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REVIEWING



REVIEWING

VIRGINIA WOOLF

With a Note by LEONARD WOOLF



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IN London there are certain shop windows that always attract a crowd. The attraction is not in the finished article but in the worn-out garments that are having patches inserted in them. The crowd is watching the women at work. There they sit in the shop window putting invisible stitches into moth-eaten trousers. And this familiar sight may serve as illustration to the following paper. So our poets, playwrights and novelists sit in the shop window, doing their work under the curious eyes of reviewers. But the reviewers are not content, like the crowd in the street, to gaze in silence; they comment aloud upon the size of the holes, upon the skill of the workers, and advise the public which of the goods in the shop window is the best worth buying. The purpose of this paper is to rouse discussion as to the value of the reviewer's office—to the writer, to the public, to the reviewer and to literature. But a reservation must first be made—by “the reviewer” is meant the reviewer of imaginative

literature—poetry, drama, fiction; not the reviewer of history, politics, economics. His is a different office, and for reasons not to be discussed here he fulfils it in the main so adequately and indeed admirably that his value is not in question. Has the reviewer, then, of imaginative literature any value at the present time to the writer, to the public, to the reviewer and to literature? And, if so, what? And if not, how could his function be changed, and made profitable? Let us broach these involved and complicated questions by giving one quick glance at the history of reviewing, since it may help to define the nature of a review at the present moment.

Since the review came into existence with the newspaper, that history is a brief one. *Hamlet* was not reviewed, nor *Paradise Lost*. Criticism there was but criticism conveyed by word of mouth, by the audience in the theatre, by fellow writers in taverns and private workshops. Printed criticism came into existence, presumably in a crude and primitive form, in the seventeenth century. Certainly the eighteenth century rings with the screams and catcalls of the reviewer and his victim. But towards the end of the eighteenth century there was a change—the body of criticism then seems

to split into two parts. The critic and the reviewer divided the country between them. The critic—let Dr. Johnson represent him—dealt with the past and with principles; the reviewer took the measure of new books as they fell from the press. As the nineteenth century drew on, these functions became more and more distinct. There were the critics—Coleridge, Matthew Arnold—who took their time and their space; and there were the “irresponsible” and mostly anonymous reviewers who had less time and less space, and whose complex task it was partly to inform the public, partly to criticize the book and partly to advertise its existence.

Thus, though the reviewer in the nineteenth century has much resemblance to his living representative, there were certain important differences. One difference is shown by the author of the *Times History*, “The books reviewed were fewer, but the reviews were longer than now. . . . Even a novel might get two columns and more.”—he is referring to the middle of the nineteenth century. Those differences are very important as will be seen later. But it is worth while to pause for a moment to examine other results of the review which are first manifest then, though by no

means easy to sum up; the effect that is to say of the review upon the author's sales and upon the author's sensibility. A review had undoubtedly a great effect upon sales. Thackeray, for instance, said that the *Times*' review of *Esmond* "absolutely stopped the sale of the book." The review also had an immense though less calculable effect upon the sensibility of the author. Upon Keats the effect is notorious; also upon the sensitive Tennyson. Not only did he alter his poems at the reviewer's bidding, but actually contemplated emigration; and was thrown, according to one biographer, into such despair by the hostility of reviewers that his state of mind for a whole decade, and thus his poetry, was changed by them. But the robust and self-confident were also affected. "How can a man like Macready," Dickens demanded, "fret and fume and chafe himself for such lice of literature as these?"—the "lice" are writers in Sunday newspapers—"rotten creatures with men's forms and devils' hearts?" Yet lice as they are, when they "discharge their pigmy arrows" even Dickens with all his genius and his magnificent vitality cannot help but mind; and has to make a vow to overcome his rage and "to gain the victory by being indifferent and bidding them whistle on."

In their different ways then the great poet and the great novelist both admit the power of the nineteenth-century reviewer; and it is safe to assume that behind them stood a myriad of minor poets and minor novelists whether of the sensitive variety or of the robust who were all affected in much the same way. The way was complex; it is difficult to analyze. Tennyson and Dickens are both angry and hurt; they are also ashamed of themselves for feeling such emotions. The reviewer was a louse; his bite was contemptible; yet his bite was painful. His bite injured vanity; it injured reputation; it injured sales. Undoubtedly in the nineteenth century the reviewer was a formidable insect; he had considerable power over the author's sensibility; and upon the public taste. He could hurt the author; he could persuade the public either to buy or to refrain from buying.

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The figures being thus set in position and their functions and powers roughly outlined, it must next be asked whether what was true then is true now. At first sight there seems to be little change. All the figures are still with us—

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critic; reviewer; author; public; and in much the same relations. The critic is separate from the reviewer; the function of the reviewer is partly to sort current literature; partly to advertise the author; partly to inform the public. Nevertheless there is a change; and it is a change of the highest importance. It seems to have made itself felt in the last part of the nineteenth century. It is summed up in the words of the *Times*' historian already quoted: ". . . the tendency was for reviews to grow shorter and to be less long delayed." But there was another tendency; not only did the reviews become shorter and quicker, but they increased immeasurably in number. The result of these three tendencies was of the highest importance. It was catastrophic indeed; between them they have brought about the decline and fall of reviewing. Because they were quicker, shorter, and more numerous the value of reviews for all parties concerned has dwindled until—is it too much to say until it has disappeared? But let us consider. The people concerned are the author, the reader, and the publisher. Placing them in this order let us ask first how these tendencies have affected the author—why the review has ceased to have any value for him? Let us assume, for brevity's

sake, that the most important value of a review to the author was its effect upon him as a writer—that it gave him an expert opinion of his work and allowed him to judge roughly how far as an artist he had failed or succeeded. That has been destroyed almost entirely by the multiplicity of reviews. Now that he has sixty reviews where in the nineteenth century he had perhaps six, he finds that there is no such thing as “an opinion” of his work. Praise cancels blame; and blame praise. There are as many different opinions of his work as there are different reviewers. Soon he comes to discount both praise and blame; they are equally worthless. He values the review only for its effect upon his reputation and for its effect upon his sales.

The same cause has also lessened the value of the review to the reader. The reader asks the reviewer to tell him whether the poem or novel is good or bad in order that he may decide whether to buy it or not. Sixty reviewers at once assure him that it is a masterpiece—and worthless. The clash of completely contradictory opinions cancel each other out. The reader suspends judgment; waits for an opportunity of seeing the book himself; very probably forgets all about it, and keeps his seven and sixpence in his pocket.

The variety and diversity of opinion affect the publisher in the same way. Aware that the public no longer trusts either praise or blame, the publisher is reduced to printing both side by side: "This is . . . poetry that will be remembered in hundreds of years time . . ." "There are several passages that make me physically sick,"* to quote an actual instance; to which he adds very naturally, in his own person, "Why not read it yourself?" That question is enough by itself to show that reviewing as practised at present has failed in all its objects. Why bother to write reviews or to read them or to quote them if in the end the reader must decide the question for himself?

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If the reviewer has ceased to have any value either to the author or to the public it seems a public duty to abolish him. And, indeed, the recent failure of certain magazines consisting largely of reviews seems to show that whatever the reason, such will be his fate. But it is worth while to look at him in being—a flutter of little reviews is still attached to the great political

* *The New Statesman*, April, 1939.

dailies and weeklies—before he is swept out of existence, in order to see what he is still trying to do; why it is so difficult for him to do it; and whether perhaps there is not some element of value that ought to be preserved. Let us ask the reviewer himself to throw light upon the nature of the problem as it appears to him. Nobody is better qualified to do so than Mr. Harold Nicolson. The other day* he dealt with the duties and the difficulties of the reviewer as they appear to him. He began by saying that the reviewer, who is “something quite different from the critic,” is “hampered by the hebdomadal nature of his task,”—in other words, he has to write too often and too much. He went on to define the nature of that task. “Is he to relate every book that he reads to the eternal standards of literary excellence? Were he to do that, his reviews would be one long ululation. Is he merely to consider the library public and to tell people what it may please them to read? Were he to do that, he would be subjugating his own level of taste to a level which is not very stimulating. How does he act?” Since he cannot refer to the eternal standards of literature; since he cannot tell the library public what they would like to read—that would be

* *Daily Telegraph*, March, 1939.

“a degradation of the mind”—there is only one thing that he can do: he can hedge. “I hedge between the two extremes. I address myself to the authors of the books which I review; I want to tell them why I either like or dislike their work; and I trust that from such a dialogue the ordinary reader will derive some information.”

That is an honest statement; and its honesty is illuminating. It shows that the review has become an expression of individual opinion, given without any attempt to refer to “eternal standards” by a man who is in a hurry; who is pressed for space; who is expected to cater in that little space for many different interests; who is bothered by the knowledge that he is not fulfilling his task; who is doubtful what that task is; and who, finally, is forced to hedge. Now the public though crass is not such an ass as to invest seven and sixpence on the advice of a reviewer writing under such conditions; and the public though dull is not such a gull as to believe in the great poets, great novelists and epoch-making works that are weekly discovered under such conditions. Those are the conditions however; and there is good reason to think that they will become more drastic in the course of the next few years. The reviewer is already a

distracted tag on the tail of the political kite. Soon he will be conditioned out of existence altogether. His work will be done—in many newspapers it is already done—by a competent official armed with scissors and paste who will be called (it may be) The Gutter. The Gutter will write out a short statement of the book; extract the plot (if it is a novel); choose a few verses (if it is a poem); quote a few anecdotes (if it is a biography). To this what is left of the reviewer—perhaps he will come to be known as the Taster—will fix a stamp—an asterisk to signify approval, a dagger to signify disapproval. This statement—this Gutter and Stamp production—will serve instead of the present discordant and distracted twitter. And there is no reason to think that it will serve two of the parties concerned worse than the present system. The library public will be told what it wishes to know—whether the book is the kind of book to order from the library; and the publisher will collect asterisks and daggers instead of going to the pains to copy out alternate phrases of praise and abuse in which neither he nor the public has any faith. Each perhaps will save a little time and a little money. There remain, however, two other parties to be considered—that is the author and

the reviewer. What will the Gutter and Stamp system mean to them ?

To deal first with the author—his case is the more complex, for his is the more highly developed organism. During the two centuries or so in which he has been exposed to reviewers he has undoubtedly developed what may be called a reviewer consciousness. There is present in his mind a figure who is known as "the reviewer." To Dickens he was a louse armed with pigmy arrows, having the form of a man and the heart of a devil. To Tennyson he was even more formidable. It is true that the lice are so many today and they bite so innumera- bly that the author is comparatively immune from their poison—no author now abuses reviewers as violently as Dickens or obeys them as submissively as Tennyson. Still, there are eruptions even now in the press which lead us to believe that the reviewer's fang is still poisoned. But what part is affected by his bite ?—what is the true nature of the emotion he causes ? That is a complex question ; but perhaps we can discover something that will serve as answer by submitting the author to a simple test. Take a sensitive author and place before him a hostile review. Symptoms of pain and anger rapidly develop. Next tell him that nobody save himself will read

those abusive remarks. In five or ten minutes the pain which, if the attack had been delivered in public, would have lasted a week and bred bitter rancour, is completely over. The temperature falls; indifference returns. This proves that the sensitive part is the reputation; what the victim feared was the effect of abuse upon the opinion that other people had of him. He is afraid, too, of the effect of abuse upon his purse. But the purse sensibility is in most cases far less highly developed than the reputation sensibility. As for the artist's sensibility—his own opinion of his own work—that is not touched by anything good or bad that the reviewer says about it. The reputation sensibility however is still lively; and it will thus take some time to persuade authors that the Gutter and Stamp system is as satisfactory as the present reviewing system. They will say that they have "reputations"—bladders of opinion formed by what other people think about them; and that these bladders are inflated or deflated by what is said of them in print. Still, under present conditions the time is at hand when even the author will believe that nobody thinks the better or the worse of him because he is praised or blamed in print. Soon he will come to realise that his interests—his desire for fame and money—are as

effectively catered for by the Gutter and Stamp system as by the present reviewing system.

But even when this stage is reached, the author may still have some ground for complaint. The reviewer did serve some end besides that of inflating reputations and stimulating sales. And Mr. Nicolson has put his finger on it. "I want to tell them why I either like or dislike their work." The author wants to be told why Mr. Nicolson likes or dislikes his work. This is a genuine desire. It survives the test of privacy. Shut doors and windows; pull the curtains. Ensure that no fame accrues or money; and still it is a matter of the very greatest interest to a writer to know what an honest and intelligent reader thinks about his work.

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At this point let us turn once more to the reviewer. There can be no doubt that his position at the present moment, judging both from the outspoken remarks of Mr. Nicolson and from the internal evidence of the reviews themselves, is extremely unsatisfactory. He has to write in haste and to write shortly. Most

of the books he reviews are not worth the scratch of a pen upon paper—it is futile to refer them to “eternal standards.” He knows further, as Matthew Arnold has stated, that even if the conditions were favourable, it is impossible for the living to judge the works of the living. Years, many years, according to Matthew Arnold, have to pass before it is possible to deliver an opinion that is not “only personal, but personal with passion.” And the reviewer has one week. And authors are not dead but living. And the living are friends or enemies; have wives and families; personalities and politics. The reviewer knows that he is hampered, distracted, and prejudiced. Yet knowing all this and having proof in the wild contradictions of contemporary opinion that it is so, he has to submit a perpetual succession of new books to a mind as incapable of taking a fresh impression or of making a dispassionate statement as an old piece of blotting paper on a post office counter. He has to review; for he has to live; and he has to live, since most reviewers come of the educated class, according to the standards of that class. Thus he has to write often, and he has to write much. There is, it seems, only one alleviation of the horror, that he enjoys telling authors why he likes or dislikes their books.

The one element in reviewing that is of value to the reviewer himself (independently of the money earned) is the one element that is of value to the author. The problem then is how to preserve this value—the value of the dialogue as Mr. Nicolson calls it—and to bring both parties together in a union that is profitable, to the minds and purses of both. It should not be a difficult problem to solve. The medical profession has shown the way. With some differences the medical custom might be imitated—there are many resemblances between doctor and reviewer, between patient and author. Let the reviewers then abolish themselves, or what relic remains of them, as reviewers, and resurrect themselves as doctors. Another name might be chosen—consultant, expositor or expounder; some credentials might be given, the books written rather than the examinations passed; and a list of those ready and authorized to practise made public. The writer then would submit his work to the judge of his choice; an appointment would be made; an interview arranged. In strict privacy, and with some formality—the fee, however, would be

enough to ensure that the interview did not degenerate into tea-table gossip—doctor and writer would meet; and for an hour they would consult upon the book in question. They would talk, seriously and privately. This privacy in the first place would be an immeasurable advantage to them both. The consultant could speak honestly and openly, because the fear of affecting sales and of hurting feelings would be removed. Privacy would lessen the shop window temptations—the temptation to cut a figure, to pay off scores. The consultant would have no library public to inform and consider; no reading public to impress and amuse. He could thus concentrate upon the book itself, and upon telling the author why he likes or dislikes it. The author would profit equally. An hour's private talk with a critic of his own choosing would be incalculably more valuable than the five hundred words of criticism mixed with extraneous matter that is now allotted him. He could state his case. He could point to his difficulties. He would no longer feel, as so often at present, that the critic is talking about something that he has not written. Further, he would have the advantage of coming into touch with a well-stored mind, housing other books and even other literatures, and thus

other standards; with a live human being, not with a man in a mask. Many bogeys would lose their horns. The louse would become a man. By degrees the writer's "reputation" would drop off. He would become quit of that tiresome appendage and its irritable consequences—such are a few of the obvious and indisputable advantages that privacy would ensure.

Next there is the financial question—would the profession of expositor be as profitable as the profession of reviewer? How many authors are there who would wish to have an expert opinion on their work? The answer to this is to be heard crying daily and crying loudly in any publisher's office or in any author's post bag. "Give me advice," they repeat, "give me criticism." The number of authors seeking criticism and advice genuinely, not for advertising purposes but because their need is acute, is an abundant proof of the demand. But would they pay the doctor's fee of three guineas? When they discovered, as certainly they would, how much more an hour of talk holds, even if it costs three guineas, than the hurried letter which they now extort from the harassed publisher's reader, or the five hundred words which is all they can count on from the distracted reviewer, even

the indigent would think it an investment worth making. Nor is it only the young and needy who seek advice. The art of writing is difficult; at every stage the opinion of an impersonal and disinterested critic would be of the highest value. Who would not spout the family tea pot in order to talk with Keats for an hour about poetry, or with Jane Austen about the art of fiction?

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There remains finally the most important, but the most difficult of all these questions—what effect would the abolition of the reviewer have upon literature? Some reasons for thinking that the smashing of the shop window would make for the better health of that remote goddess have already been implied. The writer would withdraw into the darkness of the workshop; he would no longer carry on his difficult and delicate task like a trouser mender in Oxford Street, with a horde of reviewers pressing their noses to the glass and commenting to a curious crowd upon each stitch. Hence his self-consciousness would diminish and his reputation would shrivel.

No longer puffed this way and that, now elated, now depressed, he could attend to his work. That might make for better writing. Again the reviewer, who must now earn his pence by cutting shop window capers to amuse the public and to advertise his skill, would have only the book to think of and the writer's needs. That might make for better criticism.

But there might be other and more positive advantages. The Gutter and Stamp system by eliminating what now passes for literary criticism—those few words devoted to “why I like or dislike this book”—will save space. Four or five thousand words, possibly, might be saved in the course of a month or two. And an editor with that space at his disposal might not only express his respect for literature, but actually prove it. He might spend that space, even in a political daily or weekly, not upon stars and snippets, but upon unsigned and uncommercial literature—upon essays, upon criticism. There may be a Montaigne among us—a Montaigne now severed into futile slices of one thousand to fifteen hundred words weekly. Given time and space he might revive, and with him an admirable and now almost extinct form of art. Or there may be a critic among us—a Coleridge, a Matthew Arnold. He is

now frittering himself away, as Mr. Nicolson has shown, upon a miscellaneous heap of poems, plays, novels, all to be reviewed in one column by Wednesday next. Given four thousand words, even twice a year, the critic might emerge, and with him those standards, those "eternal standards," which if they are never referred to, far from being eternal cease to exist. Do we not all know that Mr. A writes better or it may be worse than Mr. B. But is that all we want to know? Is that all we ought to ask?

But to sum up, or rather to heap a little cairn of conjectures and conclusions at the end of these scattered remarks for somebody else to knock down. The review it is contended increases self-consciousness and diminishes strength. The shop window and the looking-glass inhibit and confine. By putting in their place discussion—fearless and disinterested discussion—the writer would gain in range, in depth, in power. And this change would tell eventually upon the public mind. Their favourite figure of fun, the author, that hybrid between the peacock and the ape, would be removed from their derision, and in his place would be an obscure workman doing his job in the darkness of the workshop and not unworthy of respect. A new relationship

might come into being, less petty and less personal than the old. A new interest in literature, a new respect for literature might follow. And, financial advantages apart, what a ray of light that would bring, what a ray of pure sunlight a critical and hungry public would bring into the darkness of the workshop!

NOTE

By LEONARD WOOLF

This pamphlet raises questions of considerable importance to literature, journalism, and the reading public. With many of its arguments I agree, but some of its conclusions seem to me doubtful because the meaning of certain facts has been ignored or their weight underestimated. The object of this note is to draw attention to these facts and to suggest how they may modify the conclusions.

In the eighteenth century a revolution took place in the reading public and in the economic organization of literature as a profession. Goldsmith, who lived through the revolution, has given us a clear picture of what took place and an admirable analysis of its effects. There was an enormous expansion of the reading public. Hitherto the writer had written and the publisher published for a small, cultured, literary public. The author and publisher depended economically upon a patron or

patrons, and books were luxury articles produced for a small, luxury-consuming class. The expansion of the reading public destroyed this system and substituted another. It became economically possible for the publisher to publish books for "the public"; to sell a sufficient number of copies to pay his expenses, including a living wage to the author, and make a profit for himself. This killed the patronage system and eliminated the patron. It opened the way to the cheap book, read by thousands instead of by tens. The author, if he wanted to make a living by writing, now had to write for "the public" instead of for the patron. Whether this change of system was on the whole good or bad for literature and the writer may be a subject of dispute; it is, however, to be noted that Goldsmith, who had experienced both systems and is generally considered to have produced at least one "work of art," was wholeheartedly in favour of the new. The new system inevitably produced the reviewer, just as it produced modern journalism, of which thy reviewer is only a small and particular phase. As the number of readers increased and with them the number of books and writers and publishers, two things happened: writing and publishing became highly competitive trades

or professions and a need arose of giving to the vast reading public information regarding the contents and quality of the books published so that each person would have something to go on in making his selection of the books to read out of the thousands published.

Modern journalism saw its opportunity to meet this demand for information about new books and invented reviewing and the reviewer. As the size, differentiation, and quality of the reading public has changed, so too have the number, variety, and quality of books changed. This has entailed, no doubt, a change in the number, the variety, and the quality of reviewers. But the function of the reviewer remains fundamentally the same: it is to give to readers a description of the book and an estimate of its quality in order that he may know whether or not it is the kind of book which he may want to read.

Reviewing is therefore quite distinct from literary criticism. The reviewer, unlike the critic, in 999 cases out of 1,000 has nothing to say to the author; he is talking to the reader. On the rare occasions when he finds that he is reviewing a real work of art, if he is honest and intelligent, he will have to warn his readers against the fact and descend or ascend for a

short time into the regions of true criticism. But to assume that, because of this, the art of reviewing is easy and mechanical is a complete misapprehension. I can speak with the experience of a journalist who was responsible for years for getting reviews and reviewers on a reputable paper. Reviewing is a highly skilled profession. There are incompetent and dishonest reviewers, just as there are incompetent and dishonest politicians, carpenters, and writers; but the standard of competence and honesty is as high in reviewing as in any other trade or profession of which I have had inside knowledge. It is not at all an easy thing to give a clear, intelligent and honest analysis of a novel or a book of poems. The fact that in the exceptional cases in which the book reviewed may have some claims to be a new work of art two reviewers take sometimes diametrically opposite views is really irrelevant and does not alter the fact that the vast majority of reviews do give an accurate and often interesting account of the book reviewed.

Literary magazines have failed because they have fallen between two stools. The modern reading public is not interested in literary criticism and you cannot sell it to them. The monthly or quarterly which hopes to print

literary criticism and pay is doomed to disappointment. Most of them have therefore tried to butter the bread of criticism with reviewing. But the public which wants reviewing will not pay 2s. 6d., 3s. 6d., or 5s. for it monthly or quarterly when they can get it just as good in the dailies and weeklies.

So much for the reviewer, the reading public, and the critic. One word about the writer. The writer who wants to write works of art and make a living by doing so is in a difficult position. As an artist the critic and criticism may be of immense value or interest to him. But he has no right to complain that the reviewer does not perform the function of critic for him. If he wants criticism, he should adopt the ingenious suggestion made in this pamphlet. But that will not make the reviewer unnecessary or unimportant to him. If he wants to sell his books to the great reading public and the circulating libraries, he will still need the reviewer—and that is why he will probably, like Tennyson and Dickens, continue to abuse the reviewer when the review is not favourable.

