

The Reviewer.

"Irresponsible, indolent——"—TENNYSON.

THE conventions of society are not so stupid as we sometimes imagine. To be properly introduced, for instance, seems a cumbrous ceremony till, on occasion, we are compelled to perform it for ourselves, without the intervention of a third person. Awkward as this self-imposed duty is in ordinary intercourse, it is ten times worse, when it has to be done in print. The charming manners of "Mr. Spectator" are equal to the task, and he presents himself at length and with unequalled grace, to the wits and beaux and well-regulated families of Queen Anne. No one can regret that he took a whole essay for the purpose. But for less gifted persons, the safest rule is to get it over as soon as possible. I do not flatter myself that the readers of THE WEEK care to know whether I am a black or a fair man; but it seems right to premise that I am a Canadian, and warmly interested in whatever concerns the intellectual life of our country. These are my chief credentials. It is only necessary to add that this is not my first appearance under this device, and that for the present I ride with my visor down.

There is room for criticism in Canadian journalism. At present, but one of our writers seriously attempts it; that urbane and clear-sighted "Observer," who also puts in an appearance every week. "At Dodsley's." Others, with every qualification for the office of literary censor, began the good work, but for some unfortunate reason have now held their hands. The world prefers the personal judgment with the man behind it, to the more splendid and ornate deliverance, lacking the man. To the one it will always listen, to the other it is always rather deaf. And the world is no fool; without real worth it is impossible to gain and keep its ear. The secret is the human touch. We are lonely creatures, we men and women. Apart we are helpless; we move in a great darkness, and we like to know that our fellows are not far from us. It is reassuring to feel that even behind the printed column there is not merely steam and much machinery, but another being like ourselves. This explains the unceasing interest in biography and all its branches; from the confessions of St. Augustine to the *causeries* of Sainte Beuve. This latter development of the eighteenth century essay, we have everywhere in English, though we have as yet fitted it with no name. It may be described as taking your reader by the buttonhole, instead of talking to him *de haut en bas* from the pulpit, or the platform, or the professor's chair. But there is no compulsion; the reader himself forms the nexus. To try and reckon up those who deal in it would be useless. Almost every journal of standing has its *causerie* in some form or other. And this explains why the Lord of the Blue Pencil, for lack of a better, has given me leave to speak my mind in this place.

What is the function of the Canadian critic at the present time? This raw, commercial democracy, entirely without inherited culture, has produced not a little good writing, of which the most striking characteristic is subtle, almost over-delicate refinement. Other literary output there is of a very different character; verse that will not scan, prose that will not parse. Should the critic leave the tares among the wheat? Should he attempt to divide the sheep from the goats? One answer is: "Leave them alone." But this springs from the two mistaken notions; that critic and author are natural enemies, and that criticism itself is under the bar sinister, as who should say the illegitimate sister of authorship. A portly anthology of picturesque and varied abuse, bestowed on the professors of the gay science, could be easily compiled from the writing of the last two centuries, based on these fundamental errors. But the critic is the author's best friend. Criticism is authorship. The great gild of which Arnold and Lowell are the latest masters, needs no apology. Even the rawest apprentice feels the honour of being indented in it. Granted the necessary equipment and honest purpose, what is the critic but a cultivated person who gives his opinion on a work of art, when required, without fear or favour. For his opinion is not thrust on the world, unasked. The author, or his publisher for him, asks: "What do you think of this?" and he gets his answer according to the time, competence, and honesty of

his own elected judge. No author is bound to accept such decisions as final. Occasionally one cancels another in a bewildering fashion. But usually there is a remarkable agreement in praise or blame. Critics are simply the advance-guard of public opinion. By virtue of his office, the Canadian critic must have knowledge and honesty; but next to these his special duty at the present time is to speak out.

There are two reasons just now for especially plain speech. The first is that we have stuftified ourselves by our habit of crying up literary shoddy and rubbish as good ware. All our native geese are swans. We seem to think that every Canadian who writes a book deserves a statue for the achievement. As a consequence, our literary criticism is a dead level of meaningless praise. There is no relief, no contrast, no light and shade. Who has not read eulogy of our bards, which could not, without modification, be applied to Burns or Shelley? The motive power is, in some cases, good nature; in others, pure ignorance. The net result is that Canadian literary judgment is a laughing stock; and "Canadian literature" is hardly discussed outside of *Grip*. In the second place, this indiscriminate praise harms the very men who most need appreciation and encouragement. Within the last fifteen years some half dozen Canadians have written books which deserved recognition, and got it. Why? Because they were Canadian critics with sufficient insight to first discern the rising stars? Because we had a critical authority, like the *Athenaeum*, whose decisions carried weight with the public? Not at all. But because American and English critics, whose opinions were entitled to respect, gave them their warm approval. It is notorious that no sane Canadian will publish a Canadian book, and that a Canadian book is the last thing a Canadian thinks of buying. The market is limited, no doubt. But the chief fault lies at the door of the critic. He has belauded the home-made book till the worshipful public, tired of being gulled, has lapsed into blank scepticism as far as Canadian literature is concerned, and has definitely refused to support it.

The remedy is not in a return to the methods of Gifford and other literary scalp-hunters, but in freedom and a sense of proportion. Doubtless it is to a man's credit that he knows enough to tag verses when he might not have learned his letters. But he does not on that account deserve a review, still less that ill-judged encouragement which turns a good mechanic into a conceited, local "genius." It is not necessary to tomahawk him. Leave him severely alone. Canada needs a Lessing, a man who will not be afraid to say what he thinks, a man who will measure all work by a single standard, the unchanging standard of the beautiful and the true. To say that our work should be tested by no other, sounds the flattest of platitudes. But it must be said. Too long we have been satisfied with a local, a provincial standard. Instead of asking "How would this read to an Arnold or a Lowell," we have said, "This is very fair, indeed, for the tenth concession," or, "What more could be demanded of an undergraduate?" or, "Who would think that a schoolmaster would have so much literature?" Now, a book that is good only in Toronto or Montreal is not a book. Unless it would be good in London or Paris or New York it does not deserve the name. In the next place, if it is possible to submit the Canadian book to the universal canons of taste—that is, if the book is worth considering—the best service the critic can render both author and public is to mingle with judicious praise, judicious censure of its faults and shortcomings, provided there should be any. This can be done easier in Canada than anywhere else. Our *so-genannte* literature is a family affair. Cliques and politics do not enter into the problem. And surely we can be candid among ourselves without anyone taking offence. Free discussion on the firm basis of knowledge would be a boon to authors and public alike. It might make a stir. Some mutual admiration societies (in which one may constitute a quorum) might be dissolved, some people might not take themselves quite so seriously, but attention would, in the end be focussed on the writers and works of real and permanent value.

Holding these views firmly though I do, I still do not aspire to direct the heavy artillery of criticism. But sometimes a line of skirmishers can hold a good position, till the guns come up; and a single sharp-shooter deploying by