

AMERICAN ANTIQUITY

VOL. II

APRIL, 1937

No. 4

EDITORIALS

CRITICAL REVIEWS . . . One of your editor's duties is that of distributing for review in the journal publications submitted for that purpose, and of considering for publication reviews that may be contributed other than by request. In the execution of this work, the editor is confronted with the question of the essential purpose of a review. Should it be a philanthropic donation to the author: a compilation of all the meritorious qualities which the reviewer can possibly contrive to find in the work, with generalized compliments thrown in for good measure, or should it be a critical evaluation thereof? If it is to serve any purpose other than that of flattering the author, the latter purpose is the only one worthy of the effort either of the writer or the reader.

A critical evaluation, I take it, involves a careful analysis of the author's facts, purposes and methods, and the reviewer's candid statement of opinions relative to the merits and demerits of the work, made on the basis of such an analysis. If, in the reviewer's opinion, the work is deserving of praise, praise is given, with specific reference to the praiseworthy factors. If, however, the reviewer feels justified, for stated reasons in questioning the facts, purposes or methods manifested in the work, he has failed in the honest performance of his task if he refrains from doing so. If this statement is in error, I invite correction.

I grant that there is a courteous method of presenting adverse criticism, a means of applying the lash with the least possible sting. So long as writers possess human sensitiveness, courteous treatment should be a prevailing rule of the reviewer; at least, discourteous treatment should be avoided without exception. In the extreme, however, an overdose of courtesy may result in so concealing the criticism under polite, pseudo-complimentary verbiage that the critical point may be entirely lost to the reader, or so subdued as to lose apparent importance. I sincerely question the merits of this over-courteous method, since it results in scientific purpose being supplanted by an emotional purpose: the preservation of personal accord at all costs. Some one

has said that when men meet together in perfect agreement, progress wanes; or words to that effect. Science is essentially critical and impersonal, and students of science are worthy of the name "scientist" only in so far as their reaction to adverse criticism remains impersonal.

It is my humble opinion that courtesy in a review should correctly apply only to the personal element (which could be entirely omitted without great loss sustained by the review), and that factual and methodological matter should be treated without gloves, in clear, concise, direct style. Thus, I should say that the statement: "To cite the author's repeated use of faulty logic, he argues in a circle (citation); he begs the question (citation); and he selects his evidence throughout, as for example (citation)," is preferable to the vague apology: "To balance the author's enviable diction and fine sense of organization, one regrets that at times his logic may be described as somewhat questionable, from a severely critical standpoint, and that certain facts presented in support of his hypothesis might lose weight if counterbalanced by other facts not considered in this work."

Some writers have peculiar ideas as to what constitutes personal criticism. To say that an author is lazy, careless or dishonest, or that he has a red nose, is personal. To cite in a report a specific example of inadequacy (possibly due to laziness), inaccuracy (possibly due to carelessness), false assumption of credit (possibly due to dishonesty) or muddled diction (possibly of common origin with a red nose) is justifiable criticism and in no sense personal, as such (assuming the parenthetical remarks to be omitted).

To be sure, there are reviewers who see in a review the opportunity to indulge in exhibitions of cleverness expressed in subtle innuendoes or scintillating displays of satire. Although these compositions may be literary gems or brilliant expositions of wit, they are essentially personal in character and have no proper place in a scientific criticism. Not only are they extraneous matter of no importance in the discussion, but inasmuch as they serve only to antagonize the author of the work reviewed, they tend to defeat the ideal purpose of the review: correction, with no avoidable injury to coöperation.

On the other hand, the author whose reaction to the sincere critical treatment of his report by a fellow student is one of emotional resentment, demonstrates not only that he is a human being, but that he is for the moment an inconsistent and shortsighted one: inconsistent in that, although a student of science, he overlooks the fact that science is essentially critical; shortsighted in that he, if he has the welfare of

his subject at heart and the intelligence to profit by the corrective influences of criticism, is the major beneficiary from any criticism that has the strength to stand, and suffers not at all from futile, insupportable attacks. An intelligent critic is a scientist's best friend.

The reader desirous of testing the quantity of glass in my house is invited to throw stones by way of the Correspondence division of this journal.

W.C.M.