

## CRITICAL JOTTINGS.

Criticism is the exercise of judgment, and every act of the mind may be said to be an act of judgment. The word criticism seems, however, to be limited generally to that of literature and art. It is doubtful whether criticism has attained to the dignity of a science; the reason for this is said to be that the "good effected by criticism is small, the evil incalculable."

Sir Walter Scott called critics "caterpillars"; Washington Irving named them "free-booters"; Ben Jonson said they were "tinkers, who made more faults than they mended,"—so that it is apparent that critics have not been looked upon with favour by authors. This has been no doubt caused by the carping, unfriendly mode of criticism indulged in, also by the rude personal attacks which, though ruled out of present decent literature, still come in and give an unpleasant variety to the world of letters. Byron retaliated upon his critics in masterly, though very ungentlemanly lines, their envious darts of criticism; but the ordinary *litterateur* is unable to do this, for very evident reasons. There is a great temptation on the part of the critic to make an unfair remark of sarcastic import, or to write a stinging personal phrase at the expense of the author, in order to increase his own reputation. Notice how Beaconsfield, in his parliamentary speeches especially, has enhanced his reputation with a great many persons by his faculty for inventing epigrammatic terms of withering scorn and ridicule. There is great need of a critic divesting himself of this habit as soon as possible, as it is not politic, to say the least, to run the risk of making enemies, or of losing friends. Nothing is more exasperating to an author than to see his name coupled with a term of jeering ridicule. It surely cannot be the intention of the critic to attempt to convince an author or writer by this mode of attack. When a man's self-love or vanity is hurt, he will not listen with a good grace nor a willing ear to any arguments of his critic.

The plea urged by the critics is, that the public must not be deceived. This is very proper, but leaves out of consideration the important fact that there is a very great possibility—in many cases, a certainty—of the critics themselves being mistaken in their opinions. Like some religious people, they arrogate to themselves the doctrine of infallibility, forgetting for the nonce that as *ex nihilo nihil fit*, so from fallibility can not come infallibility. When the motive of the critic is unfriendliness there is nothing to alleviate the injury; it is an injury needlessly to wound even the vanity of another. Many an author's career has been embittered by unjust criticism, whilst the readers of it have looked upon the critic as an exceedingly bright fellow. Is not a man's self-love his own property, and why should it be attacked, even if he has an excess of it,—that is to say, attacked in an unkind and rude manner?

The evident failure of criticism to be recorded as a science may be seen in the number of editions of Shakspeare that we have, one critic even devoting his time and talents in endeavouring to discover how some folios were stained with gravy spots, thus showing that criticism fails to be regarded as a science, for the reason that we have no standards or measures of excellence in it, or rather that each critic sets up a standard for himself. The criticism of facts, say history, is in effect history itself, but the criticism of imaginative subjects is one to which it is difficult to apply a standard.

In poetry, for example, no particular age can lay claim to a monopoly, and consequently any preconceived ideas or despotism of taste which seek, or have sought, to establish rules of universal authority must be of little use. Poetry, as the power of *making* or creating what is sublime or beautiful, is an attribute even of savages. Now a man, in order to appreciate or criticise this wild and weird composition, must divest himself of his modern habits of thought and adapt them to the circumstances under which it has been composed. It is evident that critics will not succeed in doing this to the same degree. Internal excellence is the test, and if we find that the thoughts and spirit of the poetry spring from the root of human nature, it is true poetry, no matter how uncouth or unmusical the words may be. In art the same rule applies: "The Grecian executed what it proposed in the utmost perfection, but the modern can only do justice to its endeavours after what is infinite by approximation; and from a certain appearance of imperfection is in danger of not being duly appreciated."

To come to more modern times, any attempt at criticism of the paintings of Raphael, for example, can only be made by those who spurn the conventionalities of the day, and rise to an appreciation of the *feeling* expressed in these paintings. There is no doubt that Raphael and others were inspired with religious feeling and devotion: it is stamped upon their works. Had they not loved the Madonna they could not have painted her so sweetly or so exquisitely. In our own day painting is so universal that one is apt to think that modern pictures ought to equal those of the Old Masters. The reason why this is not the case is, perhaps, that the artistic soul is not at present stirred or influenced by the deep, mysterious, clinging faith of the Middle Ages. The present age is, perhaps, too intellectual for the expression of deep feeling, and confines itself to mechanical imitations or curious groupings of colour.

Many people give it as their opinion that they cannot "see anything" in these paintings of the Old Masters, and that it is merely a corrupt fashion

of æsthetics to admire them. Their opinions or tastes are to be respected; but may it not be that they have not released their minds from modern habits of thought, or that they are not capable of appreciating *feeling* expressed in this way? Again, it is urged that even acknowledged critics differ as to the precise meaning of certain expressions of feature or of modes of colouring. This arises from the want of a standard of excellence, or else it is the fault of the critics themselves, who seem to think (some of them at least) that the whole art of criticism consists in finding errors or flaws. To understand or appreciate some works of art it is necessary, perhaps, that we should be artistically educated, and be of course in a position to compare them with others, though an intuitive perception of true beauty in art may be given to some mortals by Providence, yet even this requires a certain development by education—in like manner, the musical ear. If a work of art is expressive, *suggestive*, or influences the sensations to an appreciative degree, it surely is of artistic merit.

There have been lately some letters written denying that certain paintings at the Academy of Art in Montreal were originals; this ought to be considered of minor importance. The question should first have been as to their merit; if not meritorious, the exhibition of them is a matter of small moment to the general public. Even if originals are not meritorious, they are only valuable as showing the early efforts or the declining powers of the artists, and are of interest only to the art-student perhaps.

The most satisfactory mode of examining a picture gallery by one unacquainted with *technique*, *chiaro oscuro*, &c., is to jot down the numbers of the pictures which appear to him the most pleasing or sublime, and then to compare notes with the catalogue, otherwise one is sure to be biassed by the reputation of the artist.

Hiram B. Stephens.

## CONTRARIETIES OF MEDICINE.

There is not a person now in the downhill of life but who must recollect when the principles now in the ascendant were dominant once before. Half a century ago, say in 1825, a starving system of diet was in fashion and was vaunted a great secret of preserving and restoring health. "Live on sixpence a day and earn it," was a maxim in universal favour, thought to be potent against the most violent or the most insidious forms of disease. Anon it was discovered that the whole community was being wasted by abstinence, and the cure of all disease involved a generous—nay, a very high, diet; and it was explained to us that we were all starving ourselves. We have now reverted again to the starving system. The lancet, which was in such universal use in the last century, has not yet been re-introduced; but there is no sort of security that it will not reappear as soon as its former reign may be sufficiently forgotten to allow it to come back as a novelty. For fashion, not science, rules everything in medicine. One lucky man with a good name starts, away on a tack which is oblique to the prevailing mode. His good fortune is noised abroad and the whole pack follows him, shouting his cries and reciting his maxims, until another bold and lucky innovator is able to turn the current once more and lead off on a new course. Is this a hard judgment on the profession? we think not. But let us consider one of the practices to which we have alluded, and ascertain how it may support or contradict the criticism that we have ventured to pass. Blood-letting, which was a universal practice a century ago, and is altogether discountenanced now, must have been either right or wrong. If it was right, then the whole profession is to-day following like a flock of sheep an erroneous and vicious fashion. If it is wrong, still, while it was in the fashion, all followed it without hesitation. If it had only been an accidental error in the career of true science some able and honest men would have lifted up their voice against it. The faculty would have been divided, and truth would at last have prevailed. But there is not the least reason to suppose that, until the fashion had pretty nearly worn itself out, anyone doubted the efficacy of blood-letting. All went for it as unanimously as all now oppose it. Nobody was against it then; nobody is for it now. This looks much more like ignorance guided by fashion than like science for solid truth. We are aware that the opinion which we have ventured to express has been met by an explanation intended to vindicate the purely scientific practice of medical men in the last century and in this. "Mankind are not the same now," says the apologist, "as they were a hundred years ago. Copious bleeding on almost all occasions was the right thing for constitutions of that day; but modern constitutions require a totally different treatment. Blood-letting was salutary then, but it is decidedly destructive now." This generation is expected, then, to believe that habitually and copiously to deplete their veins was good for mankind seventy years ago, but that in the present day it is undesirable to deprive a human being of a drop of his blood. Be it remembered that it is not a modification of a practice that is under consideration but a total reversal of it. It might be intelligible that blood-letting is not as extensively or as profusely required as it was two or three generations ago; but that is not all the doctrine we are taught. Modern practice is, in regard to blood-letting, diametrically opposed to the practice of the eighteenth century. Does anybody believe that we are so