WRS 106

First-Year Writing II

Dr. Adam Abraham

READING ANALYTICALLY

Samuel *Johnson, The Rambler*, No. 23 (Tuesday, June 5, 1750)

Patricia Highsmith, a diary entry, January 10, 1950

Allan Sherman, “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah! (A Letter from Camp)” (1963)

Merve Emre, “Marvellous Things” (2023)

Samuel Johnson

The Rambler

No. 23 (Tuesday, June 5, 1750)

Tres mihi convivæ prope dissentire videntur;

Poscentur vario multum diversa palato.

HORACE, EPISTLES, II.2.61–62.

Three guests I have, dissenting at my feast,
Requiring each to gratify his taste
With different food.

FRANCIS.

That every man should regulate his actions by his own conscience, without any regard to the opinions of the rest of the world, is one of the first precepts of moral prudence; justified not only by the suffrage of reason, which declares that none of the gifts of heaven are to lie useless, but by the voice likewise of experience, which will soon inform us that, if we make the praise or blame of others the rule of our conduct, we shall be distracted by a boundless variety of irreconcileable judgments, be held in perpetual suspense between contrary impulses, and consult for ever without determination.

I know not whether, for the same reason, it is not necessary for an author to place some confidence in his own skill, and to satisfy himself in the knowledge that he has not deviated from the established law of composition, without submitting his works to frequent examinations before he gives them to the publick, or endeavouring to secure

success by a solicitous conformity to advice and criticism.

It is, indeed, quickly discoverable, that consultation and compliance can conduce little to the perfection of any literary performance; for whoever is so doubtful of his own abilities as to encourage the remarks of others, will find himself every day embarrassed with new difficulties, and will harass his mind, in vain, with the hopeless labour of uniting heterogeneous ideas, digesting independent hints, and collecting into one point the several rays of borrowed light, emitted often with contrary directions.

Of all authors, those who retail their labours in periodical sheets would be most unhappy, if they were much to regard the censures or the admonitions of their readers; for, as their works are not sent into the world at once, but by small parts in gradual succession, it is always imagined, by those who think themselves qualified to give instructions, that they may yet redeem their former failings by hearkening to better judges, and supply the deficiencies of their plan, by the help of the criticisms which are so liberally afforded.

I have had occasion to observe, sometimes with vexation, and sometimes with merriment, the different temper with which the same man reads a printed and manuscript performance. When a book is once in the hands of the publick, it is considered as permanent and unalterable; and the reader, if he be free from personal prejudices, takes it up with no other intention than of pleasing or instructing himself; he accommodates his mind to the author's design; and, having no interest in refusing the amusement that is offered him, never interrupts his own tranquillity by studied cavils, or destroys his satisfaction in that which is already well, by an anxious enquiry how it might be better; but is often contented without pleasure, and pleased without perfection.

But if the same man be called to consider the merit of a production yet unpublished, he brings an imagination heated with objections to passages which he has yet never heard; he invokes all the powers of criticism, and stores his memory with Taste and Grace, Purity and Delicacy, Manners and Unities, sounds which, having been once uttered by those that understood them, have been since re-echoed without meaning, and kept up to the disturbance of the world, by a constant repercussion from one coxcomb to another. He considers himself as obliged to shew, by some proof of his abilities, that he is not consulted to no purpose, and therefore watches every opening for objection, and looks round for every opportunity to propose some specious alteration. Such opportunities a very small degree of sagacity will enable him to find; for, in every work of imagination, the disposition of parts, the insertion of incidents, and use of decorations, may be varied a thousand ways with equal propriety; and as, in things nearly equal, that will always seem best to every man which he himself produces; the critick, whose business is only to propose, without the care of execution, can never want the satisfaction of believing that he has suggested very important improvements, nor the power of enforcing his advice by arguments, which, as they appear convincing to himself, either his kindness, or his vanity, will press obstinately and importunately, without suspicion that he may possibly judge too hastily in favour of his own advice, or inquiry whether the advantage of the new scheme be proportionate to the labour.

It is observed, by the younger Pliny, that an orator ought not so much to select the strongest arguments which his cause admits, as to employ all which his imagination can afford; for, in pleading, those reasons are of most value, which will most affect the judges; and the judges, says he, will be always most touched with that which they had

before conceived. Every man who is called to give his opinion of a performance, decides upon the same principle; he first suffers himself to form expectations, and then is angry at his disappointment. He lets his imagination rove at large, and wonders that another, equally unconfined in the boundless ocean of possibility, takes a different course.

But, though the rule of Pliny be judiciously laid down, it is not applicable to the writer's cause, because there always lies an appeal from domestick criticism to a higher judicature, and the publick, which is never corrupted, nor often deceived, is to pass the last sentence upon literary claims.

Of the great force of preconceived opinions I had many proofs, when I first entered upon this weekly labour. My readers having, from the performances of my predecessors, established an idea of unconnected essays, to which they believed all future authors under a necessity of conforming, were impatient of the least deviation from their system, and numerous remonstrances were accordingly made by each, as he found his favourite subject omitted or delayed. Some were angry that the Rambler did not, like the Spectator, introduce himself to the acquaintance of the publick, by an account of his own birth and studies, an enumeration of his adventures, and a description of his physiognomy. Others soon began to remark that he was a solemn, serious, dictatorial writer, without sprightliness or gaiety, and called out with vehemence for mirth and humour. Another admonished him to have a special eye upon the various clubs of this great city, and informed him that much of the Spectator's vivacity was laid out upon such assemblies. He has been censured for not imitating the politeness of his predecessors, having hitherto neglected to take the ladies under his protection, and give them rules for the just opposition of colours, and the proper

dimensions of ruffles and pinners. He has been required by one to fix a particular censure upon those matrons who play at cards with spectacles. And another is very much offended whenever he meets with a speculation in which naked precepts are comprised without the illustration of examples and characters.

I make not the least question that all these monitors intend the promotion of my design, and the instruction of my readers; but they do not know, or do not reflect that an author has a rule of choice peculiar to himself; and selects those subjects which he is best qualified to treat, by the course of his studies, or the accidents of his life; that some topicks of amusement have been already treated with too much success to invite a competition; and that he who endeavours to gain many readers must try various arts of invitation, essay every avenue of pleasure, and make frequent changes in his methods of approach.

I cannot but consider myself amidst this tumult of criticism, as a ship in a poetical tempest, impelled at the same time by opposite winds, and dashed by the waves from every quarter, but held upright by the contrariety of the assailants, and secured, in some measure, by multiplicity of distress. Had the opinion of my censurers been unanimous, it might, perhaps, have overset my resolution; but since I find them at variance with each other, I can, without scruple, neglect them, and endeavour to gain the favour of the publick, by following the direction of my own reason, and indulging the sallies of my own imagination.

Patricia Highsmith

A diary entry

January 10, 1950

A note on hearing “America.” From sea to shining sea. The many small towns I have driven through. The many lighted windows on the second floors of small houses, where young girls stand brushing their golden hair. The houses certain people call home. The rooms that are certain people’s own rooms, unforgettable. And perhaps the rooms they will have all their lives. And the shaded window with the red cross over the sill, that I passed every morning on the way to high school in Ft. Worth. The bread they eat, and the boyfriends who call them, the cars they drive to hamburger stands in, the summer evenings when the boys are home from colleges, and the betrothals are made. The children that are born to live the same simple lives eternally. And, always, the loneliness, the unsatisfied striving that is below the surface, much or little below. The girl who is unsatisfied, and yet has not the energy or perhaps the courage to escape. She dreams of something better, something different, something that will challenge and use up the aspiration that she feels clamoring within her, that cannot be satisfied by the men she meets, the stores she buys her clothes at, the movies she dreams in, even the food she eats.

Allan Sherman

"Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah! (A Letter from Camp)" (1963)

Hello Muddah, hello Faddah,

Here I am at Camp Grenada.

Camp is very entertaining,

And they say we'll have some fun if it stops raining.

I went hiking with Joe Spivey.

He developed poison ivy.

You remember Leonard Skinner?

He got ptomaine poisoning last night after dinner.

All the counselors hate the waiters,

And the lake has alligators.

And the head coach wants no sissies,

So he reads to us from something called "Ulysses."

Now I don't want this should scare ya,

But my bunkmate has malaria.

You remember Jeffrey Hardy—

They're about to organize a searching party.

Take me home! Oh, Muddah, Faddah!

Take me home! I hate Grenada!

Don't leave me out in the forest where

I might get eaten by a bear.

Take me home! I promise I will not make noise

Or mess the house with other boys.

Oh, please don't make me stay:

I've been here one whole day.

Dearest Faddah, darling Muddah,

How's my precious little bruddah?

Let me come home if you miss me.

I would even let Aunt Bertha hug and kiss me.

Wait a minute—it's stopped hailing.

Guys are swimming, guys are sailing,

Playing baseball—gee, that's better.

Muddah, Faddah, kindly disregard this letter.

Merve Emre

"Marvellous Things" (2023)

The bookstore in your neighborhood sits on a busy corner. You pass it on your walk to work in the mornings, and on your walk home in the evenings, and although you sometimes admire the clever geometries of its window display, rarely do you take a closer look. But, not long ago, the sight of a particular book made you pause. Your eye lingered on its pure-white cover and on a curious shape cut into it. Without thinking, you walked into the store. The clerk was working at her computer. The other customers were leafing through books lifted from the great pyramids of new releases on the front table. No one paid any attention to you.

You reached for the book you had spotted. The author was Italo Calvino, whose name conjured up some vague impressions—an Italian who had risen to prominence after the Second World War, a writer of stories within stories. With your thumb, you flipped through the first few pages and, with the practiced efficiency of someone who never has enough time, you determined what the book was about. It was a book called *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, about men and women who, having been mysteriously struck dumb, were using packs of tarot cards to describe the adventures that had befallen them. Or it was a book called *Invisible Cities*, in which the Venetian merchant Marco Polo described to Kublai Khan the far-away lands of his empire, and, as you turned the pages, the spires and domes of unreal cities rose and fell before your eyes. Or it was a book that opened by addressing you, the Reader, instantly transforming you into both a character and the narrator's confidant: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every

other thought. Let the world around you fade."

You relaxed. You concentrated. The voices of the other customers grew distant, and, with each sentence of whichever book you had chosen, you plunged deeper into a story of chance encounters, magic objects, lawless crusades, and reckless loves. You discovered that this was a book of rapid cuts and quick dissolves that carried you from one character and setting to the next. At first, you believed you were reading a fable, but it soon turned into a quest, then a romance, then a utopia, with each episode as dramatic as the one that came before it. You felt that you were not reading a book at all but being whirled around a great library of books: here you glimpsed the beginning of one story, there the middle of another. But the end? The end was nowhere in sight.

Despite the otherworldliness of the story, its characters lived close to you somehow. The heroes were warmhearted, a little bumbling. The maidens were neither cruel nor insipid but daring, principled, and compassionate. The villains were not evil but merely small-minded. You looked around the bookstore and you saw it through the story's eyes. The woman with the glasses there, her hands fluttering above a table of slim translations—you could imagine the spells she might cast. And the brawny man in the camel-hair coat, weighing this season's rival political memoirs—what crimes had he committed?

The clerk cleared her throat to indicate that the store was closing. You made your choice. You bought the book and took it home, where you consumed it ravenously, ignoring the lights and the pings from your phone. When you finished, you were surprised to find that the story, burning with passion and conquest, had left you with a sensation of grief. Why couldn't life be like that?