



Books

SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR SR

LITERARY HORIZONS

The Meaning of the Fittest

TS. ELIOT wrote in "Burnt Norton":

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the
burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay
in place,
Will not stay still.

And in "East Coker" he spoke of his long struggle, never successful "to get the better of words":

And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the in-
articulate
With shabby equipment always deter-
iorating
In the general mess of imprecision of
feeling.

The struggle has always been difficult, and it is now carried on "under conditions that seem unpropitious."

Unpropitious indeed! There has never been such an assault on the integrity of the English language as there is today. Each of the professions has its own jargon, intended both to impress and to bewilder the laity. Journalists have to produce at top speed what they hope will hold the attention of an easily distracted public. And advertising men use language not to tell the truth but to make lies palatable.

Anything that may check, even briefly, the slipping and sliding of the language must be welcomed, and I do welcome Wilson Follett's *Modern American Usage* (Hill & Wang, \$7.50). Follett, a recognized authority on Joseph Conrad and Stephen Crane and employed as an editor by several publishing houses, began the book when he was well along in years, and it was only two-thirds completed when he died in 1963. Jacques Barzun of Columbia University was asked to complete the work and prepare it for publication, and he sought the advice of Carlos Baker, Frederick

W. Dupee, Dudley Fitts, James D. Hart, Phyllis McGinley, and Lionel Trilling. As I read the book, with the usual number of disagreements, I began to wonder who was responsible for what; and the same question troubled Mrs. Follett, for she has issued a press release suggesting that her husband might not have been altogether pleased with the present volume. In H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* one always hears the voice of a man, and that I miss in the Follett book, which sometimes seems to be the product of a not altogether harmonious convention.

Like every other book on the subject, the work has its strong and its weak points. It seems to me less useful as a reference book than either Theodore Bernstein's *The Careful Writer* or *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage*, by Bergen and Cornelia Evans, which are both more comprehensive and easier to use. On the other hand, it is a book that one can pick up and read with pleasure and usually profit. In addition to an introductory essay on the whole question of usage and a couple of helpful supplements, one on *shall* (*should*), *will* (*would*) and the other on punctuation, there are long discussions of such matters as vexatious adverbs, jargon, journalese, pedantry, popularized technicalities, pronunciation, scientificisms, vogue words, and metaphors. Taken together, these pieces give an acute sense of what good usage is and why it is important to our intellectual life. (I have just been reading a report by a firm of library consultants; if the authors were ever to grasp the principles expounded by Follett *et al.*, they would die of shame.)

The Follett associates are somewhat to the right of Bernstein and considerably to the right of the Evanses. (Bernstein speaks of Evans's "more generous bosom.") Sometimes the Follett book is downright pernicky. It says, for example, that *chance* has a hopeful con-

- 16 Check List of the Week's New Books
- 29 "Modern American Usage," by Wilson Follett
- 30 Letters to the Book Review Editor
- 31 European Literary Scene
- 32 "Robert Frost: The Early Years," by Lawrance Thompson
- 33 "Remembering Mr. Maugham," by Garson Kanin
- 34 "The Sun King: Louis XIV at Versailles," by Nancy Mitford
- 35 "An American Primer," edited by Daniel J. Boorstin
- 37 "As a City Upon a Hill: The Town in American History," by Page Smith
- 38 "The Great Leap: The Past Twenty-five Years in America," by John Brooks
- 39 "The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, Vol. I," edited by Arthur S. Link
- 40 "Capable of Honor," by Allen Drury
- 42 "Sunday" and "The Little Man from Archangel," by Georges Simenon
- 43 "The Changing Face of Southeast Asia," by Amry Vandebusch and Richard Butwell
- 44 "The People of Japan," by Pearl S. Buck

notation and should only be used when the idea of hope is present, but I find no support for this in any of the dictionaries I have handy or in the practice of authors I can think of. (Last week I quoted from Iris Murdoch's *Time of the Angels*, "There is only chance and the terror of chance.") The Follett book insists that *dilemma* "signifies an inescapable choice, an enforced decision to be made between two evils of equal force, and *not more than two*." (My italics.) Fowler says that "it should be used only when there is a pair, or at least a definite number of lines that might be taken in argument or action, and each is unsatisfactory." Webster's Second speaks of "two or more alternatives." From Follett we learn that "trivia are crossroads, not trifles," but the Oxford Universal Dictionary, which does not list *trivia*, approves *trivial* as *trifling*, tracing it back to 1593. Follett fights for *insignia* as a plural, the singular being *insigne*, but Hawthorne and Irving both used *insignia* as a singular, and it is officially so used by the United States Army. (Many "lost causes," as Follett and company are fond of calling them, are worth fighting for, but is *insigne*?)

Like most compilers of handbooks on

usage, the Follett people tend to be literal-minded. "Skill in expression," says the introduction, "consists in nothing else than steadily choosing the fittest among all possible words, idioms, and constructions." Everything depends on the meaning of "fittest," for what seems fittest to a poet is likely not to seem fittest to the rest of us, at least until after the poet has used it. The Follett book does have a short article on connotations, but it is concerned rather with the possibilities of making mistakes than with the opportunities for saying something fresh and impressive. The article on metaphors points out that it may be legitimate for a poet to pile metaphor on metaphor. "The prime instance," it says, "easily remembered, is the King's eulogy of England in *Richard II*." (The eulogy is delivered by John of Gaunt.) Even here, however, the emphasis is on the dangers of mixed metaphors.

As I have discovered whenever I have written about problems of usage, the subject is of interest to many readers, by no means all of them professional writers or professional teachers, and I think this is a hopeful sign. Some of my correspondents seem to me pedantic, but most of them are more concerned with clarity than with correctness. Such readers may be disturbed by some peculiarities and inconsistencies in *Modern American Usage*, which may or may not be the result of the way in which it was edited, but they will find it a sturdy weapon against the incoherence—often, of course, a calculated incoherence—of the mass media. —GRANVILLE HICKS.

**FRASER YOUNG'S
LITERARY CRYPT No. 1213**

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1213 will be found in the next issue.

UYILO CYI XI RIU VOOP MGER

LOPXIH UYERZ UYGU EU EL

VOPU. —XS. NIYRLIR

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1212

Injustice is relatively easy to bear; it is justice that hurts.

—H. L. MENCKEN.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



One and One-half Murderers

NO RESPONSIBLE JOURNAL should have published Arnold Fein's mealy-mouthed apology for the Warren Report [SR, Oct. 22].

The issue in the matter is how many assassins fired the shots. Those who have read the accounts know that, in the light of all evidence, this question reduced to how many bullets hit the President and the Governor. The Commission had to decide whether one bullet hit both, or two different bullets. If one, there was one assassin. If two, there were more than one. Whether the evidence indicated one bullet or more than one divided the members of the Commission. Judge Fein believes that, on this issue, they "compromised." He praises the Commission for its technique of compromise.

Does the Commission Report then say that we do not know whether one person or more than one were involved in assassinating President Kennedy? It does not. It says there was one, and that it was Oswald. This, and not the question of what kind of oafs some of the writers who attacked the Report can be made out to be, is the issue.

From Judge Fein's treatment of the issue, it is correct to conclude that in the spirit of compromise one should say that one and one-half murderers participated in the assassination of President Kennedy.

HERBERT HARVEY.

Morrisville, Pa.

IF GOVERNOR CONNALLY was hit 1.8 seconds after President Kennedy and if the Carcano rifle could not be fired within less than an interval of 2.3 seconds, how can the Commission state that the single-bullet theory is not necessary to any of its essential findings? . . . And if the President's wound is in the back instead of in the neck and therefore cannot be aligned with Governor Connally's wounds, then there is an extra shot which could not have come from the Carcano. In view of this, the Commission's failure to request the autopsy photographs and X-rays is not reassuring. It should be noted, however, that although the finding of a back wound would demolish the single-bullet theory, the finding of a neck wound would not resolve doubts about the theory on other grounds.

NORMA AITCHISON.

New York, N.Y.

Power of Rational Control

ROGER D. MASTERS should have brought the scalpel of the logician rather than the appreciation of the political scientist to his task as reviewer of Robert Ardrey's *The Territorial Imperative* [SR, Sept. 17].

Ardrey says, "As I weigh the evidence of biology in recent years I can discover no qualitative break between the moral nature of an animal and the moral nature of man." Surely if there were a break he could not

have gone on. But unless we are going to abandon language and the standard meanings altogether, the moral action is always the responsible action. And if there is no break it follows that either animals are as responsible as men for what they do or, vice versa, men can plead in their courts that they have no responsibility. . . .

Certainly men have "natural impulses leading to conflict," as Professor Masters points out. But both he and Ardrey omit the obvious data that men also have the power of rational control over their impulses. I fear very much that Ardrey's thesis undercuts the very point he wishes to make; if he is right then there is no hope of establishing at the world level the kind of institutions that would channel human conflict out of the areas of combat into the courts. Let us accept the thesis that all animals are territorial. I must take it on faith since the evidence that Ardrey offers is so highly selective. But even if established, the illation from animal behavior to human is the one that demands not assertion but demonstration. Do men really prefer their territories to their wives? Do they flock to cities just to be able to quarrel more easily with other men? Is human love merely a function of not hating? And may I have no concept of property unless I have hostile neighbors ravenous to take it from me? But the illation from the individual human to the group, to society and to the nation is in Ardrey's case a wild leap that shows inventive imagination but no sense of evidence. . . . We may well ask in regard to modern warfare who precisely decides to fight? Do the whole people? Or is it only their leaders, who must then dragoon their subjects into war through the use of conscription? . . .

Any historian who knows the Thirty Years War and how it was fought by professional armies marching through populaces that could not have cared less about the issues involved will find it very hard to accept Ardrey's position. And when we get into the medieval wars [and] the protracted dynastic struggles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the evidence becomes slimmer and slimmer to bear out Ardrey's position. Somehow I don't quite see how Russia could have sold Alaska or France Louisiana to the United States if there is any real basis for Ardrey's position.

There are aggressive impulses in man. . . . But that they remain dominant, that they are universal, or that they are irresistible goes against all human experience. We have a great task to perform in this world if we are ever to conquer the threat of warfare. I cannot see that Ardrey's work helps us in any way to solve the problem. The popularity of his book may in fact have set back the cause of those who are working to bring reason into human affairs and establish law and order in international life.

REV. G. G. GRANT, S.J.

Chicago, Ill.