

Fernando Pessoa

## Uselessness of criticism

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That good work always comes to the fore is a worthless affirmation if it apply to really good work and by “coming to the fore” it refer to acceptance in its own time. That good work always comes to the fore on the course of its futurity, is true; that second rate good work always comes to the fore in its own age, is also true.

For how is a critic to judge? What are the qualities that make, not the casual, but the competent critic? A knowledge of past art or literature, a taste refined by that knowledge, and an impartial and judicious spirit. Anything less than that is fatal to the true play of the critical faculties. Anything more than that is already creative spirit, and therefore individuality; and individuality means self-centredness, and a certain imperviousness to the work of others.

How competent, however, is the competent critic? Let us suppose a deeply original work of art comes before his eyes. How does he judge it? By comparison with the works of art of the past. If it be original, however, it will depart in something — and the more original the more it will depart — from the works of art of the past. In so far as it does this, it will seem not to conform to the aesthetic canon which the critic finds established in his mind. And if its originality, instead of lying in a departure from those old standards, lie in a use of them on more severely constructive lines — as Milton used the ancients — will the critic take that bettering to be a bettering, or the use of those standards to be an imitation? Will he rather see the builder than the user of the building materials? Why should he rather do one thing than the better one? Of all elements, constructiveness is the most difficult to determine in a work. . . A fusion of past elements: will the critic see the fusion of the elements?

Does anyone persuade himself that if *Paradise Lost* were published to-day, or Hamlet, or Shakespeare’s or Milton’s Sonnets, they would be rated above Mr. Kipling’s poetry, or Mr. Noye’s, or that of any other similarly quotidian gentleman? If anyone persuades himself of that, he is a fool. The expression is short [?], not sweet, but it is meant only to be true.

On every side we hear the cry that the age needs a great poet. The central hollowness of all modern achievement is a thing rather felt than spoken about. If the great poet were to appear, who would be there to notice him? Who can say whether he has not already appeared? The reading public sees in the papers notices of the work of those men whose influence and friendships have made them known, or whose secondariness has made them accepted of the crowd. The great poet may have appeared already; his work will have been noticed in a few "vient-de-parâître" words in some bibliographic summary of a critical paper.

s. d.

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