

Benjamin Joel Sweeney

English 327W

Professor Lacy

9/19/2024

### Blue-Collar Journalism (But Make it “Artsy”)

As a kid, I was constantly reading books and magazines about baseball. I deeply appreciate both of my parents allowing me the freedom to focus on reading these types of works over the more classical literature for Middle Schoolers. Although I was also reading, and loving books like *The Yearling*, and *Around the World in Eighty Days*, I was mainly investing my time reading things like, *Baseball Digest*, and *Faithful* by Stewart O’Nan and Stephen King. Reading “casual” literary works from a young age has taught me to appreciate creative nonfiction in a way that enables me to easily digest things like music and food critique, long-form documentaries, and thoughtful essays posted on no-name blogs. I think it is critical for both children and adults to read what they are *interested* in, over reading whatever is considered *canon* at the time.

In *Hidden Intellectualism* by Gerald Graff, the author explains his love of sports magazines and books as a child. He explains that although these types of work are not often seen or portrayed as necessary or intellectual, they simply require and engage a different quality of intelligence. He writes: “Real intellectuals turn any subject, however lightweight it may seem, into grist for their mill through the thoughtful questions they bring to it, whereas a dullard will find a way to drain the interest out of the richest subject” (p. 245). The love of creative nonfiction I myself had as a kid, has translated directly to my own writing. Last semester I found myself writing prose about songs that mean a lot to me or were reminding me of some long-forgotten memory. I

would write the prose, record myself reading them, put these conversational mini-essays into GarageBand between the songs and mix the two together like a radio show. I would then send it to family and friends and (if they weren't already too sick of me ranting about stuff I like) would listen and it was a ton of fun. Using creative nonfiction as a means of reminding my loved ones of pieces of music that meant something to us all is such a small, beautiful blessing.

At first, I was going to begin the next paragraph with this statement: "It was by-no-means 'intellectual' or 'literary' but it was effective and evoked emotion." But why would this be the case? Why, if something is thought provoking, emotional, and effective, should it *not* be considered intellectual? Does accomplishing all of these qualities in a work not require a certain level of intelligence and thoughtfulness? We must stop qualifying good work with whether or not it fits into a box that simply does not suit us any longer.

That being said, I have had several points throughout my life where I have severely questioned my own writing. When I started studying at Old Dominion University I was extremely intimidated by the intellectualism of the other students. So many of my classmates are better read and write more clearly than I. For someone who is watching a ball-game when most of my fellow students would be reading, it was scary. I work in construction, love sports, and am far more likely to be listening to NPR's *New Music Friday* than listening to *Mansfield Park* on Audible.

For the first two semesters, this was quite difficult for me to work through. That is, until I reminded myself why I am in school to become a better writer: To move people. That is all I want to do. I do not need classmates, friends, or even professors to think I am "intellectual," I need them to read what I write and be moved. If that happens every once-in-a-while when someone reads my work, I am a happy man.

I tend to believe that the purpose of art is to share it. Therefore, if the art is not understandable to your audience, no matter how literary or professional it sounds, it does not matter. Therefore, I trust that my audience will find me. Surely there are some other semi-well-read construction workers who listen to NPR out there.

In *The Maker's Eye: Revising Your Own Manuscripts*, Donald M. Murray explains that for a true writer, the process of revisions can go on for as long as they see fit. There is no finite end-point for a writer, they can return, edit, subtract, or add at any point. I agree with Murray's proposition that revision requires a balance of adding to, and subtracting from, a work; But I believe these revisions should be to enhance your communication, not to dumb things down or make things more palatable. I would agree with Murray that revisions can often be essential to a work, but I would argue that the natural feeling of a work can be lost through constant tweaking. I think an artist (of any kind) needs to know when to stop, just as much as they need to know when to add.

In the coming months and years, I hope to write more creative nonfiction about things that interest me, more fictional stories that interest me, and reviews of art that interests me. I would love to write for a publication centered around sports, travel, or music at some point in my life. I think I would be able to blend my interests and expertise in a unique way. I could also see myself writing television or film based on my experience working construction that would be incredibly specific to my life. In the end, I am so grateful to my parents for encouraging me to read what I naturally enjoyed reading. I think we should make more of an effort to not discredit certain styles and types of writing solely because we view them as "unprofessional" or "unacademic" and rather, learn to value all types of writing.

#### References

Murray, D. M. (1973). "The Maker's Eye: Revising Your Own Manuscripts." *Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers*. Ed. Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, and Virginia Clark. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 194-98. Print. (Originally published in *Writer*, 1973).

Graff, G. "Hidden Intellectualism."