



# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### The Right Word to Write

THEODORE BERNSTEIN, assistant managing editor of the *New York Times* and well known to the staff of that newspaper as an authority on English usage, made an impression on a wider audience a few years ago with *Watch Your Language* and its sequel, *More Language That Needs Watching*, both based on a bulletin written for circulation among writers and editors of the *Times*. Now he has published *The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage* (Atheneum, \$7.95), a useful reference work and a book that has given me a good deal of pleasure.

The word to notice in the title is "writer," for this is a book about written, not spoken, language. As one who has spent most of his life in small towns, associating with people who know nothing about grammar or usage, I have been impressed by the clarity, vividness, and power with which semiliterate people can express themselves. Bernstein knows this, and he also knows that today even the most careful writers will, as a rule, relax when they are talking informally. But he believes that there are standards which should be preserved in written English.

The controversy over the third edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* and the writings of the structural linguists have made many of us a little touchy about this question of standards. Bernstein is quite specific about the formation of his standards. They are based on: (1) "the practices of reputable writers, past and present"; (2) "the observations and discoveries of linguistic scholars"; (3) "the predilections of teachers of English"; (4) "observation of what makes for clarity, precision, and logical presentation"; (5) "personal preferences of the author"; (6) experience as an editor of the *Times*.

The fourth point seems to me the important one. Some changes in usage don't diminish the effectiveness of the language, but others do. I couldn't bring

myself to use "like" for "as" in speech, let alone in writing; but if "like" wins out, as it seems bound to do, the damage will not be great. If, however, "infer" comes to be accepted as meaning what "imply" means, we have lost a valuable word. (Maybe I dreamt it, but I believe I have seen "infer" misused in the *Times*.)

Bernstein discusses a dozen pairs of words about which confusion exists: disinterested, uninterested; incredible, incredulous; nauseous, nauseated; oral, verbal; tortuous, torturous; turbid, turgid; venal, venial; deprecate, depreciate; hail, hale; flaunt, flout; gantlet, gauntlet. When distinctions are clearly stated, as he states them, anyone can see why they are worth preserving.

ON the other hand, he is more lenient than Miss Thistlebottom, his imaginary teacher of grammar a generation ago. His discussion of "contact" is a good example of the way his mind works. After saying that "contact" as a verb is useful to businessmen, he suggests that a practiced writer can do very well without it. He concludes: "The verb will undoubtedly push its way into standard usage sometime. Do you think you can wait?" He is sensible on split infinitives, prepositions at the end of sentences, and "shall" and "will." Many people will be relieved to know that they *graduated* from college; it is not necessary for them to say that they *were* graduated.

There are excellent discussions of more general topics. Bernstein, who likes puns, talks about "ad-diction," giving many examples of ways in which advertising men are doing their best to debase the language. (They are given much assistance, he points out, by the editors of *Time* Magazine and the writers of headlines, although, as a newspaperman, he has sympathy for the latter.) In less than twenty pages he provides as handy a summary of rules of punctuation as you can find, and in ten pages he tells the careful writer all he is likely to need

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to know about rhetorical figures and faults. It's a useful book.

Bernstein writes: "The area of highly formal writing has shrunk considerably; it is now confined to such things as state papers, articles in learned publications, commencement addresses (and by no means all of those), legal documents, court decisions, and prefaces to dictionaries." As he goes on to say, colloquialisms—he prefers to call them "casualisms"—have become increasingly common in serious writing of many kinds. But he might have gone further: the skillful use of colloquialisms is an important element in some of the most effective writing in our time. He says, "There are, of course, gradations of casualisms: *falsies* is low and unacceptable in most contexts." But I can think of a number of contexts in which the word would be extremely convenient if not indispensable.

Perhaps, however, Bernstein is right in suggesting that the careful writer ought not to take chances. Last fall, in reviewing Roy Newquist's *Counterpoint*, I wrote, "He begins with a brief

but usually fulsome introduction of the author to be interviewed." I received two letters, one indignant and the other condescending, asking me if I didn't know that "fulsome" means "offensive, disgusting." I replied by quoting from the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*: "7. of language, style, behavior, etc; Offensive to good taste; *esp.* from excess or want of measure." That is just what I meant. If I had been able to consult Bernstein, however, this is what I would have found: "It does not mean full, copious, or bounteous. . . . It means overfull and offensive because of insincerity; repulsive, odious. It most often appears—and appears incorrectly, of course—in the phrase 'fulsome praise.'" I think that praise often is fulsome according to his definition, but I know that if I used that phrase I'd get into trouble.

As we all, including Bernstein, know, Shakespeare wasn't a careful writer in Bernstein's sense of the term; he mixed metaphors all over the place, and played hob with rules of grammar. Many other of our eminent creative writers have been as lawless. But most of us are not great creative writers, and Bernstein is our man. If we are going to go against the rules, we ought at least to know what we are doing, and he can tell us.

Ever since it was published in 1926, I have been both instructed and entertained by H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, for no lexicographer since Dr. Johnson has written with such cantankerous charm. As for Bergen and Cornelia Evans's *Dictionary of Contemporary Usage*, it seems to me more useful than Bernstein in some ways and less useful in others. I am glad that I have both, together with Fowler.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

#### FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT NO. 1145

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1145 will be found in the next issue.

MBT DWSUV FQ OJEE KFEE KEFV

BC MBTX KFHJ FQ EJFC BPJX

VBB KFX CFHROFXI.

YFDJQ VUTXGJX

#### Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1144

The greatest mistake is the trying to be more agreeable than you can be.  
—BAGEHOT.

## LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



### More on OP Publishing

I AM DELIGHTED with the article by David Dempsey [SR, June 12]: "OP Publishing: The New Look in Reprints." I have often thought that developments in this field would make an excellent topic for a doctoral dissertation in librarianship. I have a few comments. Russell & Russell, besides their interest in history and philosophy, are also pre-eminent in the field of reprints of American and British literature. . . . Benjamin Blom, a recently organized reprinting house specializing in theater books, should also be mentioned, and Burt Franklin, a well-established reprinter with strong lists in science, medicine, bibliography, literature and history. . . .

Another journal reprinter, with lists of more general interest than Johnson and Kraus, is AMS Reprint Company. . . . The journal of the field, *The Reprint Expediting Service Bulletin*—formerly published by the American Library Association—has been taken over on an expanded schedule by Oceana Publications, who specialize in legal reprints. This journal lists new and forthcoming reprints and also publishes suggestions for reprints. The April 1965 issue has "An Informal Directory of Reprinters."

DAVID E. POWNALL,  
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State College of Iowa  
Library

Cedar Falls, Iowa

### Mirror Dance

READING EDWARD F. McCARTAN<sub>4</sub>'s provocative letter about writers writing about writers writing about writers leads me to observe that he complicates a relatively simple procedure. Isn't it all just a matter of writers dancing with themselves before their mirrors?

Mr. McCartan<sub>4</sub>'s letter about the piece by Granville Hicks was, of course, prompted only in part by Mr. Hicks's piece. And (similarly) my letter is prompted only in part by the letter from Mr. McCartan<sub>4</sub>. The additional motive power behind us both (the power without which neither of us would have written anything) was and is self-expression or exhibitionism or whatever makes us do things like this. Therefore, come all ye faithful, and admire Nicholas Samstag<sub>1</sub>, rigadooning with Nicholas Samstag<sub>2</sub> before the mirrored image of Nicholas Samstag<sub>3</sub>.

If the sight bores or nauseates you, see the saraband above or the pavan below. Somewhere, dear reader, there is someone dancing especially for you.

NICHOLAS SAMSTAG<sub>1, 2</sub> and <sub>3</sub>  
New York, N.Y.

### Lawyers' Bookshelf

IN MYER FELDMAN's review of five books on law [SR, May 22] he laments that "good

books about the law are painfully rare." He also asserts, quite rightly, that "any discussion of the law affords opportunity for high drama, strong emotion, stimulating ideas, and fascinating glimpses into history."

Mr. Feldman and others who feel the same way will be, or already have been, heartened by the Syracuse University Press series known as "Procedural Aspects of International Law," edited by Richard B. Lillich, who also wrote the first volume in the series. . . .

Richard A. Falk, in a preface to *The Role of Domestic Courts in the International Legal Order*, third in the series, hints at the "strong emotion" and "stimulating ideas" Mr. Feldman will find (or has found) in this contribution. "I am animated by the conviction," Mr. Falk writes, "that it is sensible and necessary for states, regardless of their orientation or history, to allow national courts increasingly to serve the cause of world order without regard to national affiliation. . . . Of course, it will be argued that this is unrealistic. My reply is that the peace and order of the world rest upon such a precarious basis that action must be taken to make proposals like this one realistic."

PATRICIA BRADFORD,  
Editor, Syracuse University Press  
Syracuse, N.Y.

### Proud Shield

I HAVE NOT READ [*The Tarnished Badge*, by Ralph Lee Smith], so I cannot comment on the author's style, story content, or facts, but I can comment about police work.

Take the number of law enforcement officers and subtract from that all those officers who are involved in graft, brutality, and other forms of misconduct, and I think a great surprise would be given to William Kunstler [SR, June 26]. Police review boards, conducted by and staffed by public figures in Philadelphia and New York City, reported that 510 cases had been reviewed and only thirty-seven cases had showed signs of brutality. . . .

I believe that he is wrong too in believing that "the majority of us were already quite prepared to believe" that many policemen are on the take. I think that the policeman, in all our cities and towns, is being looked upon now in a new light. The old idea of the hack and taker is just about gone, and people, the lawbreakers are not included, know that there is just a thin blue line between them and hell on earth.

Someone once said that the proudest shield any city can have is worn on the breast of its policemen. I am proud of my calling and would do anything that I could to help change the opinion of the small number of people who believe as it appears Mr. Kunstler believes.

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