EDITORIAL

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THE LAST ISSUE of this journal attracted more than its usual share of attention and criticism from Oxford reviewers and others.[1] Certain among them alleged that its character was changing radically, that what they once knew as the organ of free, full-blooded thought was rapidly degenerating into something mild and scholarly, too weak to create, with only strength enough to dispense criticism, to pass unsolicited judgements. They also implied that this was due to deliberate policy, which was bound ultimately to lead to suicide.

We are, of course, under no kind of obligation to take notice of charges of this sort, or to be provoked by them into formal statements of policy. But, on the other hand, we see no reason why we should not at once declare that no one is, or has ever occupied himself, with the task of taming the *Outlook*, or trimming its wings, or forcing it out of its natural element of poetry and free creative prose, where it felt at ease and happy, into the procrustean bed of sophisticated criticism, where it lies cramped and miserable, since its life-blood is ebbing and leaving the body pale and pedantic.

How this could be effected, we do not pretend to know; anyway, no one is doing it now, so that if there [562] be any truth whatever in these charges, and there still may be, it would point to the existence of a definite state of mind, preceded by a change of heart, among the literary classes of Oxford, which it should be interesting to diagnose. For this journal reflects, and must always have reflected, the prevailing literary mood of the moment, since it was founded, and exists, with a single aim of giving those who are responsible for such moods, for there being any sort of literary

[1] We put the case more extremely, perhaps, than any one of them did, for they were mostly courteous, but we allow ourselves to read between the lines.

activity at all, an opportunity of showing their quality to the interested. Hence it is no longer pointless to investigate what precise degree of truth these charges contain. This is our sole justification for raising the matter at all; for ourselves, we need no defence.

The intrusion of criticism

When our critics speak in terms of 'creative' and 'critical', they do, as it happens, somewhat misuse these words. 'Creative criticism' is, after all, a perfectly plain and significant expression, with a very definite meaning, but since we think that we understand what they mean, this inaccuracy is here perhaps harmless. They seem to mean, by 'creative' writing, the poem and short story, and by 'critical', the essay. The former, they complain, is being ruthlessly ousted by the latter, a tragic state of affairs, since it means that there is a growing tyranny of the intellect over the ardent but fettered imagination.

The evidence which supports this is the fact that, five or six years ago, those who wrote for this journal did fill it entirely or almost entirely with poems and short stories, to the complete exclusion of critical prose; and that, since their time, the essay, rather than the poem or the short story, has become the typical and permanent element of the *Outlook*. Poetry, as [563] even they admit, has no sense of its own wrongs to labour under, since it occupies no less space now than it did in its early, happy, days, when its sole companion was the short story, akin to it through a common 'creativeness' from which both claim to have sprung. Its complaint is for the wrongs which this relation of hers was made to suffer by the intrusion of what was to it a foreign element, consisting in the critical essay, which encroached on its domain and established itself there permanently; which was effrontery on its part, and heightened by its eager and contented air of something which had returned to its native soil. None of this can be refuted, for it is largely true.

What, then, had happened in the minds or hearts of the intelligent to work this change of attitude, to make them abandon their former conviction, and develop interest in criticism? It may be that what happened was this: the phase out of which they emerged occurred during the luxuriant period of immense, one-sided literary activity, during which the output of short stories far

exceeded that of any other matter, and was in fact grotesquely high. Although the standard of these was, as a general rule, low enough, their quantity and their vigour showed that they were born of a widespread and violent desire for self-expression which rarely met with adequate command of literary form, but, since it was red-hot and could not stop to wait, dispensed with form, and poured itself out anyhow, in a crude, promiscuous mass, all in an enthusiastic atmosphere of over-production. In a few years the romantic impulse – for such it essentially was – had spent itself and was followed by cooler times, not wholly comfortable about their immediate past, but determined anyhow to scrutinise themselves and it, and estimate the worth of both. Hence all the self-criticism and introspection [564] which followed, and, consequent upon them, meagreness of production, and a shyness of any prose form but the essay, because ideas can seem impersonal, and not to concern your own hesitating and unsure self, but may appear to deal with objective certainties which are firmly and safely grounded, and to which it is pleasant to escape from your own unsatisfactory waverings.

There is a certain continuity about literary tradition in Oxford, and the tranquility which followed the storm and stress communicated itself to those who stood in no direct connection with the past. And it is clearly better than those who were genuinely affected by the prevailing mood of contemplation and analysis, devoted themselves to criticism, studied the art of discrimination, and endeavoured to perfect that, instead of continuing to ape the existent literary genres and writing lifeless exercises in imitation of those works of talent in which the imaginative succeed in genuinely finding themselves. Indulgence in criticism would at least tell these authors whether what seemed full of attractive potentialities, while it was shapeless and inarticulate inside them, would not, as soon as expressed, turn out to be a web of valueless platitudes. Which in either case results in an intelligent state of mind. All these processes faithfully impressed themselves on the pages of the *Oxford Outlook*, which forms the sole vehicle of the tradition.

So far, therefore, from joining in the lament over the death of the creative spirit, we wish to celebrate the wisdom and integrity exhibited by the more serious writers in Oxford in not falsifying and torturing their feeling into spurious shapes of poetry or

fiction, when in fact they felt that they had only intellectual reactions to record. In so far, then, as the essay is an expression of intelligent processes of the mind, [565] it maintains itself alongside the other intellectual activities, which, for no reason, are credited with more creativeness. And when the essay is written with more sincerity and more ability than the short story, it will claim and obtain precedence over it.

We add that this is to be taken neither as a statement of policy, nor as the reply to critics, nor, in any sense, as an apologia.

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