THE IDEA OF A LITERARY REVIEW

By T. S. ELIOT

The existence of a literary review requires more than a word of justification. It is not enough to present a list of distinguished contributors; it is not enough to express a cordial zeal for the diffusion of good literature; it is not enough to define a 'policy'. The essential preliminary is to define the task to be attempted, and the place which may be occupied, by any literary review; to define the nature and the function. Many reviews and periodicals qualified as "literary" have proved deficient not so much by their failure to carry out their purposes as by their failure to conceive these purposes and possibilities clearly. This note, therefore, will be concerned less with the point of view of The New Criterion, compared with that of other reviews, than with the definition of the literary review in general, and the precise application of the term 'literature' in such a periodical.

There are two pairs of opposed errors, into which a "literary review" may fall. It may err by being too
comprehensive in its selection of contributors, or by being too narrow. Or it may err by including too much material and representing too many interests, which are not strictly literary, or on the other hand by sticking too closely to a narrow conception of literature. It is obvious that most literary periodicals follow one of these four deviations, which I shall call for convenience 1 (a) and (b), and 2 (a) and (b); and that it is possible for a periodical to exhibit one error out of each pair.

1 (a). The review which makes up its contents merely of what the editor considers 'good stuff' will obviously have the character of a miscellany, and no other character whatever, except the feeble reflection of the character of a feeble editor. To miscellanies which acknowledge their nature I raise no objection; there is a place for such publications, but they are not reviews. A review which depends merely on its editor's vague perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' has manifestly no critical value. A review should be an organ of documentation. That is to say, the bound volumes of a decade should represent the development of the keenest sensibility and the clearest thought of ten years. Even a single number should attempt to illustrate, within its limits, the time and the tendencies of the time. It should have a value over and above the aggregate value of the individual contributions. Its contents should exhibit heterogeneity which the intelligent reader can resolve into order. The apparent heterogeneity of the present number of The New Criterion is, therefore, not without a plan—at least an intention.

1 (b). The miscellaneous review is negative: the review which propagates the ideas of a single man, or the views and fancies of a small group, is more evidently obnoxious. In the realm of action, of political or theological controversy, a small and compact body of troops, or even a single leader, may accomplish useful work. But in the world of ideas, no individual, no small group, is ever good enough
or wise enough to deserve such licence. Of messianic literature we have sufficient.

From what has been said it should appear that the ideal literary review will depend upon a nice adjustment between editor, collaborators and occasional contributors. Such an adjustment must issue in a 'tendency' rather than a 'programme'. A programme is a fragile thing, the more dogmatic the more fragile. An editor or a collaborator may change his mind; internal discord breaks out; and there is an end to the programme or to the group. But a tendency will endure, unless editor and collaborators change not only their minds but their personalities. Editor and collaborators may freely express their individual opinions and ideas, so long as there is a residue of common tendency, in the light of which many occasional contributors, otherwise irrelevant or even antagonistic, may take their place and counteract any narrow sectarianism.

2 (a) and (b). The solution of the second dilemma—that of being either too general or too strictly 'literary'—involves a working notion of the term 'literature'. Too wide an inclusion of subject matter is a fault similar to that of indiscriminate inclusion of contributors and needs no further elucidation. The vice of making a review too narrowly literary is not so evident. On the contrary, many readers have criticised The Criterion for not being literary enough. But I have seen the birth and death of several purely literary periodicals; and I say of all of them that in isolating the concept of literature they destroy the life of literature. It is not merely that there is not enough good literature, even good second-rate literature, to fill the pages of any review; or that in a purely literary review the work of a man of genius may appear almost side by side with some miserable counterfeit of his own style. The profounder objection is the impossibility of defining the frontiers, or limiting the context of 'literature'.
Even the purest literature is alimenter from non-literary sources, and has non-literary consequences. Pure literature is a chimera of sensation; admit the vestige of an idea and it is already transformed.

We must then take the vague but quite adequate concept of literature as the beautiful expression of particular sensation and perception, general emotion and impersonal ideas, merely as the centre from which we move; and form a literary review, not merely on literature, but on what we may suppose to be the interests of any intelligent person with literary taste. We will not include irrelevant information, subjects of technical and limited interest, or subjects of current political and economic controversy. We must include besides ‘creative’ work and literary criticism, any material which should be operative on general ideas—the results of contemporary work in history, archaeology, anthropology, even of the more technical sciences when those results are of such a nature to be valuable to the man of general culture and when they can be made intelligible to him. In such a structure we must include—the statement ought to be superfluous—the work of continental writers of the same order of merit as our own; and especially the writers who ought to be known in England, rather than those whose work is already accepted here. And here again, as in the choice of authors, our catholicity must be ordered and rational, not heterogeneous and miscellaneous. Above all the literary review—which might be called a review of general ideas, except that such a designation emphasises the intellectual at the expense of the sensational and emotional elements—must protect its disinterestedness, must avoid the temptation ever to appeal to any social, political or theological prejudices.

Such, then, are the principles which I hold to be valid for any literary review; many other reviews than The New Criterion might be formed on these principles. As for
The New Criterion itself, I have expressed my aversion to stating any programme or erecting any platform. But it might not be amiss to clarify by illustration the notion of a ‘tendency’. Here the reader must take warning. Even in indicating a tendency—far from formulating a programme—I must perforce falsify. I cannot help substituting personal tendencies for those which are impersonal and existing in the outside world. But from this dilemma there is no escape, and the reader must make his own reserves and deductions accordingly. I believe that the modern tendency is toward something which, for want of a better name, we may call classicism. I use the term with hesitation, for it is hardly more than analogical: we must scrupulously guard ourselves against measuring living art and mind by dead laws of order. Art reflects the transitory as well as the permanent condition of the soul; we cannot wholly measure the present by what the past has been, or by what we think the future ought to be. Yet there is a tendency—discernable even in art—toward a higher and clearer conception of Reason, and a more severe and serene control of the emotions by Reason. If this approaches or even suggests the Greek ideal, so much the better: but it must inevitably be very different. I will mention a few books, not all very recent, which to my mind exemplify this tendency:

Réflexions sur la violence, by Georges Sorel; L'Avenir de l'intelligence, by Charles Maurras; Belphégor, by Julien Benda; Speculations, by T. E. Hulme; Réflexions sur l'intelligence, by Jacques Maritain; Democracy and Leadership, by Irving Babbit. Anyone who is acquainted with two or more of these books will understand my use of the word ‘tendency’, for the theories and points of view are extremely divergent. And against this group of books I will set another group of books, more accidental, it is true, but all recently received, which represent to my mind that part of the present which is already dead:
Christina Alberta’s Father, by H. G. Wells; St. Joan*, by Bernard Shaw; and What I Believe‡, by Bertrand Russell. (I am sorry to include the name of Mr. Russell, whose intellect would have reached the first rank even in the thirteenth century, but when he trespasses outside of mathematical philosophy his excursions are often descents.) Between these writers there are many and great differences, as between the others. And they all have their moments: at one point in his novel Mr. Wells lapses from vulgarity into high seriousness; at two points, if not more, in his long series of plays Mr. Shaw reveals himself as the artist whose development was checked at puberty. But they all hold curious amateur religions† based apparently upon amateur or second-hand biology, and on The Way of all Flesh. They all exhibit intelligence at the mercy of emotion. They all, it is true, have their faith. It is not for us to sneer at the faith of those who were born and reared under conditions different from ours—perhaps more difficult—perhaps easier. But we must find our own faith, and having found it, fight for it against all others. And with this I will make no more ado of tendencies.

* Two new books about Mr. Shaw, Table Talk of G.B.S., by Archibald Henderson (Chapman & Hall, 5/- net.), and Shaw, by J. S. Collis (Cape, 5/- net), should have been reviewed, but for lack of space. They are of no great value, but show that l’on porte partout le cadavre de son grand-père.

‡ This admirable pamphlet, the most interesting so far of a pert little series (Kegan Paul), is a complete credo of die-hard radicalism. It deserves very full attention, but, as with other dogmatic revelations, an adequate commentary would much exceed in length the document commented upon.

† Very different from the religion of Mr. Middleton Murry, which I am totally unable to understand.