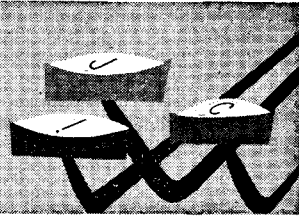


# Manner of Speaking



**Notes: The Big Idea:** Not long ago in this column I muddled the springs of choice with a few thoughts about New York, about my neighbors there, and about why I do not want to know them ("New York: Don't Say Hello," SR, Feb. 12).

Shortly before writing that column I had spent a few days in my wife's hometown, which is Frankford, Missouri, population (a guess) plus or minus 450. They are good, honest, friendly, hearty folk in Frankford, and taken in fractions of 450 or so, I like them and enjoy being with them. Though I confess to having been a bit stunned one summer when I drove the seven miles in from the farm to get a haircut at Roy Ruffin's, and drove back to be greeted by my mother-in-law with the day's news: "I hear you've been handing out twenty-five-cent tips!"

As I recall the transaction, the haircut had come to something like seventy-five cents and I had automatically waved away the change. I have always wanted to be the last of the big-time spenders, but I had hardly expected my magnanimous gesture to be flashed to all points on the party line!

The PLBS (Party Line Broadcasting System) served as a pleasant enough joke for that afternoon. Back in New York, however, I found myself thinking I did not really want my neighbors to know about me in that sort of detail. A small town is a friendly place to visit, but I just don't want to live there. Nor do I want to live in New York on small-town premises. Being entirely visible to a few hundred people is one thing; being entirely visible to eight and a half million nighttime New Yorkers and to another eight million or so commuters would be unbearable.

Had I thought of it at the time of the writing, I would certainly have added a further sentiment received from Louis Sherwin, writing from *The Players* (and thank you, sir, and agreed:)

You might have added that another point to the credit of the true New Yorker is that he is not a dropper-inner. A civilized man, before paying a visit without invitation, telephones to ascertain whether or not his visit will be (a) convenient (b) agreeable.

These views, I submit, are sufficiently self-evident. I want the anonymity

granted me by the millions of New Yorkers around me, and I return them the grant of their own anonymity as part of a sound and necessary social contract. It occurs to me, as a matter of fact, that I never look at panhandlers when I give them money. I am ready enough to recognize their need. I just don't want to see their faces: why should the needy, or even the conniving, not have the right to remain anonymous?

**I** VIOLATED that rule just once, and in Boston rather than New York. I was staying at the old Copley-Plaza, now a Sheraton, and had strolled across the street to the liquor store, emerging with a wrapped bottle in my hand, to be met by a shuffling wino. "How about buying me a drink?" he said. I reached into my pocket and came up with the one coin I could find—a fifty-cent piece. He took it but stood firm. "That won't buy a bottle of wine," he said. He had me there. My own bottle was in my hand: why shouldn't he have his? I dug again and came up with a dollar bill. "Drink hearty," I said, and this time I looked at him, and I will swear to this day that I was looking at Albert Einstein, the face sunk a bit out of focus, the chin stubbly, and still the face. I do not know what thought this is. Nor will I do as the most delicate man in town. But I was sorry I had looked. Let all those who are lost and damned to their own thirst be given what they need to die of as they must and will. But let them pass without faces. Why should I offend the man with pity when all he wants of me is a drink?

I shall not pretend that I entirely understand this feeling about the self-damned. The preference for anonymity in the otherwise asphyxiating crowd, however, seems a matter of simple necessity, and such was the simple burden of my remarks.

But nothing is allowed to stay simple once the amateur intellectuals have found it. My remarks called forth an extraordinary number of letters, a few from ministers and most of the rest from college students, the gentler of the letters asking me if I was familiar with Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*, the harsher of them accusing me of having plagiarized my remarks from him. Harvey Cox, it seems, has had things to say about metropolitan mores.

To all letter writers let me say I am sorry I have not read Harvey Cox. My curiosity now piqued, I shall look for-

ward to getting a copy of the book, though with a desk full of manuscripts that must be worked on I am in danger of contracting writer's illiteracy. But let me confess to a touch of astonishment—if astonishment may be said to come in touches; a brush of thunder, so to speak.

What astonishes me in this burst of correspondence is the assumption that the obvious cannot be arrived at except through a bibliography. Shucks, children, if you have to read socio-theological treatises in order to see the fetishistic noses on your totemistic faces, why then the tribe is in a bad way for improvisers of whatever magic it means to concoct. I am, believe me, delighted to know that you are reading, but let me suggest that no book is any good unless now and then you look up from it and take a good inquiring look at your roommate or at your own face in the mirror. We are all strange specimens when looked at by the right curiosity. And we are all capable of inciting to idea when looked at by eyes that are prepared to see idea. Books are great preparers of the right eyes to see with. But let me believe they are not the world itself but properly assistants to the world, indispensable and delightful servants that become mutinous only when you allow them the assumption that they are the world itself, and that things exist only in them. Be wary of compounding innocence with a pedantic solemnity.

Understand me, please—I am not against innocence. I must note, however, that the state of innocence provides the occupational grounds of both preachers and swindlers, though the preacher seeks to add to it whereas the swindler seeks to subtract from it. Has anyone said that in a book? I just read it from the world. And what a bibliography the world comes to!

It is always a mistake to misread it. Why fall into mere innocence when there is experience to die of? And what good is it to read ideas from books if one is not capable of going through any door to find he has walked smack into an idea, and that it is alive and moving its endless parts all around him, four hundred and fifty at a time, or fifteen or sixteen million at a time, and going its own way, which is hearty, or evasive, or shuffling, or striding, and with a cornfield in the background, or a traffic jam, and sometimes populated by one of those girls who pulls the eyes right out of your face, or sometimes just oppressive in its too-many-ness, or sometimes countrified easy, but there, and to be read of itself, ready to be enlarged by any time you are willing to spend in the library, but still apart from the library, with itself to be, itself the thing that gives point to libraries and that checks the books, finally, for accuracy?

—JOHN CIARDI.

*Joy...*



*... is to behold the growth of a child.*

- . . . to sign a report card and know that your child has done well,
- . . . to watch the dependence of a baby develop into the independence of adulthood,
- . . . to lend a helping hand when needed,
- . . . to know that the world is a better place for someone because of you,
- . . . to know that you have shared your good fortune with others less fortunate.

There are many fine agencies in the world who care for children in general, but The Pearl S. Buck Foundation is the only agency whose present *sole* concern is the education and general welfare of those children whose fathers are American servicemen and whose mothers are Asian women. Officially, these children do not exist. Literally, there are thousands of them. In the family-centered societies of Asia, the child legally belongs to the father and not to the mother. With their fathers gone now, unless we help, there is little chance for education or future employment. In fact, in many cases there is little hope of survival.

Why should we care? Already communists are saying, "Look what the Americans leave behind them" and "What are they doing about it with their high ideals?"

Pictures and letters to you from a child across the sea can bring new joy to your life, and the satisfaction of knowing that you are assuming a share of the responsibility that is at least partly American. There are many ways in which you can help these children.

Whatever way you choose to help, let it be now, I beg of you. The years between birth and adulthood are swift and few. The earlier a child can be helped, the better the chance for a normal lifetime.

Sincerely yours,

*Pearl S. Buck*

**THE PEARL S. BUCK FOUNDATION**

Dept. SR41, P. O. Box 2137, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103

I wish to support a ☐ boy ☐ girl.

I will pay \$15 a month (\$180 a year) ☐ monthly ☐ yearly

I enclose my first payment of \$..... Please send me the child's name, story, address, picture.

I cannot support a child but wish to give \$.....

☐ Please send me more information about the other support and education plans.

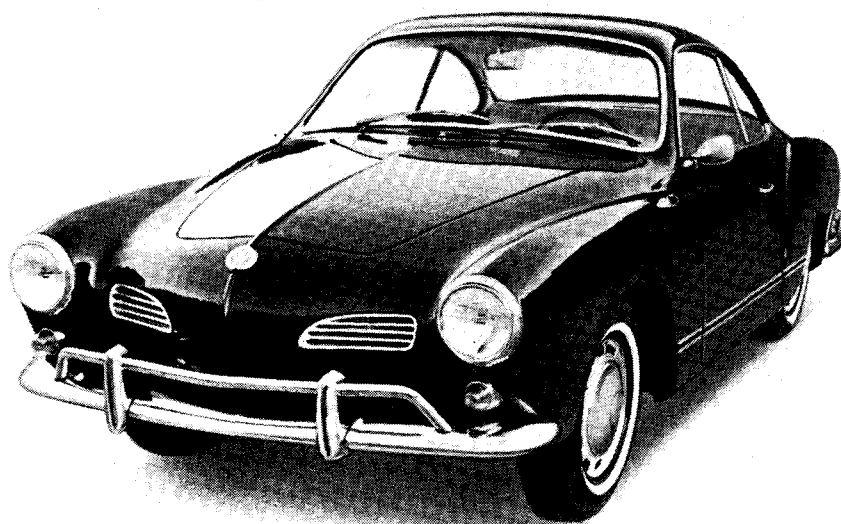
NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....ZIP CODE.....

Your contribution to The Pearl S. Buck Foundation is tax-deductible.

# Maybe you don't want to drive a wild horse, or a man-eating tiger, or a killer fish...



maybe you want to drive a Pussycat.

These days, "hunting" for a new car isn't just an expression.

One name is more ferocious than the next.

But the Volkswagen Karmann Ghia is different. It's a Pussycat.

It has all the earmarks of a sports car, and all the trademarks of a Volkswagen.

Underneath that hand-shaped, hand-smoothed body you get an engine that averages 30 mpg and rarely takes oil

between changes.

And you get about 40,000 miles on a set of tires.

And you get an independent torsion bar suspension system, so when you're cruising at 80, a bump bumps only one wheel and not the whole car.

And you get a good feeling, knowing that if your Pussycat has a breakdown, a VW dealer will fix it with the same parts and the same speed and the same prices

that a VW Sedan gets fixed with.

So if you're hunting for a sporty looking car, and run into a lot of ferocious names, with prices to match, looking like they might cost an arm and a leg to keep up...

maybe you're barking up the wrong tree.

The Volkswagen  
**KARMANN GHIA** 

# The Misuses of the Past

**Is history bunk, as Henry Ford once asserted?  
Perhaps not, but its uses can be doubtful and devious.**

By WILLIAM JOVANOVIICH

**A**ERICAN ORIGINAL that he was, Henry Ford was never persuaded that precedent is of much account. Once, on a witness stand he said, "History is more or less bunk." This is, I think, a defensible statement. It is true only in a special sense, but it is not entirely untrue, and it has a purgative effect against the pretension that derives from a conventional respect for the writing of history. Indeed, had it been pronounced by Mommsen or Burckhardt one might be allowed to draw inferences from it seriously; but alas it was Henry Ford, whose credibility attaches to what he did but not to what he said, and whose misfortune, like that of so many innovators, was that he should never have been asked to explain himself. Ford's plain dictum would be less embarrassing were it phrased in the construction he intended: "The *uses* of history are more or less bunk."

That the uses of history can be doubtful and devious we presumably all know. A humanistic education ought to leave a man, as a residue if not as a principle, a strong skeptical sense. And a working skepticism will question any statement that begins, "history tells us that . . ." and it will make one uncomfortable before those grand synthesizing theories of history that are deterministic, that make of history itself a causative force in human affairs. The formulation of such theories—whether by Marxists or Christians or Spenglerians—is a part of humanistic learning. Nothing is heretical to humanism, even if some things are ultimately opposite to it. The effect of such theories is anti-humanistic to the degree that they tend

to lessen man's respect for himself. Certainly this is one effect of the approach that both Spengler and Toynbee have taken in historical studies. Despite the considerable differences between them, their common method is to use history predictively. Both tend to measure man's capacities as well as to identify his so-called inherent inclinations by adducing patterns from his past. By fixing man at a point in history, as it were, they inevitably limit the range of alternatives in his future. For the humanist—and he is consummately the scientist—who is trying to understand man, rather than to exorcise or to justify him, the use of history as a corrective or predictive device is not very useful. Which may be another way of saying that it is more or less bunk.

The uses of skepticism are many, not the least of which is to make one wary of the sources of history. This it is not hard to be, considering the unreliability of some descriptions of current events. It seems to me, for example, quite probable that the American government was dissembling about the circumstances related to the naval engagement against the North Vietnamese in the Gulf of Tonkin during 1964. If this is so, then there is a painful irony in considering who is confounded by the ersatz making of history: it is not the others—they obviously know what happened—but, rather, ourselves. Yet I will concede that the temper of mind that tends to discredit official statements is somehow old-fashioned. It belongs more to the era of Lincoln Steffens and Henry Mencken than to the era of McGeorge Bundy and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. The liberals who used to be skeptical of official statements are now issuing them. The old-time iconoclastic temperament is compromised when the liberals are the majority. Indeed, the pervasiveness of liberal thinking makes a difference in how

we regard historical questions, for it is a liberalist presumption that contemporary issues are clear, even if contemporary events are not.

It is a tenet of the great liberal consensus that now governs most of the Western world that we know, that we can recognize and identify, the saving issues of our life. This is in a real sense a triumph of humanism, and we may rejoice in it. Given this tenet, our view of history ought to be freer of fatalism and hence less oppressive. Yet somehow it is not. We continue to be troubled, as Alfred Kazin says, "that history becomes a conspiracy against our happiness." We are uneasy in our sense of time, and feel an urgency to comprehend the events of our life before history subsumes them. There are stations in our life—to use the phrase of a contemporary dramatist—that we feel we must revisit before their meaning for us is distorted or devitalized, if not lost altogether.

**I**N part this malaise is the result of acceleration. Everything moves faster than before, as Henry Adams foretold, watching the world from Washington sixty years ago. Everything moves so fast that there is now a kind of "instant history," in which events are recorded, analyzed, interpreted, and delivered for consumption almost simultaneously. Instant history leaves us breathless and uncertain: the train of events that is pulling away, just out of reach, may possibly carry the meaning of our lives. And because the thousand voices and eyes of mass media make everyone the immediate observer of history, there is a tendency to interpret what occurs before it is even stated. (While editing the galleys of an American history textbook a few weeks after Dallas, I found it necessary to strike the author's declaration that "the President was killed by the forces of hate in American society,"

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