

The Purveyor  
(Le pourvoyeur)

There's a character I made up recently for the entertainment of my wife that I call "The Purveyor". He is a connoisseur of fine things, but in his connoisseurship he also aims to please. He speaks with a formal diction, and strikes poses, and gives flourishes, as though he were serving, presenting, or introducing - which he usually is. For example, if I make dinner, it is sometimes The Purveyor who serves it to Julie. He will brandish the plate in the air before her, then lower it to her place with a kind of side-to-side descending motion, like a leaf falling gracefully to the table. Just as the plate touches the table, The Purveyor gives it a deft quarter-turn, as if adjusting its placement for maximum effect. His left arm is folded behind his back as his right arm performs the requisite motion. Requisite for whom? For him - and perhaps him only. He is acting in accordance with the very highest standards, which he has set for himself, and which only he can fully appreciate. (Though of course he also hopes for some appreciation of his artistry from the customer.) Hopes for, but doesn't really expect; for The Purveyor cannot assume that everyone - and perhaps not even anyone - will share his exacting standards. In this

regard, he operates as a one-man judge and jury. Indeed, the title of the Mickey Spillane novel I, the Jury has always appealed to him. It is one of his favorite titles. (He sets much store by titles.) He has never read the novel itself, and never will; Spillane's reputation does not come up to his literary standards. But the title has a rakish dash and swagger that bespeak, to The Purveyor's mind, the sort of man he imagines he might have been in a different life, if he had not become The Purveyor instead. As it is, he is very far from being a tough guy; he may in fact be considered a sissy. Yet the resources of his imagination are not to be underestimated. The Purveyor, you see, has a secret life - inner passions and dimensions that are belied by superficial appearances. Do not sell him short, in spite of his formal diction and artificial poses; for there is something behind his mannerisms (verging, admittedly, on "the manners of a dancing master", as Dr. Johnson so memorably put it in his description of Lord Chesterfield's book of letters to his natural son, advising him on the finer points of conduct in good society)\* that tells of an experience of suffering and

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\* The withering verdict on Lord Chesterfield deserves to be rendered in full. My father liked to quote Johnson as follows: "Sir, he has the manners of a dancing master, and the morals of a whore." But I have checked this against

knowledge unsuspected by those he serves. "Sorrow is knowledge", said Byron's Manfred, and The Purveyor has taken those words to heart.

The references to Byron and Dr. Johnson are not idle ones, I think. The combination of inward pain and depth of character with the outward show of pride, approaching imperiousness, is suggestive of those literary forebears. But make no mistake -- The Purveyor has no literary pretensions. He is not a writer, nor any sort of creator. He originates nothing; he produces nothing. His efforts are aimed only at providing and displaying for others. Style and appearance are all, and his have a distinguished pedigree. The mannered gestures partake of the formality of the Louis XIV and Augustan eras; the hidden sufferings just adverted to - all the more intense for their necessary repression - hint at a penchant for Romanticism. As you can see, The Purveyor is by no means a simple character.

A word more about those gestures. They are of both hand and foot. Let us take the feet first. When serving, presenting or introducing, the feet are always placed at right angles to each other, at what would be called, in

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Boswell's Life of Johnson, which quotes Johnson as saying that Chesterfield's letters "teach the morals of a whore, and the manners of a dancing master." But I prefer my father's transposed formulation, which seems more in the rhetorical spirit of Johnson.

ballet, Fourth or Fifth Position. (Remember the dancing master, and think also of the description, with illustration, of the body positioning of Tristram Shandy's Uncle Toby, declaiming near the beginning of that novel.) The effect is one of deliberately absurd artificiality and stiltedness. It matters not which foot is placed foremost, but only that they be at right angles to each other. Anything more than 90 degrees would not be formal enough; anything less would be awkward to manage, and probably result in a loss of balance.

The hand gestures are more various. They consist of a range of Baroque flourishes, turns and rotations - graceful, studied, and equally if not more absurd. (In art, architecture and music, the Baroque Period is The Purveyor's favorite, by a long shot. He finds that Baroque music orders and steadies his mind.)

Exaggerated formality of hand and foot is matched by stiltedness of diction, reliant on the conditional and subjunctive moods. Thus: "Should you wish anything more at present?" (The verb "to want" is banned from The Purveyor's lexicon; it is much too direct, even peremptory, for his purposes.) "I asked that my associate add green chiles to the fettuccine, as I know how much you like them." (There is, in fact, no "associate"; this fictive

personage is invoked merely so that the subjunctive "add" may be used.) In this way foot, hand and mouth work together to induce an environment of graciousness, gentility and refinement.

But it is not only a matter of appearances, of presentation and form; it is also a matter of substance. And here it may be justly asked, "What exactly is it that The Purveyor provides? What are the actual things he is purveying?" Fair enough. It is to those things we shall now turn.

The Purveyor deals in "only the finest of ingredients". Nothing but the best is good enough for him. For example, if he is serving a grilled cheese sandwich (I have indicated before that he is not creative, and this disposition extends to the kitchen he works with), it is necessary that it be made with "only the very finest of ingredients": Tillamook cheddar, say (which may be considered almost local, since The Purveyor resides in Seattle, and Tillamook is in Oregon), between slices of artisanal whole-grain bread, grilled to perfection in organic sweet butter. Or, if he is serving a "a fillet of avocado" (his term for two halves of an avocado, minus the pit; despite his attachment to the tempora and mores of the court of the Sun King, he prefers the British spelling and

pronunciation), it is of the first importance that it be a Haas avocado, in a perfect state of ripeness (not over-ripeness, which is an easy trap to fall into), dressed with fresh lime juice (not lemon), extra-virgin olive oil, Kosher salt, and fresh-ground pepper. (The fillet of avocado, it should be observed, is a perfect accompaniment to the grilled cheese sandwich.)

Note that the actual fare served by The Purveyor - as opposed to the way it is served -- is simplicity itself. This is not only because, as previously remarked, his associate is not creative in the kitchen, but also because that cook - me - is in fact quite lazy, and has taken to offering food that requires only a minimum of preparation. But the simplicity of the fare is yet another way of highlighting the quality of the ingredients that go into its preparation.

This obsessive emphasis on quality is meant to entice the customer, certainly; but it also serves to reassure The Purveyor himself. He could not bear to be associated with anything less than "the finest". In this regard he reminds me a little of a waiter I used to work with, when I was a busboy in a family-style Northern Italian restaurant on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Dan McDonald was a bit of a connoisseur himself, and I suppose The Purveyor is partly

modeled on him. Dan and I shared many laughs working at Piro's, whose Serbian chef/owner, a self-made, tyrannical, reactionary recovering alcoholic and marathon runner, was an entertaining character, prone to sudden rages and colorful insults, directed especially at those customers he perceived to be liberal Democrats. "Finalize the liberal Democrats at table five," he would command when Dan stepped up to the kitchen window to place or pick up an order. "They're taking too long with their coffee. Unacceptable." Dan let it be known to me, though, that the job he worked most evenings was of a different order than the life he lived outside the restaurant. He was an educated man who loved classical music; he was taking piano lessons. He had worked in institutional fund-raising before becoming a waiter, and had traveled widely in the US and Canada. He dreamed - or fantasized; but I always liked to think of it more as a dream - of someday opening his own restaurant. It would be called "The Other McDonald's". If I ever happened to mention a pursuit or opinion he considered beneath him, he would remark, with a smile that had a distinct sniff of superiority behind it, "I don't go in for that sort of thing myself." I guess the idea was never to mistake his job at the restaurant with his personal tastes and values. There was an aura of slight pathos around Dan

- a higher calling missed, potential held in abeyance, worthier ambitions contemplated, checked and baffled - that touched me, and increased my affection for him. No doubt some of that feeling has made its way into the construction of *The Purveyor*.

On the side of a railroad trestle in Worcester, MA -- where I happened to live long ago, in my pre-Seattle life - was a billboard I have never forgotten. It consisted of a sentence from George Eliot: "It is never too late to be what you might have been." A fine thought, and one I have kept in mind these many years as a kind of touchstone. But in the case of *The Purveyor*, I am afraid the pronouncement is not true. It is manifestly too late for him. In his day he might have been a chef, or a restaurateur, hotelier, caterer, or food retailer of some sort -- or even, perhaps, an actor. His gut feeling for flair and panache might have been put to good use in a career in the food or entertainment industries. But as it is, he is a mere server, a lackey, a factotum. Even the title "*Purveyor*" is perhaps over-generous, suggesting as it does the owner and operator of a retail business. But he is not a businessman; he deals in no tangible product or service. He is but a domestic middle-man, shuttling prepared food between kitchen and table.



But of course, the whole thing is only a fiction anyway -- just a joke to entertain Julie and make her laugh. Yet the pathos of the character comes from someplace real, which is not just the memory of Dan. To quote from King Lear, "This is not altogether fool, my lord." The middle-man; the salesman; the retail sales clerk; the "facilitator"; the professional "greeter", say at Bank of America; even, perhaps, the impresario - or, for a real stretch now, the film producer (not the line producer, who does actual work, including organizing and directing the production crew; but, say, the executive producer) - all of these, even the producer, may be considered some sort of purveyors, putters-together of things made by others. Packagers, consultants, rooters-on of the principals. True, the film producer is often the originator of the project -- but never the creator. In Aristotelian terms, where would the producer fit in the chain of causation? Somewhere within the Efficient Cause, perhaps - connected with the makers (the writer(s), director, actors), but not a maker himself. The purveyor of entertainment: suggesting, spurring on, critiquing (before the fact) the production of the product, then overseeing its presentation to the public.

But the example of the film producer is surely too grand, too glorified (or infamous, as the case may be these days) to apply to our Purveyor, whose arena, after all, is not the world, but only the home. (Only my home, actually.) This limited sphere of action, though, may be misleading. For The Purveyor's intention is to be seen as a figure with a more universal application: the middle man, shuttling back and forth between the parties of supply and demand, eager to please both factions. This eagerness to please is as poignant as it is annoying. Dare I say it is a feature of his Jewishness? For he is - like his creator - a Jew. Now I am well aware that the figure of the Jewish middle man risks invoking something out of "Protocols of the Elders of Zion". The Purveyor too is aware of this danger; and it is perhaps to forestall or preempt it that he has taken to playing off that stereotype, wringing his hands, with shoulders hunched over, in front of Julie with a barely concealed glee, in a parody of the anti-Semitic depiction of Semitic connivance, as he plots - all too transparently - how to seduce the unwitting (Gentile) customer into partaking of his services. The Purveyor practically invites you to see him as a Shylock, a Fagin, a version of the hateful Nazi caricature with the greedy,

shifty eyes, depending zucchini nose and flapping lips, so adept at unscrupulous verbal deception and cozening.

Have I gone too far? Our ironical Jewishness - The Purveyor's and mine -- is surely no excuse for rehearsing such evil trash, even in jest. The point was only to show how low The Purveyor will stoop to garner some laughs - almost any laughs. On that score, my father - who also had a complicated and ambivalent attitude toward his Jewishness - was fond of quoting the Elizabethan playwright Robert Greene: "A groatsworth of wit, bought with a million of repentance." I won't say my purchase price has gone that high - but I have no doubt the Jewish stereotype joke wasn't worth it. I'll let it stand, though - not only as an example of my relation to The Purveyor, but also as an illustration of my own twisted insecurity and self-hatred. Le pourvoyeur, c'est moi.

So why do I do it? Why do I play The Purveyor for Julie, and why do I eviscerate myself for the reader? Surely the reader does not enjoy this display of self-abuse? Surely it makes her feel uncomfortable? It seems, though, that discomfort is my beat. I deal in discomfort. (I am, indeed, a purveyor of discomfort.) And The Purveyor's awkwardness, stiltedness, ridiculousness, and self-consciousness are indices of that discomfort in both

of us. His character is only another way for me to explore my own, under cover of a joke, a role, a performance. His primary identity, I am coming to believe, is that of an actor. Make of that what you will.

It occurs to me that perhaps The Purveyor is deserving of further treatment - further fictionalization, say, in a short story, or even a novel. There, I've said it. The gauntlet has been thrown down. Will I pick it up? Do I have it in me to pick it up? I fear that I don't. If I did, I wouldn't be playing the part of The Purveyor in the first place. For The Purveyor, you see, in addition to his other characteristics, is a failure. That much you have no doubt gleaned from this introduction. He has failed to have the career - actor, retailer, producer, impresario - he should have had. For him, pace the Worcester billboard, it is too late - always already too late, as the post-structuralists might say - to be what he might have been. There is no going back for him.

And yet, and yet - he is not completely a failure, either. This is not altogether failure, my lord. For he possesses a kind of wisdom, too. Perhaps it is the wisdom of failure. It hardly matters where, or who, the wisdom comes from. Coleridge - another failure, albeit on a much grander scale -- said that "truth is a divine

ventriloquist", speaking the same message from different mouths. True, Coleridge used this pronouncement in self-defense against charges that he committed plagiarism in his Biographia Literaria, where he copied whole passages from the German philosopher Friedrich Schelling, without attribution. Coleridge's mind - surely one of the great poetic and critical minds of the nineteenth century, and one that, through the Biographia, set the stage for modern literary criticism, if not theory as well - was encyclopedic, and brilliantly eclectic. It drew ideas from everywhere. Coleridge's reading was voluminous, his memory seemingly indelible. It is likely that he knew passages from Schelling by heart - though unlikely, I think, that with a memory like that he would have forgotten the sources of what he'd memorized. The "ventriloquist" quote, though - which he used on a number of occasions - if read generously, and not just cynically as a rationalization of his plagiarism, suggests a larger truth: that no one owns an idea. An invention, yes - but not an idea. Ideas are the intellectual capital of humankind, to be borrowed and built upon by whoever needs them, and then passed on. Long live veridical ventriloquism!

So I want to pass on to you an idea The Purveyor recently gave me - a piece of that wisdom I claimed for

him. He said, "Speak only the words that make people happy." I don't think he was talking about flattery, or obsequiousness, or appealing to other people's wishful thinking. I believe he was trying to convey a deeper truth - deeper perhaps than he knew - about what the Buddhists call "Right Speaking" - part of the High Eightfold Path (which includes also Right Seeing and Right Acting). He meant that words matter. The timing of words, the tone of words, the intentions of words, and of course the meanings themselves (both denotative and connotative) all matter. Do not be a polluter of the environment through your words. Do not, that is, say the thing that is bad: wrong, or insensitive, or otherwise cruel or hurtful. Only speak the words that make people feel better. This is not, as I say, a defense of talking fluff, or insipidities, or speaking in such a way as to withhold truth for the sake of not hurting a person's feelings. I don't think that is what The Purveyor meant at all. I think he was adverting to another Buddhist idea: the concept of mindfulness. Be mindful in your words, as in your thoughts and actions.

There are, of course, all sorts of ways to make people happy with your words. I have already indicated that it is not the happiness procured by pandering to what you think people want to hear that I mean. Indeed, the argument

could be made that those methods will not produce genuine happiness at all. Jollyng someone along in their delusions - or yours - has nothing to do with the production of true happiness. True happiness must have to do with the truth. And in the case of *The Purveyor*, what he purveys is, finally, the truth: the truth of humor. Which is to say, the truth of laughter: for only something with a measure of truth can be truly funny. The truth of ridiculousness, of excess, of absurdity - the deep truth of silliness, deep silliness. The truth of, say, Monty Python. Of Steve Martin. Of - dare I say it - Jerry Lewis. (This name must be pronounced with a French accent, issuing from the annals of the Cahiers du Cinema: "GeRI LouIS, c'est un génie, quoi!") Now I admit I have never enjoyed the work of Lewis myself - but *The Purveyor* believes (along with the Cahiers) he is a genius; and *The Purveyor* is wise. He knows that "Speak only the words that make people happy" - in the sense in which we are to understand happiness - is just another way of saying, "Speak only the words that ring true for the people you are speaking to." I understand that what rings true for one person may not ring true for another; and also that hearing the truth does not always make people happy. But that doesn't mean that they don't need to hear it; or even, on a

deeper level, that they don't want to hear it. We are made to seek and know the truth, no matter how it makes us feel, no matter what the consequences. This is the great message of Oedipus Rex - and why, after finally learning his own unspeakable truth, after his self-blinding and self-exile, Oedipus goes on to become a kind of holy man at Colonus. His courage and determination in pursuing, to the end, his horrible but necessary truth have sanctified him.

Oedipus and Jerry Lewis - strange bedfellows indeed! Let them stand for two of the faces of truth - dramatic truth, universal truth: the faces of tragedy and comedy. The two ancient Greek masks that are emblematic of our humanity, and that relieve us of the burdens of that humanity, in such different and complementary ways. The masks of tears and laughter - Aristotle's catharsis. The nutty professor, and the blind, egregious king. Purveyors of your entertainment, speaking the words and performing the actions that somehow - we haven't quite yet figured out how, pace Aristotle - make you feel better. And The Purveyor has his own place somewhere in there, too - be it ever so humble - shuffling back and forth on the domestic stage, assisting in the human drama, eager to be of service in purveying "only the very finest of ingredients for your dining pleasure." (His wisdom is optional.)