

CRITICISM

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Criticism by W. C. Brownell

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W. C. BROWNELL

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TO BRANDER MATTHEWS



CRITICISM

I

FIELD AND FUNCTION

CRITICISM itself is much criticized,— which logically establishes its title. No form of mental activity is commoner, and, where the practice of anything is all but universal, protest against it is as idle as apology for it should be superfluous. The essentially critical character of formularies alleging the inferiority to books of the books about books that Lamb preferred, finding the genesis of criticism in creative failure, and so on, should of itself demonstrate that whatever objection may be made to it in practice there can be none in theory. In which case the only

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sensible view is that its practice should be perfected rather than abandoned. However, it is probably only in — may one say? — ‘uncritical circles,’ notoriously as skeptical about logic as about criticism, that it encounters this fundamental censure. ‘Nobody here,’ Lord Morley remarked, addressing the English Association, ‘will undervalue criticism or fall into the gross blunder of regarding it as a mere parasite of creative work.’ And, indeed, it would be slighting just proportion and intellectual decorum to lay any particular stress on the aspersions of the sprightly sciolists of the studios, such as, for example, the late Mr. Whistler, and of brilliant literary adventurers, such as, for another instance, the late Lord Beaconsfield.

As a matter of fact these two rather celebrated disparagers of criticism were greatly indebted to the critical faculty,