

PARADIGMS LOST

Reflections on Literacy and Its Decline

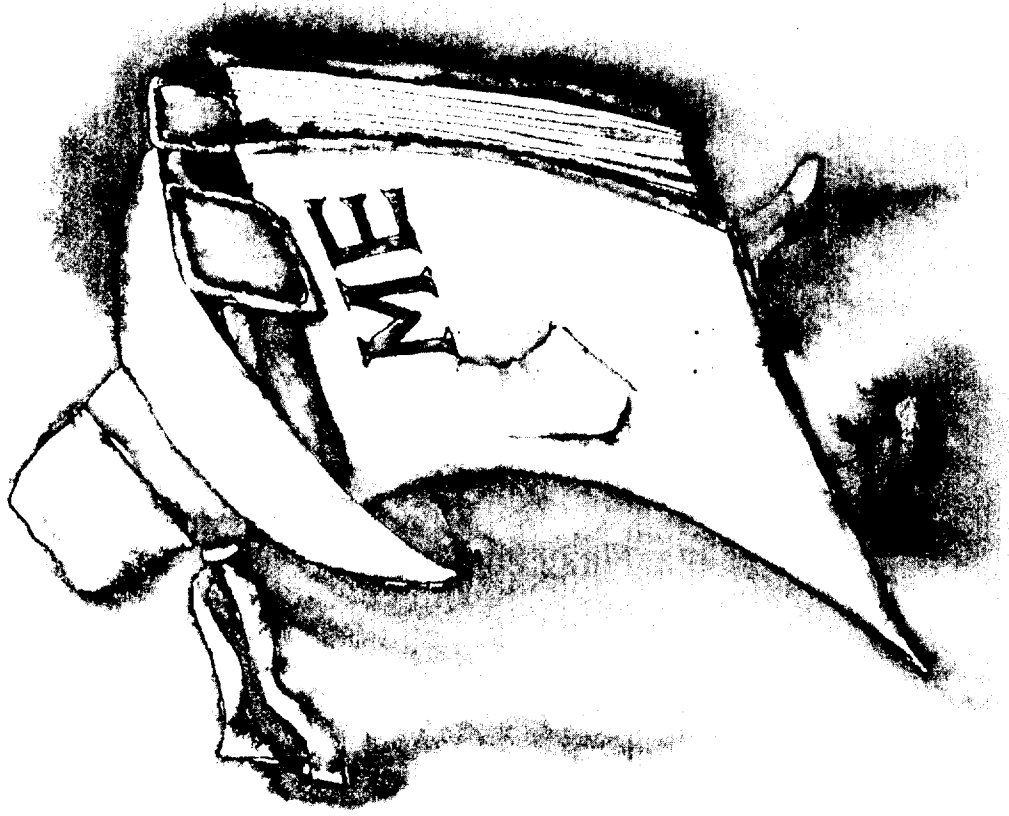
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AUTHORS WITHOUT FEAR OR SHAME

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To Alexandra
Before whom words fail me

With the possible exception of a baseball umpire or movie critic, there is no more popular object of abuse than the English language. The other day, at a lunch for the 1978 Polk Awards (journalistic awards more respectable but less prestigious than the Pulitzers), I heard Robert C. Toth of the *Los Angeles Times*, the winner in the Foreign Reporting category, repeatedly refer to "a media." Once, in fact, he said: "The media has a special responsibility. . . ." If there is a special responsibility the media have, it is to write good English and to know, for example, that *media* is the plural of medium, and so requires a plural verb.

A few days later, I was reading an article by Mel Gussow, a *New York Times* drama critic and reporter—and I stress that this was a piece of reportage, not a hastily written and edited review—where, disbelieving, I found: "Each of Mr. Fugard's plays . . . are themselves acts of contrition and ennoblement." The subject, *each*, is clearly singular, yet Gussow and the copy editor were content to let it multiply miraculously—an excellent thing in loaves and fishes, but sinful in syntax. What are we coming to when our big newspapers and their writers see no difference between singular and plural?

But let us give the press a rest for the nonce while we examine a different but equally sinister source of linguistic corruption: special-interest groups. Language, I think, belongs to two groups only: gifted individuals everywhere, who use it imaginatively; and the fellowship of men and women, wherever they are, who, without being particularly inventive, nevertheless endeavor to speak and write correctly. Language, however, does not belong to the illiterate or to bodies of people forming tendentious and propagandistic interest groups, determined to use it for what they (usually mistakenly) believe to be their advantage.

Take, for example, the aged. When I referred not long ago to *senior citizens* as an unsavory euphemism, George J. Friedman, of New York, was moved to compose a piece of ghastly doggerel accusing me of incompetence for not knowing that "that's what the aged like to hear./Per Gallup, who, three years ago./In survey was by them told so." Now, what these good folks prefer to hear, not in the least care I. They are the old, the aged or the retired;

they are not *senior citizens*, with grandiose implications of political importance well beyond the reduced bus fares and cheaper movie tickets they do in fact receive. Thus the fancy term is a mere trope—metaphor or circumlocution—that sounds, at first, hollow or jeering; later, stale and ludicrous. "An old man lay drunk in the gutter" is sad but unexceptionable. "A senior citizen lay drunk in the gutter" is risible.

There is nothing morally wrong with being old; it is precisely such supposedly status-raising phrases that begin to suggest that there is. I guess it all began when undertakers became morticians, and, when that wasn't fine enough, funeral directors. By tomorrow, they may be masters of obsequies. I can sympathize with people who dislike being called garbage collectors, though that is a perfectly useful and honorable calling—certainly better than that of structural linguist, semiologist, or punk-rock superstar. It is, in any case, not by changing their title to sanitation workers that they will upgrade their social position. Rather, it is by making the public comprehend their usefulness and dedication; otherwise people will disparage them just as stupidly and unjustly with "You sanitation workers, you!" By the way, have dogcatchers become canine euthanasianists yet?

Well, the tireless Mr. Friedman sent in still another missive, this time in prose, informing us that *policeman* is not a word destined to survive, as I had claimed. No, sir: "A few years ago, in a move to eradicate sexism in law enforcement, the New York City Police Department decreed the use of the neutered *police officer*." Look, I don't tell the police department how to catch *perpetrators*, and I don't want them to tell me how to speak English. Would people even understand a neutered, or castrated, headline that read "Acute Shortage of Police Officers," or would they shrug it off with a "So long as there are enough police sergeants"?

What I am leading up to is the wanton and shocking destruction of the good and necessary English word *gay*. One fine, or not so fine, day, some homosexual pressure group in America decided that the preferred term for *homosexual* was henceforth to be *gay*. And forthwith there was *gay liberation*, *gay pride*, *gay whatnot*, and, worse yet, the substantive *a gay*. Although there is considerable disagreement about how it all came to pass, the presumable source of the term is *gay boy*, the Australian slang for *homosexual*. Where, however, did the Aussies get it?

As Eric Partridge's *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional En-*

glish makes clear, the word comes from early-nineteenth-century British slang, where the adjective *gay* referred to "women leading . . . a harlot's life." Accordingly, *gay bit* was a whore; *gay house*, a brothel. What kind of honorific, then, is *gay*? *Homosexual* is a precise and dignified word, against which only two, equally unwaranted, objections are possible. First, that it is long. But, though brevity is a virtue, we have many four- or five-syllable words happily ensconced in everyday speech. No one has objected to and shortened *pediatrician* or *womanliness*, *paratrooper* or *dictionary*; then why shorten *homosexual*? Second, the once prevalent, now blessedly defunct, *homo* may rankle in some memories. But *homo* is merely Greek for *the same* and, although misleading and probably mischievous in this sense, is not intrinsically base, as, say, *kike* is. And if our society does not come to accept homosexuality, you may be sure that *gay* will, sooner or later, give rise to some similar pejorative distortion.

Meanwhile, there is every reason to object to a supposedly offensive word that carries clear implications of whoring. Apparently, some homosexuals who advocated it must have been of the "screaming queen" type, which ostentatiously acts out a parody of homosexual behavior. This is just as offensive as any crudely aggressive heterosexual behavior, e.g., pinching women's posterior, whistling at passing females, et cetera. Such homosexual shenanigans might seem gay in the established sense of the word but are merely desperate, undignified, and pathetic. Other homosexuals may have felt that prevalent patterns of promiscuity in homosexual behavior (probably socially conditioned rather than inherent) justify the use of such a whorish word. That, however, is self-hate and should not be legitimized. And some self-deceivers and hypocrites may have actually believed that homosexual lives are merrier than heterosexual ones and so merit the appellation *gay*. Yet such manifest untruth cannot be endorsed.

To be sure, Partridge gives us two other slang meanings of *gay*. One is "slightly intoxicated," and though alcoholism seems to be a not uncommon phenomenon among homosexuals, it is hardly something that can or should be so memorialized. The other is "impudent, impertinent, presumptuous," and that at least applies to those who would enshrine *gay* as the correct term for *homosexual*, though this could hardly have been the intended meaning. But whatever the intention, be it noted that many, if not most,

civilized homosexuals refuse to call themselves or others gay. On the "Dick Cavett" show, Gore Vidal rejected the word.

The problem is that this special-interest use of *gay* undermines the correct use of a legitimate and needed English word. It now becomes ambiguous to call a cheerful person or thing gay; to wish someone a gay journey or holiday, for example, may have totally uncalled-for over- and undertones and, in conservative circles, may even be considered insulting. The insulting aspect we can eventually get rid of; the ambiguous, never. What do we do about it? If we energetically reject *gay* as a legitimate synonym for *homosexual*, it may not be too late to bury this linguistic abomination.

There are, of course, many more examples of this nonsense emanating from minority groups or professions trying to upgrade themselves by bastardizing the language rather than by establishing their dignity through precept and example. Take the host of linguistic absurdities being perpetrated by the feminists, who have queered—if not expunged—such useful terms as, for instance, *young girl*, the feminine suffix *-ess*, and nouns ending in *-man* where this is clearly a generic term meaning a human being of either sex engaged in a certain activity.

Take the term *young girl*, or *girl*. Instead of enjoying girlhood, the feminists want to be *women* the moment they leave high school, if not before. How wrongheaded! There is something infamously lovely about being a *girl*—very different from being a *woman*, which is wonderful in quite another way. So Humbert Wolfe's poem "Ilion" ends with the line "Girl, there were girls like you in Ilion!" Pity today's brainwashed poet who would write, "Woman, there were women like you in Ilion!" The lyric is about Trojan girls who "hoarded their loveliness, while Helen spent it," as any beautiful *woman* might have. The result was tragic, but imbued with romantic grandeur. These loveless *girls* merely tug at your heart wistfully, a distinction the poet wanted to make.

A reader, David Craig, from Baton Rouge, wrote in, objecting to my objections to *chair* as a replacement for *chairman*, which he finds preferable to *chairperson*. And he concluded by informing me that a magistrate in court is referred to as *the bench*.

Chairperson is certainly disgusting; but *chair* sounds, at best, like a fossilized metaphor or metonymy not worth preserving; at worst, like a stick of furniture. There is, moreover, inconsistency here, since women senators certainly want to be called senators,

even though the *-or* ending is technically just as masculine as the enclitic *-man*. If neologisms are necessary, why not espouse *chair-woman*, though it may suggest an aged female in the Tuileries gardens who demands two francs from you for the use of a chair. Absurdity lies in wait everywhere. Now that women are entering the armed services, will the command have to be "Man and woman the guns [or lifeboats]"?

This is different from Negroes opting for *black* over *Negro*. *Black* means the same thing and was used all along, although formerly considered less polite than *Negro*. By shifting the preference, no harm is done to the language. As for magistrates acquiescing in or relishing the term *the bench*—surely language is too important a matter to be left in the hands of magistrates.

U, Non-U, and You

Virtually nothing is so feared and hated in this allegedly egalitarian country of ours as snobbishness. There is no more detested creature anywhere—unless it be the elitist or the intellectual—than the snob, who cannot even enjoy the semifavorable publicity accorded bank robbers, necrophiliacs, and starters of forest fires. And yet H. B. Brooks-Baker, the publisher of *Debrett's Peerage* and, with the Viking Press, of *U and Non-U Revisited*, claims that England, the reputed cradle of snobbism, "is among the least snobbish and class-conscious countries. Far less so," he continues in the Foreword to *U and Non-U Revisited*, "than America, for example, which basks in the reputation of being the most democratic of nations."

As the jacket copy explains, the present tome is a kind of sequel to *Noblesse Oblige*, a book edited in 1956 by the late Nancy Mitford that "hit the world like a bombshell. Profiting from the researches of the philologist Professor Alan C. Ross, who had coined the expressions 'U' and 'non-U'—that is 'Upper-class' and 'non-Upper-class'—[Nancy Mitford] set about telling the man in the street just how common he was." I remember the immense sensation the book caused twenty-three years ago even in "classless" Amer-

ica, and the only reason I myself did not read it when everybody else did was snobbishness.

Just to show you how promiscuously and hostilely the word *snob* is bandied about, let me quote from an article on drag queens in the June 25, 1979, *Village Voice* by Edmund White, a respected novelist and a coauthor of *The Joy of Gay Sex*: "Disdain for drag is, I would contend, often concealed snobbism. Most gay transvestites, especially street drags, are either black or Puerto Rican. Discrimination against them may be both elitist and racist." First, I am surprised that a homosexual writer of White's talent and literary espousal of the dreadful abuse of the word *gay*; second, I am appalled at his subscribing to that bugbear of gutter radicals, the three-headed monster Snob-Elitist-Racist. Obviously the distaste of heterosexuals for drag queens—leaving aside the question of whether it is justifiable or not—stems from sexual sources: sexuality is so ingrained, so elemental a thing with us that the person whose sexual practices are antithetical to ours and who flaunts this antithesis becomes more resented than a mere religious, political, or social adversary. But whenever heavy demagogic weaponry is needed, *snob*, *elitist*, and *racist* get hauled out.

The origins of the word *snob* remain uncertain.* The late, sorely missed Eric Partridge, in his splendid etymological dictionary *Origins*, writes: "*Snob*, cobbler, hence (slang) a townee, a plebeian, hence a toady and a superior person: o.o.o." ("O.o.o." means of obscure origin.) Ernest Weekley, whose *Concise Etymological Dictionary* Partridge goes on to cite, argues that *snob* is related to *snip*, a tailor, suggesting kinship with *snub*, to cut short. Notice the implication that a snob is an inferior person trying to climb the social ladder, hence he is both "a toady" to those above and "a superior person" to those beside and below him.

What concerns me here, however, is whether there is such a thing as linguistic snobbery: the use of language to achieve or assert social superiority. Such language, though correct from the linguistic point of view, might be reprehensible in a larger, humanistic context and thus a good thing to avoid. As *Noblesse Oblige* made crystal clear, there existed an Upper-class English and a non-Upper-class one. The differences still exist, though *U* and

* I can find no evidence for the frequent assertion that *snob* derives from *s. nob.*, for *sine nobilitate*, as a designation for commoners on certain British rosters.