Occasional Papers
([on])
Practice & Form

On Being Quirky

Baron Wormser

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On Being Quirky

A few times over the course of what some writers in a burst of optimistic narrative refer to as a "career," I have been called "quirky" in print. Whenever I have seen this sprightly word, it has given me pause. I understand it roughly as meaning "hasn't played along with the game but seems to be a writer nonetheless—don't know where the guy is coming from but seems to be somewhere—is sort of all over the place in terms of subjects, approaches, and genres but probably possesses some core somewhere—not a career academic but not an urban bohemian—political and historical but not an activist—didn't he live in the woods like some sort of heathen for a long time, way longer than Henry David Thoreau—what's with that?" I could go on in terms of paradox and oxymoron but I'll stop there.

Quirky, of course, also means "quirky," which is to say not able to be easily pinned down, fond of idiosyncrasy, and, at its furthest reach, eccentric in that way the British made famous, which is to say weird but harmless. I can't say I've gone out of my way to be idiosyncratic or eccentric because I wouldn't know what the way was in the first place. Chet Baker singing "Let's Get Lost" has always been one of my favorite songs, which is to call up some personal history, all of which relates to being "quirky."

In the fall of the tumultuous year 1969, I was in graduate school in southern California. I had graduated with a B.A. in June of that year and wanted to get as far away as I could from the East Coast, specifically from my hometown of Baltimore, an environ that was both gritty and stifling. California beckoned many people around that time, though the bloom, as the Manson murders indicated, was off the psychedelic rose. Southern California was a particularly poor choice because I didn't like traffic, smog, endless suburbia, drive-in churches, fast food, or relentlessly cheerful people, but, being quirky, or having no self-knowledge whatsoever, I thought I could make a go of it.

Probably *thought* is too kind a word. I had no idea what I was doing. While I was applying to graduate schools, my mother was dying from cancer, and I was holding our family together as best as I could, which was taking a toll on me that I had no way to reckon. And yes, by the way, a large-scale land war was going on in Southeast Asia in a place called Vietnam, more particularly a place called South Vietnam. It actually was a conflict since, despite the presence of tens of thousands of American troops, war never had been officially declared. It hasn't been since World War II.

As a graduate school student, I may have thought I was safe from the draft. I, like many, did not know what to think. There were quotas and they had to be filled, but the nation was a crazy quilt of local boards with very different populations. My board was located in still-rural-though-becoming-suburban Baltimore, and they wanted me. Many quirks of circumstance were played out in many young lives at that time. I was drafted that fall and went to Draft Morning in an armory in less-than-scenic downtown Los Angeles in November, 1969—the week, as I recall, of Thanksgiving. One advantage of being quirky is that life seems to supply you with an additional ration of ironies.

I should stop here to note that I despised the war. I didn't despise the soldiers fighting the war, but I despised the lying that accompanied the war and the lack of any sensible goal to the war. I despised the suffering the war caused and the ghastly environmental damage. I grew up hearing about falling dominoes, but the nations of Southeast Asia didn't look like dominoes. I grew up hearing that if we didn't fight this war, "they" would be in Hawaii next. I also despised the very notion of war. I wasn't sure about the value of any war, much less one that intervened in another nation about which we knew next to nothing and whose inhabitants we contemptuously labeled as "gooks." Who were we to do that? As a question, it seemed much more than quirky.

I found myself that day with the text from one of the English classes I was taking at the university, probably something like *The Collected Poems of John Donne*, a large pink paperback I still own and often open because I like John Donne a great deal. I thought I might have some time to read. I was always looking for time to read. Of course, I was wrong. Instead, in the famous words of Arlo Guthrie, a young man such as myself got "injected, inspected, detected, infected, neglected, and selected." I went through numerous lines and filled out numerous forms and

ate lunch at some diner where the government gave me a voucher and then found myself at the desk of an Army psychologist who looked understandably world-weary and who asked me why I had requested to see him. I said I couldn't do it. He looked at a letter from the psychiatrist I had been seeing for the past year or so in Baltimore before I headed to California and who spelled out that I was a hurting body. The psychiatrist had prescribed Valium for me, to which I quickly became something like addicted since it softened some of the torment I was going through with my mother dying a very hard death and my family generally falling apart and me not having much of a clue what to do with myself beyond getting through the day's obligations while the war, always there, raged on, a fever that would not quit.

At the end of the day, after more lines and very brief conversations with various other guys, many of whom were dark skinned and a few thousand times savvier than I was, I sat on a bench and waited for my name to be called to learn my fate. I had thought about alternatives such as going to Canada or applying as a conscientious objector, but neither one fit me. I was more inclined to be a draft resister, to simply refuse and take the consequences. I had no idea what the consequences might be or what went on in jails. I probably didn't even know what male rape constituted. I just knew I wouldn't go if I was told to go. I wasn't religious in the conscientious sense, but I had a conscience, and it said "no."

After what seemed like years but wasn't, I was given a card that told me I was 1-Y, psychologically unfit. I wasn't being drafted that day, though I could be drafted another day if my mental health improved in the government's eyes and if my draft board needed my body. I looked at the card and nodded and told some other guy and he said, "You're lucky," and I walked out of that building and stood in the California sunlight and was elated and saddened. I wasn't going but others were; many others, to judge by the numbers that day in that armory. Some of them would not be coming back. Probably all who returned would be coming back totally different from the people who first set foot there. All of us that day could suspect that, but none of us could know that. We needed time and life to fill us in, even when there wasn't going to be much time or life.

My reaction to the war, and to what that day constituted, was, by definition, a good deal more than quirky. History was leaning hard on me and countless others. Yet if you don't agree, if you think twice, people have to put you in some category, and the less threatening, the better. The basic notion is that everyone will forget about this unhappy stuff anyway. America is built on a sort of genial amnesia. Slavery, smallpox blankets, race riots, lynching, the so-called Great Depression, a war on the other side of the world, whatever….We're still here to make money and be happy. Writers, of course, are people who don't forget.

I wasn't writing at that time. I was in school writing papers about Yeats and Joyce and John Donne, which isn't so much about writing as performing various critical shenanigans, but that only lasted for a year. I liked novels, poems, essays, plays, and short stories, but I didn't like theory. And I wanted to like things the way I liked the Rolling Stones or crab cakes or watching the sun go down over the Pacific. I didn't want to theorize about it. After I left grad school, a guy there told me that the profs thought they were going to get a Johns Hopkins hotshot, but instead they got you, Baron. How true. When, upon mutual agreement, my tie with academia was severed, my heart almost went out to those serious men in their book-lined offices. I was bent. Wartime, grief, and psychedelics, to name three presences in my young life, had influenced me irreparably.

After moving as far away from southern California as my wife and I could (I had met Janet, my wife of forty-four years, in July of 1969) while still remaining in the continental forty-eight (which upon later examination was probably a mistake, our stopping at an ocean), I wrote a book about architecture and a novel. The book about architecture was written with a Harvard Design School guy whom my wife knew and who became, for a time, one of those intellectual, stoner companions with which the era was littered. Many nights we had meandering, halting, very randomly insightful conversations that covered everything from Aretha Franklin to Herman Hesse. I wrote about how Bauhaus modernism was tedious and tight, and how architecture wanted to loosen up and be more sculptural, decorative, and colloquial. In other words, I predicted what was going to happen to architecture, which Tom Wolfe and others wrote about down the road. Unfortunately, I had no credentials beyond a couple of undergrad courses, my own interest, and my stoner buddy. When the editor who was interested in the book found out I was some English department drop-out doing odd jobs (working a night shift in a box factory and washing dishes) in Cambridge, MA, she passed on it. Again, my heart almost went out to her. Uncredentialed meant quirky.

I understood, or at least was starting to understand. I showed the manuscript to a professor of architectural history at Yale whom I idolized and who told me to apply to grad school there in American Studies, but I was done with school, little knowing that a lucrative career as an adjunct awaited me in the fabled, we-can-pay-these-suckers-almost-nothing halls of academe. The novel was based on a Turgenev novel and set in Maine in the 1970s. That alone should tell you of its absolutely zero commercial potential. An editor at a New York house (this was before you needed an agent to get in the door) told me I could write, however. Thanks. If I had a nickel for every encouraging brush-off I've received, I could fill a couple of those piggy-banks that I received as a child but inevitably broke in a paroxysm of trivial yet overwhelming need. I liked Fudgsicles.

Meanwhile, my wife and I had moved to the Maine woods, quite literally. With the help of a local carpenter and his amused assistants we built a house (or glorified cabin, as our son came to call it) on forty-eight acres in central Maine. The house was off the grid. We could have situated the house on a part of our land that was within the distance the power company allowed you to get poles without charging you, but we liked a different site that was beyond that distance. It was like us to choose aesthetics over money and practicality. What for most people would not have been a decision—"Of course I want power. Are you crazy?"—was not only a decision for us but one that took us in the opposite direction. I'll avoid the *q* word here. It seems too mild.

We never asked ourselves how we were going to do it, because we figured people all around the planet lived like that, and people had lived like that forever, and we could live like that. One reason my wife and I were together was that we were comfortable with what Buddhists call "big mind." The advantage of "big mind" is that you can situate yourself in a framework larger than your fears and desires. The downside is that the framework can get so big, you can get lost. People who came to visit us from the so-called civilized world, people who were working in the city and starting to get ahead and have careers (there's that word again) intimated and sometimes more than intimated that we were lost and already well on the road to nowhere. It was charming, how we lived, but what were we up to? What we were trying to prove? What were we protesting? Most of the world was trying to leave this way of life behind. Didn't we know that?

I wasn't trying to prove or protest anything. I wasn't even trying to be defiantly different. I thought that way of living, which very much was a way of living, not a lifestyle (an odious phrase) or something you pulled off a store shelf, but a way of living on earth and being with the elements—fire in the wood stove, water that we pumped and carried, earth that we tilled, and glorious air that we breathed—was how everyone could live. It wasn't some hardship or problem. It wasn't pathetic or confused. It just had no use for what the rest of the world called progress. It valued a kind of freedom that for many people might have seemed little more than drudgery: You heat up water? You don't have indoor plumbing? You heat your whole house with wood? You cook your own food every night from scratch? You don't have a television? Don't you know you can be arrested for not having a television? As those sages of that era, Cheech and Chong, put it, "Are you out of your bleeping mind?"

One of my quirks is that I have never really much cared what other people thought about anything. It wasn't that I didn't pay attention to what others said. I did. I liked to ask questions and listen, much more than I liked to talk about myself, which is one reason why this is not easy to write. It wasn't that I didn't want to hear thoughtful feedback about something like my writing. I did. It was just that I was pretty much going do what I was going to do anyway. And whether that inclination stemmed from arrogance, indifference, sheer out-of-it-ness, sincerity, intensity, or all the above, it made little difference in the end. I figured there wasn't one size that fit all. The very notion of there being one, homogeneous, get-with-the-program size repelled me. Life seemed to me to be infinite sizes. Little wonder that the Army sized me up as "psychologically unfit." From their point of view, and from the point of view of many enterprises, I was. From the point of view of that vaunted, though not often practiced, American individuality, I wasn't at all unfit. I belonged to the tribe of those who, for better or worse, went their own ways and weren't afraid to see where that would take them.

Looking back I can see myself as very much a product of a time, someone who grew up with J. D. Salinger, quite literally (I remember reading his work as it came out in *The New Yorker*), and took it to heart. Salinger's heroes and heroines, Holden and Franny and Seymour, were nascent pilgrims in search of something more than the First Church of Extroverted, Hand-Shaking, Back-Slapping, How's-It-Going, Let's-Make-a-Heap-of-Money Socialization. The reason those books had such an enormous impact was that they squarely stepped into the quiet

hell of getting along in this world but made no hysterical fuss about it. They were lyrical and calm, even when they portrayed harrowing moments. They could be very funny too. They were prose, but they were poems too, in the sense that they honored the insights that came from the moments that composed life—Franny sitting in the ladies' room or Holden watching Phoebe on the carousel. As I came to realize many years later, the American writer who made the strongest reckoning of the suffering of World War II was J. D. Salinger.

Another age might have dismissed Salinger as hopeless and dangerously close to sentimental. Many a young reader these days considers Holden Caulfield to be little more than some maladroit, whining, lacking-in-ambition loser, which is to say that those readers already have bought into the hell that is oppressing Salinger's characters. It's a good-natured hell in many ways, particularly if you are born with the advantages of money and skin color. And it's a hell with zillions of road maps about where to go and what to do. Salinger confirmed an insight—we are all born with the mortal arrow of suffering lodged in us—but provided no road map. That wasn't his job. Literature asks questions. It doesn't give answers, which makes it an inherently quirky and well-nigh worthless enterprise, which is why I always have felt at home there.

And not only in literature, but in poetry. If I were to pause now, I might feel some emanations (a poetic word favored by the likes of William Blake) about poetry, as in "Now we're in for it." As a woman I once worked for used to say when she introduced the faculty, "And then there are the poets": cloven creatures that dress in violet and subsist on watercress. Indeed, we are in for it because, after all, poetry is one of our human birthrights. Despite the bad, I-don't-get-poetry press, I wouldn't want to give up a birthright that had such value. And I haven't. This is where quirkiness may seem to descend into downright incomprehensibility. Poetry is no help in the material world. However much in my own life I have striven to get poetry into people's lives—and I have, by creating and running a conference on teaching poetry, by going to libraries and people's living rooms to lead discussions of poems, by working extensively in schools, and by being available to talk to anyone about poetry including in bar rooms of such diverse locales as Presque Isle, Maine, and Atlanta, Georgia (both notable occasions where the question "So what do you do?" moved beyond the implicit answer of "Stare into my beer" and sparked considerable and modestly awe-struck discussion)—poetry remains for most people somewhere out there on a very hazy horizon.

Poetry chooses you. You don't choose poetry. This may be said of all serious writing, as many people in this enterprise know well, but poetry in particular has been likened to wandering around in an electrical storm waiting to be hit. It's not the most logical way to spend a life. It's also not the safest, because the amount of putative control one exercises is next to nil. Our age, which has taken its cues from switches, buttons, knobs, pads, and my favorite phrase of all, joy sticks, believes in control. Poetry is not about control. Have you noticed a slight stagger in my stride that goes beyond my having an L4 herniated disc? Have you noticed me looking warily up at the sky? Have you noticed a habit of reverie masked by the habit of attentiveness? I raise these questions because poets, who after all are not writers in the sense that there is a publication called *Poets and Writers*, lead two lives. Most of us, of course, have a public life and a private one, but the private one for poets is not only intimately connected with the public one, it is distinguished by a resolute degree of mystery. I've written hundreds of poems and have no real idea where they come from. I can't say I want to know either. Part of the gig is being at home with mystery, which again puts me at odds with most folks around me who are busy demystifying, deconstructing, rationalizing, therapizing, and generally shedding some explicable light on our dark inner seas. All day long, people on National Public Radio are explaining and then explaining the explanations. Poetry just wants to go along for the ride.

Part of the gig, too, for me is about the impossibility of poetry to begin with. As Adam Zagajewski, the esteemed Polish poet and sometime correspondent of mine back in the 1980s, once wrote, "Poetry is an impossible art." I can hear some of you saying, "Well, that's great, Adam. What do we do next?" The thing is that it is great, the way mountain climbing is great or trying to bowl a perfect game is great or staying in love for more than six months is great, because all those endeavors are challenges and challenges make life engaging. It's a strange but good weight to carry around, at once a heady dose of idealism—"Wow, that's a big lake to swim across"—and a beckoning wave—"Let's try and see what happens." This aspect of the art, and it is vigorously an art not a craft, is more or less incommunicable to most people, including many people with whom I have been close, my father, for instance, who never once cracked one of my books. Poetry for them is something like a quirky hobby. "Baron's down in the cellar again putting ships in bottles or building a rabbit hutch even though he doesn't have any rabbits." You never know

when you might need a rabbit hutch, just the way you may not know when you'll need a poem. Death or love, grief or joy, has a way of jumping out from the hedges and emotionally waylaying a person.

When asked by strangers on the train what he did, the great poet W. H. Auden was supposed to have replied that he was a professor of medieval history, a reply that shut most people up. You can hear them saying, "How fascinating," and turning back to their newspaper or resuming staring out the window as an image of Lancelot or whatever the Magna Carta looked like wandered through some dimly lit mind-cave. In the United States, where we find a slot and identity for every endeavor, hundreds if not thousands of poets are eager to show up at conferences such as AWP, many of whom have joined the ranks of the academy and consider poetry to be a species of knowledge on an equal footing with quantum physics and political science. That has never been much value to me because it's the inwardness of poetry that intrigues me, not the outwardness. It's the unknowing, the approximation, the boggling uncertainty, the rare clarity, the fine feel of the right word, the unsettling mix of the received—hundreds of years of sonnets—and the personal—my take on it, that have led me on for decades. If we are, as Shakespeare wrote, "time's fools," then a poet such as myself is a further fool because I've gladly given myself up to something that in the world at large, despite the tokenism of prizes and poetry month (there is to my knowledge no fiction or nonfiction month, though there is a Financial Literacy Month and a Southern Side Dish Potluck Month), gives back next to nothing. And I consider myself—and this may be the main thing I have to tell you—to be lucky. In the roster of my failings, self-pity does not have a place. What does have a place, though not necessarily an unhappy one, is attitude. To say I've lived a life of internal exile would be an overstatement. To say I've been marching for decades to some different drummers would be accurate. Since people assume you are marching to their drummer, that's not usually an issue. I can smile half-heartedly or ironically as well as the next person, but what's on my mind isn't so much mayhem—I'm a peaceful, meditative sort—as a large sense of why-are-people-doing-what-they're-doing. It may be that one of the primal motives to writing is a sense of "I-don't get-it," not so much a sense, as they say about their football team in New Orleans, of "Who Dat?" as "What Dat?"

When I consider some of the animate and inanimate eminences that have fogged my screen—a crook saying, "I'm not a crook," We Destroyed the Village to Save the Village, someone named Dubya, Hummers (Don't you want to mount a rocket launcher on the top of your vehicle?), Just Say No (surely a piece of final wisdom), Salary Caps (I won't play for a lousy eight million, sorry), Gated Communities (Good fences eliminate neighbors), the decades of code words ("the undeserving poor" who want "your hard-earned money") for what amounts to nothing more than racism, Mutually Assured Destruction, Bundled Mortgage Backed Securities, Love It or Leave It—I can only shake my head in something like bleak wonderment. I know, of course, there has been worse. I have spent, as a not untypically haunted Jew, a lifetime studying that text (read, for starters, Vasily Grossman's magisterial *Life and Fate* or *Survival at Auschwitz*, by Primo Levi) but that fact doesn't take away a certain permanent disillusion. That disillusion sits beside a sort of pleasure in the dramas that the society into which I was born generates and about which, one way or another, I have written.

The balm this society offers is identity, but if you aren't particularly interested in an identity then you may wind up being called "quirky," because there is no nomenclature for you. More-or-less-amiable-but-unrepentant- renegade doesn't quite make for a category. Yet to be a writer in any serious sense seems to me to be the act of creating your own category, a category of one. As Oscar Wilde noted, you might as well be yourself because all the others are taken. If you really feel that, among other things, you won't be teased and tormented, as more than a few writers are, by that nasty itch known as envy. To accept our singularity, however, may be much easier said than done. Most people in publishing say they want originality, but when it comes down the road, precisely because it is original, it may receive less than a warm welcome. The pages of literary history are strewn with stories about belated recognition: this book about a guy chasing a white whale, who cares? It goes on and on and on. And how big is the I-want-to-read-about-whale-blubber market anyway?

In terms of my own life, definition has not weighed heavily on my mind, so that's okay. Part of the genius of poetry is that it honors the moments that compose life. It registers transience—another impossible but somehow crucial task. One of my favorite poets, Donald Justice, once wrote a book of prose called Oblivion. It's not a place many writers want to face up to for understandable reasons—most of us are buried alive there, most of us face not so much discovery as a serious job of excavation—and yet I feel that my own life, living in the woods of Maine

and rural northern New England far from the madding crowd, has benefited from the oblivion that geography can bestow. However much we try to make sums out of life, adding up our purposes diligently and arriving at a tally of achievements, the lesson that I learned over the years in those Maine woods was to forget such inveigling additions. Leaves fell, snow fell, mud seeped and oozed, and then it all started again. Everything does pass. It's breathtaking, literally and figuratively, but it's part of the "terrible beauty," to quote W. B. Yeats, that makes life so fascinating.

As my daughter likes to put it, I'm high-minded, also radical in the sense that my life as a writer has been lived without any regard to what the so-called real world wanted. There never has been anyone saying what my next book should be or might be. It's been me and my conscience and my predilections and my intuitions all the way through. In a society obsessed with what is going to happen next, I think that such people are weirdly crucial. I may be flattering myself as a writer and flattering you as writers, but I do believe that what writers can offer is stubbornly genuine. The connection between life and art is ever sketchy, but if we want to go to the most fearless places, and if we want to find out what is inside of us, that is where writing can take us. I'm thinking here of addressing the arrow of suffering that is in each of us, but that doesn't square necessarily with "Have a good day" and "Eat your happy meal." Of course, people may not want to go to those places. In fact, mostly they don't—they would much rather be entertained and distracted, particularly since a lot of money is being made in those quarters and a lot of corresponding attention doled out. Sometimes, however, they do want to go there. Sometimes they are willing to step out of line and think and feel twice about what they are doing here. Sometimes they are willing to let the enormity in, along with the trembling fineness of the ever-passing moments. Sometimes they are willing to listen to something that's, yes—quirky.