The Critic on the Hearth

Isaac Asimov

I HAD BEER BROODING A BIT DURING rhe course of the dinner with George, but I finally said, “Would you like to hear what Samuel Taylor Coleridge thought of critics?”

“No,” said George.

“Good! Then I’ll tell you. He said, ’reviewers are usually peo­ple who would have been poets, historians, biographers, etc., if they could; they have tried their talents at one or at the other, and have failed; therefore they turn critics.’ Percy Bysshe Shelley said almost the same thing. Mark Twain said, ‘The trade of critic, in literature, music, and the drama, is the most degraded of all trades.’

“Lawrence Sterne said, ‘Of all the cants which are canted in this canting world . . . the cant of criticism is the most tormenting.’ Twenty-three centuries ago, the Greek artist, Zeuxis, said, ‘Criticism comes easier than craftsmanship.’ Lord Byron said, ‘Critics all are ready-made . . . with just enough of learning to misquote.’ He also said, ‘As soon seek roses in December, ice in June, Hope constancy in wind, or corn in chaff; Believe a woman or an epitaph, Or any other thing that’s false, before you trust in critics.’ —I could go on and on.”

“You are going on and on,” said George. “What do you do? Memorize these things?”

“Yes, I have lots more.”

“Don’t quote them.”

“I have two of my own comments. The first is that every critic ought to become a garbage collector. He will be doing more useful work and he will have a higher social position. The second is that every critic ought to be thrown into the fireplace.”

“And become the critic in the hearth, eh? And all this, I gather, because one of your miserable productions received a truthful review from some hardworking artisan who had been forced to read through your swill.”

At this point, a brilliant idea crossed my mind. “George,” I said, “have you ever known a critic and tried to help him?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you have bent my ear most grievously with your tales of your little demon, what’s his name, and the miseries he has inflicted through you on innocent victims. Surely, there has been an occasion when you have inflicted rhe miseries on someone well worth it—a critic, in other words.”

George said, thoughtfully, “There is indeed the case of Lucius Lamar Hazeltine.”

“A critic?”

“Yes, but I doubt that you have ever heard of him. He doesn’t work with your kind of trash, as a general rule.”

“And you tried to help him?”

“I did.”

For the first time in our long acquaintanceship, I made no effort to abort one of his stories. “Give me all the details,” I said, gloat­ingly.

Lucius Lamar Hazeltine [said George], although a critic, is a most remarkably handsome young man. In fact, I have never known any­one more handsome than he except for myself in my somewhat younger days.

It is to his good looks entirely that I attribute his ability to remain a critic for ten long years and yet retain an unscarred face and an unbroken nose. As you, of all people, know very well, critics are constantly faced with the possibility of being struck with gener­ous force by writers who object to being described as “meretricious purveyors of organic dreck.”

Hazeltine, however, had so nearly the look of an angel from heaven with his clear, blue eyes, his golden curls, his pink complex­ion, his beautiful nose, and manly chin that one could see writer after writer striding toward him with malevolent intent, only to waver and turn away. They did not want to be responsible for spoiling perfection. Undoubtedly, they cursed their own weakness, and it must have occurred to them that if one among them, but one, were to consent to bang up Hazeltine a bit, his perfection would be gone and the rest could then pounce on him with unre­strained fury.

However, none wished to be the villain of the piece.

For a while, the hopes of the writing fraternity rested on Agatha Dorothy Lissauer. Perhaps you have heard of her. She writes murder mysteries that delve ferociously into the inner workings of psy­chotics. Her stories are so replete with details of the most repellent sort that even critics find themselves irresistably drawn to her. One critic said, “For slime, Agatha Dorothy Lissauer cannot be touched.” Another said, “Horrifying disgust fills every sentence.”

Naturally, a delicately nurtured young woman would feel glee and delight at having her work described in this fashion and, at a meeting of the Crime Writers Association, she was the only writer to stand up and defend the art of criticism, to the slack-jawed astonish­ment of every decent writer in the place.

It was, however, Lucius Lamar Hazeltine who taught her better. He had ignored her first dozen books totally, but her new book, *Wash Your Hands in My Blood,* seemed to attract his attention. He said, among other things, “*Wash Your Hands in My Blood* attempts to upset the stomach and at times I became aware of a very mild feeling of nausea, but nothing more than that. I find myself aston­ished that any young woman cannot do better. The book might as well have been written by a man.”

On reading this, Agatha Dorothy Lissauer burst into tears and then, afterward, her lips set firmly, and, a cold, hard look in her glo­rious eyes, she went from livery stable to livery stable pricing horse­whips.

Hazeltine, she knew, was a member of the Critics Congregation, a gathering of the profession who met in an obscure tenement in the wilds of the South Bronx, where they felt, quite justifiably, no one would dare follow them. Ms. Lissauer, however, caught up in the grip of stormy emotion, threw caution to the winds. It was her intention to find the Congregation, wait till Hazeltine emerged and then, showing no mercy whatever, whip and lash him into a bloody pulp.

This she would certainly have done, cheered on by a happily drooling membership of the Crime Writers Association, until she actually came face to face with him. She had seen photographs of him, but had never seen him in three-dimensional proximity.

The sight of his lovely face changed everything for her. Throwing away her horsewhip, she collapsed in tears. I might have mentioned that Ms. Lissauer had the same heavenly beauty that Hazeltine had, except that her hair was russet, and her eyes a heavenly brown. Her nose was tip-tilted, her lips bee stung, her complexion a delicate peach and, to be as brief as possible, the two fell instantly in love.

I met Hazeltine not long afterward. We were good friends, partly because, as a critic, hardly anyone would speak to him, and he was always grateful to me that I consented to do so. —But then, you know me, old man. Hazeltine was generous with his luncheon hos­pitalities and I am the kind of person who is a true democrat. I will accept refreshments from any hands, however lowly.

“Lucius,” I said, “congratulations. I hear that you have won the heart of the loveliest writer in all the world.”

“Yes, I have,” he said, with an oddly strained expression, “and she has won the heart of the loveliest critic in all the world—myself. It is, however, an ill-fated love. It can never be, George.”

“Why not?” I said, puzzled.

“She is a writer. I am a critic. How, then, may we love?”

“Why, the usual way. Having obtained a motel room with a comfortable bed, you—”

“I am nor speaking of the physical manifestations of love, George, but of the inner and spiritual beauty. You might as well expect oil and water to mix, fire and sand to coexist, dolphins to cohabit with deer, as to expect writers and critics to love. Could I refrain from reviewing her books?”

“Of course you can, Lucius. Just ignore them.”

“No. Having reviewed *Wash Your Hands tn My Blood* I have established reviewing rights, and I must review all her future books including the one she is now writing, a tender tale to be entitled *Hang Me Up by My Intestines.”*

“Well, then, if you do review, say something nice. Emphasize the nausea and disgust.”

Hazeltine looked at me with loathing. “How can I do that, George? You forget the Critic’s Oath as established in ancient Greek times. Translated into English it reads: ‘Though the subject is divine, and the outlook wide and vasty. Put starch into your spine, and utter something nasty.’ I cannot break that oath, George, though it destroys my love and tears me apart.”

I went to see Ms. Lissauer. I did not know her, but I introduced myself as a close friend of Lucius Lamar Hazeltine. That, combined with my air of stately dignity, worked wonders, and in no time she was bedewing my shirt with her tears.

“I love him; I love him,” she said, finding a dry spot on my sleeve with which to wipe her eyes.

I said, “Then why not try to write something he would like?”

“How can I?” she said, eyeing me with loathing. “I could not break the Writer’s Oath.”

“There’s a Writer’s Oath?”

“It goes back to the ancient Sumerian. Translated into English it states: ‘Be always keen and analytic, with the back of your hand to every critic.’”

My heart bled for these two sundered people and I felt that I had to turn to Azazel, whom I proceeded to call from the high-technology continuum in which he lives.

For a wonder, he was in a good mood. His little red face, with its nubbins of horns, smiled at me, and his inch-long tail wobbled to and fro.

“O Wonder of the Cosmos,” I said, “You seem happy.”

“Indeed, I am,” he said, “I have written a zyltchik which has been greeted with universal approbation.”

“What is a zyltchik?”

“A witticism. All have laughed. It is a great triumph for me.”

“Would that I could report triumphs for two young hearts that are steadily breaking. But, obviously, since your zyltchik met with univer­sal approbation, there are no such things as critics on your world.”

“Are there not?” said Azazel, in sudden indignation. “There you reveal your puny ignorance. We have these fossil remnants of Hades among us. It was only last week, in discussing another zyltchik I had perpetrated—I mean, composed—that a critic said, ‘Horsabelum desoderatim andeviduali stinko.’ Can you credit the ignorance and vile personality of anyone who would say that?”

“What does it mean in English?”

“I wouldn’t sully my lips to explain.”

He was becoming furious and I could see his willingness to cooperate beginning to disappear, so I hastened to put the situation before him.

He listened closely, and said, “You have this critic and you want me to ameliorate his behavior.”

“Yes.”

“Impossible. Even I could not do that. A critic is beyond all help, at any level of technology.”

“Could you in some way, then, manage to make him something other than a critic?”

“Again impossible. Surely you understand that a critic is totally unable to succeed at any other line of endeavor. If he had a trace of talent at anything, would he choose to be a critic?”

“There is something to that,” I said, rubbing my chin.

“However,” said Azazel, “let me think. There is a second person involved. A writer.”

“Yes,” I said, with sudden enthusiasm. “Could you manage to make her write something bland enough to avoid criticism?”

“You know that’s impossible. Nothing is so bland, or, for that matter, so good, that a critic will refrain from tearing it to shreds. Where else lies the point of criticism? However—”

“However,” I said, tensely.

“If I can’t change a critic and can’t change a writer, either by itself, I can change the two together. That is—1 can turn the critic into a writer and the writer into a critic, by making use of the Law of Professional Conservation, and perhaps each one, having experi­enced the other side of the fence, so to speak, may then approach each other with newer eyes.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “I think you have the solution, O Master of the Infinite.”

About a week later, I went to see Lucius Hazeltine and, sure enough, the virus was working.

He heaved a sigh in my direction and said, “I have grown tired of being a critic, George. The social obloquy that meets me on all sides; the hatred; the scorn and contumely, wearies me. Even the keen ecstasy of finding new ways of being unfairly nasty and vile in my estimates of literature no longer makes up for it.”

“But what will you do instead?” I asked, anxiously.

“I will be a writer.”

“But, Lucius, you can’t write. You can stumble through critical invective, but that’s about all.”

“I will write poetry. That’s easy.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. You bung in a rhyme or two and count the feet and if it’s modern poetry, it doesn’t even have to make sense. For instance, here is a morceau I have just tossed off. I call it 'The Vulture.’ It goes:

“*He clasps the crag with crooked claws;*

*Close to the Sun without a pause.*

*Ringed with the azure world because*

*He watches for prey from mountain sides,*

*Then down like a thunderbolt he glides.”*

I said, thoughtfully, “Lucius, that sounds derivative.”

“Derivative? What do you mean?”

“There’s a poem entitled ‘The Eagle’ that starts with ‘He clasps the crag with crooked hands.’”

Hazeltine glared. “An eagle? With hands? Anyone knows an eagle doesn’t have hands. To be ignorant of so elementary a fact of natural history must make the poet a fool of no common size. Who wrote that poem you mention?”

“It was Alfred, Lord Tennyson, actually.”

“Never heard of him,” said Hazeltine. (He undoubtedly never had, for, after all, he had been a literary critic.)

“Let me read you some additional pieces,” he said. He intoned:

“*Listen, my children, and you will find*

*That I’ll tell you a story, if you don’t mind.*

*About the Land of the Rising Sun*

*On the Seventh of December, forty-one,*

*Almost all who remember are over and done—”*

I interrupted. “What do you call this one, Lucius? 'The Daylight Snooze of Kimmel and Short’?”

He stared at me narrowly. “How did you know?”

“A wild guess,” I said.

He then went on to recite, “That’s my last mother-in-law painted on the wall—”, and “You know, we Yanks stormed Anzio, and on the trysting day—”

I had to stop him when he began what would clearly be a long, long ballad. It started:

“*It was an ancient sailing man*

*And he stoppe th one of five.*

*‘If you don’t unhand me, gray beard loon.*

*You won’t be long alive.*

I staggered away. It wasn’t as bad as being a critic, but it wasn’t much better.

I went to see Ms. Lissauer. I found her in her study, drooping sadly over a manuscript.

“I don’t seem to be able to write any longer, George,” she mur­mured softly. “The whole process no longer seems to grab me. My book *Hang Me Up by My Intestines* is doing well despite the cruel and vicious review of it by my beloved Lucius, but this new one palls. It is called *Skin Me to the Bone,* but I can’t seem to put my heart into the skinning.”

“But what are you going to do instead, Agatha?” I asked.

“I have decided to be a critic. I have sent in my curriculum vitae to the Critics Congregation, including documentary proof that I beat my aged grandmother and that I have stolen milk from babies on numerous occasions. I believe that will qualify me for the profession.”

“I’m sure it will. And is it your intention to be a literary critic?”

“Not quite. I am, after all, a writer, and what does any writer know about literature? No, indeed, I am going to be a poetry critic.”

“Poetry?”

“Of course. That’s easy. The pieces are usually short so you don’t get a headache reading them. And if they’re modern you don’t have to strain to understand them, because they’re not supposed to have meaning of any kind. Naturally, I shall find a post with *Book­sellers Weekly,* which publishes anonymous reviews. I am certain I can really fulfill myself if no one ever finds out who said the nasty things I plan to say.”

“But, Agatha, you probably have not heard of this, but your beloved Lucius is no longer a critic. He is writing poetry.”

“Wonderful,” said Lissauer. “I will review his books.”

“Gently, I hope,” I said.

She eyed me with loathing. “Are you mad? And be fired from my post by *Booksellers Weekly?* Never.”

I suppose you see the end.

Hazeitine’s book of poetry was published under the title of *Fra­grant Reminiscences* and was reviewed anonymously by Ms. Lis­sauer. This time it was Hazeltine who went about the livery stables, testing out horsewhips for the necessary springiness. He stormed the offices of *Booksellers Weekly* and before they could get in a squadron of police to remove him, he had found Ms. Lissauer cow­ering in a corner.

“Yes, yes,” she said, “It was I who wrote the review.”

Hazeltine threw away his horsewhip and burst into tears. As they dragged him off, he said, “She well deserves a lashing but I could not bring myself to raise welts on that glorious skin.”

But it is still the same. Despite the changeover, they are still critic and writer and their love, which is as deep and as passionate as ever, must remain forever unfulfilled.

I had listened closely to the story and, when it was done, I said, “Let me get this straight, George. Lucius Lamar Hazeltine, who had been a literary critic, is still suffering, is he?”

“He is suffering the agonies of the damned.”

“Wonderful. And Agatha Dorothy Lissauer, who became a critic, is also still suffering, is she not?”

“If anything, more than Hazeltine is.”

“And they will continue to suffer forever?”

“I am sure of it.”

“Well,” I said, “no one can ever say that I am a vicious person or that I hold grudges. All who know me speak favorably of my sunny disposition and my ability to forgive and forget. But I do make some exceptions. George, for once you don’t have to ask me for anything. Here is twenty dollars. If Azazel has any use for Earthly money, give him half.”