



ON CRITICISM

The mission of the critic is to help people to improve. The aim of criticism is to increase efficiency. Too often criticism is confused with cynicism, and is supposed to be mere fault-finding and grumbling.

The critic should be the physician who diagnoses the trouble and indicates the remedy. The doctor, however, does not walk up to the man in the street, inform him that he is obviously suffering from certain disorders, and prescribe suitable treatment. His advice is too precious to be given away for nothing. It is worth money, because **he knows**.

Paradoxical as it may sound, gratuitous criticism is not always received gratefully, and this is not altogether surprising. It is natural to resent the so-called criticism of the inexperienced, of those who have not sufficient grasp of the subject to judge of the quality of the performance. The attitude of the would-be critic is sometimes that of the Pharisee: he thanks the Lord that he knows so much and is not as other men whose ignorance he pities and condemns.

To be of real use, criticism must be sympathetic: he who speaks should have struggled with difficulties himself and, having climbed a little higher on the rugged path, should stretch out a hand to aid and raise his fellow traveller. His duty is to encourage, not to depress; to heal, not to wound. Ability to criticize involves experience, discrimination, comparison and tact. Criticism must be candid if it is to be serviceable. Indiscriminate praise is mischievous,

but praise should be given where it is due. On the other hand, imperfections must not be glossed over. The first step towards improvement is to know one's faults, and no human being should feel aggrieved if it is suggested that he or she is not absolutely flawless. If a patient informed a doctor that he was suffering from a sore throat, he would be rather annoyed if he were told that his throat was not sore at all, but in a very healthy condition.

Yet when a singer (sometimes honestly) asserts that she sang something **dreadfully**, her friends hasten to assure her that she is quite mistaken and that, on the contrary, she did splendidly. And probably she would feel hurt if they agreed with her statement. She might be like the penitent lady who went for consolation to John Wesley telling him that she felt the burden of her sins, but who, when he agreed that she was no doubt a great sinner, flew into a passion of indignation.

The pointing out of some weakness in execution is sometimes met with the retort, "Could you do it any better yourself?" This reveals an untrue conception of the function of the critic which is to know, not to perform. A cripple might criticize dancing, and a dumb man might criticize singing, if they had the requisite knowledge. But that is the point. When may a man assume that he possesses that knowledge? Probably it is really wiser not to offer criticism until it is sought, though when the desire truly is to help, it is often hard to keep silence.