

On Pseudo-Self-Effacement
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In March of 2011 I wrote a thought for this site entitled “Jerry Lewis’ Socks.” I was trying to establish a field of inquiry, I guess you could call it: how people get it across that they are better than you are. I started out the thought by noting that Jerry Lewis, an old-time comedian I watched on television and read feature stories about as a kid, regularly made it known that he only wore socks once and then gave them to charity. That revelation got two points across to me: one, that Jerry Lewis must be a special kind of person to only wear a pair of socks one time (in contrast to the two beaten-up pair I rotated back then); and two, that Jerry Lewis is a great guy who helps out his fellow man (at least keeps some of them in socks). Really something, this Jerry Lewis, and that was cleverly established with his apparently off-the-cuff asides about his socks; it wasn’t as if Jerry was out-and-out bragging about himself or anything. The key lesson in this socks talk for me was that, for sure, Jerry Lewis had to be on a higher plane as a human being than the likes of me. I was about twelve years old when I bought that idea, but still. I bet if I saw Jerry Lewis today—he’s still alive, and so am I—I’d look up to him, and I think the impression he made on me way back when with the socks would be a big part of that.

I’ve been paying attention since that 2011 thought to how people who are fawned over get themselves in that position when they don’t really deserve to be that high on life’s totem pole. It’s not that these people are unaccomplished; it’s that the adulation they evoke goes beyond their actual merits. How do they pull that off? I ask myself. For example, Princess Kate in Britain. She used to fold clothes at the Gap, not there is anything wrong with that, and seems a nice enough person, and she has a pleasant thin-upper-lip-exactly-to-the-upper-edge-of-her-front-teeth smile, nice precision going on there, but really she’s no better as far I can tell than any of the young woman I see looking in store windows in downtown Burlington, Vermont where I live. Of course what Kate has going for her is the princess title, which from what I read she went after pretty hard. If you can bring it off, the princesses and kings and queens and duchesses and dukes stratagem is a good one: you get you and yours designated royalty and them and theirs labeled

commoners. Get that in place and a elephant-eared dunderhead like Prince Charles is somebody and that man standing over there next to the Coke machine, doesn't matter who it is, and regardless of his ears and IQ, is nobody. If you can manage to keep that gig going, you've got yourself a real nice deal.

This past week I've been paging through a book of reminiscences about the late George Plimpton (Nelson Aldridge, Jr., editor, *George, Being George* (Random House, 2008)). Plimpton (1927-2003) was an American journalist and writer and party-hosting man about town in New York City. He was best known for a being a co-founder of *The Paris Review* literary magazine and for his sports writing in which he would recount his exploits as an inept-but-charming everyman participant in big time sports. His most successful book in the sports area was *Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last String Quarterback*, published in 1966, in which he wrote about his experiences in the training camp of the Detroit Lions pro football team. His angle was that he wasn't there as an observer but rather as a player. He even took a couple snaps as a quarterback in one of the Lions' pre-season games. *Paper Lion* was a good book and a best seller; I remember enjoying it at the time it came out. Looking back on it now, I realize that more than anything the reader of *Paper Lion* comes away from the book thinking what a super guy George Plimpton is: here he is, this Harvard man and big time literary type, and yet he gets around these rough and tumble jocks and they accept him in their world and really take to him; yes indeed, this George Plimpton is a man for all seasons.

Back in the 1960s and '70s, I would nightly sit alone in front of a TV set in a darkened room in the upper Midwest munching on potato chips watching late night talk shows out of New York City—Johnny Carson and Dick Cavett in particular—and Plimpton was a regular on those shows. Plimpton would sit on the couch or chair with Johnny or Dick in his tweed sport jacket and, without being heavy-handed about it, get across in a vaguely British accent that he was from old money and went to Harvard and attended the right parties and knew everybody that was anybody. He related amusing personal, name-dropping anecdotes to an attentive and bordering-on-reverential Johnny or Dick (as well as to me, of course). The only thing that stuck with me from these little stories, now that I think about it, was that not only was George Plimpton a superior

being compared to the rest of us, he was an upbeat, chipper, fine fellow to boot. I got that message loud and clear, but at the same time I didn't feel as if I were being sold anything or put down. I felt fine about me being a humdrum plebeian and George Plimpton being a lively noble; that was just the way things were. When I think about the people who have been masters of self-puffery over the span of my long life, George Plimpton's name is right there among the top few.

I didn't pick up the Plimpton book this week to read it from the angle of Plimpton's self promotion, but it couldn't have been more than five pages into it and I was caught up with examining how Plimpton worked his self-inflating magic from the perspective of an informed and savvy adult, which I like to think of myself as being these days. The book has been a fun read for me, I'm not done with it yet: techniques that went right by me back in the old days jumped out at me now. One of them is what I'll call the pseudo-self-effacement technique. The basic idea with this maneuver is you seem to be putting yourself down, but what you are really doing is building yourself up. You have to be careful with this technique, because if you aren't good at it you could wind up doing what I so often do: I put myself down and get nothing across but how big a loser I am—the “but really I'm a winner” doesn't come through. So I'm not recommending this technique to beginners.

I'll use a transcript of an after-dinner speech Plimpton gave in the mid-1980s that was in the book (pp. 323-326) to illustrate how the pseudo-self-effacement technique can be effectively employed. I'll quote from Plimpton's speech and insert my comments in caps to point out how George was selling himself even as nominally he was documenting his limitations.

I think I should start off by saying that I didn't do very well at Exeter. I WENT TO EXETER, AN ELITE PREP SCHOOL My marks were terrible. I'M NOT HERE PITCHING HOW GREAT I AM. I'M A MODEST, SELF-EFFACING GUY. I had the strange notion that in class, even if I were daydreaming of something else, I'M CALLING IT DAYDREAMING, BUT YOU KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT ME TO GET THAT IT WAS ACTUALLY MATURE, INSIGHTFUL, CREATIVE MUSING AT A VERY YOUNG AGE my brain was still absorbing all the material like a specialized sponge, and the next day at the exam I could scratch around in the appropriate corner, in the detritus, I KNOW WORDS

LIKE DETRITUS and there would be the appropriate answers. I HAD CONFIDENCE IN MYSELF EVEN BACK THEN.

These [his low grades] elicited letters from my father. MY FATHER CARED ENOUGH ABOUT ME TO COMPOSE LETTERS TO ME. Genetically speaking, I was supposed to soar I COME FROM A GOOD GENE POOL through Exeter. I WENT TO EXETER. Wasn't the family full of outrageous successes? I'M FROM OUTRAGEOUSLY SUCCESSFUL STOCK. THAT'S MORE THAN PARTICULARLY SUCCESSFUL, OR REMARKABLY SUCCESSFUL, OR EXCEPTIONALLY SUCCESSFUL—OUTRAGEOUSLY SUCCESSFUL, GET IT? CAN YOU HONESTLY SAY THAT ABOUT YOUR PEOPLE, OUTRAGEOUSLY SUCCESSFUL? NO, YOU CAN'T.

I hadn't studied, but why hadn't my brain compensated out of thin air? I DIDN'T GET BAD GRADES BECAUSE I WAS DUMB. I HADN'T STUDIED, THAT'S WHY. Somewhere in Melville's Moby Dick is the line "my whole beaten brain seems as beheaded." I HAVE READ MOBY DICK AND CAN QUOTE IT FROM MEMORY. Which is apt, thinking back on it, because my head, when I was in Exeter, I WENT TO EXETER was ever off somewhere else, I WAS THINKING BIG THOUGHTS funning it up I WAS A GOOD TIME KIND OF GUY, NOT A DRUDGE with the heads of the few others who were having difficulty. We beheaded few, we band of brothers. I WASN'T AN ISOLATE LONER REJECT. I WAS PART OF A BAND OF BROTHERS.

At nightfall, I went down to the Plimpton Playing Fields THIS ELITE SCHOOL HAD FACILITIES NAMED AFTER MY FAMILY and drop-kicked field goals with Buzz Merritt, I HAD FRIENDS just the two of us in the gloaming, often with a thin moon shining above the pines, above the river. THAT IDYLIC IMAGE WAS ME—YOU WORKED IN A CAR WASH. Why did I do this when I should have been studying Tacitus WE STUDIED TACITUS IN THIS ELITE SCHOOL I ATTENDED, WHILE YOU STUDIED HOW A BILL BECOMES A LAW for the exam I knew was coming up the same day? THE ANSWER: BECAUSE I WAS INTO GROOVY THINGS LIKE BEING WITH MY BUDDY BUZZ—NOT CLARENCE, BUZZ, A COOL NAME, KIND OF PREPPY--KICKING FIELD GOALS UNDER A FULL MOON, NOT CRAMMING FOR AN INANE TEST. Sometimes to escape the exams, I went to the infirmary. There was a secret way, which I have now

forgotten, to drive up the temperature on a thermometer.
CLEVER OF ME, HUH?

But what really got me in trouble were the little things I thought were funny—like sneaking in at night and turning all the benches around in the Assembly Hall because I thought it would it would be funny to have my classmates sitting backwards when they came in for assembly. I WAS ADVENTUROUS AND CREATIVE.

I wrote for the Exetonian, but if you were on probation you couldn't use your real name. I WAS GOOD ENOUGH TO WRITE FOR A MAGAZINE AT A PLACE LIKE EXETER. I WENT TO EXETER.

I took piano lessons from Mr. Landers. He assigned me a Debussy piece called "Bells," as I recall. I PRACTICED PLAYING DEBUSSEY ON THE PIANO WHILE YOU LEARNED THREE CHORDS ON A GUITAR SO YOU COULD POUND OUT CHEAP-ASS ROCK AND ROLL. The next week I appeared at Mr. Landers' quarters NOT AN OFFICE OR DESK SOMEWHERE, QUARTERS, GET THE PICTURE? and sat down to play. Mr. Landers said, "Well, that's very fine, but that's not Debussy's "Bells." I EVEN PLAYED NOT JUST FINE BUT VERY FINE PIANO, WHAT CAN'T I DO? PLUS, I ADDED MY OWN INDIVIDUAL TOUCH TO IT--CREATIVE, UNIQUE, ONE-OF-A-KIND, THAT'S ME, GEORGE PLIMPTON.

I tried out for a play called Seven Keys to Ballpate. I WAS GAME, TOOK RISKS, TRIED NEW THINGS. They found a minor role for me, that of a young widow. I was required to let out an unearthly scream, perhaps at the sight of a corpse, I've forgotten what. My scream carried far out over the quadrangle, down the hill past Langdell and into the Jeremiah Smith Building, CATCH THE IMPRESSIVE-SOUNDING NAMES OF THESE LOCATIONS AT THE ELITE PREP SCHOOL I WENT TO past the mailroom with its letterboxes, WHEN I DID SOMETHING, I DID IT BIG where in those days I received my father's letter once a week, I WAS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO MY FATHER FOR HIM TO WRITE ME ONCE A WEEK with its admonitions—and up the stairs to Dean Kerr's office, WE HAD A DEAN IN MY PREP SCHOOL, YOU HAD A PRINCIPAL IN THAT HIGH SCHOOL YOU WENT TO where he sat comfortably smoking his pipe, A PIPE--GOT THE IMAGE? when suddenly

this high-pitched shriek wandered in, and his blood curdled and he said aloud, "My God, what's Plimpton up to now." I DID NOTABLE THINGS EVEN BACK THEN, THE DEAN KNEW ABOUT ME. WHAT WOULD I DO NEXT?--ONE MEMORABLE ESCAPADE AFTER ANOTHER. "MY GOD, WHAT'S PLIMPTON UP TO NOW," THEY WOULD SAY. QUITE THE TEENAGER, ME, DON'T YOU THINK? .

Could it have been that, having failed in all the departments at Exeter, I WENT TO EXETER I was driven in later life to compensate, to try once again to succeed where I hadn't? I'VE BEEN SUCCESSFUL IN MY ADULT LIFE. I've wondered, on occasion, whether these exercises in participatory journalism, for which I am known, I WROTE PAPER LION, A BEST SELLER, THAT WAS ME were as much to show my mentors at Exeter I WENT TO EXETER AND HAD MENTORS, YOU HAD A GUIDANCE COUNSELOR that I had somehow managed to intrude into the highest plateaus of their various disciplines. I HAVE REACHED THE HIGHEST PLATEAU IN NOT JUST ONE DISCIPLINE, BUT VARIOUS DISCIPLINES. VARIOUS, AS IN MORE THAN TWO. ME, GEORGE PLIMPTON, I DID ALL THAT, VARIOUS DISCIPLINES, HIGHEST PLATEAUS. AND YOU THOUGHT I WAS JUST TELLING YOU HOW I WAS A MESS-UP IN SCHOOL. OH, AND YOU DID PICK UP THAT I WENT TO EXETER, AN ELITE EASTERN PREP SCHOOL, FACILITIES NAMED AFTER MY FAMILY AND EVERYTHING, RIGHT? THAT DIDN'T GET BY YOU, DID IT?

So that's my illustration of the pseudo-self-effacement technique of blowing air in your balloon, this George Plimpton "I didn't do well at Exeter" speech. How about if you come up with an example of this technique, and if you do, let me know through the contact-me email on this site. If you have the time and interest, read the Jerry Lewis' socks thought and identify another technique or two that people employ to establish their superiority over other people. Again, if you come up with anything, let me know. If you get into this area of inquiry, I think you'll find that it's a good time playing around with this topic, and that getting into it will give you a better handle on how people maneuver to attain not-entirely-deserved reputations and status in the world generally as well as in your own particular circumstance.