

Two Letters and a Short Essay

P. K. Pehda

Childlike says my usually trusty *American College Dictionary* means “like or befitting a child, as in innocence, frankness, etc.” *Childish* says the same dictionary means principally “of, like, or befitting a child,” and, secondarily, “puerile; weak; silly.” It is sincerely hoped by this writer that he has long ago graduated from the *childish* category but at the same time he hopes that he will never depart from a *childlike* state that allows him to overlook the passage of the forty years since he first began to pay attention to the printed word and to most admire those writers who, never childish, but always childlike, remind us of the beauty in the earth’s spontaneity (spring!) and who clearly see, directly and truly — without sham or artifice — the very core of the matter. It was the child who childlike (but not childishly) saw the Emperor’s lack of clothes.

I grew up with the stories, the fables, and the cartoons of James Thurber, the most staple force of the *New Yorker* from the day of its inception to the day of his death. *Time* once wrote of him: “Mr. Thurber, more than any writer, living or dead, is able to pass within a single sentence from reality to unreality, from nonsense to the sublime.” My immediate comment is that children, too, usually possess this quality of merging reality with what oh-so-serious adults term “unreality.” *The New York Times Book Review* called him “the master of...the sneak attack of understatement,” which might explain this one American’s ability to bridge the wide gap existing between what is considered humor by Americans and by Britons. (Penguin has a long list of Thurber titles in print.) Children utilize the understatement — intentionally and unintentionally. One of Thurber’s most charming works is a fairy tale for children, *The White Deer*:

If you should walk and wind and wander far enough on one of those afternoons in April when smoke goes down instead of up, and near-by things sound far away and far things near, you are more than likely to come at last to the enchanted forest that lies between the Moonstone Mines and Centaurs Mountain. You'll know the woods when you are still a long way off by virtue of a fragrance you can never quite forget and never quite remember. And there'll be a distant bell that causes boys to run and girls to stand and tremble. If you pluck one of the ten thousand toadstools that grow in the emerald grass at the edge of the wonderful woods, it will feel as heavy as a hammer in your hand, but if you let it go it will sail away over the trees like a tiny parachute, trailing black and purple stars...

Perhaps my favorite Thurber is to be found in his *Fables for Our Time*, wherein the owl who thought he was God was run down and killed by a truck along with most of those who blindly followed him in their peculiarly adult way of not being able to think for themselves; the man who saw the unicorn cropping roses in his garden and who triumphed over the wife who wanted to have him put away in the booby-hatch because "the unicorn is a mythical animal"; the seal who swam away and joined a circus but who eventually drowned when in his new life he forgot how to swim.

When I was teaching high school in Massilon, Ohio, a few miles from where Thurber was born and brought up, I found it rather imperative to have a copy of the *Fables*, then completely out of stock. For the first time in my life, I decided to write a fan letter (childish or childlike?) to The Source himself and at the same time inquire about the availability of the book. This was my response:

West Cornwall
Connecticut
August 13, 1952

Dear Mr. Pehda:

If you are strong enough to want to live in Gish country, not to mention Paul Brown or Coxey* you are tougher than I am. As for "Fables for Our Time," a new edition is being brought out this fall by Harper & Brothers, around October, I think. It will surely reach Boston, but I doubt that it reaches Massilon. I think you'll be able to get one in Columbus, though, or Cleveland. Thanks for your letter and all best wishes.

Sincerely yours,
JAMES THURBER

The signature of Thurber was in black crayon and approximately two inches high: America's greatest humorist since Mr. Clemens's day was already totally blind.

In poetry, the clearest and purest childlike music comes from Edwin Estlin Cummings, he of the smaller-case letters (e. e. cummings). Let it be said here and now that a charge often levelled at cummings throughout his lifetime was that of "immaturity," which is surely related more to *childish* than to *childlike*. America's foremost critic, Edmund Wilson, back in 1924 on the appearance of cummings's *Tulips and Chimneys*, wrote:

Cummings's style is an eternal adolescent, as fresh and often as winning but as half-baked as boyhood. A poet with a real gift for language, for a melting music, a little like Shelley's, which rhapsodizes and sighs in soft vowels disembarassed of their baggage of consonants, he strikes often on

* Reference is made to three famous citizens from *Massilon*: silent-screen star Lillian Gish, football coach Paul Brown (for whom the Cleveland Browns are named), and Jacob Coxey, who led a famous march of unemployed on Washington back in 1894.

“who live in furnished souls” and who are not aware that “the moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy” or politicians—*all* politicians (“A politician is an arse upon/which everyone has sat except a man”). I agree with Mr. Wilson’s comment about the *spontaneity* of Cumming’s poetry, a spontaneity that came from a clear and direct viewpoint of life uncluttered by -isms, when in Rome doing as the Romans do (only an adult preoccupation — children only do it in *games*), or man-made machines. It was a viewpoint of life and towards life that came from a childlike intensity: to the child the sky is bluer, trees are greener.

Tumblinghair

picker of buttercups

violets

dandelions

And the big bullying daisies

through the field wonderful

with eyes a little sorry

Another comes

also picking flowers

Who comes with eyes “a little sorry”? The cluttered adult world — and the flower it picks is that vision, clear and intense, of the little girl with the tumbling hair.

Cummings once said: “I’ll tell you what else I believe: the importance of intensity in art...I’d say 90 per cent of the human race believes in extensity, believes that two readers make a poem better than one reader, and that a hundred readers make it still better. And all that palaver has nothing to do with art. It isn’t just one plus one. A poem, a painting, lives in itself...a man who lives to be a hundred and twenty doesn’t necessarily live at all... today so-called writers are completely unaware of the thing which makes art what it is. You can call it nobility or spirituality, but I should call it intensity...”

The second fan letter I wrote was to Mr. Cummings. By this time, I was in Japan and had recently ordered a copy of his *nonlectures* that he had given on poetry at Harvard University. To my delight, I received a letter informing me of a Japanese interest of which I'd not heretofore been aware—and all this in typical cummings form and punctuation signed with a red-pencilled *E.E. Cg's* almost as large as Thurber's signature:

4 Patchen Place

New York City

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January 24 1956

Dear Mr. Pehda—

thank you for much more than kind letter:
& here's wishing the undersigned may some day deserve its praise. As a human being, I envy you your encounter with Japan; & as an artist, your contact with Zen—my admiration of Japanese painting & poetry being almost as old as myself: while the book I've recently most reread is probably "Haiku; Volume I, Eastern Culture" by R. H. Blyth (Kamakura Bunko, '49). Should you chance to meet a promulgator of fantastic missives named M. Ishibashi (who shallwesay enlightens his compatriots re contemporary Western literature; & whose address equals 58 Tetsukayama Naka 3-Chome Sumiyoshi-ku Osaka) please tell him he'll, shortly or otherwise, receive a copy of my nonlectures. And let me add that I hope the copy you've ordered will please you

— best luck!

I know not whether Ishibashi-san ever received his copy of the

nonlectures, but I do know that now when I read

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the train that *I* see is the Hankyu train between Kobe and Nishinomiya in early April, and it really isn't spouting violets. It is ploughing like a snow-plow through the *sakura*, pushing to each side of the track banks of pink and white blossoms. Childlike, I partly live in Thurber's green forests where white deer play and in cummings's flower-lovely world (mud-luscious, puddle-wonderful) where

“always

it's

Spring) and everyone's

in love and flowers pick themselves”

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Except for the poetry selections, which are to be found in Mr. Cummings's *Collected Poems*, the quotations of Cummings utilized are to be found in *The Writer Observed* by Harvey Breit (The World Publishing Company, Cleveland & New York, 1956). The criticism attributed to Edmund Wilson is to be found in that eminent writer's *The Shores of Light* (W. H. Allen & Co., Ltd., London, 1952).