Pedantry as the Best Defence

by Theodore Dalrymple (September 2022)

New York Office, Edward Hopper, 1962

I am trying to catalogue my books—a task that is probably beyond both my powers and my life expectancy. The first thing that most people ask when they see my books is, 'Have you read them all?' to which I feel inclined to reply, 'Several times,' but I still have, even at my advanced age, a slight regard for the truth, and I therefore confess that I have not. I would certainly like to have read them all—I never buy a book that I do not *intend* to read—but somehow things like going to the

supermarket have always got in the way of reading the three volumes and 2456 pages of A.C. Crombie's *Styles of Scientific Thinking in the European Tradition: The history of argument and explanation especially in the mathematical and biomedical sciences and arts.* I suspect that it would take many people even longer to read the book than it took Professor Crombie to write it, indeed several lifetimes. Now, alas, I am obliged to recognise that I should have to live a great deal longer than I shall if I were ever to read these dense and fantastically learned volumes, which stand reproachfully on my shelves.

My books are a kind of autobiography, but an autobiography readable or decipherable only to the subject of it himself, namely me. Anyone else would see just a jumble of small collections of titles about very various subjects: the history of Haiti, the authorship of Shakespeare question, arsenic poisoning 1750 – 1950, the Rwandan genocide. The possessor of these books must have had a grasshopper mind, anyone perusing them must conclude, not a scholar but a kind of intellectual magpie, the various subjects being to his mind what bright little objects are (or are said to be) to the magpie's uncapacious brain. I once read the obituary of a man who had spent his life studying Ethiopia, who had 7000 books about that country in his personal library. I have perhaps 25: therein the difference between a scholar and a dilettante.

Looking through a pile, I came across a slim volume published in 1995. I remember that I bought it when it first came out; I think I must have hoped that it would attain classic status, though I don't think my hopes have been fulfilled. Not having read it, the book remained in pristine condition. One can almost always tell when a book has been read, without the need to search for the DNA of him who has read it.

The book was a novella titles *The Simmons Papers*, by Philipp Blom. It is the purported autobiographical manuscript, perhaps veridical, perhaps a spoof (that is to say, a spoof within a spoof), posthumously published and commented upon by literary

academics of marked inability to write clearly or say anything important, of a deceased philosopher called P.E.H. Simmons. It recounts his work on words starting with the letter *P* for a dictionary that will fix once and for all the real meanings of all the words in the English language, such that no one will ever again mistake their meaning or feel the need to invent new words. Thus will Man, or at least English-speaking man, have gained a sense of control over the universe: the untoward will have been conquered and therefore anxiety overcome.

The author, Philipp Blom, was born in Germany, grew up in Austria, and studied for a doctorate (in philosophy) in Oxford. English, I presume, was his second tongue, and I was full of admiration for his mastery of it. His description of some faded artificial flowers in a depressing café of the kind that still existed in England at the time he wrote, and that somehow managed to serve food that seemed not to be fresh even when just cooked, is perfect:

> *The pots of plastic flowers which are dangling from the pillars have long since lost their synthetic liveliness and taken on the lighter tone of cooked vegetables.*

A sentence such as this is sufficient, at least for me, to conjure up an entire world, perhaps because I have known that world. Strange to relate, I even feel a sense of nostalgia for its dinginess. I roll the sentence round in my mind, as a wine-taster rolls a vintage in his mouth. Dinginess has its attractions: it makes no demands on you, you can relax in its presence and make none of the effort necessary to maintain something better. That, of course, is the attraction of the informal way we dress now: it makes no demands on us, and enables us to pretend that our minds are on higher things.

Mr Blom—or perhaps I should say Dr Blom—also captures perfectly the tone of the English upper-middle class pedant, no doubt because he had the opportunity to observe the type closely (though it has now all but died out in academia, and

been replaced by something far worse).

That type of pedant can never bring himself to say anything categorical, without some kind of derogation from what he has just said. He cannot make a statement without qualifying it, and then without qualifying his qualifications. He lives in a permanent mental hall of mirrors where everything is a reflection of a reflection. It is ironic, then, that such a type should be trying to fix meanings one and for all so that we may live in certainty.

Our lexicographer attaches special virtue to the letter *P*, probably because, having been allocated it as his field of research, he wants to believe (as most of us do whenever we have something to do) that his task is of special significance, at least of more significance than something else. He goes every day, at precisely the same time, to the institute in which the Definitive Dictionary is being concocted and works away in his small office without contact with anyone except the messenger in the building, who fetches and carries documents and books. His life could hardly be on a smaller scale or more circumscribed, except perhaps in prison: but from the window in his office he can see a woman in a flowered dress working in an office devoted to the letter *M*. He dreams of some kind of relationship with her, and eventually has the fantasy (that seems real enough to him, and perhaps even satisfies him) that he has tea with her every afternoon. The tininess of his existence is expressed by the way he starts the section of the manuscript in which he describes her appearance one day in the dismal café in which he takes his lunch:

> *Perhaps you remember my telling you about the small café in which I usually take my lunch.*

The manuscript is so short that no reader could possibly have forgotten. The *perhaps* is a typical manifestation of his pedant's inability to say anything categorical or without

qualification.]

Something almost happened there.

Something almost happened there: the nearest he ever got to an event in his life that was out of his routine. Such an event, if it were ever to happen, would be both exciting and anxiety-provoking. It is better to keep events—such as afternoon tea with the lady from *M*—at the level of fantasy. That way it is possible to have the excitement without the anxiety.

It is not of course unprecedented for writers to write so cleverly in a language not their first: Joseph Conrad, after all, was one of the greatest writers of prose in English, and English wasn't even his second language, but his third or fourth. Arthur Koestler was another such who springs to mind. But for those of us who have struggled to reach a certain level of proficiency in a foreign language, this level of virtuosity is deeply impressive. Moreover, in Blom's case, he was only 25 years old when his book was published At the age of 25, I doubt that I had ever written, or even uttered, a single interesting sentence that could bear repetition twenty-five years later.

The nature of Blom's narrator—the pedant of miniscule scale of existence—interests me because I almost envy him. I envy him because his life is predictable, because it runs on rails, because, finally, fatal illness (which comes to us all in any case, whatever life we lead) is really the only thing he has to worry about, the only thing that can disturb the even tenor of his existence. His joys may be tiny, for example the coming across of an unexpected and hitherto unknown reference—but so too are his sorrows: and since sorrows, as Gray tells is, never come too late, and moreover are usually more prevalent than joys, the pedant's bargain is a good one.

But to be a pedant, to be able to fix your mind on tiny details, you have to have a certain temperament. It is not

given to everyone to be a pedant. No doubt you can train yourself to a certain extent, and no doubt many are pedantic in some corner or other of their lives, for example examining their electricity bill minutely, to find contradictions within it. But to be the full-blown thing, the man who can spend hours over dusty documents whose contents he holds in his mind so that he can pounce on inconsistencies with other documents—it requires that he be of a certain type for that. I envy him because, of course, I cannot be like him. We envy only those who are not like ourselves.

Although I am not sufficiently patient to be a real pedant, I nevertheless know the joys of pedantry. Principal among these is that of finding others to be in error. Pedants often or usually address themselves to other pedants, and there is rivalry in the accuracy of detail. Pedants have their pride: they indulge in a game of more-accurate-than-thou. The pleasure of discomfiting another pedant is not to be underestimated. Pedants can, of course, dress this up in their minds not as a lowly species of rivalry, but as a strict and honest regard for truth. A man who disregards truth, or overlooks small error because he thinks he has a deeper, truer truth to convey, is not only deluding himself but (worse still) misleading others. Therefore, no error is too small to be corrected or worth correcting. Untruths are like small clouds on the horizon, they grow until they cover the whole sky. A man who would overlook even a single untruth, no matter how small, is destined for a life of lies.

To immerse oneself in tiny details (such as entomological taxonomists, for example, have to do) is a way of keeping the intractability of the world at bay, in one’s mind if not in reality, the latter being defined as what will come to you if you do not go to it. But even if reality can be kept at bay only temporarily, this is still worth doing: at least one is free from anxiety, ambition, a sense of meaninglessness to life, for as long as one can remain immersed pedantically.

Under a regime such as the Soviet, it must have been very tempting for intelligent people to become pedants. Once you had made the obligatory obeisance to Lenin (no thesis, no matter what the subject matter, was complete or receivable without it), you were free of the pervasive lying and could then almost ignore the horrible world around you. You were like a prisoner who has decided that the best way to get through his sentence is to make no waves. And with luck, a pedant could alight on a subject that actually was of some interest.

I suspect that we are fast approaching a state of society in which pedantry will be the best defence against the prevailing moral and philosophical (not to say physical) ugliness. Find a corner of the world about which nobody cares, and immerse yourself pedantically in it. That will be the way to survive until you reach the bourne from which no traveller returns.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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