

Not Dealing but Criticism!
by Yisroel Shtern (1927)
Translated by Mindle Crystel Gross (2006)

In his review (*Literarische Bleter* 5) of *Warsaw Writings*, I. I. Singer touches upon my article “Crowns to Adorn the Head of Jewish Criticism”¹. Well, a difference of opinion is understandable. And I would not like to be drawn into disputation.

But since a question of principle is at stake here, about a matter as important as literary criticism, I cannot let this pass in silence.

“If critics were the way Shtern wants them to be, they would be creative writers themselves. If you yourself could sow and reap, would you bother with a corn dealer?”

This sentence is one fat mistake, as a result of being twisted upon itself. In no way do I want critics to be creative writers. My demand is such a modest one – I only want them to be... critics.

Whoever carefully reads my “Crowns to Adorn the Head of Jewish Criticism” will have no difficulty in finding the dividing line between creative writing and criticism. Criticism cannot be translated into “dealing” – that must not be the interpretation.

Else every duty would fall by the wayside. Every feeling of responsibility – a lawless world, without law or judge. Critics and criticism would breed like mosquitoes in a summer field. Who doesn’t know this kind of work? With its low level approach, its assessment that misses the point completely...so what does it matter? After all, it’s no more than – dealing!!

It goes like this. The bride is obliged to settle the dowry. And the groom must stick to the agreement. But the matchmaker thinks to himself: the heck with you both. As far as I am concerned, you can go to the Rabbi right after the ceremony and get a divorce. So long as I’ve been paid...

In considering the inner workings of genuine and concentrated critical creativity, I emphasized that our criticism should be quite a bit better than it is.

¹ (Ed.): Shtern’s long essay had opened (pp.1 – 42) the new publication, *Varshever Shriftn* (1926 – 1927). Singer’s review of *Varshever Shriftn* appeared in *Lit. Bleter* on 4 Feb 1927. This rejoinder by Shtern was published there on Feb 18.

This has to be said some time. Critics are not beyond evaluation themselves. They too, the controllers, must themselves be controlled.

I.I. Singer defends them. Apparently Jewish criticism is all good, need not, cannot be better; and his explanation: the critic is a dealer.

Will his defence give pleasure to our critics? I doubt that very much. If nothing comes from criticism, nothing is clarified, no hidden beauty in the work is revealed – then what meaning can it have, this critic’s mediation between writers and readers? Only details? Only as advertisements for books?

A little further on, I.I. Singer poses a question: since other fields have their scholarly researchers, why shouldn’t literature have its learned ones as well, and so forth.

Only a moment earlier criticism was mere brokering. How, all of a sudden with one more sentence, did this turn into a science? Is science – brokerage?

Secondly, it does not occur to me to ask for anything more. I would be extremely satisfied if all those who occupy themselves with literature would have a similar relation with it as scholars do with science. Especially from them should we learn how every single thing requires expertise, specialization and love for the calling.

Now, it only remains for me to respond to I.I. Singer’s remark that what the artist gave – the artist has already given himself. Whoever feels this – feels it, and who does not – no amount of interpretation or re-writing can help him.

The same can be said not just about criticism, but also about art itself. One can, for instance, say the following: what influence can literature ever have? Whosoever has the talent to absorb the impressions of world events, has the capacity – and he who does not – no amount of re-writing will help.

And that which writers do with real life – critics do with the book.

A true critic wants and believes, has enthusiasm and character, because true criticism is creative.

It isn’t necessary to relate here all of my perspectives and understandings of the value and essence of constructive criticism. That is impossible in an article of three printed pages. Those interested will find it in the “Warsaw Writings”.

I have only wanted to draw attention to several errors which I.I. Singer made, regarding the evaluation of criticism.

I would like to see amongst us fine poets, storytellers, dramatists – and fine critics.

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