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CRITIC? OR — NO CRITIC!

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The Critic

We may marvel at the critic, or we may curse them. Not everyone can or will appreciate the role of the critic. As a result, we ask two simple questions. *Is the critic necessary?* And if yes: *What makes a good critic?*

The origin of the word is from the Greek and has the meaning of *to judge* or *to decide*. Our understanding of the word sits well with this. Taking this into consideration, we could be tempted to see the critic as a *guide* or *teacher* because these too demonstrate similar characteristics.

For most poets there is that internal want, desire or need to improve and perfect one's art irrespective of style or form. This means a lot of time and effort. *In short, dedication.* Now what is dedication if there is no improvement, or indeed study! All results in mediocrity! Society encourages mediocrity, but this ingrained mentality does not encourage improvement. In fact, the complete opposite—to be content with being average and the same as everyone else. We are too entrenched in a fictitious hierarchical system which only disguises the faults of the society in which we live.

For the critic as an educator, one of their purposes is to analyze and reveal. What *is* revealed is the good *and* bad, for what it's worth. We cannot have one without the other, but many cannot accept a critical comment which *is*, or *borders on* the negative. For some reason, they are under the impression that everything they write is *perfect*. The concept of perfection is merely a lofty dream. Perfection is that state which remains elusive to all! I would go so far as to say that it can never be achieved. However, with a good critic, we may come a little closer under the right circumstances. Think Eliot, Pound and *'The Waste Land'*.

It is our task to seek a critic satisfying our requirements if we have come to realize them, but it is always going to be a two-way journey. The critic too needs to find something or someone worthy of criticism. Apart from the obvious, the critic may open our eyes to something new, even old, which we may be able to use or adapt for our own purpose.

It is no secret that poets have different techniques to apply in their art. They may like to think that they have invented them, but mostly they will have been derived from the masters they have previously read, and there is no shame or harm in this. Most poets of any standing have progressed past this stage. We could say that borrowed techniques are like a good pen — fantastic to use but will not make you a better writer.

Is the Critic Necessary?

So, is the critic *really* a necessary element of writing? The answer is a resounding yes, if only for their professional thought on the matter. The fact remains that work would never be new, original or that for matter, get any better if no one made any criticism at all.

A factor of our success is how we take what the critic says. We need to be open to possibilities and suggestions and not doggedly remain in our own methods. The value of criticism is proportional to the knowledge and expertise of the critic. This makes good sense. Those who attempt to make some criticism without or with little knowledge and experience in the area can only give an opinion often clouded by emotion.

Emotive responses mean nothing and should mean nothing to the recipient. Unless they are easily impressed by glossy and irrelevant discourse, then they are wasting their time even reading or listening to it, for it means nothing whatsoever. What is required is a critic who practices and works in the area which they criticize. This is useful in that the critic is aware of what is necessary to be successful in this area.

But what does this mean, and does it necessarily mean that the critic knows what they are talking about? It is one thing to work in the area, quite another to be able to give meaningful advice.

What Makes a Good Critic?

We must try to *understand* where the critic comes from. In most cases we can determine the intentions of the critic very quickly. It is all in the presentation of advice. A knowledgeable critic is one who does not force the poet into a set or expected mold. The poet may well be an inventor of new devices or styles. The last thing the critic will want to do is to discourage the poet, especially one who has only started on their poetic journey.

The good critic will guide and give examples of what should or could be done in different situations. They must be firm and insistent and not be given over to sentimentalities or other nonsense such as not wanting to hurt the poet's feelings, pride or ego. These matters are trivial when it comes to improving work. The knowledgeable critic will help avoid misinformation.

Critics will specialize in different areas, and at times the critic may be at a loss when confronted with new or unfamiliar forms or styles. The critic must be well versed in their field and must analyze and suggest how the work could be improved and not *only* compared to the current or past work by other poets. They must, to be successful, be working in the area they are critiquing and have a creative interest. They should not be open to emotion (emotive responses are pointless and of no value) and should not only compare but also analyze. If something is wrong, there must be supporting reasons and how it can be corrected, but the communication must be amicable. Understanding and honesty.

Many times, criticism refers to something in the past, and although such a comparison may be good or even advantageous, it is not necessarily what is required. The critic must look upon the work and consider such comparisons, but also the newness if appropriate. Not all comparison with past masters is appropriate or needed. The links with the past should not be ignored but should not be the only consideration. The critic can do more than simply offer advice. The critic can be destructive or appear to be so. The point is not to react quickly and be patient to see the outcome.

When we are prepared to be critical of our own work, we achieve a sense of honesty and learning. If the critic is to criticize other work, they must be able to be honest with their own. The usual adage, *one is never perfect*. To be able to sit back and view one's own work as another is a skill. Be prepared to cut verses and be ruthless. This makes the critic!

Is the Critic Required?

The short answer is—Yes! A poet's work can never improve if someone does not read it and makes some comment whether positive or negative. The fact is that no form or style of poetry, or any poet can improve without critical comment. No form of art can. Yet there are many who cannot accept criticism of what it is and consider it a form of personal attack. Not all people are comfortable being critical of other work. There are several reasons for this, some being:

- have never criticized work before,
- have no idea how to go about criticism,
- prepared to sit in the background and pretend that all is fine,
- not understanding the content to begin with,
- being thought of as a *know-all*, or
- afraid of their own work being criticized.

Often, it is the last which is the cause of not offering some form of criticism. Lack of criticism is very common in online poetry groups. The norm is to offer comments which praise the poet's work hoping that the recipient will do likewise for them. Generally, comments such as these are lies. They are worthless and made for the wrong reasons. However, there are people who genuinely have difficulty articulating what they feel. This is a different situation altogether, but by examining other critics' work and with practice, they will realize that this is no longer an excuse.