby and the Ford ran out of gasoline just outside Jamaica, L. I. . . . Incidentally, it seems that "dear old Jackie" has written another masterpiece (publisher and price indicated), that he is a hell of a nice fellow, and spends five hours at his lunch when his critic is with him. It further transpires that the Critic has just been round the

bookshops and has picked up a fine copy — in Everyman's Library — of "Typee". He has no hesitation in recommending this hitherto neglected and unknown work to his sweet customers. The customers aforesaid do not wait to be told twice — although, as a matter of arithmetical fact, they hear the same thing twice daily for several weeks after — they rush to the bookshops, and "dear old Jackie" shares with Herman Melville a species of boom.

The more intensely personal and domestic the Critic becomes, the more insistent he is that the "we" reserved for editorial writers and royalty shall be his pronoun. Upon which analogy, let the charitable and uncharitable explain according to their diverse temperaments. It does seem as though an "I" could hardly strike a jarring note in so intimate a picture, but such egotism is rigorously excluded. Instead, one gets an obviously detached account of how "we" were lunching on board the "Aquitania", when "our" dear old friend Tommie So and So confided that he was publishing a new book, and without having seen it, "we" can swear to its excellence and entreat "our" dearest patrons to order it at once. At the same time, the same publisher is bringing out a series of reprints in which "we" discover a delightful book which "we" had never read, but which "we" now intend to boost till many moons and many columns have waxed and waned. Whereupon a breathless audience is made aware of the existence of "Robinson Crusoe", "The Three Musketeers", or some similar forgotten volume. The genial Critic is much beloved of publishers and booksellers. He is a popular educator. He knows when to give credit where credit is due. In the trade they say he has "a large following".

He has an alter ego, however, whose typewriting on the wall is a more powerful omen than that which troubled the feast at Belshazzar's court. The Critic unadorned makes no play with his icebox, his lunches, the dog by his fireside, and the dawn coming up like thunder across Oyster Bay. No poetic pictures in the pseudo-Lamb manner for him, no references to rare Ben Jonson, cheese and ale. He is a regular guy, who would as certainly prefer a ball game or a session at poker to the books which he has to discuss, as would the husbands of all the ladies who read him. When he can, he escapes, and entertains the men with his genuine appreciation of all manly sports. But the women want culture, and so he tells them what the lips of their menfolk refuse to speak. He can put them on to a good mystery story, another analysis of the problem of sex, and, every now and then, a work of more or less serious intent which happens to deal with some question which arouses his natural feeling in favor of fair play. He can "sell" them an idea.

What, however, is vastly more important, he can sell books, and is thereby unanimously constituted the world's greatest Critic. His name adorns the jackets and advertisements of many books, and lucky indeed is the publisher who can quote him as saying: "Get me, kid, this sure is some humdinger of a story, holy gee!" When he concludes his examination of some new contribution to the literature of domestic slavery, his peroration brings joy into many a publisher's humble home: "By gosh, this jane has hit the high spots of married life. The best book we have read in years", or words to that effect. Whereupon carloads of paper rumble eastward, printing presses revolve, in the moving picture market there is a flurry, and the American

home is enriched by one more triumph of the native genius.

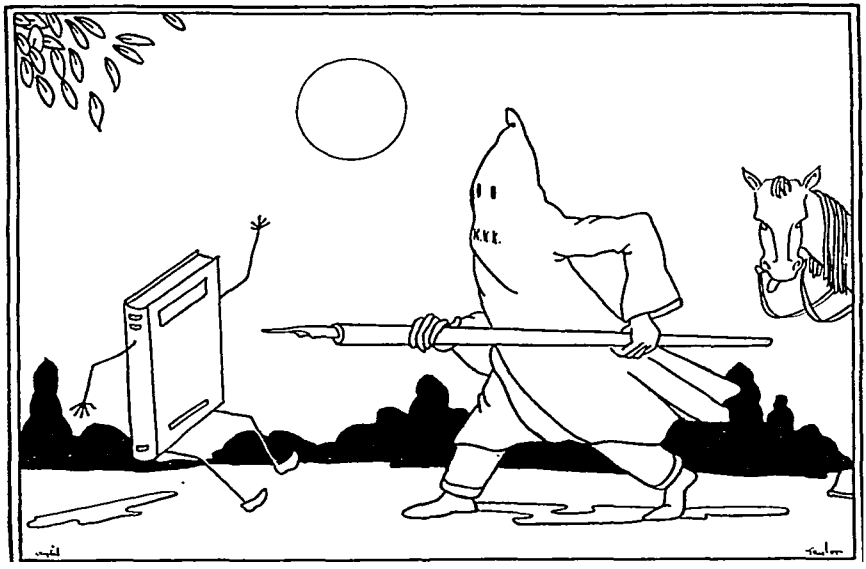
In criticism he is man as Rousseau desired him, in his natural state, unspoiled by the affectations which bedevil his less fortunate rivals. Fundamentally their equipment is the same, but the others present those fluctuations from the normal which do not add one cubit to their critical stature, but seriously detract from their usefulness as the accurate reflection of mass opinion. Others may stumble occasionally upon a book which proves to be just what the public wants, but they cannot be relied upon to repeat the performance instinctively. The Critic unadorned can arrive by second nature at the judgments expected of him, his reactions are as standardized as Ford parts and as reliable. If he cherishes any secret desires of a subtly intellectual or æsthetic kind, he conceals the stirrings of this libido from the profane gaze. His habit of reiteration sometimes leads to his methods' being confused with those of his more introverted colleagues. When he returns again and again to praise of the same book, he is animated by no more reprehensible motive than that which prompts a child to voice his pleasure in repeated singsong. He wants the public to share his enthusiasm.

His naive rejoicings, in fact, prove now and then his undoing. Rival publishers have hardly passed advertising proofs in which he greets each particular goose as a swan, when they discover that their respective masterpieces have been hymned in identical terms as "the best we have read". Sinister suggestions are made by the disgruntled, who assert that this appearance of candor covers an elaborate system of log rolling, but the charge cannot be proved. It is irrelevant, moreover, because it lies against every writer who is called upon to pass comment upon current literature. As usual, the individual is blamed for the achievements of the plain people. It is their recognition which confers the power against which those who cannot benefit by it protest. Henry James

"He is a regular guy"

could not have sold an edition of "The Egoist" by boosting "old Georgie Meredith".

There are certain risks which our Critic does not take. If he did, he would not be the phenomenon which he is. If he were even liable to such lapses from normalcy, he could not wield the influence which makes him the complete Critic in our time. He can do none other, Demos helping him. But it is in no spirit of martyrdom that he can adapt those words to fit his case. He is a round peg in a perfectly round hole, unlike the many square pegs which fit so uneasily into the critical places assigned to them in this age of Equal Opportunity. We live, it is said, in a democratic era, and we pay the penalty of our daring. With greatness thrust upon him before he has



"He rides forth in his literary Klan robes"

attained competent mediocrity, the Solemn Critic inevitably plays at being grown up by donning the clothes of his literary parents. The Æsthetic Critic tries to achieve sophistication before he has acquired knowledge. The results are equally absurd. And so we arrive at the logical conclusion: *vox populi, vox critici.*

Casting his shadow over the whole scene stands the professor, who usually possesses all the qualities which the others simulate, but none of the virtues which make those qualities desirable. He has a certain background and real perspective, but urbanity, intellectual curiosity, and sensitiveness to new ideas are lacking. He lives in his watertight literary department, so cut off from the world of contemporary letters that even those whom he pursues in his feuds are fantoms to him. He has the distressing habit of lumping all his dislikes under some generic epithet, and dies unaware that the groups which he has indicted have as little in common among themselves as they have with him. His particular phobias are the "younger set" or the "bohemians", but he has never troubled to find out which writers actually belong to these categories. He can see no difference between an Æsthete: Model 1924, and the antithesis of this phenomenon: Theodore Dreiser and H. L. Mencken. In his rasher moments he confounds Van Wyck Brooks and Burton Rascoe in an identical excommunication. When he rides forth in his literary Klan robes, he runs amuck, and insinuates that the brachycephalic Mediterranean or even the Jewish taint is present in writers of authentic Dutch lineage dating back at least two hundred years. He calls for the instant deportation of such aliens, when their works displease him, on the ground that they are unassim-

ilated and un-American. The Academic Critic is a species of Fundamentalist in literature.

When he becomes a Modernist the fruits of his condescension are rather dry. He remains the schoolmaster to the end, but develops an extraordinary faculty for balancing on critical tight ropes. His lack of prejudice — ostensible prejudice — becomes positively embarrassing. One watches breathlessly while he trips along the slack wire of his cautious prose, maintaining a skilful balance, so that he can praise with equally discreet enthusiasm exponents of diametrically opposite tendencies, without once revealing toward which side his own convictions incline. Finally the truth emerges, that he has no convictions outside the accepted figures of the past, where a certain degree of liberty of judgment is permitted to a scholar and a gentleman. He can argue for or against Poe and Whitman — there are academic precedents for whatever side he takes. Otherwise, his indifference enables him to be all things to all new men of letters, but at times his assumed enthusiasm threatens the prerogatives of the journalistic amplifiers. At this precise moment in his evolution he is at his zenith, for he then combines the commercial influence of the regular fellows with the parchment prestige of the pedagogue. His ramifications are many. He is the Great Power in American letters.