

**GEORGE
ADLER**

LETTERS OF A
LUNATIC

George Adler
Letters of a Lunatic

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Adler G.

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G. J. Adler
Letters of a Lunatic / A Brief Exposition of
My University Life, During the Years 1853-54

PREFATORY NOTE TO THE PUBLIC

In a recent publication on German Literature, I hinted to the reader my design of giving an account of an event in my personal history, which I alleged to be the cause of an absentment from my proper place of study, and consequently of an injustice to my public. I now proceed to fulfil my promise, by offering to my personal friends, and to such as are interested in matters of academic education and morality, a few of the many letters written by me during the past year. I might have added others, both of an anterior and of a more recent date. The question however was not to write a volume, but simply a brief exposition, of a page or two from my life in connection with a public institution of the metropolis, and thus to bring a matter of private and iniquitous dispute before the forum of the public, after having vainly sought redress in private. My main object was of course to vindicate and defend my character, my professional honor and my most sacred rights as a rational man and as a public educator, against the invasions of narrow-minded and unjust aggressors, whose machinations have for several years been busily at work in subverting what other men have reared before them, in retarding and impeding what the intelligence of our age and country is eager to accelerate and to promote. The much agitated question of University reform and of the liberty of academic instruction, which of late years has engaged the attention of some of the best intellects on both sides of the Atlantic, and which within a month past has again occupied the public mind, and even called forth legislative intervention may, however, perhaps likewise receive some additional light from the following pages, which I now submit, not from any motive of vanity, or from the expectation of self-aggrandisement or of histrionic applause; but from a sense of duty to the cause of liberal culture and of sound morality, to which I have devoted many a year of laborious effort and of earnest thought.

NEW-YORK UNIVERSITY
June, 1854.

} G. J. A.

LETTER I

New-York University, Sept. 10th, 1853.

Rev. Isaac Ferris, d. d.

Dear Sir, – I deem it a duty of justice towards myself, as well as to the honor of the Institution of which I am an officer and yourself the newly-elected head, to bring to your consideration a few circumstances from the history of our incidental intercourse during the past winter, which at the time of occurrence, struck me with painful surprise, and which I cannot suffer to pass without my most earnest protestations.

1st, During the earlier part of the winter, in passing out of my lecture-room one morning, I met you in the hall of the University with a pale face, asking me in the most uncalled-for and singular manner the strange question: – "*Are you my superior?*" – The reply, which I ought to have written on the spot to such an enquiry, I would now make by saying, that such an idea never occurred to me, and that, as I had never seen any thing of your presence in the actual performance of duty in the University at the time of my instruction to the students, such an idea *never could have suggested itself* to me. The question of superiority or inferiority being, moreover, of a relative nature and one that (in our profession) can only be settled by actual services rendered to the cause of letters and by actual acknowledgements obtained in a proper manner and from competent judges, it would be folly for me or for any one else to attempt to place it on any other ground; and for that reason I never touch it, although I am always ready to acknowledge both moral and intellectual superiority, wherever I become aware of its existence.

2d, On a second occasion, I met you by accident in the hall before my door, when to my equal surprise, you informed me by indefinite murmurs and in the same painful half-way-utterance, "*that I had the chapel,*" and "*that I was in the next church,*" pointing to Dr. Hutton's. This cannot possibly be the case, as I am not of your persuasion in matters of religion, and if I am to communicate any instruction in the Institution, it must be done in the usual way.

3d, During the horrid disorders within the Institution the past winter, I repeatedly heard vociferous declamations in the adjoining room, and at one time the famous words of Patrick Henry were declaimed by Mr. Bennet (I think) of the last class: "*Give me liberty, or give me death!*" fearfully emphasized, and *your own voice echoed: "Death you shall have!"* As at that particular time I underwent the crucifixion of college-disorder, at the same time receiving occasional intimations that either in my speculations or in my instruction *I was going too far*, and that on that account it was necessary for me to leave, I cannot possibly be mistaken in supposing, *that both that horrible word of yours*, as well as the frequent scandalous vociferations were intended as an insult for me; (and, *if that is so*, I would most respectfully beg leave to reciprocate the compliment).

4th, At the dinner of the Alumni my attention along with that of all the rest of the assembled guests was directed towards you, at the time you rose to speak. While yet standing, you turned towards me with a peculiar expression of countenance (which I beg you to allow me to reciprocate) and in an under-tone (distinctly audible to me) asked the guests of the opposite side of the room (between whom and yourself there appears to have been a collusion): *Shall I have to become the step-father of that man?* and again in the same tone and with the same expression of countenance: "*Next year I shall see another man in that man's place!*" The subsequent exchange of salutations *over Prof. Martin* was ironical on your part, and independently of the rudeness of the act, wholly out of place. No one else present was treated in the same way. – In regard to the last expression, with which you honored me on that occasion, I would say, that by the repetition of the scenes of immorality and disorder of which this building was the theatre (in the most odious sense of that term) during the past year, such an event might be possible, not however without some troublesome resistance on my part and *the*

prospect of another change. – In regard to the first question, I will myself take the responsibility of a reply, by frankly informing you, that, although I do not feel the slightest inclination to question the responsible honor of your office, and with due deference to the reputation for moral integrity (of your *scholarship* I have never seen any proof), which must have secured the same to you, I nevertheless most emphatically decline such paternal supervision – having for many years past been myself of full age, and even won a place *as a man* among the men and scholars of our land. And this I purpose to maintain, whether I am in the University, or out of it. I must, therefore, beg you *to take back the offensive words at the next dinner as publicly as they were uttered*, or else I shall be obliged to take measures in defence of my honor, which, painful and disagreeable as they would be to me, would nevertheless be a necessary duty of self-protection. As for my peculiar views and position with reference to questions of scholarship and education, I have undergone no change of opinion whatever, nor could I undergo one, unless it were the necessary consequence of a rational conviction; and I shall have my hands full for some years to come, to write out and publish what I have but imperfectly and in a desultory manner indicated in my lectures and conversations; and while I am convinced that in many respects I have (as is usual) been voluntarily and involuntarily misunderstood, I am sure, that in the main I am right, and entitled to a hearing or a reading, whether, as has been intimated to me, I go too far or not. – In regard to the many scandalous interruptions by spectral noises (by day and by night), of which I well remember the chief authors, and in regard to my other persecutions, I am aware, that they can only be the subject of commiseration and of merited contempt, and that under the given circumstances, it would be difficult to obtain redress or justice. I shall, however, procure some legal advice on the subject. Allow me, in conclusion, Sir, to assure you of the absence of all hostile personal feeling on my part. I have said what my duty imperatively demands, and my silence would have made me a villain, justly liable to perpetual abuse.

*I am, Dear Sir,
with the most distinguished consideration,*

*Yours, &c.
G. J. Adler.*

LETTER II

New-York University, Sept. 12th, 1853.

*To his Honor, the Mayor
of the city of New-York.*

Dear Sir, – I deem it my duty as a citizen of New-York, and a member of a literary institution, of which your Honor is *ex-officio* an officer, to apprise you of a fact of my personal history during the past winter, which as it is intimately connected with the maintenance of social order, should not for one moment be passed over by the authorities of the municipal corporation. I have for a number of years past been connected with the University of the city of New-York, first as a resident graduate and lately as the Professor of a modern language, and have ever since my connection with the institution resided in the building on Washington Square, spending most of my time in authorship and instruction in a room, which for several years I have occupied for that purpose. In consequence of some bad feeling towards me on the part of certain enemies of mine, who of late have done all in their power to annoy me, the quiet of my residence has been disturbed in a scandalous manner, by day and at all hours of the night, for weeks and months together, so as to inflict on me the torments of perpetual interruption not only in my work during the day, but of rest during the night, until my health was completely shattered; and in this miserable manner I have lost nearly the whole of last winter without accomplishing any of my purposes with satisfaction or comfort. This outrageous annoyance has been the source of severe loss to me not only in regard to my health, but also in a pecuniary point of view. My salary in the institution being altogether inadequate for my support, I have been engaged for a number of years past in preparing works for publication, and this winter the ruin of my health from the causes already mentioned has also threatened me with the ruin of my income. As this villainous business has proceeded in part from the institution itself, or rather from individuals personally hostile to me and to my purposes, I deem an address to your Honor so much the more in place, as I believe it to be officially your duty to interpose your municipal authority in matters of this kind, and to reprimand or punish men for the immorality of so flagrant a disturbance of the peace. As my ears have almost daily been wounded by disorderly noises, not only from students, but (and mostly) from other persons, who ought to blush for such base conduct, I cannot say, that I am unacquainted with the authors of the nuisance, and could easily designate to you at least half a dozen. Such cries as "Go on! Stop! – Out of the institution with that man! – Kill him!" besides multitudes of vulgar chuckles, screams and other horrid vociferations have been heard by me from well-known voices, until at times I felt as if I could support the vexation no longer. Numberless insults in the street and even menaces were constantly thrown out by a low gang, who were evidently hired for the vile purpose, and I have seen things, which I never witnessed before either in Europe or America. A certain firm of this city seems to have commenced the nefarious hostilities. I have suffered encroachments on my personal safety to which no American citizen ought for one moment to submit. As I cannot afford, nor feel inclined to lose my time and health any longer, I would respectfully submit to your Honor's consideration *my claim to the protection of the laws of the city* in this respect, to which as an American citizen I am entitled, and the necessity of a sterner maintenance of order by the police of the city. Disagreeable and painful as it is for any one to come into hostile collision with fellow-citizens, there are nevertheless cases, in which such enmities may be innocently contracted, and holding mine to be of such a nature, I may confidently expect the ready and effectual interposition of your Honor and of the honorable members of the Common Council, to whom the order and honor of the city must ever be dear, in a matter that seems to me to involve one of the most cherished principles of

our republican freedom, viz., the personal safety and peaceable domicile of every member of our community, of every citizen of this vast republic.

To sum up my complaints briefly, they are as follows: – 1st, Personal hostility towards me in the institution itself; 2dly, Horrid footsteps, noises and loud conferences under my window by day and by night; 3dly, Menacing insults from low people in the street, without the slightest provocation on my part.

Trusting that your Honor may find an early occasion to give me an opportunity for finding my firm conviction true, that the majesty of the law is capable of being upheld by its representatives in the community, and that I may have a different tale to tell respecting the morality of the city and my own sense of personal safety,

I am your Honor's

most respectful and obedient servant.

G. J. Adler.

LETTER III. – (Answer to No. I.)

Rev. Dr. —

Dear Sir, – Understanding that you are a friend of Professor Adler, of this University, and know his brother, I take the liberty of calling your attention to his present condition. – During the last winter he gave various indications of a disordered mind, and these have become more decided during the past summer. I am distressed to see his haggard look, and have feared unhappy results. He is unfitted for the business of teaching, and his friends would do well to get him another institution, adapted to such, away from study. I think there should be no delay in the matter. – We all esteem Dr. Adler highly, and would be delighted with his restoration to the full use of his fine intellectual powers.

May I solicit your fraternal aid in this case, and please let me hear from you at an early day.

*I am with great regard,
Yours,*

*University of the City of
New-York, Sept. 19th, '53.*

} (Signed) Isaac Ferris.

EPILOGOMENA TO LETTER III

As the above letter was handed to my personal friends for the purpose of conveying the desired intelligence, and sent to me, when the report of my illness and mental derangement was found to be groundless and false, there can be no impropriety or breach of courtesy or justice in its publication. The serious consequences to which it gave rise, the deprivation of my liberty for six entire months, and the suspension of my functions as an academic instructor (though not of my activity as an author, which under the most inauspicious circumstances was still continued) alike demand, that it should be made known in connection with my own communications before and during my imprisonment. A comment or two will exhibit the contents of the Doctor's epistle in their proper light.

1st, The Dr's. letter is itself a contradiction and an egregious symptom of insanity on his part, which is, moreover, confirmed by his previous conduct from his first entrance into the institution. In comparing the University with the Lunatic Asylum, I find that the former during the winter of 1852-'53 (I may add, ever since my return from Europe in 1850) was a far more disorderly and irrational place than the latter, where the occasional confusion or the perpetual (sane and insane) perversity of men is the lamentable, but natural and necessary (consequently *irresponsible*) result, of an internal physical or intellectual disorder or defect, which is moreover susceptible of classification and of a psychological exposition, while in the former it was "got up" for the particular purpose of subjugation or of expulsion, and where consequently it was the result of *responsible* perversity and malice, *susceptible of moral reprobation*.

2d, The allegation of my being "unfitted for the business of teaching," and of the propriety of finding me "another institution, adapted to such, away from study," is an absurd and a libelous perversion of the truth, which it is scarcely worth while to refute. From the year 1839, the year of my matriculation at the institution, to the present hour I have had no other profession, except that of having appeared in the additional capacity of an author. Even during my undergraduate career I taught successfully the various disciplines of our academic course, with the approbation and to the satisfaction of the Faculty, members of which examined and admitted to promotion several of my private scholars, who had been expressly referred to me for tuition in the Classics, in Mathematics, in Philosophy, &c. – Of my courses of instruction since my official and regular connection with the institution (which dates from the year 1846) in the language and in the literature which I was more especially appointed to profess, it is not necessary to speak here, the University itself having offered but little inducement and no emolument or honor to the cultivation of the modern languages. In all the professional services, however, which I have had occasion to render to the institution of late years, my qualifications and my efficiency could never have been honestly or honorably questioned. I have prepared my own text-books, which have found their way into most of the literary and educational institutions of this continent to some extent into Europe even. One of them was begun at the very time, when "the indications of a disordered mind had become more decided," and was completed with scarcely a day's intermission of my work at the lunatic asylum, where I subsequently improved my leisure (as far as my shattered health would permit) by zealously engaging in some preliminary studies for a history of modern literature. – It is equally needless to expatiate on my extensive acquaintance, direct and indirect, with academic men and methods both in the United States and in Europe, where within a few years past I spent an entire year in the pursuit of literary and philosophical studies at two of its most prominent Universities. —*To my morality*

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