

while perhaps not quite far back enough to be history, but in Buckley's working out of the dangers of détente, his play has currency as a standing warning to advocates of game strategy theory in Washington.

Last but not least comes Brad Korbemeyer's *Incident at San Bajo*, chosen from among 1,700 other submissions to win ATL's one-act play contest. His very nice play is the story of seven survivors of the (fictional) poisoning of an entire small town in California, told from the point of view of each. *Incident at San Bajo*, like *God's Country*, is constructed like a documentary; there is no plot, just the winding out of the characters' fantastic stories. But Korbemeyer does that well, and unlike Steven Dietz, Korbemeyer has assembled a wonderful and varied set of characters.

Jon Jory is proud, I would think, of his reputation for taking risks. His whole formation of a new play festival was a risk for which he should only be congratulated. He has taken the further risk of commissioning a large number of new plays from established writers who are not experienced as playwrights (like Crews and Buckley this year, or Jimmy Breslin last year, or E.L. Doctorow next year). Sometimes this pans out; the Crews play especially is quite good. But sometimes it doesn't. And while I understand that the job of wading through thousands of unsolicited scripts was colossal, it is evident from the Korbemeyer play—a better play even in a staged reading than several of the commissioned works that had full productions—what is available out there, often from unknowns. (Mr. Korbemeyer had been working in management for a fast-food company and trying unsuccessfully to break into television.)

One of the best-known plays to come out of Louisville, John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God*, which has been on Broadway and was made into a movie, came out of nowhere, back in 1980, in the fourth year of the festival. Ditto for Beth Henley, whose *Crimes of the Heart* also premiered in Louisville, in 1979. Except for the one-acts, which can still come in unsolicited and get their reading, the Great American Play Contest Jory founded in 1978 was discontinued in 1986, and I regret that.

In garnering Doctorow and fiction

writer Tama Janowitz for next year's festival Jory has gone straight to New York. That's too bad, as no place is more provincial. It's worth remembering that another of Jon Jory's most successful finds was *Getting Out*, a play in the 1978 season written by not just an unknown but an unknown Louisvillian named Marsha Norman. It also seems noteworthy to me to see that some of the best acting performances in this 1989 festival were by ATL regulars or former regulars—Bill McNulty in *Stained Glass*, Bob Burris and Anne Pitoniak in *Blood Issue*. Long-time company member Adale O'Brien also did a nice job in Buckley's play. ATL has found, commissioned, and produced a lot of good work, but it is this local (or regional) talent that it should be happiest about and that is, I believe, its strongest asset.

Katherine Dalton is managing editor of Chronicles.

LETTERS



Jeanne Berg

The Fallacy of Descriptivism by Steven Goldberg

People with more than a passing interest in words fall into two groups: prescriptivist and descriptivist. The prescriptivist believes that there is an ideal of correctness in the use of words, shifting and temporally-based as it ultimately may be. The descriptivist finds the concept of "correctness" elitist at best. More often, he finds it incom-

prehensible.

The one inviolable rule of descriptivism is this: there are no correct definitions, meanings, or usages other than those used by people-in-general; any attempt to impose some other definition is invalid. Where the prescriptivist subordinates popular usage to correctness, the descriptivist rejects all other criteria except those used by people-in-general.

Now consider what happens when you ask a descriptivist how he defines "dictionary."

The descriptivist might, as his inviolable rule says he must, accept the popular definition of "dictionary." If he does this, he will have to define "dictionary" in the commonly accepted sense of a book giving correct definitions that are determined by a literary elite. This, after all, is what most people mean when they say "dictionary." The descriptivist must accept the common view that there is a correct usage—in this case correct definitions—because his inviolable rule requires that he accept the view of people-in-general. In granting that there is a correct usage, the descriptivist grants what his inviolable rule, his basic premise, denies.

The descriptivist might, on the other hand, reject the generally accepted definition and substitute the definition of "dictionary" implied by his inviolable rule, the definition that *denies* that there is a "correct" usage other than that used by people-in-general. But if he does this, he does the one thing that his inviolable rule prohibits: he substitutes a "correct" definition for the only definition that his basic premise grants as legitimate: the definition used by people-in-general.

The descriptivist cannot argue that people-in-general are incorrect in defining a "dictionary" as giving correct usage because "incorrect" (or "wrong") has no meaning in the descriptivist universe (except, perhaps, to describe a misrepresentation of the usage of people-in-general, which is just what the descriptivist does if he alters the popular definition of "dictionary").

Whether the descriptivist accepts or rejects the popular definition of "dictionary," his descriptivism is exposed as rotten at its core. The contradiction is not merely an oddity relevant only to a single definition. The problem of defining "dictionary" is but a focused

view of a contradiction that infuses all of descriptivism, and it can be stated without reference to a definition of "dictionary." The general contradiction is that descriptivism is founded on an axiom that accepts "A" (popular usage) and rejects "B" (any other authority or criterion for correctness) even when acceptance of "A" commits descriptivism to an acceptance of "B," which is rejected by the axiom ("A") that requires its acceptance.

There are problems with descriptivism that many will find even more serious than the failure of logical structure. Descriptivism would have us almost immediately follow the lead of people-in-general, even when doing so would eradicate a distinction that increases precision. So, for example, as soon as people begin to ignore the distinction between "continuous" (how a faucet runs) and "continual" (how a faucet drips), the distinction dissolves for the descriptivist. The prescriptivist, on the other hand, believes that when a distinction increases precision, as does the distinction between "continuous" and "continual," there is every reason to maintain it well past the point where most have begun to ignore it.

There does, no doubt, often come a time when only the etymologist remembers a worthwhile distinction, and by that point even the prescriptivist has come to favor ignoring it. But while a significant minority maintains the distinction, so that its fate remains in question, the prescriptivist favors retention. Indeed, it is primarily this that makes him a prescriptivist.

Now it might seem, and often is the case, that the prescriptivist is the conservative yearning for stability, while the descriptivist is the radical who sees the hands of the people as the only proper repository for power, linguistic or otherwise. But this is not always so. Some of us find the most dependable defense against the tendentiousness of *all* groups, the literary elite included, to be a precision of language that exposes muddled thought.

The difference between the prescriptivist who is an elitist and the prescriptivist who trusts not even the literary elite can be seen in the defense each supplies for his prescriptivism. While both are interested primarily in precision and the other virtues of cor-

rect usage, the elitist tends to accept for its own sake the value of speaking and writing like—indeed being like—the literary elite that provides his correct definitions and usages. He identifies with the literary elite and sees as correct not merely the precise, but the "appropriate."

The nonelitist prescriptivist, on the other hand, cares primarily about the precision. Moved only by valid argument, he rejects the assessments made by the literary elite when the assessment is supported only by self-appeal. Analogously, he is likely to ignore the illogical rule stating that the quotation marks at the end of the preceding paragraph should come after the period. Likewise, the prescriptivist of this stripe rarely has much interest in pronunciation, because mispronunciation rarely interferes with the rigor, precision, and communication that are his interests.

The distinction between the two types of prescriptivists can be seen in their differing attitudes towards the distinction between "less" and "fewer." The traditionalist prescriptivist does not question the value of the claim that "less" must be used with the continuous (a stream of water) and "fewer" with the discrete (drops of water). I must admit that I abhor the increasing use of "less people" as much as does the traditionalist prescriptivist. But my point is precisely that feelings on such matters—whether one's own feelings or those of an elite—have no persuasive power when not supported by valid argument. "Less people" sounds terrible only because of the rule that one must maintain the alleged distinction between "less" and "fewer." If, as I suggest, the distinction is not a legitimate one, then a sensibility rooted in the illegitimate distinction is illegitimate as well.

Superficially, the distinction between "less" and "fewer" seems analogous to that between "continuous" and "continual." But note the crucial difference between the two pairs: the distinction between "continuous" and "continually" increases precision by providing information not otherwise provided: "the leak is continuous" is different from "the leak is continual."

In the case of "less" and "fewer," however, the information that deter-

mines the choice of words *must* be stated (i.e., "less water" or "fewer drops of water"). Thus, the distinction between "less" and "fewer" does not provide any new information of precision; the distinction is merely redundant. The only effect of this redundancy is to increase inelegance.

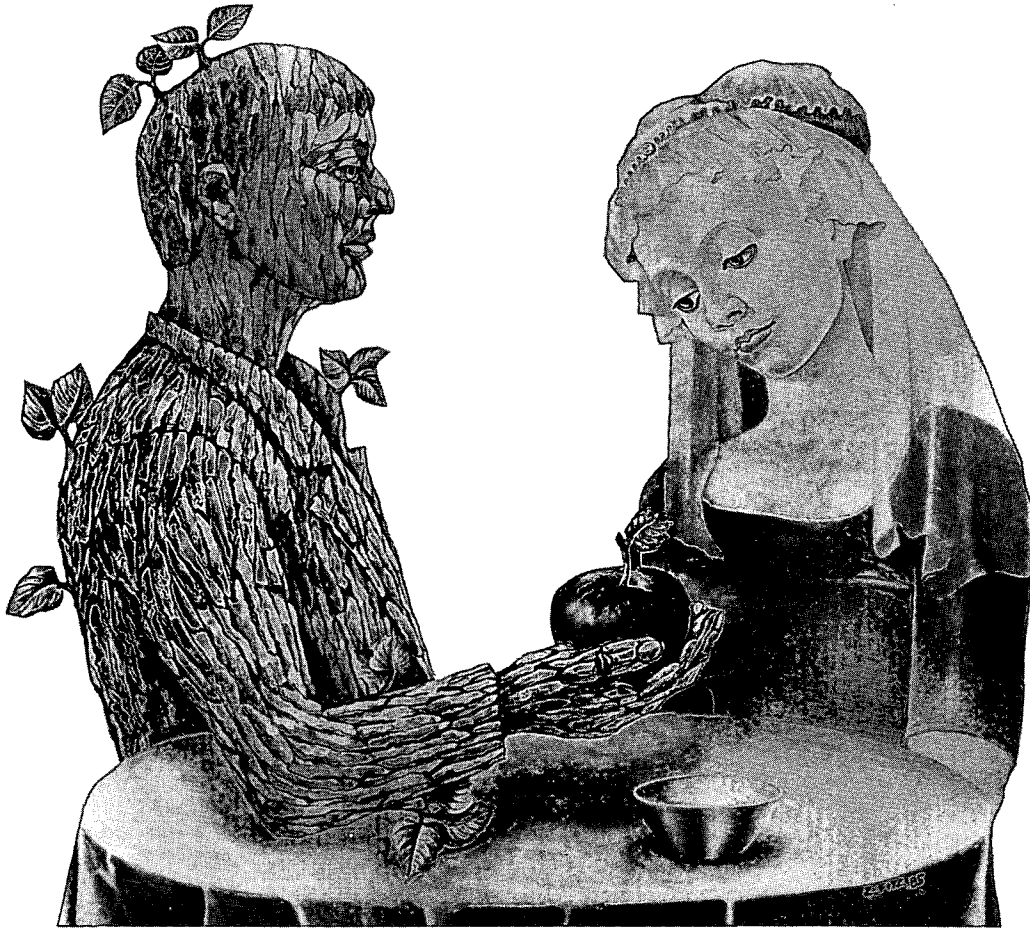
Now, the inevitable response to all this by the traditionalist prescriptivist is to argue that such "logic chopping" would maim, if not rend, the language. The problem with this criticism is that its assumption is untrue: removing redundant distinctions like that between "less" and "fewer" would not do any harm to the language, but would merely remove a few analogous nondistinctions (like that between "amount" and "number").

The first fact I ever heard about our language remains the fact that most impresses me: no two synonyms mean exactly the same thing. The capacity for precision that this fact implies is our language's greatest strength. (No one has ever claimed for English the honor of being the most euphonious or most easily-learned language.) We should not let the language shred at the edges for no reason.

There are many other aspects of English for which elegance, simplicity, and precision do not justify the jettisoning of distinctions. We would not, for example, change all of the present-tense forms of "to be" to "am" ("I am," "you am," "he am" . . .) because, at the very least, euphony would be lost. In the case of "to be," in other words, there is a need met by the maintenance of distinctions and the distinctions are not, therefore, redundant. But this cannot be said for the nondistinction between "less" and "fewer" and the few nondistinctions analogous to that between "less" and "fewer." That such distinctions are not necessary is clear from the fact that it has been hundreds of years since anyone has had the nerve to insist that we distinguish between "more" and "mo" when describing "water" and "drops of water."

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