

Notes on the Desire for Validation

"You give me reason to live."

Randy Newman

Back when I was in high school and affecting to smoke pipes - I mean, I did smoke pipes; but it seemed something of an affectation even at the time, and certainly seems so now; though I retain some fondness for the aspiring and idealistic youth that I was then, so eager to cut a figure in the world (I was a romantic, though I didn't know it yet) - I purchased a book at Ed's Tinder Box in Santa Monica called The Pleasures of Pipe Smoking, by Carl Weber. My friend Mike, also a pipe smoker (in fact, it was Mike who first got me into the idea of smoking pipes, though he went about it quite differently from me, with less affectation and pretense), found this book amusing, for several reasons. He was amused by the authoritative air with which Mr. Weber communicated his knowledge and enthusiasms, and by all their pedantic detail. He was amused also by my apparent need for a kind of manual to accompany and support my newfound hobby (never quite at the level of an actual smoking habit, though it was part of my pose to pretend it was). But more than anything else, Mike - who was then beginning to have an interest in philosophy, which he would go on to major in in college - was perplexed

by the idea that because of his "expert" status in the world of pipes, the author appeared to enjoy smoking them more than we did. To be fair to Weber, this idea came more from me than from him. When I would cite his authority regarding various aspects of pipe-smoking, Mike would say something like, "Who gives a fuck what that guy thinks?" But I was quick to defend Weber - not entirely seriously, but also with the genuine respect I felt an authority on the subject deserved.

"What makes him such an authority?" asked Mike.

"Well, he has made a study of the subject," I replied, with a smile.

"And you're saying that makes him enjoy pipes more than I do?"

"Actually, yes. Because you see, Mike, he has more justification for his enjoyment."

Mike giggled. He was enjoying this. "Let me get this straight. You're saying that...what exactly are you saying?"

"I'm saying he has more validity and authority in his pleasure than we do. I guess you could say his pleasure is certified, ratified and validated." I smiled again. The emphases were meant to draw attention to the questionable nature of these assertions. I was aware of the absurdity here; yet I was not completely joking in my outlook,

either. After all, Weber had written a book. Published a book. His opinions and enthusiasms had been made official by publication. They were therefore, in a sense, unassailable.

"Well then, I am assailing him. I hereby assail him," Mike declared.

I pointed at him in mock admonition, and shook my finger. "Then you do so at your own risk."

Mike cracked up. 48 years later, at an informal school reunion I'd put together, Mike reminded me of our exchange. "Remember that guy who enjoyed his pipes more than we did?"

"Carl Weber. The Pleasures of Pipe Smoking," I cited. Mike cracked up again - the same giggle he'd had as a teenager. That Christmas (which was just this last Christmas, as a matter of fact), I found a copy of Weber on Amazon - the same paperback edition I'd had in high school, with the calabash and various pipely paraphernalia laid out in fetching profusion on the cover -- and sent it to Mike. The book, it turns out, was published in 1965. But age cannot wither, nor custom stale, its infinite...whatever. Weber lives! Mike even messaged me some deliciously absurd quotes, which pleased me, since I had only sent him the book as a joke - a fond allusion to our youthful vagaries -

and hadn't expected he would actually read any of it. I guess he just wanted to check up on Weber's philosophical validity. But I could have told him it was still secure, instantiated and documented by his book. Weber's authority had been bookified, and was therefore - notwithstanding Mike's objections - still unassailable.

If anyone accuses me of idolatry - Idolatry of the Book - I will readily plead guilty. You might even say this essay is an inquiry into the grounds of that idolatry - but not just of the book. It is an exploration of the desire for validation, which makes me look to books to satisfy it. But though books, to me, represent the highest form of validation, they are not the only one. Validation can also be achieved through degrees, awards, credentials, certification, and peer-reviewed publications and notices. (I used the British term here; I am still, in my mind, smoking a pipe.) It is important to note that, as in my exchanges with Mike, I do not take any of this stuff totally seriously. Though I do not exactly disavow it, either. I merely, like the rest of us, seek approval and confirmation in my being. I wish to know that I have reason to live.

Just kidding. (Sort of.) It's a running joke between my wife and me, this predilection for academic approval -

especially since my doctoral degree is from a second-rate institution - the University of Southern California. Or at least it was a second-rate institution when I got my Ph.D. (I was tempted just there to write "the Ph.D." I once, while ardently scanning someone's credentials, observed the following sentence: "He holds the Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University." Oh my God! What a consummation devoutly to be wished! To hold - and even better, to be said to hold -- the Ph.D. from The Johns Hopkins University! The mere thought of such a thing was -- still is -- enough to make me tumesce.) But that - my doctorate, not my tumescence -- was in 1994, before the successful completion of USC's \$1+ billion capital campaign, which propelled it (arguably, no doubt, for some academic snobs - of whom I am one) into the ranks of first-rate universities.

I should mention that although I continue to use them, I really do not like the terms "first-rate" and "second-rate". They seem rather hateful to me. No, they are hateful - perched as they so complacently are on their snooty, superior (falsely-superior, actually), judgmental, pseudo-authoritative, bogusly-omniscient, obnoxiously-elevated Olympian overview. God, how I hate that shit. Of course, I cannot really disavow it, either. Much as I

would like to - or much as the better part of me would like to - I cannot totally disavow it. I myself am an intellectual snob. (Which is rather different, and perhaps more justifiable, than being an academic snob.) When mental push comes to cerebral shove, I really have time only for "the best that is known and thought in the world". (Matthew Arnold is my master. One of them, anyway.)

Full disclosure here: I went to Exeter. Graduated from Exeter. What's more, I graduated with a classical diploma. I applied to Harvard, Princeton and Stanford. (Harvard, twice.) I did not get in. I crapped out of the Ivy League. That's maybe one of the reasons why I'm an academic snob. If I'd actually gotten into one of those schools, I would have had nothing to prove. As it is, I am a perpetual B-list striver. I try harder, but will never quite succeed. I went to Berkeley instead. (Classics major there, too. If I had to go to Berkeley, the least I could do was be a classics major.) But I am actually very proud - now - of having gone to Berkeley. Good old anti-elitist Berkeley. Though at the time - freshman year, at least - I was not proud of it at all. Truth be told, I was deeply disappointed. Deeply disappointed, and slightly ashamed. Not smart enough for the Ivy League, where many of my friends from Exeter ended up going. But not me. I

didn't make the cut. I didn't cut the mustard. Not quite first-rate.

God, how I hate all this! How tedious and jejune and wrong-headed all this shit is! What a colossal waste of time! What a colossal waste of Mind, too! For I believe in Mind. Not "a first-rate mind", but Mind itself, as it is invoked and practiced by Arnold and his inheritor, Trilling (another one of my masters). Good old Trilling, nowadays so unfashionable and passé in the academy. Well, fuck the academy. (Which I am a member of - a failed member, that is. All the more reason to fuck it.) Let Trilling and his master, Arnold, be even more unfashionable and passé, then! (And let me sound even more like an academic Underground Man! I admit, Notes from Underground is one of my ur-texts. And Dostoyevsky, if not exactly another master of mine, is certainly in my pantheon.) Let all the so-called cutting-edge academic theorists despise and condemn both Arnold and Trilling! Their contempt only makes my masters all the greater - all the nobler - all the righter.

Whoa there, cowboy. Off your high horse. I got a little carried away there, I know. Not very professional of me. Then again, what would you expect of a second-rate, semi-retired academic? Second-rate? Hell no - fourth-

rate! Literally. The college where I was employed for 19 years was a fourth-tier college, the very bottom (according to the US News and World Report rankings) - that is, before it went bankrupt and closed its doors and I became a part-time adjunct instructor, teaching freshman composition.

OK, here is something else I cannot resist telling you. Once, when my father - whom I used to call "Gog" (an infantile appellation that somehow stuck) -- was feeling spiteful (he was not in general a spiteful person, but he had a mean streak, and I guess we were having a fight about something or other - probably real estate, which made him crazy), he remarked that I was a teacher at a third-rate college.

"No, Gog, you're wrong," I corrected him. "It's not a third-rate college. It's a fourth-rate college." That shut him up, all right.

The community college where I now teach is actually much better - larger, financially stable, competently run and directed, part of a statewide system of community colleges - than the private four-year college I taught at for all those years as a tenure-track, tenured, and then full professor. Normally, I would have been impressed by those credentials I just gave you; but since it was me, and I knew better, I never was. Frankly, I was always a little

ashamed that I ended up there. Sort of like my Berkeley syndrome - only much more so. Because of course there was no denying the fact that Berkeley was - and, just as importantly for academic snobs like myself, was known to be - a world-class university; even I, in my freshman-year, Ivy-League-manqué wrong-headedness, had to acknowledge as much. Whereas Dowling College - I can name it now that it's defunct, and there can be no repercussions - was totally unknown off Long Island, and on Long Island was known to be the College of Last Resort. I know this because our president once denied it at a faculty meeting. He said, "We are not The College of Last Resort." (Kind of like Nixon: "I am not a crook.")

I'll admit it was nice to be a tenured professor, even at a school like Dowling. But I never felt it was a real achievement - as I would have, say, at even a third-rate school. I was always more afraid of Dowling going under than of not getting tenure there. Turns out I was right. And now that I am a mere part-time hireling, working term to term, and making less than a quarter of what I made at Dowling (though I also took Social Security early, so it's not as bad as it could be), I actually feel better than when I was working at Dowling. At least for the last five or so years I was there, when it was in its slow death-

spiral, and things were very depressing: precipitous decline in enrollment, classes being cancelled, cafeteria getting emptier and emptier, faculty leaving, staff being laid off. It was gruesome. So it was actually sort of a relief when it finally closed. It was put out of its misery, and you no longer had to live in fear. The worst had come to pass, and the survivors dealt with it and got jobs at other schools. A number of us went to Stony Brook. I myself was there for a semester, until I met my wife and moved to Seattle, where I got a job as an adjunct at Highline College.

It was interesting, in a horrible way - the effects of living in secret shame for 19 years. Everybody there knew Dowling was a lousy school, but nobody wanted to admit it. Or if they did admit it - if only to themselves - they didn't talk about it. We talked instead about supporting our students, being there for them, making a difference, doing the best that we could wherever we were. Which was true, and all good stuff. And I believed it - and still do. I worked as hard at Dowling as I ever did at USC, or Holy Cross (where I taught for three years, non-tenure-track - my first job out of graduate school), or Stony Brook, or Highline. I never became cynical, I will say that - and most of my colleagues at Dowling were the same

way. But I carried an invisible mantle of shame around with me for all those years, despite my undeniable pride at being tenure-track, and then tenured, and then a full professor. (I keep repeating that mantra, don't I? I guess by now it's no wonder why. The regular progression through the academic hierarchy denoted by that litany of changing statuses pleases me - pleases the validation part of me, anyway.) But there was always a strong qualification to that feeling of pride. ("Yeah, but it's Dowling. I'm tenured at Dowling. I probably never would have gotten tenure at Holy Cross.") And that was probably true. Furthermore, my excessive regard for credentials and such was no doubt connected with the secret mantle of shame. My preoccupation with the outward signs of validation (for others, that is; because teaching at Dowling, I never felt I could claim that kind of validation for myself) was a kind of antidote to my inner feelings of disappointment, failure and even disgrace. After all, I had gone to Exeter. I had graduated with High Honors, and with a certificate in General Academic Distinction, from Berkeley. Even USC, when I was there, was beginning to make a serious bid to be a first-rate university. And now I was at Dowling. I had ended up at Dowling. What could I do about it? Well, I could buy books about Harvard, Oxford

and Cambridge. I could let my imagination roam over the green pastures of excellence. (Others' excellence, anyway. But the vicariousness of it worked for me.) I could nourish my mind with the best that was known and thought it the world. And I did. Knock yourself out, cowboy.

But true excellence, as we know, is a different thing from status and prestige. Just as validation is a different thing from affirmation, or acceptance, or approval. I like to think of myself as someone who pursues excellence, not status or prestige. But is this true? And if it is, then why I am so obsessed with the mere trappings of excellence? Do I really, truly care about validation, ratification, certification? Do I really care about badges and awards? Or is it rather just approval, acceptance, and affirmation that I am searching for? And what is "just" about any of those things? Aren't those the things, the fundamental things, that all of us want and are looking for?

I mentioned earlier that my obsession with these essentially empty markers - I'll call them VRC, for short (it's got a nice antiquated ring that appeals to me) - is a running joke between me and my wife, Julie. (Who, not so incidentally, is summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa from Yale; or "Phi Beta summa", as I like to abbreviate it; or

sometimes, summa cum Kappa.) It's a joke because we both know I'm not really serious; but the joke is funny because we both also know I am a little bit serious. These things really do matter to me - at least a little more than they should. Why? Because I don't have them. I don't have VRC. It is the "trace", as the literary theorists would say (the theorists at the universities that didn't accept me, and would never have hired me), of the cut I never made. Of the mustard I never could cut. The mustard stain, so to speak, that ended up on my "USC Trojans" sweatshirt. (Block that runaway metaphor, tackle!) VRC is just the surface manifestation - the epiphenomenon, if you will; or, if you won't, then the perversion - of a deeper desire for membership in the triple-A club of approval, acceptance and affirmation. For aren't we all, in our own ways, broken-down cars on the highway of life, requiring roadside assistance? And you don't need to be a member in good standing in this AAA to get service. All you need is love.

Is that too glib? Has my penchant for the apt epigram gotten the best of me once again? That may be. A penchant for the apt epigram is an occupational hazard of the essayist - especially one with pretensions to be a stylist. I once got a comment on a teaching evaluation that I have

never forgotten. It said, "He is in love with his own style." Ouch. The truth still hurts. But if it is also true - and I think it is - that if you scratch the surface of the desire for VRC, you will find the desire for AAA underneath, then maybe my silly obsession points to something more serious. The desire for VRC is just a perversion of the desire for AAA; and the desire for AAA, plain and simple, is just the cry for love we all begin our lives with. Once again, the Beatles speak the truth.

But there's validation, and there's validation. The kind of validation I've been talking about so far - the validation of the "VRC function", so to speak; the validation of credentials - is superficial, and not to be taken all that seriously. There is another kind of validation, rooted in AAA, that goes much deeper, and is based on the sublime simplicity (some might say oversimplification) of the Beatles lyric. This is the kind of validation my friend Joe gives me. I call him "Vlad" - short for "Validator" - and he calls me "Rico" - short for "Recommender". I recommend books and movies, and he validates them - validates my choices. Or maybe I should say he validates me, because that is what it feels like. Is this a little narcissistic of me? But at least the recommendations themselves are more than self-referential.

(At least I think they are.) I want him to enjoy the things I have enjoyed. They mean more that way. It's called sharing. And isn't sharing the opposite of narcissism? Then again, if the act inevitably redounds to you as well, isn't it also self-interested? Of course - but not in the same sense as something that is selfish or narcissistic. Academic distinctions, really. In any case, there is a nice give-and-take between Vlad and Rico that benefits both of us, both ways. It gives me pleasure to recommend, it gives Vlad pleasure to validate. He also validates my writing, when I worry about it being too self-regarding and narcissistic, by assuring me that it speaks to him, too. All you need is assurance. (Maybe it should be the quadruple-A club, then? Nah. Doesn't have quite the same ring to it.)

It does seem to me, though, that there are some distinctions to be made in our triple-A club. Acceptance and affirmation, taken together, seem fundamentally different from approval. Approval seems to imply a power differential that doesn't obtain in either acceptance or affirmation. When someone approves of something - and certainly when they approve something - doesn't that suggest a certain power, on the part of the approver, that doesn't apply on the part of the approvee? (Or, if it's not

a person that's being approved or approved of, the approver still seems to have a power that isn't held by someone who isn't doing the approving.) Whereas the acceptor and the affirmer are both operating on the same level as - and on equal terms with - the acceptee/affirmee. The acts of acceptance and affirmation level the playing field, I think, whereas approval establishes, or just reaffirms, an inequality that allows the approver to bestow his or her approval upon the worthy object. Something like that, I think. I am certainly no semanticist; my interest in philosophy is strictly that of an amateur. (At least Mike was a philosophy major; as a classics major, I only got as far as The Apology. But in the original Greek, of course.)

Then again, the essayist - almost by definition - is an amateur. Therein lie her purpose and value: to speculate, to explore, to attempt - without professional qualifications or credentials, other than her natural curiosity - and, you might even say, presumption. The essayist lacks validation. And the essayist who writes on validation is doubly wanting: he both does not have, and desires, the object of his quest. But if he ever obtained it - if he ever received validation - his quest would be at an end, and his qualification for the search in the first place - not having, and wanting (which in a sense are

synonymous) - would be, er, invalidated. It is only not knowing, and wondering, that give him his validity as an essayist - as someone who tries, but doesn't necessarily succeed. Because what constitutes success in the essay is still an open question, and I certainly do not presume to answer it. The goal of the essayist is to plant a seed, not reap the harvest. We leave the fruits to the approved, the credentialed, the certified. The essayist, as an authority, is bound to fail. And therein lies her value.