

On Comments

By Carl Nelson

“Only paid subscribers can contribute [comment],” – a notice on many substacks

Writing and then the published response can be like a tree falling in the forest. There are a lot of trees in the forest so it must happen a lot, but I can't remember ever hearing the crash. Likewise, many writers' work is published (Christened like a ship) and slid down the skid-way, but nary a splash is heard. As an author it feels much like expressing oneself into the void or yelling into the night, but left with the feeling that you are just another writer yearning upwards into the light. At best, you can argue that at least one person liked it – the editor. At worst, it's like a fart which didn't even smell and beyond this, there is that great silence. (Especially, if no payment arrives.) And here is where comments come in.

Letters to the editor, have traditionally been the old school way of readers voicing their thoughts regarding a writer's scribbles.

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g turn of the table, as the corresponding reader/writer must pass through the same hoops, in this case, another editor, with the same standards applied. The incoming comment must be interesting, cogent (or perhaps entertaining), limited in length and fairly strictly relate to the article in hand, with a little play allowed if the respondent happens to be especially credible, for example having expertise – in which case, the author might respond. My first publication credit was in a far ranging letter to the Editor in which I discussed (brainstormed) various solutions to world problems discussed in the paper. I had noted that tropical fish were said to be recession proof, and that if people would get smaller, instead of thinner, the problem of world hunger would be self-limited. It seemed unfortunate that they didn't.

I'm writing all of this while still not being a member of any publishing inner circle. Rather, I am just peering through a hole in the fence like many authors, and narrating the game

that I see. Online articles and substacks usually offer a much richer game than most newsprint sources. People can have their comments seen, and then other people can comment upon those comments. The author may respond and onlookers register their likes or dislikes (thumbs up or down). The editor is generally there only as a referee to prevent illegal play. Interesting threads may form. Some comments are supportive, some evidentiary, and some swing for the fences, testing or trying for the author's accolades. Foul balls occur. The more professionally serious substacks charge an admission fee, which, like anyone, I'll pay if I feel the product worth it – but I'm not going to join just to be heard. That's too much like a vanity press.

I remember reading one of Theodore Dalrymple's essays in a rather prominent journal online which also allowed readers to post their reactions. This is an all too rare allowance for major publications. But reading through the comments I could surmise why. My goodness! Did a number of us even read the same article? The responses were all over the map. I thought at the time, that to envision one's apparent audience from such a flotilla of stray thoughts and/or verbal effusions could lead any author to despair. If I were Mr. Dalrymple I would wonder whether there were any use trying to communicate with our fellow beings at all. It was truly scary to see how the crowd might take one's words and attribute them to this and that, like rabble cannibalizing a store to strip it of things useful to a rioting mind. At best, it would seem that given even the most seductive of pitches many readers could not hit off them, with few intellectual sparks thrown except perhaps some singles and several fouls.

I can imagine why a published magazine might closely monitor their letters to the editor. An emcee has to manage their audience so as not to encumber, misdirect or torpedo the show.

And I can imagine why an author might never respond. Who knows where the conversation might lead, when you are locked into a

verbal arrangement of sorts with an unvetted stranger. The result might be to platform some unknown the likes of Nick Fuentes and somewhere down the thread find him a big fan of Stalin and Hitler. One has to be careful of who one associates with publicly. Plus it all takes some time and effort. Like scientific experimenters, it makes more sense to do and publish another study than to try and reproduce someone else's.

One of the reasons I used Mr. Theodore Dalrymple as an example is that I read what he writes whenever I happen upon it. I find his style and subtlety of thought very appealing. His writing softly promotes a point, something in the tenor of Chekhov. But largely he writes to explore the dimensions and aspects of a particular observation and the attendant conundrum it spotlights. Theodore might find this following comparison jarring, but the product has something in common with a country song whose lyrics are hung upon a single common saying or clever line, such as Willy Nelson's "isn't it funny how time slips away". (Or a personal favorite of mine, Moe Bandy's, "It was Always so Easy, to Find an Unhappy Woman (Till I Started Looking for Mine.)" In each case, the larger song unpacks and visualizes the contributing elements.

There seem to be two kinds of writers: the most common sort who start right in with something to say (usually a 'burning topical question') and a target – these seem to collect the greatest crowd with the most germane comments. They line up in single intellectual file like soldiers, responding to the authoritative voice. Then, there are the more poetic who are indeed, pointed somewhere, but are most interested in what they find along the way which, if interesting enough, might toss them way off course. Their observations are more interesting to them than the argument. And their readers' observations tend to be all over the map too.

People whose minds are naturally quite directed can fall away or be lost to a tenuous narrative. These readers might find it

wandering or unclear or muddled or tedious. But those readers who like the piece might very well find in it – just about anything the mind might conjure, as its allusions direct the readers mind into personal associations. As an analogy I would suggest a string of pearls where the string represents the narrative, while the pearls represent the observations. The author, reading the evoked comments might justly wonder whether many of his readers had read the article at all! And then wonder, more morosely, why he had even undertaken the effort to compose his thoughts. But isn't it natural for a person admiring a jewel or pearl to imagine more interesting features within it, than the sweaty string? Perhaps one measure of an article's worth is the number and delight of the comments, rather than the lucidity of them. And isn't a (unexpressed) call to inaction (reflection) and wonder of some benefit?

In James Michener's book *Return to Paradise*, the short story, "Mister Morgan", an irreligious, itinerant beachcomber comes in conflict with the local missionary. The beachcomber has found acceptance in the native Samoan community who respect his privacy and cultural affinity. The newly arrived missionary, Pastor Cobbett, on the other hand, whose nature vis a vis the natives is like flint on steel, creates sparks quickly upon arrival as he begins to implement his teachings using local bullies as his wardens. The beachcomber, who takes an immediate dislike to the puritanical missionary, didn't move to this island to "change his ways" or to have them dictated. The brandishing of a shotgun changes the power dynamic. But in the end, the natives who were very much on the side of Mr. Morgan, eventually let themselves be placed under the thumb of Pastor Cobbett's leadership. And why was this because? As the author suggests, it was because Mr. Morgan offered no leadership. The majority wanted a leader, even if they were the person they disliked.

As Hitler noted, the audience is feminine. It is hard to

sexually excite them with another woman. Large audiences are drawn to someone who speaks with authority and moment; someone who urges action for definitive reasons. Who claims something needs to be done with force and vigor. The listener might not follow. But there is an urge to listen. Following someone's illuminating thoughts for a faint reason which you're unsure of is less urgent. Tracing the path of a butterfly is usually only done on warm summer afternoons as one is relaxing after lunch, or like watching fireflies on a sultry summer evening.. Other things grasp our attention at other times.

When you're sharing your thoughts with someone and the message fails, there is always the question of whether they don't understand what you are saying, or whether they can't understand what you are saying, or you just don't interest them personally. But more commonly it might be the case that they misconstrue what you are saying, or haven't listened to what you are saying. Since most of us feel that what we have to say is interesting, when our audience fails to materialize or leaves us, the above is demoralizing. Whatever the cause, for some reason they lost interest.

Say what you will about comments. At their least they underscore a point of interest and that the author held them enough to squeak about it. Your writerly existence has been stamped and validated. This is how you pay for your parking, and is why I often try to leave a comment, even if terse, following much of what I read.