

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 3 (1987)

Artikel: Addison as semiotician : the threefold structure of Spectator 28
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99857>

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Addison as Semiotician: The Threefold Structure of *Spectator* 28

Werner Brönnimann

In Swiss political life the letter to the editor published in Addison's *Spectator* 28 would seem to be a plea for *mehr Staat*, i. e. more state intervention. The letter begins:

Sir, Observing that you have Thoughts of creating certain Officers under you, for the Inspection of several petty Enormities which you your self cannot attend to; and finding daily Absurdities hung out upon the Sign-Posts of this City, to the great Scandal of Foreigners, as well as those of our own Country, who are curious Spectators of the same: I do humbly propose, that you would be pleased to make me Superintendant of all such Figures and Devices as are or shall be made use of on this Occasion; with full Powers to rectifie or expunge whatever I shall find irregular or defective.¹

This proposal – to create a governmental post for the supervision of street signs in the city of London – may seem absurd. Indeed it is meant to be absurd, but it points to a genuine phenomenon of eighteenth-century London: aids to orientation in that town were picturesque rather than efficiently unified. In the Penguin *Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator* Addison's number 28 is therefore anthologized in the section on "The Town and Daily Life", as a document preserving what to the modern reader adds a touch of quaintness to the usual image of London as a thriving and expanding commercial and cultural center.

But Addison's introductory remarks preceding the letter to the editor invite other readings:

I shall here present my Reader with a Letter from a Projector, concerning a new Office which he thinks may very much contribute to the Embellishment of the City, and to the driving Barbarity out of our Streets. I consider it as a Satyr upon Projectors in general, and a lively Picture of the whole Art of Modern Criticism.

¹ All quotations from the *Spectator* are from Donald F. Bond's edition, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. I, pp. 115–118.

This introductory paragraph shifts the reader's mental set three times. The reader first expects a genuine letter to the editor; he is then told to expect a satire on political opportunists and busybodies; and he is finally advised that this number of *The Spectator* is an allegorical presentation "of the whole Art of Modern Criticism."

The first sentence of the "letter" can thus be read on three levels:

1. As opening a genuine letter by a somewhat naive schemer who thinks he has found a sinecure.
2. As opening a fictitious letter that is meant to satirize the type represented by this particular schemer. Indeed the negative connotations of the word "Projector" undermine the reliability of the purported letter writer from the beginning, and the word "Satyr" defeats the pretense that the so-called letter is genuine, because the "Projector" will hardly voluntarily indulge in self-parody.
3. As opening an allegorical text, where street signs stand for a systematic structure of signs called 'texts', and where the "Superintendent" represents the literary critic, who not only supervises the use of "Figures and Devices", i. e. rhetorical figures and tropes, but also acts as a censor, because he may "rectifie or expunge" texts that are "irregular or defective."

This discussion of *Spectator* 28 will concentrate on the third, the allegorical level, where street signs stand for literary texts and the "Projector" for the literary critic. Addison does not say that he presents a *satirical* view specifically of "Modern Criticism", he calls his allegory a "lively Picture" of criticism; "liveliness" does not necessarily imply satire, nor does it exclude it. Indeed the medley of genres that make up *Spectator* 28 – genuine letter, fictive satire, allegory – makes the picture of criticism so "lively" that we do not always know where Addison really stands, in that we are uncertain when he is being serious and when he is being satirical. Nevertheless we can posit a dual structure of the allegorical level by dividing up the "Superintendent" of "Figures and Devices", i. e. the critic, into a naive prescriptive censor-critic resembling the "Projector", and a sophisticated descriptive observer-critic or "anti-pedant."² Addison's point-of-view (being Mr. Spectator's point of view) ideally coincides with the descriptive observer-critic's opinion.

For want of such an Officer, there is nothing like sound Literature and good Sense to be met with in those Objects, that are every where thrusting them-

² For the "critic as anti-pedant" see Lee Andrew Elioseff, *The Cultural Milieu of Addison's Literary Criticism* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1963), especially p. 38.

selves out to the Eye, and endeavouring to become visible. Our Streets are filled with blue Boars, black Swans, and red Lions; not to mention flying Pigs, and Hogs in Armour, with many other Creatures more extraordinary than any in the desarts of *Africk*. Strange! that one who has all the Birds and Beasts in Nature to chuse out of, should live at the Sign of an *Ens Rationis!*

To the *Projector* street signs containing “blue Boars”, “black Swans”, “red Lions”, “flying Pigs”, and “Hogs in Armour” are unnatural and monstrous. To the *prescriptive* critic invented and fantastic entities should not occur in literary texts because they are only products of the imagination and not of nature. To the *descriptive* critic the presentation of imagined beings presumably is not objectionable.

In the second Place I would forbid, that Creatures of jarring and incongruous Natures should be joined together in the same Sign; such as the Bell and the Neats-Tongue, the Dog and gridiron. The Fox and Goose may be supposed to have met, but what has the Fox and the Seven Stars to do together? and when did the Lamb and Dolphin ever meet, except upon a Sign-Post?

The prescriptive critic establishes rules for the combination of signs: unlikely collocations must be avoided, and an unlikely collocation is defined as one that only occurs in texts – not in nature: “And when did the Lamb and Dolphin ever meet, except upon a Sign-Post?” To the pedantic critic literary tradition does not diminish the strangeness of unusual collocations, whereas the observing critic knows that “art is born of art, not of nature.”³

I must however observe to you upon this Subject, that it is usual for a young Tradesman, at his first setting up, to add to his own Sign that of the Master whom he serv'd; as the Husband after marriage, gives a Place to his Mistress's Arms in his own Coat.

Even the censorious critic must accept combinations of signs based on intertextuality if “certain [unspecified] rules” are followed, just as the projector must accept that tradesmen exhibit the sign of their masters within their own. On the allegorical level, this probably means that integrating the *styles* of literary predecessors is permitted. On this topic the difference between the prescriptive and the descriptive critic seems to be minimal, a mere matter of tone: the notion of the author's work as his intellectual property is beginning to establish itself.

In fact, the Projector's comments on the integration of other tradesmen's signs can be interpreted differently, i. e. as not referring to the integration of *styles* of literary predecessors:

³ E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon Press, 1960), p. 20.

I would therefore establish certain Rules, for the determining how far one Tradesman may *give* the Sign of another, and in what Cases he may be allowed to quarter it with his own.

This sentence could also refer to the problem of plagiarism and thus of copyright. If so, the descriptive critic and much-plagiarized Mr. Spectator would probably be in favor of even stricter rules than the prescriptive critic; he certainly agrees with him later in the text, where it is claimed that literary predecessors should be acknowledged:

But though it may not be necessary for Posterity thus to set up the sign of their Fore-fathers; I think it highly proper for those who actually profess the Trade, to show some such Marks of it before their Doors.

In the first two paragraphs Addison's critic has discussed the relation of the literary text to the world of existing things, and the intertextual relation of texts to previous ones. In the third paragraph he turns to the relation between the signifier and the signified and posits the iconic sign as an aesthetic ideal:

I would enjoin every Shop to make use of a Sign which bears some Affinity to the Wares in which it deals.

The pedantic critic simply holds, but does not justify the opinion that the relation between signifier and signified should be somehow plausible and not contradictory:

What can be more inconsistent, than to see a Bawd at the Sign of the Angel, or a Taylor at the Lion? A Cook should not live at the Boot, nor a Shoemaker at the Roasted Pig; and yet, for want of this Regulation, I have seen a Goat set up before the Door of a Perfumer, and the *French* King's Head at a Sword-Cutler's.

The dull critic *does* perceive that unlikeness is the associational link between sin and virtue – as represented by “Bawd” and “Angel” – or between cowardice and courage – the “Taylor” and the “Lion” – but to him unlikeness is mere contiguity, no more than senseless contradiction. What the pedant does not see is the foregrounding effect of these apparent inconsistencies: when the associational nexus between signifier and signified is unlikeness, the sign – and thus the public house – draws attention to itself.⁴

⁴ For the influence of Hobbes's and Locke's theories about the association of ideas on Addison see Martin Kallich, “The Association of Ideas and Critical Theory: Hobbes, Locke and Addison,” *ELH: A Journal of English Literary History*, 12 (1945), 290–315. For Dryden's role in the transmission of these theories see C. H. Salter, “Dryden and Addison,” *Modern Language Review*, 69 (1974), 29–39.

The difference between the prescriptive critic and the descriptive one is thus the lack of discourse awareness. The dull critic posits: "A Cook should not live at the Boot, nor a Shoemaker at the Roasted Pig", the descriptive critic superimposes a second structural pattern over the dull critic's argument, that of a chiasmus, thus simultaneously validating and denying the censorious critic's argument. The pedantic critic's argument is *validated* – indeed a cook should live at the Roasted Pig – because the chiasmus is based on contiguity and on cause and effect: the chiasmus links the "Cook" with the "roasted Pig" and the "Boot" with the "Shoemaker"; the pedant's argument is *denied*, because the straightforward statement: "A cook should live at the Roasted Pig, and a shoemaker at the Boot" would be uninteresting. The prescriptive critic holds an opinion, the descriptive critic plays with it at the other's expense; discrete textual structures reflect discrete views on criticism.

The tendencies of the descriptive critic's views on criticism become more manifest in the last paragraph of the letter, where he first ridicules criticism that praises the altogether too obvious: he praises Mrs. Salmon for "ingeniously" giving her signpost the shape of the very same fish, and then exposes the follies of a criticism that turns to the abstruse and ludicrous, to folk etymology and clichéd psychologizing. But this tendency of Addison's to situate himself between the extremes, in the present instance between dullness and what he elsewhere calls "false wit", is not the only expression of opinion on criticism in *Spectator* 28. There is a discrete strand of fascination with the possible arbitrariness of the sign that runs through this text.

The hypothetical descriptive critic does everything he can to extend the range of signs. He does not limit the referents of signs to the world of nature, he implicitly also allows referents that belong to the world of the imagination, including flying pigs. This critic also likes to expand the limitations that are imposed on the choice of signifiers by the strict laws which govern associations between the signifier and the signified; his play with ironically incongruous associations shows the comic potential inherent in the foregrounding of surprising contiguities. The "*French King's Head at a Sword-Cutler's*" is an example of such a playful incongruity of signifier and signified. From this example we can extrapolate: a non-arbitrary relation between signifier and signified in literary texts is only desirable for certain *effects*, primarily for effects of wit, just as on the level of sounds the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary except for onomatopoeic effects. "Modern Criticism" – Addison implies – is wrong in its insistence on the iconic sign, a sign "which bears

some Affinity” to its signified; the relation between the signifier and the signified is conventional or arbitrary.⁵

If – hypothetically – we accept this view as Addison’s, we must examine the consequences. They are far-reaching.

The town is structured like a language: we all read its conventional signs. Literary texts have an analogous structure: critics read its conventional signs. It is individuals – be they ordinary citizens or the specialized readers of signs called critics – who impose significance on the signifying structures of our textual surroundings. All individuals become imposers of meaning, thus creators and authors – although only what I have called descriptive critics are aware of this role. Pious Addison thus lays the foundations of secular individualism and of critical hubris.

Furthermore, the relation between signifier and signified is an analogue of the free market: we as individuals decide which relations of signifier and signified count, which rules we accept. What seem to be natural rules governing street signs are boring, what seem to be natural rules governing the structure of literary texts stifle the imagination and true wit, what seem to be natural rules governing early mercantile society in an absolutist state stifle the free exchange of goods. Addison wants criticism to encourage a literature that deliberately breaks these natural rules. Hohendahl in *The Institution of Criticism* puts it more radically: “Literature served the emancipation movement of the middle class as an instrument to gain self-esteem and to articulate its human demands against the absolutist state and a hierarchical society.”⁶ It is the critical discourse of Joseph Addison in particular which, for all its “blandness”, contains unruly elements suggesting that social hierarchical structures are arbitrary, that the signifier “birth” only by convention signifies

⁵ Saussure’s concept of the arbitrariness of the sign can be found in Hobbes and Locke. See Stephen K. Land, *From Signs to Propositions: The Concept of Form in Eighteenth-Century Semantic Theory* (London: Longman, 1974). Land quotes Hobbes, ed. W. Molesworth, vol. I, pp. 14–15 (p. 16): “And of signs, some are *natural* . . . and others are *arbitrary*, namely, those we make choice of at our pleasure, as a bush hung up, signifies that wine is to be sold there; a stone set in the ground signifies the bound of a field; and words so and so connected, signify the cogitations and notions of our minds.” And Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III.II.1: “Thus we may conceive how *words*, which were by nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by men as *the signs* of their *ideas*: not by any natural connexion that there is between particular articulate sounds and certain *ideas*, for then there would be but one language amongst all men; but by a voluntary imposition whereby such a word is made arbitrarily the mark of such an idea.”

⁶ Quoted in Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From The Spectator to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 10.

“command”, that this relation can be ironically juggled with, although it is of course only the *French* king’s head which is – quite prophetically – involved in this juggling. Addison’s critical discourse, in short, is not as harmless as it looks; his critique of contemporary criticism, the “lively picture of modern criticism” presented in *Spectator* 28, attacks the remnants of absolutist hierarchies in the criticism of his time: he attacks the belief in natural rules, in iconic signs. “In the early eighteenth century . . . the bourgeois principle of abstract free and equal exchange is elevated from the market-place to the sphere of discourse . . .”⁷ Although Addison is thus a proponent of a rational discourse that permits free exchange of opinions, a discourse that reflects and enlivens the free exchange of goods, this free discourse does need fixed rules when it comes to property: forefathers and predecessors must be properly acknowledged.

Admittedly the correlation of the indexical or iconic sign with conservatism, and of the conventional or arbitrary sign with progressivism is a schematic simplification – a simplification which needs some elaboration.

In a recent controversy between Murray Krieger and E. H. Gombrich in *Critical Inquiry*, Krieger commits the error of slicing Gombrich in two: into a humanistic, progressive proponent of the arbitrary sign and a scientific, conservative proponent of the non-arbitrary sign. The main point of dissension is the issue of whether perspective in art is a mere convention, or whether perspective is a more “natural” mode of representation than others. To Krieger this is an ideological issue: to him the view that perspective is non-conventional, the view that perspective is a more “natural” mode of representation, necessarily implies that e.g. Egyptian art is inferior to the Greek tradition, and this he considers a reactionary view. Krieger accuses Gombrich of having abandoned his former progressive views; Krieger’s text belongs to a new genre: the liberal complaint:

One change (from the early to the recent Gombrich) is the denial of the antique distinction in aesthetics between natural and conventional signs, that is, between signs which look like their referents and arbitrary signs related to their referents only by convention: in short, between pictures and words. For all representation – even that apparently depending on its resemblance to external reality – comes to be similarly viewed as responding to the perceptual and cultural norms brought to it – in short to be similarly viewed as conventional signs. And these norms, through usage, establish an authority that does not depend upon fidelity to what (in a neutral, naturalistic sense) is being represented. All signs must be read, not – as with the natural-conventional sign distinction – some signs seen and some read.⁸

⁷ Eagleton, p. 26.

⁸ Murray Krieger, “The Ambiguities of Representation and Illusion: An E. H. Gombrich Retrospective,” *Critical Inquiry*, 11 (1984), 184–185.

Krieger accuses Gombrich of reintroducing the notion of “seeing” pictures, rather than “reading” them. Presumably only arbitrary signs demand that one *learn* to “read” them.

In spite of those daring early moments that got us all going, it does seem to be his constant conviction that this tradition [i. e. the tradition of perspective], with its perfection of perspective devices, solved the problem of representation in a way that permits the viewer to see immediately (that is, without semiotic mediation), to see without having to read. In effect, it reestablishes the distinction between natural and conventional signs and the mode of response appropriate to each.⁹

This tendency in Gombrich Krieger calls an “anticonventionalist theoretical conservatism.”¹⁰

The Krieger-Gombrich controversy proves the importance of the arbitrariness – non arbitrariness issue in today’s critical theory and the ideological implications of the issue. As to the relevance of the controversy for Addison’s *Spectator* 28, Gombrich’s statement in *Art and Illusion* may be pertinent: “The test of the image is not its lifelikeness but its efficacy within a context of action.”¹¹ The test of criticism for Addison was not its absolute truth, but its efficacy in a new public sphere.

⁹ Krieger, p. 188.

¹⁰ Krieger, p. 190.

¹¹ Gombrich, p. 94.