

THE ROLE OF THE LITERARY CRITIC

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"We tend to be thrifty while estimating works of art, not because we are afraid to risk a possible overestimate but because our ability to love nowadays is at an extremely low level. Criticism is an education in enthusiasm.

"A real critic teaches us how to love!" This saying belongs to the great French writer and critic Louis Aragon who, in a few days, is going to celebrate his 85th birthday anniversary. His work marked our century and his presence has been sensed not in France and not in literature only, but all over the world and in culture as a whole. This short phrase of his, can interpret the meaning and also the importance that the word "critic" carries with it. The job of the literary critic is to discover the real beauty and make the people love it. "Criticism", says the other great critic Sainte-Beave, is understanding, not remark, it is echoing trumpet not punishing cudgel. Allow me, my dear colleagues, to transfer these thoughts to a well known place for me, that of Cyprus, which comprises a tiny society, where everything is difficult both for the creator of art, and for his work, simply because the horizon is desperately narrow. Consequently, things are also difficult for the critic who needs a long distance antenna to receive all the various messages from every corner of the world and at the same time an acrobatic ability to balance on the narrow possibilities offered to him by his framework.

We have got wonderful examples of brilliant critics, such as Belinsky and SainteBeave who discovered and promoted the great masters of Literature of their time. But let's not forget that these great critics did not descend from sky. They were born and nourished by the culture of their time; and this culture again derived from thousands of sources bound to the social and historical data of the time, to tradition and space, etc. But what happens with the many little and suffering nations like Cyprus, where the possibility of a Dostoyefsky been born is limited and the possibility of a Belinsky been born is even more limited? For heavens sake I only try to apply the law of comparison and proportion. I don't at all underestimate the culture of the little peoples. Does the role of the critic become less important in these cases? Without any hesitation, I would say no. On the contrary, in these cases, the role of the critic is more decisive and fateful. He has got a twofold task. One, outgoing, to discover new talents and two, inward going, to discover the identity of the nations. The small nations of today are threatened by the huge waves of the various influences coming from the rest of the world. In most cases, the peoples of these nations are unaware of the

danger and unprepared to fight. The possibility of losing their identity, or being swallowed or assimilated by other cultures is great.

When our children say "hello" or "ciao" instead of "cherete" they really abandon a word that came straight away to us from Homer, travelling great distances of time and avoiding all kinds of obstacles on the way. And this is only one simple and trivial example. There are many others, having to do with the ways we live, read, think and even amuse ourselves.

If this danger is real for the peoples of Malta and Sicily - to take two of the other islands of the Mediterranean - it's also real for my country. We should worry ten times more. Because of the recent political and military events there, the issue of retaining our identity is a matter of life and death for us. So the role of the critic takes new dimensions there, inversely proportional to the geographical space and potential. To go back to Saint Beave again, "The critic is the one who knows how to study and teach others how to do the same." So a critic has to become a teacher, a historian, a philosopher, a confessor, a comrade in fight, a partner in life. "He must be more sensitive to the merits of a work of art than to its drawbacks" says Diderot, "he must be more wise than the philosopher and more talented than the creator", says Alexei Tolstoy.

Allow me, dear friends, to remind you, now that we are here at this sacred place, the way the ancient Greeks exercised the wonderful profession of criticism. Aeschylus, Euripides and above all Aristophanes criticised one another (their colleagues) in their very works, their tragedies and comedies. They were writers and critics at the same time, carrying out a constructive dialogue always open for the public to participate. This close and perfect relation between writer, critic and public should be the basis of every hopeful and promising endeavour in art.

Anyway, as we all know our subject is endless and inexhaustive. Allow me to conclude by thanking the Greek critics and their Union for their praiseworthy initiative to gather us all here at this sacred and symbolic place where once spirit and beauty reigned side by side.