

THE NECESSITY OF CRITICISM

A DIALOGUE

CHARACTERS: The Poet. The Plain Man.

The Plain Man. Hullo! Why so glum? Price of wool affecting your output?

The Poet. Why the deuce shouldn't I be glum? How can a man produce good work in this country? No feeling for tradition, no standards, nothing but slackness and complacency. It's in the air — you breathe it in even if you don't want to.

P.M. Well, why not do your part to set us right? When's your novel coming out?

Poet. It's not. I've torn the damn thing up. What this country wants isn't another second-class, guaranteed all Australian, novel. It's spiritual standards: something to tighten up its life: a mental tonic, or a purge, or both. If we knew what we were aiming at, and braced ourselves to attain it, we might get there, instead of drifting cheerfully to perdition. Price of wool, indeed! Bah!

P.M. Come, come, old fellow. Why not leave our spiritual standards to some parson? It's none of your business. You're a literary chap. Your job is to express things as they are, not to go round with a long face and play the mental physician to a community whose only sickness is low wholesale prices.

Poet. That's just it. I am a literary chap, and for that very reason to be a mental physician to the community is my business. I'm only just coming to see it, though, and it's hard — damn hard. It's not wholesale prices that are wrong with this country, or with the world. It's loose thinking, no thinking at all, chaos due to the discrediting of old standards and the absence of new — result, spiritual slackness and deadness.

P.M. I seem to have heard that before. But still, where do you literary johnnies come in?

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Poet. Literature is the vehicle of thinking. It is also the vehicle of feeling, of sensibility, and of the blend of all these which is the characteristic of the highest man. Literature is the embodiment of ideas, and where a nation's literature measures up to a true standard there won't be much wrong with its life. We need a new set of values for all our life, and this is at least as much a challenge to the man of letters as to the Archbishop of Sydney. If we could get order in our own house, it might be some help to others.

P.M. I think I see what you mean. You mean that the man who is trained in letters, and has access to the literature of two or three countries, can examine the experience of the past and judge what is good and what bad, and so see what is lacking now that the past can supply?

Poet. Partly, though you put it rather crudely.

P.M. But isn't that all wrong? Surely the present is unique. It's not the past, and you can't compare them. It's only waste of time rummaging in the past for solutions to our special problems, and misleading and pernicious to palm off old answers to superficially similar questions as if they were adequate now. You know about old wine in new bottles.

Poet. But you surely don't mean that the present is wholly separable from the past. Wouldn't you rather say that it grows out of it and is largely conditioned by it, though it is at the same time different?

P.M. Yes, I would agree to that.

Poet. And if we are to deal understandingly with the present, we must understand the past, as affecting it? The setting of our lives is, if you will excuse the metaphor, a continuous stream. The past and the present are continuous — our actions are part of the stream of tradition. Tradition, believe me, is not something dead, divorced, and different in kind from the reality of the present. It is alive, a continuous and unending process. We can ignore the past — at our peril. If we do not live by the tradition, we cannot help living in it, and surely it is better to know what we are doing than to

act blindly, by intuition. If we want to alter the course of the stream in some respect, and that I suppose is what the revolutionary and the modernist want to do, surely we shall effect a more successful and more durable change if we first understand the nature of what we want to alter, so far as it may be apprehensible to us?

P.M. Yes. That sounds all right, but aren't you rather getting away from the literary critic?

Poet. I think this is relevant to our question. Literature gives us an important part of our knowledge of the past, and an index of present tendencies. By taking for analysis this particular portion of the stream of human experience, we may hope to get some light on the whole. Only we must remember that it is a living process, and must avoid the sin of the professors, who cut off a dead slab from the past for dissection in the lecture-room, like a corpse in an anatomy class. We must always see the past in the present and the present in the past, and life and living movement in and through all.

P.M. Yes. Quite, but where does your critic come in?

Poet. The business of the literary critic is to discover and set forth as clearly as may be the standards by which literature is to be judged, to verify and exemplify them from the past, and to show their application to the present and the future — that is, they must be capable of intelligent application and yield significant results when applied to the literature of any country and any age. There cannot be one law for one work and one for another — his law must make sense for all or it makes no sense at all. But it will not necessarily be the same as that which other ages have put forward or which critics of other nations may work out. Herein lies the need for an *Australian* literary critic. His scales of values must be founded in Australian tradition (which has behind it the immeasurably greater richness of British culture, or rather, the experience of Western Europe, of which that culture is a localized expression) and in Australian experience. Besides, it is not good for a country to import all its serious opinions ready made.

We cannot be a nation, in any true sense, till we have worked out our standards for ourselves, in our own idiom.

P.M. What then do you mean by saying the standard must be universal? If it is to be in terms of Australian life, would it not be better to take simply the literature that deals with that life, and apply to it, and to it only, the special standards derived from it? Besides, critical standards are relative. Our literature is still in its infancy, and it is not fair to compare it with that of older countries. A book might be a very good Australian novel, even if we would not have thought much of it had it come from England!

Poet. Critical standards are *not* relative. That is precisely what I meant, and that is just what is wrong with our criticism. Every nation must work out its own standards because every nation has, to a greater or less extent, its own point of view — its own original contribution to the world's life. But its standards must differ from others in idiom, not in their range of application. I am sick of this idea that anything a little better than we happen to have produced before in Australia is to be hailed by us as a masterpiece. One result is Australian literature as it is now — a mass of second-rate stuff masquerading as national masterpieces. Another is Australian life — the conviction that *we* must be all right, come what may, and that if we are in a mess it is somebody else's fault, and somebody else's job to get us out. As long as he keeps up to his own private standards the Aussie can do no wrong!

P.M. You're rather harsh, aren't you? You must have been reading the 'Bulletin' lately.

Poet. That's why I say the standard must be universal. It can be as peculiarly Australian as you like, but it must be such that you can apply it equally to all the literatures of the world with intelligible results. The other thing isn't a critical standard — it's the negation of critical standards. What I have described is the sort of standard the world needs today, and every nation must evolve it for itself.

P.M. But I still don't see the connection between lack of literary standards and the decay of national morals. What is the nature of this universal-national standard, anyway?

Poet. A work of literature has three elements: the matter, the inner form, and the outer form or technique. By the matter I mean that portion or aspect of human experience which the work represents; by the inner form, the attitude or response of the author to the matter — the mood of presentation; by the technique, the means by which this attitude or response is communicated to the reader.

P.M. I think I have got that.

Poet. The literary critic, since he is to judge a work of literature or enable us to do so, must investigate all these and discover standards of value or perfection for each. They are all important, and all equally relevant to the literary critic's task, for if a work falls short in any one of them it cannot be really great literature — certainly not the greatest. The matter must be worthy of attention — that is, of some permanent significance as human experience — the attitude of the author must be appropriate to it, and last, though not least, he must transmit that attitude to his reader, that is, his technique must be adequate. Our self-styled critics, in practice, too often confine themselves to the last element. They regard it as their function to tell the author how to do what he sets out to do, and think their job done when they have stopped him splitting infinitives and otherwise abusing the king's English and have appreciated his conveyance of 'character' and 'atmosphere'. And, indeed, I have no wish to belittle their work in this respect.

P.M. Of course not. If the author fails to convey what he wishes to the reader, we can scarcely be expected to bother about the rest.

Poet. Quite so. But our critics do not see that they must go farther. They must go on from their consideration of technique to take account of the other elements also. These nowadays we are too ready to over-

look. Yet it little matters if a thing is perfectly done which is not worth doing, or if an author has successfully conveyed his attitude to a subject if it is a wrong one — if for instance he treats a serious subject in a flippant or trivial manner, or makes an inadequate or hackneyed response to a great and lofty issue, as is too often the way of our journalists and popular novelists when these things enter their ken. Against these faults too the literary critic must provide a touchstone, if he is really to give us standards by which we may judge literature, as we said he must, to discern the true from the counterfeit, the important and universal from the merely trivial and ephemeral.

P.M. You will have hard work to find such a man among those whom we now style critics.

Poet. We shall, indeed, and perhaps much of our present confusion comes from this that the critic in his concentration on technique omits to judge the end to which that technique is applied. For in judging literature or human thought, or indeed anything else, we cannot abstract one element in it and treat it as if it were the whole. Our literary critic must be a critic of life too, if his canons are to have any real value. And so far from singing that old song 'Art for Art's sake' which for all its merits has led astray so many good men, and has provided many more with a specious cloak for their idleness, he will realize that in the end he and the moralist and the metaphysician are all engaged in the same task; that they must pool their results and that each must have in him something of the nature of the others, that he may attain some glimmerings of that whole in relation to which alone has his work any real significance. It is for lack of the vision of this ultimate synthesis that our life is sick today. To recover it our first need is hard, clear thinking, honest and uncompromising, as well in the literary sphere as in any other. It may be that the man of letters is destined in this to give a lead to the rest of the community.

P.M. Your literary critic, I see, has an exalted function, and I see the point of your theory that sound

canons of literary judgement, once discovered and applied, will go far to remove the evils of our national life — which, goodness knows, need some remedy since this wretched depression settled on us.

Poet. I do not think we shall have a healthy national literature till we have a healthy school of criticism, facing these problems in honesty and sympathy, and evolving some such canons as we have suggested. And I believe that if we had discovered a sound critical basis for our literature, we might not have so far to seek for the critical basis we require for our national life. It would at least clear the air of some of the muddle-headed conceit which seems to be our chief national characteristic in the eyes of the world.

P.M. I am with you entirely. I don't see why we don't do something about it. Couldn't we collect a group of clever and learned persons and set them to work at this problem, not letting them rest day or night till they have discovered and propounded to us these universal-national standards which we require?

Poet. Don't be in too much of a hurry, my friend. You may find you have taken on a harder job than you think. For it is one thing to decide that we must have standards, and quite another to determine precisely where they lie and to expound them in a form capable of definite application. That we must work on these lines I am sure. Whether or not we shall reach a positive solution for immediate application to the diseases of the world is another and, to my mind, less important question. But I must be off, or I shall miss the last boat.

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