

The Greater Garble

JACQUES BARZUN

THIS is addressed to the busy-bodies of the year 4000, who will dig-up the remains of our erstwhile civilization and will judge our contemporary writers from such printed books as may survive. I tell them authoritatively: the text of the works written in prose are nearly all corrupt. They are deliberately garbled. Hence just as we, in our critical dealings with ancient writings, have to take into account the stupid scribe or the ignorant monk who piously altered the original, they as future critics will have to take into account the copy editor.

Since later comers, and many persons living today, will want fuller knowledge of this peculiar institution, I may be permitted to discuss it in detail. Good publishers do not merely design, print, and sometimes sell books: they edit them. For this purpose they regularly employ one or more copy editors. I do not refer to the general editors—the Saxe Comminses, the Stanley Salmens—who shepherd work in progress and offer broadly conceived suggestions to their authors. I mean the official—usually a girl, and a very nice girl—who takes the author's completed manuscript and goes over every word of it, marking it up with an indelible pencil before it is sent to the printers. The old monk, on the strength of his faith, tried to make the ancient author more seemly. The new girl does exactly the same to us on the strength of her college education.

Her ravages fall into three large categories: she alters spelling and punctuation; she enforces the house "style" in various ways to be discussed later; she contributes her own ideas of verbal felicity and taste. Her clearest ideal is consistency, but since in matters of language many questions cannot be solved by rule, consistency boils down to conformity with the reference books found in the office—Webster, the University of Chicago Press manual, or whatnot. The author is stretched on the bed of Procrustes by fair means or Fowler.

If young and innocent, the author knows nothing of what's going on. He thinks his book is being set up in type, after possibly a confidential look at his capitalization and the straight-

ening out of typist's errors and comma-quotes combinations. He does not know that most of his which's are being changed to that's. He never suspects that words arbitrarily condemned by the particular firm are being replaced by supposed synonyms. Wherever he wrote "likewise," for example, the girl puts in "also"; if he used "at length," down goes "at last"; if he likes "as though," the text now reads "as if." When the girl decides that he has written an awkward sentence she freely recasts it, cuts it up, inverts it. She especially delights in transposing modifiers, and is a dab at moving "only" so that it shall be glued to the word it technically affects. If you come to grips with her, she's likely to say (like a sensible girl): "I only thought I'd be of help," but she will make you write something like: "I thought I'd be ohly of help"—and you're lucky that she stops shoving before the "of" instead of after it.

All this small-time pedantry and impertinence goes on behind the author's back, and at his expense—in two ways. First: when he accidentally discovers these changes on galley proofs, every restoration of his original wording will be charged to him as—supreme irony!—an author's alteration; recovering his own prose may cost him hundreds of dollars. Second: when he reads galleys—his eye bent on catching typos and his mind on the larger elements of composition—he will very likely overlook some of this pointless doctoring. Later, when he goes back to his published book, he will come with a shock upon a turn of phrase that he instinctively knows is not his—whether because it it stupidly commonplace or, on the contrary, affectedly correct. One way or another, his tone will have been denatured by the imposition of a house style, or more exactly, a college-girl style.

It is true that if the author is experienced and thinks he can afford a pleasant row, he may restrain the copy editor in mid-flight, hold the girl's hand to keep it from wrecking too many of his intentions. Actually, this is but a lesser form of imposition

upon him, for he cannot begin objecting until she has begun to destroy, by which time he finds himself in the humiliating position of having to plead for his preferences, to excuse them as "quirks" (whereas hers are "style"), and generally to waste his time and eyesight going over a text that he knows to be well considered. If he balks at the whole routine he is told that certain authors can neither spell nor punctuate nor frame readable sentences. The clinching answer to this is, of course, that those authors' manuscripts should either not be accepted for publication, or else accepted under a clause giving the copy editor a free hand. But no argument, apparently, can reach the unproductive when they are bent on tampering with the work of craftsmen.

THE issue is anything but trivial. Its implications take us a good way beyond literature and "mere" style. Here we are in mid-century deploring on all hands the loss of individuality in a mass culture, the universal standardization, the itch of anonymous bureaucrats to interfere with private choice; and yet in the traditional medium for expressing individuality the custom of the trade steadily works to reinforce those very evils. We clamor about freedom of speech, we ridicule (with a shudder) the absurdity of soviet committees guiding Russian art; yet we submit without a word to the identical restraint. For no difference of principle exists between forcing Prokofiev to change his harmonic style and compelling a writer to change his syntax.

To be sure, the publisher's coercion of American writers is more gentle and roundabout, but the coercive state of mind and its instrument are there, all ready to act more stringently. Bad manners lead to crime, as the French say, and the point of etiquette involved is without question the ultimately political point. Changing a man's written word without his consent is a piece of rudeness no publisher would commit in his private capacity. In law,

changing words over a man's signature is forgery. But collectively and anonymously, and with a trumped-up idea of the general good, changing a man's words becomes allowable, virtuous, imperative. From publishers' current practice to Bismarck's editing of the Ems Despatch, to bogus confessions under third degree, is a straight line along which one finds two things keeping pace with each other—the amount of pres-

(Continued on page 48)



THE LITERARY SAMPLER

EXCERPTS AND JOTTINGS FROM NEW AND FORTHCOMING BOOKS

Mission to Moscow

FROM THE beginning, Churchill and Stalin understood one another perfectly. The best authorities agree that Stalin knew well enough that Churchill recognized him as a merciless conspirator to whom the war was only incidental to Russia's long-range aim of world conquest. On the other hand, it was plain to Stalin that Churchill's attempted jockeyings, at each conference involving the big three leaders, had the age-old underlying British motives of postwar balance of power. The first meeting of Churchill and Stalin, in Moscow in August 1942, resembled the head-on collision of two competitive bison. Churchill and Stalin share a few characteristics: each is capable of pursuing an ideal to the bitter death, each has a clairvoyance about the probable course of political events, they are rabidly patriotic in their different ways, they have almost unlimited mutual distrust, and they are gustatory champions in the grand style. For "Moscow No. 1," as the English call the conference, Churchill put on his siren suit and flew to the Russian capital in an R.A.F. bomber.

An observer says that Stalin, a cob-

bler's son without much distinction in the way of manners, goggled rudely at Churchill's attire at the moment of their first tête-à-tête. Churchill did not appear to be interested in the dictator's dress, which was the familiar gray Russian uniform. They got down to cases promptly. Talking through an interpreter, one Comrade Pavlov, Stalin expressed the opinion that Churchill's North African campaign was trivial and inquired, in effect, when England really planned to get to work and fight. Churchill's diplomatic *sang-froid* deserted him for a second; he jumped up to speak and pounded the heavy oaken table so hard with his right fist that some glasses at one end danced and rattled. At this point, the enigmatic Stalin got up and announced, through his vocal medium, who was becoming slightly rattled himself, "I don't know what you're saying, but, by God, I like your sentiments!" It was presumed by the English delegation that the Russian premier approved of Churchill's style of delivery rather than the words expressed. The group then recessed and threw down some vodka. By the second day, Churchill's spirits had revived, and he continued his argument that England was doing her utmost to

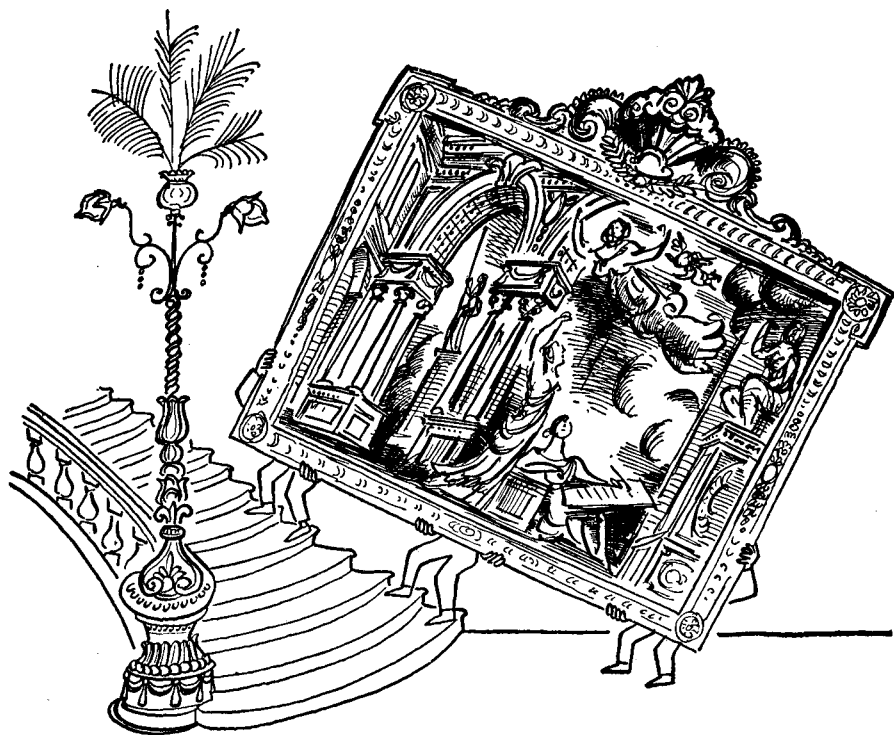
lift the Russian burden. But by the third day, still stalemated by Stalin's mulish insistence on European landings, Churchill was, for him, badly depressed. He went back to his quarters, and, after a few warming nips of some first-rate brandy he had brought along, went into a distinguished tantrum. According to one member of the party, an aide tried to quiet him, pointing out that beyond doubt the room was wired for espionage. Churchill's response was to approach each suspicious fixture in the place—wall lamps, pictures, recessed bric-a-brac—and address them with supremely eloquent abuse of everything Russian he could call to mind. The performance went on for several minutes, while the other occupants of the room were treated to a historic exercise of one of the world's rich vocabularies. When the Prime Minister finished, with the Russian situation covered to his satisfaction, he said, "That will at least make for interesting reading."

From "*Winston Churchill: An Informal Study of Greatness*," by Robert Lewis Taylor (Doubleday).

Art and Henry Ford

THE LONE wolves of the art world at last decided to pack up. Even Duveen consented to merge his talents with the talents of those he regarded as stumbling pedagogues whose function it was to prepare American art buyers for his finishing school. Looking around for new clients, the purveyors of art were discouraged. Save for one towering monolith, the horizon was blank. That monolith was Ford. The dealers—Duveen, Knoedler's, Wildenstein, Seligman, and Stevenson Scott—decided to make a mass assault on him. Ford was an objective so big that there would be enough for them all, and too big, they felt, for just one of them to tackle and risk fumbling. It was like annexing Texas. The five dealers reconciled themselves to pooling their inventories as well as their aggressiveness. They decided to prepare a list of the Hundred Greatest Paintings in the World and offer them to Ford; thus in one transaction they could convert America's richest man into America's outstanding collector . . .

The pictures, each of which was accompanied by a scholarly text, were



—By Saul Steinberg for "Duveen."