

AESTHETIC CRITICISM IN CANADA: ITS AIMS, METHODS AND STATUS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649227648

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Cover @ 2017

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**AESTHETIC CRITICISM
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Univ. of
California

Aesthetic Criticism in Canada: Its Aims, Methods and Status

Being a Short Propaedeutic to the Appreciation of
the Fine Arts and the Writing of Criticism, on
Literature, Painting and Dramatic and Musical
: : : Performances : : :

By

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**MCCLELLAND, GOODCHILD & STEWART
PUBLISHERS : : : TORONTO**

TO
NEWTON MACTAVISH,
ILLUMINATING CRITIC OF THE GRAPHIC ARTS,
A. CURTIS WILLIAMSON, R.C.A.,
MASTER PAINTER,
AND
R. H. HATHAWAY,
LOVER OF THE LITERARY ARTS AND CONNOISSEUR:
THREE LOYAL FRIENDS WHO HAVE DONE MUCH
TO PROMOTE AESTHETIC CULTURE IN CANADA
AND FROM WHOM I HAVE LEARNED
MORE THAN I CAN RETURN.



PREFACE

THE following essay is addressed primarily, if not wholly, to my compatriots, to the cultured amongst the Canadian people. It is an essay as much in social psychology as in criticism, since it discloses, for the first time, or in a new way for the first time, certain facts in the aesthetic genius and history of the Canadian people. But as an essay it is not in itself a venture in *belles-lettres*. For it aims wholly to be pedagogic and pragmatic: namely, to recall to the consciousness of the people of this young country, Canada, the importance and need of aesthetic criticism, to orientate some of the relations obtaining between criticism and the development of the fine arts, and to signalize the method of criticism that, at the current stage of Canadian civilization, will best promote aesthetic culture and the distribution of aesthetic standards amongst the people of the Dominion. In short, the essay aims to give to a people notably intolerant of foreign criticism of their civilization and culture a *new method of self-criticism*, with which they may, on their own initiative, coolly and sanely reflect on the status and tendencies of their culture, and, thus seeing themselves as others see them, reasonably and cheerfully turn to observe right standards of aesthetic appreciation and to democratize good taste in all the fine arts.

The best way to invite my compatriots to conduct this free examination of their aesthetic civilization and culture was, it seemed to me, to write the following brief essay in *criticism of criticism* in Canada. Such an essay, I felt, would perform a double service. First, it would cause Canadian critics themselves to consider how loyally they were employing their own function, and, if need be, to correct their aims and methods. Secondly, it would encourage Canadians who sincerely wish to enhance their powers of aesthetic appreciation or to refine their taste, to read native criticism with respect and grateful acceptance of its appraisals, comments, and recommendations.

PREFACE

The essay, therefore, is to be regarded as a summary pro-paedeutic solely to Constructive Criticism in Canada.

What is Constructive Criticism? Essays in appreciations of literature, painting, sculpture, music, and other arts and crafts are criticism; but they are not—at least not necessarily—constructive criticism. They are self-contained, an end-in-themselves, written to give aesthetic delight, enjoyed for their own sake. Such criticism is itself fine art, *belles-lettres*. Constructive criticism, on the other hand, is an applied science, or a craft rather than an art. It has a threefold aim. Objectively, it discloses what is good or bad, better or worse (and sometimes what is right or wrong) in a work of literary, graphic, plastic, or tonal art. It does not, however, disclose these merely for their own sake, but rather as a *discovery* of some *new* way in which the art of an author, painter, sculptor, or composer may be appraised and appreciated. Subjectively, constructive criticism aims, first, to purge taste, and, secondly, to increase the range and power of aesthetic appreciations. Constructive Criticism, then, must not be conceived as the opposite of Destructive Criticism, but rather as fresh, novel, and striking discoveries of the virtues and shortcomings in a work of art—for the extrinsic purposes of purging taste and of enlarging the scope and power of aesthetic appreciations. The following essay is, in that sense and intention, an essay in Constructive Criticism as distinguished from Interpretive Criticism.

April, 1917.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "J. G. Lafan". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the date.

Aesthetic Criticism in Canada

I.—INTRODUCTION

THE aesthetic taste, appreciations, and standards of a people, in order that these may be kept genuine, refined, dignified, spiritually sustaining or elevating, always need, as it were, careful "mothering." All the more does this necessity obtain in a young country, as, for instance, Canada, where civilization naturally is somewhat inchoate, and where, therefore, aesthetic taste and standards inevitably are, in general and for the most part, ill-begotten in form, vulgar in manifestation, and ephemeral or trivial in value.

To criticism belongs the function of "mothering" a people's taste and standards in literature and in the graphic, plastic, and tonal arts. In an old country, as in England or in France, the exercise of this function must be Athenian, rather than Spartan, in method and aim. That is to say: in a country which has long possessed established standards of genuine taste and of fine artistry, criticism itself must be aesthetic—polite (in the French sense), disinterested, humane, engaging with a sweet reasonableness, and delightful in itself. This is the justification and value of all essays in pure criticism and *belles-lettres*, as, for instance, the essays of Saint Beuve, Arnold, Brunetière, Pater, Arthur Symonds, Gilbert Chesterton, and James Huneker: these essays themselves are literature; they have intrinsic aesthetic charm; and, irrespective of mere truth of point or contention, make delectable reading. In a young country, such as Canada, the "mothering" of aesthetic taste and standards must be Spartan, rather than Athenian, in method and aim. That is to say: in a country where the people are, perforce, primarily concerned with material possessions, and only secondarily with spiritual goods, criticism must be rigorously pragmatic and pedagogic: while, in the first place, it declares this or that to be a bad or a good performance in literature, painting, drama, or music, it must also, in the second place, be constructive by a reasonable justification, according to established standards, of a piece of criticism, and

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thus hold up the ideal and point the better way both to the artistic craftsman and to the public.

Now, it should be obvious that in a country having a relatively inchoate civilization, criticism, though sincere, will be "young-eyed"—that it will be pragmatic, settle right down to the business of speaking its mind, without having clear, philosophical vision of its proper function and methods, and of the hierarchy of values according to which it justly may declare the work of a given poet, novelist, dramatist, painter, musical composer, or other artist to be good, bad, or indifferent. Further: in a young country, criticism, forgetting, as it does and will, that all things are good or bad, right or wrong, only relatively, not absolutely, will fail to observe the historic process in the evolution of civilizations, and will, therefore, tend to make a poem, novel, painting, musical composition, or other work of art appear absolutely good or absolutely bad. Praise will be high, and condemnation will be severe: criticism, even while aiming to be, and remaining, sincerely pedagogic, will not be, or will tend not to be, sane, balanced, impersonal, sympathetic and constructive. Consequently, in a young country eventually there will arise a necessity for the *criticism of criticism*.

The evolution of culture in Canada has at length caused that necessity to show its head. The time for criticism in the Dominion to become self-critical has arrived. But before this can become real and effective, there must be some sort of propaedeutic to the history, aims, methods, and status of criticism in Canada. The present essay is meant to be a brief propaedeutic to the criticism of criticism in the Dominion.