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On Being Criticized —  
*A Few Psychological Remarks*

In 1959, the legendary Austrian comedian Helmut Qualtinger performed a surreal skit about a plumber, a car mechanic, and a telephone operator, anxiously waiting for their reviews in the evening papers. “The critics came to the house yesterday,” the plumber, played by Qualtinger, says in a heavy Viennese dialect, “so something will be in the papers today.” To which the car mechanic replies: “I don’t care. I never read that stuff.”

Then someone brings the papers, the plumber eagerly starts his search and presently reads out: “Mr. Zargitsch displays good plumbing skills and a solid performance, as we already know from his extensive activities in the suburban communities. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for his faucets to become leaky and drip after a short while.” At this, the plumber flies into a rage: “What can I do with such bad material! That guy should try to do my job! He can’t do anything but criticize!” But the next review is even worse. “The only truth that can be stated about Mr. Zargitsch’s seals is that they are sloppily installed. There’s dripping, and what drips is not humor, only water.” — “My God,” the plumber shouts, “is this supposed to be witty? That man is ruthless. He’ll destroy a livelihood for the sake of a joke!” An actor comes in. The car repair man asks him whether you just have to sit back and let reviewers insult you, to which the actor calmly replies: “Oh no, *you* don’t! Look, you can set up a bathroom for that guy that will annoy him his entire life. And if he wants to have dinner here, Mr. Waiter, what can I tell you, you know what to do! You all know what to do. There is only one group that can do absolutely nothing. You see, and that’s why only artists get reviewed.”

The funniest thing about this skit is, of course, that its surreal premise has become reality. In a world of Yelp and Google and Amazon, every contractor, every restaurant, and most taxi drivers live under the constant pressure of reviews. So, we, the artists who have

always lived with them, can actually be helpful and tell the rest of humanity what it feels like.

Of course, a big piece in *Le Figaro*, the *New York Times* or *Frankfurter Allgemeine* is still slightly more powerful than a Yelp review. Or maybe not. I do still buy books that the New York Times hates, but I do not go to a dentist some stranger on Google Maps tells me is a dilettante. Of course, long articles in serious papers are still better written than the best reader reviews on Amazon—except quite often, they are not. At a time when the whole world gets reviewed, somehow the spark has left the world of cultural reviewing. As we all know, even rave reviews do not sell books anymore. We, the artists who love to claim we do not read them, are now often the only people left who still read our reviews.

My first book was published by a small Austrian publisher when I was 22 years old. The first review appeared in a large Austrian newspaper. Reviews were still a big deal back then, and obviously I had no coping mechanisms in place and I was very nervous. My first reviewer said my book was so bad that it should be flushed down the toilet and, hopefully, I would never write anything again. That same afternoon I got a phone call from a friend, an experienced actor, who just said: “Get used to it!”—“But listen,” I answered in an unsteady voice, “this is so unfair, it’s so mean, it’s so ... Who does something like that, and how can they publish that, and, no, I have never met that guy, never even heard of him, and ...”—“Daniel!” he interrupted. “Just get used to it.” Then he hung up.

Did I? Do we ever? All my adult life, I have heard writers talk about reviews; over and over, I have heard them say things like: “I don’t mind bad reviews. I just don’t like *unfair* reviews. I want a reviewer to try to understand the book on its own terms, try to understand what I wanted to do, try to not impose rules that were not the rules I was going by when I worked on it—if someone does that, I don’t mind any criticism.” This is, obviously, wrong. Writers want to be praised. As long as they are praised, they are basically fine.

And on the other hand, I have heard professional critics say over and over: “It’s all pretension. Writers just want to be praised. As long as they’re praised, they are fine.” Which is, obviously, wrong. Writers are not that simple and not that vulgar. As long as a reviewer tries to understand the book on its own terms, we really do not mind criticism ... that much. Even though we still prefer praise. Who wouldn’t?

Writers definitely want reviews to exist, otherwise anyone could be a writer, but we are also deeply scared of them, because we think

bad reviews are really harmful to us—except we know that no one reads them anymore, and we know that being reviewed well is a matter of pure chance, except, of course, we also know that creating good work will exponentially increase our chances of being reviewed well, except we still know it is basically a matter of luck.

And, despite all that, we absolutely want to be reviewed. A book that does not get reviewed is considered as good as dead. It is not true that a bad review is also helpful, that is something people will say to you when they try to console you, but do not believe them: a bad review is bad. But it is true that no review at all is worse than a bad review, except if it is a devastating review. In that case, no review is indeed better.

The eternal question is, of course, how much harm such a negative review will do in terms of real and symbolic capital. The obvious answer is: none. Except it is also: a lot. But then ultimately none whatsoever. Except it will keep some people from reading you, which is the ultimate harm the world can inflict on a writer. “Not the sting,” as Norman Mailer put it, “but the pressure.”

“Don’t worry,” friends will say to you. “This thing in the *Guardian* was mean, but no one will take it seriously. It’s obvious that it has nothing to do with your book. That guy had his own agenda. Really, it’s nothing!”

“Yes,” you will respond, hopefully and already half-convinced. “That might be true. Yes, yes. So, what did you think about the new Thomas Pynchon? I can’t believe he wrote a book again— isn’t it great?”

“I don’t know,” your friend will answer. “I didn’t read it. The *Guardian* said it’s a trainwreck. Did you see those terrible passages they quoted? My God.”

“Yes,” you will answer, now half-persuaded to not read the new Thomas Pynchon. “Those quotes really sounded bad.”

And they did. Because everything quoted to prove bad style seems like a valid proof of bad style.

The system of cultural reviewing has a paradox at its core. It is an important feature of public discourse, but, at the same time, it is strangely excluded from public discourse. Because if you feel that someone makes an incorrect claim about your work, there is no recourse you can take, no higher court, literal or metaphorical, to which to apply, no king’s messenger who will show up to right the wrongs. I could write a review of the last novel of Juan Gabriel Vásquez, in which I state: “It’s not too bad, just the Vienna chapter is a failure.” How would Juan Gabriel react, what could he do? It is simply my

informed opinion. So, what is he supposed to do with the fact there is no Vienna chapter in his book? He could, of course, write a letter. It might even be printed. Or he could tweet about it. What would then happen? Absolutely nothing, except some people might say, “This Vásquez guy is really thin-skinned; he doesn’t take criticism well.”

You probably think this example is a bit far fetched. It really is not. I have tales of unbelievable injustice and stupidity and meanness and gross deeds of base hatred committed towards me over a long writing career. Would I like to tell them to you? Oh, yes, in great detail. Would you like to hear them? Of course not. Why would you? That’s my point.

But don’t get me wrong: This unfairness of the system is—despite being really, really bad—a good thing. Because look at us. As a writer, you are self-employed, you do not have a boss, you never get to experience what it means for most people to get up every day just to spend that day in an office among people you despise, subject to the whims and aggressions of a superior you detest and, worse, who detests you. We are among the few people allowed to surround ourselves exclusively with people who are nice to us. With family and friends who keep telling us that we deserve all the awards and all the praise, and our writer friends, who tell other writers exactly what is wrong with our latest book, but are certainly not going to tell us. The way our world works, only billionaires get the option of living inside such a colorful bubble of narcissism. Which would be fine, it works for the billionaires, but it is really bad for writers. We tend to lose the edge, the despair, the sharpness, and pain that makes the work of young writers relevant. At some point, writers either turn bitter and lose touch or they turn into well-fed, happy, successful celebrities who feel secure and sure of being valued exactly in the moment when the world ceases to value them. So, how do we keep the reality principle from sneaking out on us? It is a not a trivial question.

Well, among the few things that still have the power to puncture that bubble of narcissism are reviews. Not so much because they let us know what is wrong with our work (even though that might be the case), because we all secretly know exactly what is wrong with our work anyway. No, the review game punctures the bubble of narcissism *because* it is so unfair, because it is such a brutal matter of hit or miss. To quote Tom Stoppard: “For every thousand people there’s nine hundred doing the work, ninety doing well, nine doing good, and one lucky bastard who’s the artist.” A truly efficient way society has found to get back at that one lucky bastard is to periodically submit them to an

anxious limbo of waiting for reviews, enduring reviews, and then helplessly plotting revenge against reviewers from a position of utter powerlessness, because while plumber Zargitsch might be able to give them a bathroom that ruins their life, but we are not in the same position. The reviewer is, of course, not the artist's boss, but the review system, in its contingency and its chaotic nature, is in itself the best equivalent any self-employed artist has to what for other people is their superior in the office—feared and coveted and dreaded and thought about in long, sleepless nights.

So we writers live, by our own free will, under the shadow of a constant and ongoing downpour of criticism that we desperately want, except we fear it like death, except we also tell ourselves with some reason that it cannot really harm us, except we are not quite sure that is true, and then we keep telling ourselves—like that actor friend told me at the very beginning of my life as a writer—that we just have to get used to it, which never happens. And, yes, in the meantime, most of us make matters even more complicated by actually writing from time to time and, quite frequently, writing book reviews.