

Postscript

With online pseudonymy being so prevalent, the author, returning to active voice, allows himself this opportunity to disclose his rationale for anonymity and the abandonment of his plans for a more autobiographical website. As a specific example of the risks of online socializing (*cave canum*), this cautionary case history based on personal experience is offered.

I joined an online discussion group hoping to draw support from the convivial, collegial fellowship of the like-minded. The result of my dealings with one particularly uncongenial contributor to this *Festschrift* necessitated my withdrawal in order to indemnify myself against further dangers.

In a simultaneous and self-contradictory use and rejection of jargon, the person in question, who will only be referred to pronominally, condemned my use of what he called “ten-dollar words,” while himself using such expressions as *ersatz*. Perhaps his were only eight-dollar words. Or, as he resided in a foreign country, he may have been exploiting asymmetry in the exchange rate. In any case, civilized people, who appreciate the concepts denoted by such words, never seem to be bothered by them. One is not civilized just because one uses sophisticated vocabulary. But still less is one entitled to conclude absurdly that one is civilized just because one does not. Since even dogs can do it, avoiding “ten-dollar words” is not particularly impressive and should not be worn like a badge of rank, though some seem to think that they deserve a medal for it. James Burke once defended the use of precise, unambiguous jargon in communications between physicians and pharmacists by saying, “Or would you rather be dead?”

The offender characterized my commentary as “verbal diarrhea” [sic]. Fittingly, this is, according to *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, third edition*, the expression by which the term *logorrhoea* is “vulgarly known.” I thus stand proudly guilty of insufficient vulgarity, as well as of failure to meet his demand for frothy, bourgeois pedestrianism. According to Pauline Kael, “Vulgarity is not as destructive to an artist as snobbery.” To artists is vulgarity gladly ceded.

His aversion to verbal sophistication culminated in a grouse against Latin. With their great respect for history, scholarship and the foundations of literature, Oxford and Cambridge maintained their Latin entrance requirements into the 1970s. Winston Churchill “would let the clever learn Latin as an honor and Greek as a treat.” “One of the regrets of my life,” says historian David McCullough, “is that I did not study Latin. I’m absolutely convinced, the more I understand these eighteenth-century people, that it was that grounding in Greek and Latin that gave them their sense of the classic virtues: the classic ideals of honor, virtue, the good society and their historic examples of what they could try to live up to.” For James Russell, “Only those languages can properly be called dead in which nothing living has been written. If the classic languages are dead, they yet speak to us, and with a clearer voice than that of any living tongue.” But civilization cannot be legislated, and *diarrhea* will forever be linked in my mind with Latin, whether it be the epitaph of Sir Christopher Wren that graces St. Paul’s cathedral, the motto on the U.S. dollar bill, the Roman Catholic mass, the Mr. Micawber of W.C. Fields, or the anatomy lecture in *Restoration*. The two greatest causes of irony will be the motto that introduces the main action of my favorite film and the following national motto: *A MARI USQUE AD MARE*. For a final word on this matter, the reader is referred to *The Browning Version* and to the act 1

finale of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*. Goodbye indeed, Mr. Chips, and hello Allan Bloom. Hanson and Heath, who asked, "Who killed Hamlet?" need look no further.

He sarcastically admitted to speaking *only* two languages. What, other than insecurity, could explain his vilification of those suspected of speaking more languages than he? Maybe he believed that homage should be accorded in inverse proportion to accomplishment. In fact, one should speak as few languages as one likes and without shame. The issue is quality rather than quantity. What matters is not the number of languages one speaks, but the number of valid arguments one can express in any of them. Heteroglossia cannot compensate for the lack of something worthwhile to say (*satis eloquentiae, sapientiae parum*).

He declared himself resolutely hostile to "theory" in the realm of entertainment. With an airily dismissive antipathy, and not even aspiring to civilization, he took pride in his cultivated inability to participate in a given universe of discourse. "But to reject theory *in toto*, as if it were the serpent in the garden of film analysis, is on one level simply to reject the major intellectual currents of our epoch," observes Robert Stam. As with "ten-dollar words," one wonders whether it is merely coincidental that this same antitheory stance is adopted by dogs. Dogs, too, can be entertaining, but, precisely due to their lack of theory, deserve little credit for understanding what they are doing as they do it.

He implied that true scholarship does not exist and that dispassionate, informed critical discernment is a myth. Pop-psychologizing me, and giving figment free reign to occupy the space left blank by ignorance, he made the unseemly assertion that intellectuality may never be authentic and that erudition is useless except as a devious and insincere courtship display. Attacking erudition can certainly have little other use among those incapable of it. I employ it simply in fulfillment of my duty to myself and to civilization, whereas he was obviously not subject to any such obligations. As to courtship, he may rest assured that his virtue was never at risk. Further, to the extent that he is concerned about everyone else's, my anonymity should allay his fears about women being "troubled with a pernicious suitor," to quote Shakespeare's Beatrice.

As a champion of the culturally disadvantaged, he glorified film buffery (and to some extent rank consumerism) while recoiling from the concept of connoisseurship with demeaning, venomous eschewal. At the same time, he expressed a personal preference for the company of people who are more practically inclined than those who "sit on their asses," as may be said of Albert Einstein.

He criticized one particular view of a certain film as being "not wrong," but "too narrow," adding that this condition is a "pitfall of many an academic analysis." With respect to pedagogy in general, there is indeed a danger of leading students through the trees without giving them a glimpse of the woods. However, the nature of analysis is such that it normally isolates one resolvable aspect of a phenomenon for close, individual, concentrated study at the expense of all others. This inevitability is the principal reason for the existence of so "many" academic analyses. In such analyses, the lack of either novelty or relevance or significance can be a fault, but an excessively narrow focus can never be, unless accompanied by the presumption that the one aspect under consideration exhausts the topic. Typically, such presumption is neither present nor implied, and often explicitly disavowed. Thus, academia abounds with unproblematically "narrow" scholarship. Watson and Crick's 1953 announcement of their model for the structure of DNA is only one page long and yet is considered a landmark. Biographies normally concentrate, uncontroversially, on the life of a single person. If medicine as a whole could cure all diseases, then it would not be a "pitfall" if any one drug cured only one disease. Being "too narrow" is

simply not a concept applicable to analyses considered individually. (He himself seldom failed to betray the limited scope of his own narrow cognitive palette.) Also, that any person could be aware of or care about every possible aspect of a work of art is very unlikely. It takes a village. Art is susceptible to diverse readings, and there is nothing wrong with considering these readings separately and discretely, and with “narrow” scholastic precision.

A telling, anti-intellectual accent fallacy occurred when he said that the makers of the film in question would “be the first to tell you” of the abridgment of this story, whereas academicians, he implied, would not. Since unacknowledged reductionist simplifications are forbidden by academic ethics, the characterization of an excessively narrow analysis as academic would be almost oxymoronic.

In a pathetic attempt at gnomic drollery that failed to extend beyond vacuous sloganeering, he offered a bromidic proverb concerning the reflexive nature of finger-pointing (*qui s’excuse s’accuse*), and then, with deliciously self-ironizing poetic justice (*plus on est de fous, plus on rit*), proceeded to demonstrate, via numerous examples of self-contradiction, that this principle of reflexivity applied equally well to him (*parlez du loup, et vous en verrez sa queue*). Well, no harm, no foul, for as Ludwig Wittgenstein says, “A contradiction cannot lead one astray because it leads nowhere.” However, as Jung observes, “It is often tragic to see how blatantly a man bungles his own life and the lives of others yet remains totally incapable of seeing how much the whole tragedy originates in himself.” Also, turnabout being fair play (*par pari refero*), it is just to judge people according to their own standards.

He made evaluative comments about a certain film, claiming to be operating under the protective mantle of objectivity. When I, with actual objectivity, accurately described certain empirical facts about that film that were not just explicit but referential, he spat back with unconstructive and fear-revealing stridency, saying that merely noticing any such facts obligated me to hate a film and that I must then hate the film that was the topic of the mailing list through which we were communicating. Unable to distinguish a laudatory defender from a detractor, his forlorn attempt at Socratic irony left him at pains to show why I would have gone to the trouble of getting myself on the mailing list in the first place if I hated the topic. I leave him to wrestle with that paradox.

An object in itself can be square or round, but not good or bad. It can only good or bad *for* or *to* someone. Such qualities are subject-contingent, hence the term *subjective*. Citation of the mere occurrence of an event or the mere existence of an object is objective, except according to him, given the impediment preventing him from recognizing such distinctions. I cited both judgments of taste, which were truthfully labeled as such and to which the concept of wrong does not apply, and empirical facts, for which I was not and could not be responsible and was powerless to change. Neither can threaten any healthy psyche. When merely stating facts, he accused me of bending them. Such behavior is unnecessary when one is right and so is left to lawyers and politicians.

He characterized my accurate, factual reference to the form of his signature as denigration, even though on the level of sheer, uncommitted description, I perfectly and unassailably satisfied his criterion of objectivity. He seemed not to realize that objectivity entails an inability to see the emperor’s new name. The message being invulnerable, he attacked the messenger. The comfortable haze through which he “objectively” sees the world is not for me (*amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*). Further, I disclaim all responsibility for what others choose to publicize about themselves.

After claiming to pride himself on his objectivity, he then stooped to speculation that bore the stench of prejudice. It was so sad to see him held hostage by his few, poised, reactive dispositions, offering mere knee-jerk assertion with neither argument nor development. As a study in rancorous, corrosive solecism, and with his intellectual profiling, summary nerd bashing and contempt for all things cerebral, he was charm itself. Via unfocused projection, he saw in my sincere, factual objectivity his own smirking sarcasm. As Robert Stam notes, "Films are open to our desires and projections, even when these desires are sublimated into an apparatus of positivist objectivity." Shunning legitimate logical resources, he pathetically resorted to counterfactual, shallow, abusive, anti-intellectual stereotypes, which he claimed were the product of his experience. However robust may have been the intuition on which these were based, I too have been around long enough to recognize certain stereotypes, including those embittered persons who harbor a malignant intolerance of all who would dare outscore them on the GRE, or what Gene Seymour calls "spoilsportsmanship." In such circumstances, the rationalization that "there's no show without Punch" is of little comfort.

Were he a true participant in civilization, and therefore personally invested in positive representations thereof, he would have been slower to denounce it. However, his ox not being gored (and sparing himself the rigors of logic), he had nothing to lose by offering a reductive portrayal of me based on slothful induction and upward-looking snobbery, sufferers of which must rationalize their ignorance by diminishing those of greater sophistication, with the pot calling the sugar black. Character assassination passing for argument, as Hamlet says (III.ii.), "though it make the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must, in your allowance, o'erweigh a whole theatre of others." Being so proudly untutored, and with so little concern for the nobler aspirations, he would be happy to know that the dullness of his fustian rant made it hurt all the more. He need never fear an accusation of the erudition he so reviles. Far be it from me to dispute one so eager to establish and reinforce his commoner-than-thou credentials as one of the intellectual peasantry.

Those times during discussions when I agreed with him, he could not bring himself to notice. Instead, he persistently (*toujours perdrix*) labored under the misconception that I disagreed with him. (When Lucy asks Ricky for money and Ricky agrees, Lucy can be counted on to ask, "Why Not?") I was able neither to prevent nor correct his misconstruction of the situation. He offered strenuous assertions that my attempted clarifications were insincere, failing to grasp (and perhaps even to glimpse) the truth, or perhaps merely spoiling for a fight. Given his treatment of those who concur with him, one can only imagine his reaction to actual opponents. When I spoke common sensibly, he took it as preening and posing, as if I were sagely waxing dogmatic and expounding autocratically. He falsely accused me of misguided certainty and would not concede that a person could know his own meanings. Thus, when some time later he said, "Don't get me wrong," I thought, "If there is any justice, then why *not* get you wrong?"

As with other examples cited above, such as his signature, when I *defended* an example of anachronism in a film, he astonishingly, though true to form, mistook this for condemnation, as if (*per saltum*) mere noticing constituted disapproval and depreciation, an idea the derisive dismissal of which is manifestly justified. He later excused anachronism in the same film as "artistic license" and "expediency," extending to himself alone rather more leniency than he had extended to others. Such observations were apparently unacceptable unless he was the one making them.

Following his example of disclosing autobiographical information, I did the same. My participation was of the same order as his, and yet he characterized mine as "self-aggrandizing."

Little did he know that I was once awarded a certificate of commendation by the university at which I was employed for working almost double my specified hours and spending hundreds of dollars of my own money in order to achieve my department's goals. I did not attend the banquet at which I was to be an honoree, thus saving the university the cost of my dinner. I instead received the award in my departmental mailbox. So much for self-aggrandizement, though after accusing me of it, and bragging that he never employed double standards, he subsequently turned his e-mail signature into a resume-like business card. His e-mail address already included a reference to his professional employment history, yet he faulted me for making an identical reference regarding a third person. Having freed himself Houdini-like from his own standards, and with his achievements publicly deployed, he was as Narcissus with his pool before him.

In passing, I casually mentioned the name of a film. He protested that he did not want to discuss that film, as if he had been solicited to do so and as if he had the prerogative to speak for everyone on the list and veto a topic. My right to participate in no way conflicted with his right to abstain. Ironically, he went on to offer personal information that was even more extraneous and off-topic.

He said that he would "not be lectured," but did not hesitate to upbraid me with withering, indecorous, defamatory and unjust social demotion born of his vulgarian rationalization. I, on the other hand, will *only* be lectured. Those who have nothing to teach me are not worth my time.

In freely lecturing me, he railing against positions I have never held, using examples similar to those I used decades before I became aware of him. I proved to be a convenient target for his transparently hand-waving and invidiously name-calling tantrum, and for his broad, caustic and unnuanced polemic, which offered not even a suggestion of a principled response and against which reason had no force. I was simply an opportunity for him to defend himself from accusations that were never made, at least not by me. (Ah, but the strawberries! That's . . . that's where he had me.) As if trying to gaslight me, his phatic philippic simply failed to make contact with the real issues (*vox et praeterea nihil*). The nonsense marshaled to his uses could garner merit only in the realm of pataphysics. Not even sticks and stones can break my bones when aimed not at me but at a straw man. And while false pretensions surely occur, the tooth of envy is powerless against granite.

Compulsives are known to defend themselves with alternate accounts of events. But, rather than simply assume his neurosis, I diplomatically acknowledged that his misunderstanding could have been due to clumsy expression on my part. He rejected that explanation, eschewing an opportunity for reconciliation. If he was not a pathological contrarian, then he at least had a highly developed sense of irony. And when moved to scorn, though residing in a glass house, he could at least dish it out. In fact, given the many discourtesies extended to me, he could make a career from vituperation, though "a furious man," as per Proverbs 29:22, "aboundeth in transgression."

I gladly granted him a monopoly on the use of that last resort of scoundrels: profanity (*O tempora! O mores!*). This he ultimately abandoned, instead loftily standing on dignity and dismissing me with oleaginous, mock-courtly formality, as if heeding the advice of a lawyer. He also invoked and rested on his record of courtesy and civility, ignoring the fact that that was then and this is now (*Fuit Troja! Stat Roma!*). His historical courtesy was welcome as far as it went (*pourvu que ça dure*), but did little to compensate for later behavior that did him little credit. Whereas I repeatedly apologized for inciting him, he never reciprocated and was seldom even grudgingly conciliatory.

Even though Samuel Johnson says, “No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money,” I have something to share rather than something to sell. Seeking the least remunerative means of exhibition, I told him that I would not flaunt my website by announcing it on the mailing list. He denounced this act of modesty as a “passive aggressive threat.” Passive aggression is the best kind. He may prefer the active form, but I do not abet suicide. My statement could only be a threat if the material in question were valued and if access to it were denied. For him to acknowledge its value would be flattery, a strange mode for one bent on insulting me. Denial of access is virtually impossible. Anyone who could manage to find their way onto the mailing list in question would have no trouble finding anything that I might post. My “threat” was thus of great practical inconsequence.

He countered my “passive aggressive threat” with his repeated “offer” to withdraw from the mailing list. He was a very valuable resource, making his gesture substantially more threatening than mine. It looked for all the world like a desperate solicitation of praise, which he received. In the end, he retired in consternation, but only temporarily, demonstrating his integrity to be no greater than his objectivity. Such self-mockery is enough censure in itself.

He thanked those who had e-mailed him privately with their support, a gesture redundant with respect to its stated purpose, as those people would have already been thanked by direct reply. Instead, this most amusing stunt was useful only as a boast aimed at me, a mare’s nest in which he could rub my face even if the cited e-mails were fictitious.

Ultimately, he fell afoul of the demands for both intelligence and civility made by civilization, and was unappreciative of corrective analysis of his distortions. Finding his confusion intractable and himself lost to sober debate and not worth the bother (“*Nous ne sortirons jamais de ce bordel.*”), as well as experiencing health issues due to this episode, it seemed prudent to decamp (*ex abundante cautela*) and to relinquish the platform to this 800-pound gorilla so that he could hold forth *hardi comme un coq sur son fumier*. This imperious alpha male is now free to take his singularly bilious, smugly platitudinous anathematizing and run with it (*spero meliora*). I gladly concede to him the title of *maître des basses œuvres*. Heavy is the crown worn by the king, but the great ones make it look easy. (And if people cannot publicly parade their faults and disgrace themselves, then the terrorists have won.) To save him the trouble of braying his contempt, it may be assumed that he would, no doubt, summarize my work with the words of Bart Simpson: “In conclusion, Libya is a land of contrasts.” Thus, escaping with my health, I vacated the proverbial kitchen, recognizing that fences make good neighbors, and sincerely hoping that he would enjoy the resulting relief. (Having already expressed his disinclination to review the written record, as if his denial could allow him to have his cake and eat it too, he would be expected to fail to notice this acknowledgment and to recommend that I retreat, thinking it was his idea.) In the end, with a fittingly cinematic allusion, the only thing to say is “Clipper Ships.” If not even Atlas is entitled to shrug, then sue him.