

CRITICISM AND THE IMAGINATION OF ALTERNATIVES*

BY PHILIP RAHV

IT HAS been repeatedly observed of late that the period we are living in is far better endowed critically than creatively, and it is certainly true that in recent years we have witnessed an unprecedented rise in critical activity. Moreover, critics have become so self-conscious of what they are about as to engage in intensive examinations of their discipline, its uses and abuses, methods, assumptions, and purposes. This is all to the good, no doubt, in so far as it may bring forth a wider and keener appreciation of the true nature and proper employment of the critical medium.

Yet, for all its busyness, contemporary criticism exhibits certain features, among which is a peculiar and increasing self-sufficiency setting it apart somewhat from the literary process as a whole, that cannot but arouse misgivings. The truth is that this busyness of criticism has fallen short of bracing us intellectually or of producing those tonic qualities the want of which is so acutely felt in our literary situation. For one thing, though criticism is apparently thriving, new imaginative writing is for the most part stricken with a sluggishness of spirit quite untypical of the modern enter-

prise in letters; and this condition may well indicate a growing derangement of the normal relation between the critical and creative faculties in our literary economy. For another, criticism in this period impresses one as being controlled by rather narrow assumptions. The incentive is mainly pedagogic, with far too much concern with the quasi mysteries of "methodology" and not nearly enough release of the energy of discovery—the kind of energy which William James once identified as "the imagination of alternatives." My object in this paper is, first, to explore some of the ways in which that type of imagination might affect our ideas of criticism and, second, to inquire into some of the causes operative in our time that have exalted criticism to its present position.

TWO SUCH causal factors suggest themselves to me. One is local and the other more general in character. The local factor, which surely accounts in part at least for the present display of critical energy, arises, I think, from the migration of writers into the academy that has occurred in the past few decades. This migration is quite as much a socio-esthetic as it is a socio-economic phenomenon. It is changing some of the essentials of American literary life, and among the changes it has already enforced is a rise in the prestige of criticism. For the writer-teacher is likely to be concerned less with the social and historical background of literary creation than with its intrinsic qualities and

PHILIP RAHV, editor of *Partisan Review*, presented the accompanying discussion of literary criticism on May 24, 1956, as the annual Hopwood Lecture. Mr. Rahv is equally at home in American and European letters. He is the author of *Image and Idea: Fourteen Essays on Literary Themes* (1949), and has edited three books, *The Partisan Reader: Ten Years of Partisan Review* (1946), *The Great Short Novels of Henry James* (1944), and *Discovery of Europe: The Story of American Experiences in the Old World* (1947).

* Copyright, 1956, by the University of Michigan.

effects; he is therefore inclined to insist on the distinction between the actual merit of a work of literature and its historical importance. But this amalgamation of criticism with teaching is by no means a one-sided process. If criticism changes teaching so does teaching change criticism by providing it with a more solid institutional basis than it disposed of in the past.

Certainly the emergence of the movement known as the "new criticism" is scarcely to be understood apart from this migration of writers into the universities and the consequent clash that has ensued between old and new methods of imparting literary knowledge. Thus on one side at least the "new criticism" essentially represents an effort to redefine the relationship between literature and the academy, or, more specifically, to meet the need that has arisen to replace past methods of teaching literary texts with a more adequate method, taking full account of the critical function. Inevitably this has exposed the "new criticism" to a double attack, coming on the one hand from old-time professors of English, prone to dismiss it as mere literature, and on the other from old-time literary men who make out that it amounts to no more than "the simple annotation of classroom texts." Exaggerated as this latter charge may be, it is certainly true that the typical tone and style of the

younger generation of "new critics"—the generation, that is, whose career does not go so far back as the 1920's and whose experience of literary life is almost entirely restricted to the academy—are unmistakably those of an address to students rather than to the general reader. The devices most

favored by the younger critics in organizing material, such as the deliberately slow pace, the patient concentration on textual minutiae, the cautious progression from item to item, and, above all, the avoidance of general ideas and of the larger and more controversial issues, immediately suggest the classroom approach rather than the synoptic mode that forms the traditional resource of critical expression in its greater moments.

We would do well to distinguish between the literary character of such older writers as Eliot, Pound,

Richards, Empson, Tate, Ransom, Blackmur, Winters, Austin Warren, and Robert Penn Warren (the founding fathers, so to speak, of the "new criticism") and that of their younger disciples. The former, coming out of a different and more seminal cultural period, are all intractably their own men and possessed of richly diversified interests. It is the younger generation really who at present compose a school of "new critics" *tout court*. This school has now settled down to its tasks, and what it appears to



PHILIP RAHV

Editor of Partisan Review and Hopwood Lecturer for 1956; after a photograph by Sylvia Salmi

stand for mainly is the academic consolidation of the "revolution in poetry" which took place in the English-speaking world between 1910 and 1930 approximately and which is principally linked in our minds with the names of Eliot and Pound. The "new criticism" is thus a meaningful term historically in so far as it refers to a grouping of critics formed some decades ago, most of them also practicing poets, who were predominantly concerned with demonstrating the significance of modern poetry by reevaluating the order of English poetry as a whole. That mission has been triumphantly accomplished. But in the "new criticism" as currently expounded there is another element, and that is the traditionalist ideology taken over almost exclusively from Eliot. This element strikes one as problematical, to say the least, and for my part I cannot see that its connection with the central poetic doctrine with which it is usually combined is more than fortuitous. Traditionalism is after all but one ideology among many, and as such its degree of truth or falsity is not to be determined on literary grounds alone.

Clearly, the partnership that criticism has newly effected with teaching has influenced it in ways both positive and negative. The positive aspect is to be noted in the distinct gains that criticism has made in prestige, morale, and productivity. The negative aspect is that, in becoming overtly pedagogic, criticism runs the risk of cutting itself off from the creative writer as well as from the general reader, who not unexpectedly is seldom in a mood to go back to school. "Criticism is the very education of our imaginative life," as Henry James so handsomely defined it; in the Jamesian context, however, the word "education" must be taken in a sense more honorific than literal. Education is primarily a matter of institutional practice, while criticism has by and large functioned as a free medium of literary expression and judgment.

In a notable essay in *The Sacred Wood*

T. S. Eliot once defined what he named as "the essentially uncritical state"; and among the ways of reaching that state he singled out that of regarding literature as an institution—"accepted, that is to say, with the same gravity as the establishments of Church and State." Now this is an unfortunate state of mind which criticism in its present mood can scarcely be said to resist with sufficient force. Indeed, not a few of our critic-teachers have lately taken to celebrating the institutional aspects of literature. But the sense in which literary art can be described as an institution is at bottom no more than a paltry truism. Institutions are not only inevitable but necessary. Art too cannot escape the bonds they impose; nor would we want it to escape such bonds and attain a condition of unqualified liberty. Yet to join in solemnizing the institutional aspects of art is gratuitous at best. It is far more refreshing to attest to the fact that art has nearly always been much too restive to have acquired very reliable institutional manners and uses; that in a certain sense art is actually the great counterforce to institutions, in that it cannot without self-betrayal be ultimately reconciled to their rigidity and impersonality.

SO FAR I have touched only upon the local or national circumstances affecting the status of criticism. The other factor involved is far more general in character. I have in mind the enormous growth in self-consciousness that we have been witnessing for many years now in the practice of all artistic media, and our increasing and well-nigh irresistible inclination to achieve a rational, that is, a critical understanding of all artistic means, conventions, rules, and traditions. What this comes to, of course, is a kind of historical loss of innocence, making for an incursion of critique into the creative act itself. In an essay written soon after the last war, Ernst Robert Curtius, the outstanding German critic and scholar, spoke in glowing terms of this growing self-consciousness and ex-

pansion of the critical faculty, for in his opinion this expansion was bringing about a union of creative intuition and analytical intelligence.

We must throw off [he wrote] the superstition that poets must be simple-minded, that literary men are necessarily uneducated. . . . T. S. Eliot interests me all the more for combining critique and poetry in his own person. He reinforces my conviction . . . that in the twentieth century criticism has become a leading component of all higher spiritual and intellectual production. You ask for examples? Here they are: Gide, Proust, Valéry, Joyce, Larbaud, Ayala, Ortega. . . . All are artists of intellectualism, all makers of consciousness. The capacity to shape material into artistic form . . . has ceased to be enough.

As an account of what has actually been happening in modern literature this is accurate enough. Still, I must confess that for me that last remark of Herr Curtius', namely that the capacity to shape material into artistic form has ceased to be enough, strikes a rather portentous note. To consider intellectualism as a positive good and nothing else is manifestly one-sided. There is another side to the equation, and that is the loss of spontaneity and consequent danger of sterility which is so often the unlooked-for outcome of the victorious investment of the creative act by the spirit of critique with its painful deliberateness and rationalizing of the imaginative grasp of experience. From another point of view, that of Thomas Mann, for instance, in his novel *Doctor Faustus*, this very growth of self-consciousness and proficiency in analysis is regarded as a symptom of decadence, imperiling the artist's chances of bringing his creative powers to full realization. The protagonist of Mann's novel, the composer Adrian Leverkuehn, sells his soul to the devil precisely because he stands in need of demonic assistance if he is to break through the control of his art by reason and thus find his way back to what he calls "the old primeval enthusiasm, the divine

raptus, genuine inspiration, immediate, absolute, unquestioned, ravishing." Knowingly or not, Leverkuehn is here invoking the ancient theory of artistic creation as an act of inspiration to which consciousness has no access, the very theory which Socrates invoked when he contended that poets write poetry not by wisdom but by "a sort of genius and inspiration" that reminded him of diviners and soothsayers, who also say many fine things without understanding their meaning. It is curious to find Thomas Mann making the most of this ancient idea of art in depicting a modern predicament; and even if he may be said to have overdramatized it in his novel, his version of it will nevertheless do very well as a foil to Herr Curtius' contrary notion.

I have wanted to place the present-day workings of the critical faculty in a broad enough perspective to allow us to perceive what is at stake in its bid for influence and authority. For the more we become aware of the importance of criticism in our age, the more urgent the necessity of discriminating between the true and false alternatives open to it.

2

ONE OF the major alternatives proposed to criticism is that it convert itself into a science of literature or at any rate into a discipline rigorous enough to justify its advancement to near-scientific status. Is this a meaningful ambition presenting criticism with a viable alternative? I think not. To be sure, there is a whole array of facts about literature that can be studied in a scientific manner more or less. But such studies belong chiefly to scholarship rather than to literary criticism properly speaking. Since criticism deals more with questions of value than with questions of fact, it is unlikely that it will ever be able so to transform itself in essence as to acquire even so much of objectivity as the social

sciences lay claim to. Criticism seems inextricably bound up with issues of value, of belief and ideological conflict; and if we are not deluded by purely theoretical models of criticism but look to its actual practice in the past as in the present, we realize soon enough that the greater part of the criticism of consequence that we know is shot through and through with ideological motives and postulations that remain for the most part unanalyzed and unacknowledged.

Of course, once a given criticism has been completed in the sense of having been brought to its historical consummation, the student of it may well undertake to sort out the ideology it contains from other components that appear to him to have permanent validity. In fact, this sorting out is an activity that we pursue continually in our inspection of past criticism, and we may also attempt to cope in the same way with our contemporaries. However, this sorting out is essentially an *ex post facto* operation, performed not by the critic himself but by those coming after him; nor is there any certain method available to us insuring that such latecomers go about their task free of ideological presuppositions of their own. We may think that, for example, we have by now sorted out to our complete satisfaction Dr. Johnson's ideas concerning metaphysical poetry; yet in the future critics may conclude that our altered estimate of this poetry was not quite the act of superior critical discernment that we take it to be, but was fully as subject as Dr. Johnson's estimate was to the varying ideological pressures and provocations of the historical process. This does not necessarily mean that our judgment of metaphysical poetry will not be vindicated in the future. All it means, rather, is that the historical process may either weaken or strengthen our critical judgment, that it may work in our favor or against us; in other words, that as critics we never exer-

cise our judgment in the perfection of self-determination but within an historically conditioned framework of cultural need and response.

THE DEMAND that is being made nowadays for a radical purification of criticism implies something quite unreal, namely that the literary interest can be advantageously divorced from other interests. Mr. F. R. Leavis has very effectively hit at this notion in remarking that "one cannot seriously be interested in literature and remain purely literary in interests." This he said in the course of questioning Ezra Pound's proposal that poetic technique be studied by itself, impersonally and in splendid isolation as it were, apart, that is, from the sensibility, with its varied and manifold content, engaged in applying that technique. Pound had proposed studying "how the pouring is done," and Leavis' retort was that "how the pouring is done cannot be studied apart from the thing poured. . . . We have to speak of technique as something distinct from sensibility, but technique can be studied and judged only in terms of the sensibility it expresses. The technique not studied as the expression of a particular sensibility is an unprofitable abstraction." Surely Leavis is entirely in the right in this matter. And, indeed, if we accept the premise that criticism is ever closely attendant upon sensibility, then we must give due weight to the fact that it invariably resists the effort to systematize it and to predict its development; and there is no science without system and prediction. For that matter, sensibility also resists the effort to institutionalize it. In this respect it has an affinity with love, of which Nietzsche once said that it is the one thing in the world which cannot be institutionalized.

Criticism, I take it, is a reflexive discourse of the literary mind, and it is very much a mixed discourse besides. And

though the good critic knows that the mixing is inevitable, he is also possessed of sufficient intellectual tact and sense of relevance to know just how to mix and what to mix. Yet at the same time he is under no illusions that criticism can be subjected with any real hope of success to a strict delimitation of function and to a purge of its allegedly "extraliterary" interests. He cannot but regard any such notion as a Utopia of rationalism, growing out of the division of labor and the mania for specialization which are among the least attractive features of modern culture.

BUT IF criticism is not a science, is it proper, then, to speak of it as a literary medium? I would say that it is exactly that in the strict sense of being a department of letters. It is not an artistic medium, however, and for my purpose the distinction between a literary and an artistic medium is worth stressing. A critical essay is not a work of art but neither is it a piece of purely objective writing, entirely informative or utilitarian in character. Being involved with the objects of sensibility, criticism necessarily adopts some of its means of expression, such as style and symbolic reference.

Having brought criticism so close to some of the primary processes of literature, I am tempted to proceed even further along the same lines. Is it not possible to maintain that the function of criticism is best understood in conceiving of it as a superstructural form of literature, its generalization into consciousness, or, to put it more directly, as a form of literature about literature? It depends on literature not only for its subject matter but also for its fundamental experience, and if it deals with life, as it is often brought to do, it does so at the remove of its esthetic incarnation in the basic literary genres. I am offering this idea of criticism not as a rigorous definition or conclusive theory of it but simply as a provisional approach and

as a corrective to the fetishism of method to which the critical intelligence has lately been yielding.

The principal objection that presents itself is that in conceiving of criticism as a form of literature, even if only as a form of literature *about* literature, we are in effect abolishing its cognitive function. The critic is, after all, concerned for the most part with discovering and verifying truths about the literary process, while the creative writer is concerned with the invention and formal elaboration of fictions. To this objection the rejoinder would be that it is chiefly in the popular view that the fiction embodied in the poem, novel, or play is something wholly feigned or imagined which offers us the possibility of pleasurable identification at the price of untruth. If we reject, however, this vulgar view of the nature of the imaginative fiction, recognizing that it has a measure of cognitive value peculiar to itself and gained through its own proper means, then we can see our way clear to retaining the truths of criticism. For we can then put it that criticism has cognitive value in relation to literature to the degree, no more and no less, that literature can be said to have cognitive value in relation to life.

This conception of criticism has, to be sure, little to do with formal esthetic theorizing. It derives rather from the empirical observation of the behavior of criticism, its actual performance in the sphere of letters, and of the demeanor of the critic as a man of letters. Moreover this conception has in its favor the appeal of economy in that it reforges the unity of the literary mind, bringing its creative and critical faculties into close accord instead of disconnecting and driving them apart, as is being done nowadays by most theorists of the critical task.

To see criticism in its literary character is to realize that an exclusively valid method of work can no more be prescribed in its field than in poetry or the drama.

Not that all methods are equally good. Some are obviously more rewarding than others, but this truism hardly comes to the same thing as the idea of salvation through method—a method single, strict, all-pertinent, and alone legitimate. Though this idea may appear to resolve some of the quandaries of criticism by normalizing it, in the long run it leaves it in a worse quandary than ever. In its way this idea is in itself an admission that the imagination of alternatives has failed us, that we are prepared to embrace a narrow specialization that may perhaps satisfy our sense of professional status and enhance our pride in it but only at the expense of the living man in us. In the present literary situation what the critic needs above all is to recover the role of participant in the literary event—a role that can again belong to him if he seizes it; and if nowadays he more often than not prefers to play the part of a disengaged spectator and analyst of the literary event, the reasons for such unheroic renunciation are not to be sought in the nature of criticism per se but in other spheres altogether.

The conception of criticism as a literary medium is a difficult one to sustain. I have discussed one major objection to it. Another one, not quite so telling, is that it makes criticism into a medium that has its end within itself. Now the dominant view has been that criticism, unlike the basic literary media, has no such autonomy; only a small minority of critics have maintained that in this respect too it differs hardly at all from literature in general. Thus John Middleton Murry contends that criticism performs the same function as literature itself, that of providing the critic with a means of expression; and Remy de Gourmont speaks of criticism as a subjective literary form, a perpetual confession on the critic's part. "The critic may think," he writes, "that he is judging the work of other people, but it is himself that he is revealing and exposing to the public."

Needless to say, this is a notion I do not subscribe to. In my understanding of criticism, it is a medium first and foremost of the critic's response to literature and only indirectly, by refraction as it were, of his response to life.

It seems possible to transcend these contrary views of criticism by going beyond the particular formulations given them. May we not say that subjectively the critic cannot help but regard his work as an end in itself, for in reacting to art he is expressing his own ideas, elaborating his own meanings and in fact projecting a vision of life, even if only in an indirect and piecemeal fashion, by actively absorbing and pronouncing upon the visions of the artists that engage him? It is nevertheless true that in the economy of literature as a whole criticism is, objectively speaking, seldom an end in itself but mostly a means toward an end. What that ultimate end is we can define, after acknowledging its immediate ends of elucidating and evaluating works of art, under the double aspect of assimilation and mediation. To elucidate and evaluate a work of art is to assimilate it, and assimilation is in essence an act of mediating—mediating between art and the individual artist, between tradition and novelty, between the parts and the whole, and, in the long run, between art and life. This is culturally a function of the highest value, an indispensable one in fact; but it is in the main a function of cultural service and utility. Criticism exhausts itself in accomplishing it, which explains why it has so low a survival value in comparison with other genres of writing. It would seem as if in the very act of using criticism as liberally as we do we make and unmake it.

3

I would like to propose a distinction between types of criticism, a distinction that has little to do with the arid issues of methodology but is centered rather on the quality and import of the critic's interest

in the literary process. In my view, there are chiefly two approaches that critics follow, one being prospective and the other retrospective. An excellent though somewhat one-sided example of the prospective attitude is Wordsworth's famous *Preface*. It is an attitude that asserts itself whenever the critic conceives of literature as something actual and alive in his own time and relates himself to it by trying to affect its course of development here and now. Both Eliot and Pound had this approach in mind when they first made their influence felt, as when Pound said that criticism is at its best when it is "definitely shot at new creation, at a reinvigoration of writing." In *The Sacred Wood* Eliot put it that "the important critic is the person who is absorbed in the present problems of art, and who wishes to bring the forces of the past to bear upon the solution of these problems." What is indispensable, he argued in another essay in the same volume, is "a creative interest, a focus upon the immediate future"; and it was exactly that focus, of course, adjusted with beautiful calculation, that made for the extraordinary cogency of Eliot's reassessment of the order of English poetry.

This quality of absorption in the present problems of literary art, this sense of it as continuous and open to the incursions of the sensibility in its dynamic changes and responses to new experience, is missing in the retrospective critic, who tends to take literature as something given once and for all, secure in its pastness and unopen toward the future. Retrospective criticism may be good or bad of its kind, it may be extremely useful or nearly useless, but it is always marked by taking for granted that what matters are not the potentialities of literature but its norms. This type of criticism may be written by professors, by free-lance critics, or by literary journalists; it is the lack of a creative and intentional concern that makes it retrospective. Nor is it in the least a question of the critic's subject mat-

ter. Prospective criticism, though preoccupied with present problems, is hardly limited to contemporary literature. It may deal with the literature of the past or of the present or both. But in dealing with the past it does so with a certain intention—so well illustrated, for instance, in Eliot's essays on the Elizabethan dramatists and seventeenth-century poetry—the intention plainly being that of mobilizing the masterpieces of the past as a means of reactivating the creative imagination of its own time. Both Coleridge and Arnold shared this particular intention, if not in all then surely in a good part of their work. It is this relation to the past that makes the literary heritage come alive for us, whereas the retrospective critic makes it available to us as an object of study, of intense professional curiosity or antiquarian pleasure, but seldom as a living experience.

Of present-day criticism one might say many things but scarcely that its impact is of a prospective character. In the work of its finer representatives this criticism displays many assets, such as erudition, eloquence, virtuosity in the selecting and presenting of literary evidence, and intellectual brilliance; but it is quite clear that it is incapable of serving even in part as the motive power of new creation. It is much too self-contained and safely adjusted to its limited role to undertake the commitments that a programmatic approach to writing exacts from its partisans. As for "the forces of the past" invoked by Eliot, criticism is now marvelously aware of those forces and has no end of traffic with them, though by and large this is a one-way traffic that gets us past rather than into the present problems of art. To be sure, a plea might be entered in defence of contemporary criticism on the ground that, in the absence of a powerful new impulse among creative writers, it can be hardly expected to strike out on its own to perform a function which the history of literature shows to be more naturally and confidently performed in pe-

riods witnessing a renewal of imaginative energy and the emergence of insurgent tendencies in the national culture. It should be recalled, too, that the criticism of the generation of Eliot and Pound that might be described as "definitely shot at new creation" was produced not apart from but in conjunction with its literary practice, the sensibility and techniques of which needed, first, to be defined with precision and then justified in the light both of the rediscovery of tradition and of the revolt against it.

BUT THERE is another type of prospective criticism, in its way quite as valuable, I think, as that aimed at the immediate reinvigoration of writing, to which contemporary critics might profitably address themselves. This is the type of which Matthew Arnold gave classic definition in his essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." In that essay Arnold was of course mainly concerned with the relationship between the critical and the creative power, and in particular with the operative meaning of that relationship in uncreative periods; and it is by reason of that emphasis that the argument of Arnold's celebrated essay seems to me to bear closely upon our situation. In his view, literary talent mostly manifests itself not in the unfolding of new ideas, not in "synthesis and exposition" but in "analysis and discovery," its great faculty being that of becoming "happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, when it finds itself in them." Arnold had a far broader and more flexible notion of the relevance of ideas to the imaginative life than that prevailing in our literary world, where ideas are commonly assumed to exert a devitalizing influence on creative effort. Arnold, on the other hand, perceived that ideas, in his richly suggestive and socially viable sense of the term, composed the very element with which "the creative power works," and he held it as certain that in

modern literature especially no display of the creative power in disengagement from that element could prove to be "important or fruitful." The fine concreteness of his historical insight is shown in this last observation, no less than in his further observation that the ideas literature works with cannot be those that are accessible at any time but only those that are "current at the time," that is to say, only those which historical development has made actually and directly available to the imagination. Now the creative power, for its effective exercise, must have the requisite atmosphere, it must dispose of itself amidst an order of fructifying ideas. But this atmosphere and order are not within its control. "This is why the great epochs in literature are so rare . . . for the creation of a masterpiece two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment." It is that "moment" that the applied vigor of criticism can help to bring about through its own means of prefigurement and preparation, since, potentially at least, its aptitudes are scarcely so meager as not to be able to contribute to the making of an intellectual situation of which the creative power can avail itself.

That this account of the interaction that sometimes occurs between the critical and creative faculties is substantially correct can be demonstrated from numerous examples from literary history. It is unnecessary to go far afield into foreign literatures to illustrate this interaction. Consider, for instance, the ferment of ideas that occurred in this country in the 1830's and '40's, a ferment which can only partially be identified with Transcendentalism and the inner meaning of which is now lost on us. The point is that it is this ferment of ideas which instigated changes in the literary consciousness, without which such masterworks as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, and *Leaves of Grass* might conceivably never have been written. Or consider the seminal

influence in this century, again in Arnold's sense of establishing a new atmosphere and a new intellectual situation, of critics like Mencken, the early Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne on the one hand and the group of poetry-critics taking their cue from Eliot and Pound on the other. However much those critics differed among themselves, they were alike in the immense stimulus they provided to the national literature by striking boldly, openly, and with exhilarating success, at the forces that had long inhibited its growth.

The type of prospective criticism of which Arnold speaks in his essay is patently criticism only in the broadest sense of the term. Being educative and preparative in

intent, it is as much a criticism of the larger context of literature as of its specific texts. Still, that is no reason for belittling it; we misunderstand the critical task if we conceive of it as unvarying from age to age; the changing needs of literature are the goad of criticism. In this period we have gone so far in specificity and formalistic detachment as to neglect the wider and more vital interests of American writing. The impulse that animated this writing in the first half of the century is apparently exhausted. A fresh impulse can arise only from a new quickening of thought reaching out from the life within literature toward the greater life by which it is encompassed on all sides.

Reprinted from MICHIGAN ALUMNUS QUARTERLY REVIEW
December 8, 1956, Vol. LXIII, No. 10