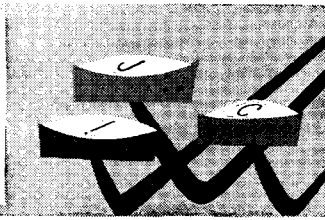


# Manner of Speaking



**On Purifying the Antiquities or the Greeks Had More Words for It than You Are Going to Hear in Ypsilanti, at Least While Bert Lahr Is on Stage:** I note that my friend William Arrowsmith, secretary-translator to an old Greek named Aristophanes, has had to endure multiple excisions of the diction (logodectomies) from his rendering of *The Birds*.

Aristophanes, with an easy Greek candor about bodily functions, and with a gusty rump-thwacking goatishness, used a number of words unknown to Queen Victoria even in translation, and when Arrowsmith did translate them (in a larruping fine Englishment, an early draft of which Arrowsmith read to me and I read back to him one great evening years back in Rome) they turned out to be too colorful for the American stage, or at least for that part of it represented by the Greek Theater of Ypsilanti and by Bert Lahr. Bert Lahr gets into this by playing the starring role in Ypsilanti's presentation of *The Birds*, and he gets into *The New York Times* for June 30 by insisting on cleaning up the Aristophanic simplicities "because," he said, "they were not fit for children."

Lahr's, of course, is the incantation that stops all psychic traffic in America. The spells of the voodoo conjure-man have less power on the dreams of Haiti than a simple "not fit for children" has upon the adrenalin of public righteousness in these high-minded, and partially united, states. I am certain the day will come when sex itself is banished from American mores, exorcised forever by the baleful denunciation that it is "not fit for children."

As far as I am concerned, that will only serve the brats right. Let them fend for themselves. Go get yourselves born without parents, kiddies, and see how you like it.

Nothing but a notable increase in rationality and civility could follow from such an uptum of the human graph. After a few uncertain years there would be no more children for anything to be unfit for, and adults (if, then as now, there are any) would have to stop hiding their own deceptions behind their deceitful concern for their deceitful offspring.

Bert Lahr was, of course, sure to win, and Aristophanes-Arrowsmith was sure to be cleaned up and fitted up for children. I am sorry to say, however, that the *Times* did not follow up its own story in usefully informative detail, and

that I am thereby left with a central question unanswered. Maybe Bert Lahr can tell me: how many of the children the play was made fit for showed up?

For it still is—isn't it?—the Poopsi Generation we are talking about, its shoulders slumped forward, its backs hunched toward lordosis, its eyes glazed with the blank purity of detergent morality as each lump sits inert, its psyche focused on the tonic sounds of gunfire, of the thud of saps, of the crunching of cartilage, and of the screams of dying squares pushed off water towers, rooftops, and bridges by real cool villains; just before a station-break plug for the Beverly Pug-Uglies.

Confirmed in a practical cynicism, I may have lost perspective, but I have to think I could do better selling pickled pig's feet to Yeshiva than I could scalping Greek theater tickets to the Poopsies.

I am also inclined to think that any Poopsi who does find his way to Aristophanes is sure to know all the words Bert Lahr thinks are unfit, and probably a few more, though on this point I am limited by the fact that I must base my judgment on my own family assortment of (technically) children, and I must admit, in fairness, that mine are typical of nothing, except perhaps of what a Neapolitan street urchin might be were he to acquire a private income named Daddy.

**T**HERE remain to be considered, perhaps, those few Poopsies who are hauled off to Aristophanes by a culturally demented mother or by an equally insistent aunt, both of whom probably did time at Smith, where they learned that the Greeks are highly educational. It is easy for them to believe, therefore, that Peter and Pam Poopsi will have their IQ's raised by the act of being dragged to genuine Greek Theater in a town named for a genuine Greek general.

But on these, certainly, Bert Lahr will be wasting all his anxious purities. These are the dragooned, Mr. Lahr. Pete is missing the telecast of the double-header teen-age riot at the Motorcycle á Gun Gun. Pam is missing the Grimace á Go Go show, the Watusi á Wag Wag, and the Frug Festival. They have had to put on their squarest clothes. And they have been remorselessly informed that the experience will do them good, and that they should be grateful. They will arrive Shanghai'd and mutinous, and they will not only be muttering words Bert

Lahr never found in Aristophanes-Arrowsmith, but will be working up vocabularies they could peddle to a Marine whose liberty has just been canceled.

No, Mr. Lahr, it won't work. If your psyche feels uneasy about the vocabulary of the Aristophanic gusto, that, of course, is understandable: we have all suffered traumatic childhoods. But that remains a problem every man must discuss with his parents and his own psyche. It just won't do to fob it off on the Poopsies.

What we probably need, let me suggest—though probably only after psychoanalysis in depth—is to find out why we are so uneasy about the root words of our bodily functions.

For in practical fact none of us is ever going to get to the Greek theater until we lose that uneasiness. The Greeks, so to speak, were emotional nudists, though they might reasonably have objected to being called nudists on the grounds that they were simple naked-ists. The point about getting naked in the Greek spirit is that once you have taken your clothes off, there is nothing to hide. Not even from one's fitful children.

**Y**OU don't know me, Mr. Lahr, and I can't reasonably ask you to take my word for the essential Greek of it. But you do know Arrowsmith, and I know he will bear me out. If you really want to know something about Greek theater, ask him. And if you don't want to know about it, what are you doing in it?

Or is it just a Ypsilanti version of Greek theater you are after? Or has it, perhaps, occurred to you that it would be bad for your possible future on the family screen if word got around that you had uttered a few Greek equivalents on the stage of a Ypsilanti equivalent of Greek theater? That would be merely a self-seeking, and therefore an understandable motive.

But stop hiding behind those so-called children. Forced to a choice between the purity of Greek theater and the depravity of my own, or any man's young, I have to vote for the salvation of the Greek way and the damnation of the Poopsies. I already know on which side of the colloquial slice my breed is uttered. You go ahead and clean up what is already pure in heart, sir, but you won't be selling me any tickets for my brats. Before I take them to anybody's Greek theater I mean to insist that it be Greek. I know you mean well—or I am willing to pretend I believe so—but I insist on believing that Aristophanes meant better. I hope it won't seem an unfriendly thing to say, but I think I prefer his sensibilities to yours, if only because there may just be a bit of sentimental arrogance in the assumption that your excisions are more civilized than his inclusions.

—JOHN CIARDI



# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### Blandishments of Wealth

JOHN KNOWLES's first book, *A Separate Peace* (SR, March 5, 1960), was a quiet, perceptive novel about boys in a preparatory school at the time of World War II. Remembering the book pleasantly, I have followed Knowles's career with interest and, I am sorry to have to say, disappointment. His second novel, *Morning in Antibes*, attempted to deal simultaneously with two themes, the gaudy life of the Riviera and the Algerian struggle for independence; and it seemed to me that it did both, but especially the latter, less than justice. Then, after a travel book, *Double Vision*, which I didn't read, I began to hear about Knowles's third novel, *Indian Summer* (Random House, \$4.95). Again I was hopeful, and again I have been let down.

*Indian Summer* is a selection of the Literary Guild, and in the Guild's bulletin for August, Knowles says that the book "came about through the collision in my mind of two things: a strange little town I knew in Connecticut, and the friendships I have formed with people who later turned out to be very rich." This, however, was not the whole story: "But in essence what I tried for in *Indian Summer* was neither a novel of place nor a novel about great wealth. I wished instead to express the plight, and the wide dreams, of a certain kind of young American, one who has had to come down in the world."

It is with the young American, Cleet Kinsolving, that the novel begins—on the day in 1946 on which he was discharged from the Army Air Force. Although he didn't know exactly what he wanted to do, he was full of optimism: "he . . . confidently expected to find a place where he himself could roll out his life full force." To begin with, however, he is content to take a humble job in Kansas with a man who sprays farmers' fields from the air.

Not much of a mixer, Cleet has had one close boyhood friend, Neil Reardon, heir to a large fortune, and that is how the rich come into the story. Neil, who

has come out of the service with political ambitions, lectures at a nearby college and Cleet goes to see him. Immediately Cleet is seized upon by the Reardons, and the next thing he knows he is back in Wetherford, Connecticut.

Knowles does fairly well with Wetherford. The town, he says in the Guild bulletin, "is off the beaten track a little, lying inland from the great urban sprawl which is embracing the whole Eastern seaboard." Although it still looks like an old New England town, most of the old families have vanished, and their houses are inhabited by newcomers. It is the kind of town that can help a *nouveau riche* family such as the Reardons to believe that it has roots. We can see the town clearly enough and even make a guess at the identity of the place Knowles has in mind.

At first he seems to be doing rather well with the Reardons, too. He describes their huge house, High Farms, with its haphazard enlargements and incongruous adornments and innumerable servants. But the more he tells us about the Reardons, the less we understand them. In the end about all he has to report concerning the rich is that, as Hemingway said to Fitzgerald a long time ago, they have more money than the rest of us. It does seem to me that the Reardons aren't very bright, but that is true of a lot of people who aren't rich.

In any case the only Reardon who particularly concerns us is Neil, who is somewhat more comprehensible than his parents. He has recently married a girl of proletarian tastes, as he puts it, and at the moment he is satisfied with her because she is pregnant and is, he is sure, about to bear him a son. The girl, Georgia, is somewhat interesting, and so are her parents, who appear in the latter part of the story. But I find it hard to believe that Neil would have married such a girl as Georgia. In fact, Neil puzzles me in many ways. For the sake of his political career he advocates a welfare state, but, it seems clear to Cleet at any rate, he doesn't believe what he is

23 Literary Horizons: Granville Hicks reviews "Indian Summer," by John Knowles

24 Letters to the Book Review Editor

25 One Thing and Another, by John K. Hutchens

26 "The Negro American," edited by Talcott Parsons and Kenneth B. Clark; "Anyplace But Here," by Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy

28 "Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator," by Robert D. Crassweller

29 "The Mafia and Politics," by Michele Pantaleone

30 "The Lie," by Alberto Moravia

34 "The Stranger in the Snow," by Lester Goran

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saying and writing. The idea of a millionaire demagogue might have been worth developing, but Knowles does little with it.

What Knowles does work at is the relationship between Neil and Cleet, which is a little like the relationship between Gene and Finney in *A Separate Peace*. Through their boyhood Neil "had no friends except his peculiar, unlettered, shrewd, erratic, dreaming, life-long pal, Cleet." Like Finney, Cleet is a spontaneous person, a true individual, and that is why Neil looks up to him but at the same time has to try to dominate him.

I can understand after a fashion what Neil sees in Cleet, but I cannot understand why Cleet is attracted to Neil. In fact, Cleet is a mystery whatever way I look at him. In the passage I have quoted, Knowles speaks of Cleet as "one who has had to come down in the world." But coming down doesn't seem to me the point at all. Cleet is simply an old-fashioned rugged individualist who finds himself out of place in the modern world. Looking down at the river, once the starting point of great seafaring adventures, he thinks: "In those days a man who would take a dare and had the strength and fast reflexes and inner