

The truly religious knows that to the world he can only impart his happy contemplation of the life beyond the grave by the practise of rigorous self-denial, never-failing gentleness and cheerfulness, deep earnestness pervading his whole life.

When one remembers the undaunted energy of Richard Wagner in proclaiming his theories on art and religion, even when beset with the most virulent vituperation, for the bitter enemy of which, perhaps, no parallel in the history of art can be found, it is sacrilegious to accept insinuations of his irreligious tendencies.

An audience which has seen "Parsifal" has had represented to it a lofty symbolical drama, apt to inspire it with thoughts at least as high and pure as any to be derived from church services and sermons in these cold days. It was the Christian Church, which, in old times, gave us the Christian drama; it will be a strange thing if the Christian drama leads us back to the Church of Christ!

RHAPSODIES.

CRITICISM DISSECTED.

(By Bryceson Treharne.)

III.

"Many a man is a fool, and doesn't know it," quoth an illustrious philosopher; and many a newspaper scribe, nay, a "musical critic," is an Aristophanes of irony without knowing it.

From the earliest days the musical critic has exercised a weird fascination over me. I have ever rejoiced in the contemplation of his autocratic superiority and his supreme confidence in his own discernment. To me the critic is as the organ-grinder to the artistic gutter child—a being to be envied and admired for ever; a being who lives in an eternal Paradise of delirious joy and power. I yearn to be a musical critic.

I want to give Sarasate a few useful hints on bowing, and to explain to Paderewski—kindly, but firmly—wherein lies his singular lack of musical feeling.

The salient characteristic of the critic seems to me to be his extraordinary homogeneity. When you have read one of him, you have read all of him. He varies infinitely in style (or the lack of it) and opinion—indeed, his opinion is really always diametrically opposed—but, roughly speaking, he is unanimous.

Accustomed as he is to lay a disproportionate stress on his own judgment, and the importance thereof, he can hardly fail to be egotistic.

Yet the critic's egotism, like the melancholy of the Slav, like the self-satisfaction of the amateur, is rather a racial characteristic than a personal trait. It is a subtle, all-pervading essence, which perfumes the critic's style. And it is, on occasion, astounding! Frequently, the critic will give as a reason for depreciating the value of some work of art, the simple fact that he does not like it.

Merciful powers! As if the opinion of the casual critic were law.

I feel sure that the exercise of his calling is fatal to the critic's character.

Now, though the critic is homogeneous and unanimous, he is also various.

He is a theme with many variations. He includes the most fantastic foolery and the dullest sense.

I came across a criticism the other day which, as a masterpiece of unconscious satire, is a retirement for humdrum ears.

It ran like this:—"It is said that Rubenstein received the impulse to utilise Biblical subjects for musical dramatic purposes from witnessing a ballet based on a similar subject years ago in Paris, and that it suggested to him the propriety of treating Biblical stories 'worthily in music.'"

This is about the silliest thing in its way I have ever read. The force of sarcasm could no further go—the fluorine acid mordancy of it masked by the cream-milk mildness. It is a monument, in its way, as colossal as the work it celebrates. If we go on at this rate a Darwin's occupation will soon be gone. The wing-heeled Mercury of John of Bologna will no longer be a mere type to us, but we shall find ourselves some fine morning making a foot-stool of him cozily ball.

Every word of this epoch-making utterance is worthy of being weighed, learned, marked, and inwardly digested. That on dit to begin with—"It is said";—by whom? What favored mortal imparted the information (worthy of being telegraphed from the music of the spheres) to our roll-dial-tone Babelus, Dryden, and Swift?

With regard to the information itself, it is too mystic—one dare not pry into its mysteries, lest, Semite-like, we should be consumed in a way dear to the muddier-up infer alia of Abraham and Nimrod, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; or in a way also dear to the immortals of the Hebrew Aclaton. "Rubenstein received the impulse"—woful declaration! Let us not pry the veil from its Shekinah and O the mystery.

But that word "utilise"—the whole phrase, "to utilise Biblical subjects!" Was ever anything more superfluous in its tock-may jargonism?

O, thou Divine Art, things are coming to a sorry pass if thou can'st only so inspire thine acolytes!

But the "deeper and deeper still" of bozhos, press only the lowest in its mazy unreasonability, remains. This new Babelus received his immortal impulse "from witnessing a ballet based on a similar subject years ago in Paris."

So I should think. If anybody after this can out-Herod Herod, let him put on Alexander's buskins; let him o'erstride the world like a colossus whose legs we petty mortals peep about and fill our graves.

The critic is privileged to be hysterical by reason of his necessarily emotional temperament.

He goes to a concert—the pianoforte pre-ke to set him quivering; the love song makes him feel like a devil that's been cooked too long, and unilluminates him with pain and pleasure.

Yet his passion is as highly-sphered as his intellect. He tries to reproduce these sublimated sensations through the imperfect medium of words; and the result is just a little bewildering. From an aesthetic point of view the critic satisfies. Yet he is sometimes useful as well as ornamental. He stimulates young artists by slating their work. (His words are about as persuasive as a bludgeon; they lack the massive delicacy of the tomahawk). He causes grateful showers of invective to descend on their delighted heads; he rouses their slumbering self-esteem. Sometimes he sends a chilling light of approval on the callow artist, for he is as capricious as the climate.

Then that artist is indeed cast down and full of sorrow.

For praise is deadly poison; praise is the confirmation of our worst fears—it is the brand set on mediocrity.

The philosophic mind is merely amused at adverse opinion, expressed with exaggerated violence and intolerance.

The musical claqueur of to-day, who always yell one way like a pack of hounds, cannot afford one the same innocent distraction from one's serious interests. Honest criticism is almost a lost art; and so is the dishonest criticism that amuses. I confess if I had an hour for relaxation I would rather spend it in seeing a man hanged in effigy than in listening to one of those eulogies that are like eating-house dishes—all alike, except in name.

After all that can be said in disapprobation of the musical critic—he is more to be pitied as the martyr of an ignoble machinery, than execrated as a bad amuser.

He is, with very few exceptions, in the same pickle as the unfortunate society reporter, who is obliged by his necessities to squander his life in the vestibule of "society," and hale every waddling young woman, who makes her formal entrance into her gilded cage, as a paragon of beauty and Admirable Crichton in petticoats.

The counting-house controls the critic's judgments, and allows him no selection; and, indeed, when a man has a social lever, as well as the ordinary means of influencing the opinions of the poor critic, through his employer, there is very little moral hesitation in evidence; then the critic cuts capers, which may well make him desirous of preserving his anonymity.

It is hard to have to praise a lady's work because she is the wife of a millionaire, and one's employer is invited to her table; and it adds a new poignancy to the situation when the lady's dinners and not the work must occupy the chief place in one's criticisms.

If he were only allowed to say what he thought, the critic's life would not be so miserable; but his opinions are furnished him by gentlemen whose ideas of art generally are picturesque, to put it mildly, and the poor man has to father all sorts of crudities, or else resign in favor of someone to whom intellectual prohibition is less obnoxious.

He tries to be instructive, but in doing so illustrates the fallacy of human judgment; for he and his colleague invariably take up precisely opposite points of view with reference to any work of art, and they can't both be right; whereas it is quite possible that both of them are wrong. Of course, I do not dream of affirming that there are such arbitrary distinctions as right and wrong in aesthetics, though there may be such in ethics.

But in writing of criticism one lapses almost unconsciously into the critical, dogmatic style and crude assertive manners.

The critics know but little light and

shade, and the chameleonic instinct adapts itself to the critic's coloring.

There is no ascertainable criterion of aesthetic art. All criticism is necessarily empirical. It is too often little more than an unfavorable opinion of Pegasus expressed by a man who is accustomed to riding only in an omnibus.

A positive basis of criticism is impossible, but the comparative method of estimating imagination, takes us farther away from a reasonable approximation, by comparing things utterly unlike, and rejecting those of most recent date for their dissimilarity.

It rarely helps us to form any true and definite idea of the relative value of anything, for aside from conformity to the broad principles of art, there is frequently little community of purpose or method among the greatest artists.

The tyranny of past conventions has always been one of the strongest obstacles to progress in thought.

On the other hand, to attempt to destroy the influence of the greatest thinkers of the past is presumptuous and injurious; but when fresh changes in artistic life bring about the condemnation of old errors and prejudices, no matter how ancient and respectable, it is the lowest depth of mental servility to defer to the conservative spirit, that always survives for a generation or two the ideas which are effectually exploded by the thinking men of the time.

But in throwing away the conventions of other days we are rarely under no obligation to discard or depreciate the truth and beauty of the art that grew up under their shadow.

Augustus William Schlegel defines the scope of comparative criticism as affording a clue to the conditions necessary to the creation of original works of art.

He says:—"Everything must be traced up to the root of human nature; if it has sprung from thence, it has an undoubted worth of its own; but if, without possessing a living germ, it is merely externally attached thereto, it will never thrive nor acquire a proper growth."

This is the value of the best criticism. It compares the works of the greatest artists, not to discover conformity of opinion, or matter, or method, but merely to ascertain in a general way some guide to the highest expression of art.

There will be almost as much correspondence in certain particulars as there is wide divergence in others, because, with all differences of temperament, and training, and experience, men of genius must deal largely with the same material, human life, and their reflections must often be of the same metal; but they are stamped with the super-scription of their creators, and are as new as next year's apples will be.

People do not discard a gold mine after the first few nuggets are discovered, and while life and death remain art can never become merely an echo.

In the examination of history, the sciences and philosophy, the strictly comparative method is indispensable to the reaching of any sound conclusions, although it is indubitable that, in the latter, essential truths have often been discovered in large and bold generalisations.