

The Assassination of English

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If a college student of English were to hand you a paper purporting to demonstrate his grasp of his English professor's teaching, and the paper included sentences such as, "The President was assassinated on TV before our veery eyes," or "Hubert is the Greek sin of pride," what, besides a loud guffaw, would your reaction be? It must cost hundreds of millions of dollars and occupy thousands of acres of classroom space to teach English to the several million undergraduate and graduate students in our institutions of so-called higher learning. What benefits accrue to these students and to society from this enormous expenditure? Are the results worth the expense?

If precise communication were the general goal of English teaching, we could concede the efficacy of studying drama, philosophy, etymology, and expository writing in the English classroom. But this concession is premature when we realize that in the study of drama, students write such things as, "When we first see Shylock he is on the Rialto, which is the business end of Venus," and, "Henry VIII found walking difficult because he had an abcess on his knee." Another drama enthusiast, obviously a devotee of Tennessee Williams, wrote that, "In *The Glass Menagerie* the climax is when Blanche goes to bed with Stella's husband." Another bright-eyed luster for knowledge would certainly have convulsed George Bernard Shaw with, "In . . . *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, her profession is the Oldest Profession, but she is not really a Lost Woman. She is just mislaid."

Apparently, it was Plato's *Crito* that inspired one exegete to explain that "Socrates died from an overdose of wedlock, but before he went he had the crowned heads shaking in their shoes." Perhaps it was the New Testament which drove another student to observe that "Abstinence is a good thing if practiced in moderation." We can't even guess at the creative impulse behind, "Today every Tom, Dick, and Harry is named Bill."

If you've ever wondered why lecture halls seem to attract the bored, perhaps this astonishing, albeit wildly erroneous, insight from a student of etymology will clear things up: "*Auditorium* comes from *audio* (I hear) and *taurus* (the bull)."

In expository writing, the student is urged to exercise his imagination in the use of metaphor, presumably for the sake of elegant clarity. But the results are something less than that, as when a student writes, "A virgin forest is a place where the hand of man has never set foot," or, "It was the painter Donatello's interest in the female nude that made him the Father of the Renaissance." One student achieved the ultimate misconception, so to speak, when he declaimed, "A taxidermist is a man who mounts animals."

Laughable? Sure! However, aside from misspelling, awkward phrasing, and misinterpretation of what one has read, these samples of writing by English students in college have one element in common: fuzzy thinking. Undisciplined thought results in writing that is ludicrous, ambiguous, and absurd.

It's not fuzzy thinking, on the other hand, that leads the foreign student of English to write that "Nearly every religion has been directly concerned with a profit." Nor is it an inexcusable blunder when the same student finds "sublime" as a synonym for "noble" in his English dictionary, and then writes, "In the Middle Ages, the sublimes lived in large castles." Using the dictionary as a source of meaning leads him further to discover that "presumptuous" is a synonym for "forward," producing the sentence: "The ship runs presumptuous, not backward." Naturally, these excuses don't hold for the college student whose native tongue is English; he should know the difference between sublime and noble, between forward and presumptuous, and—even if he can't spell it—he should be aware of the difference between prophet and profit.

Are all the space, money, time, and effort spent in colleges and universities really helping our young citizens to think clearly and express themselves precisely in their mother tongue? Perhaps, the students who committed the blunders quoted here were eventually led to clear thought and expression. Alternatively, maybe they are the ones who later occupy lofty pinnacles in industry, finance, government, and education, writing such stuffy nonsense as, "Personnel desirous of rehabilitation to nonindigenous cultural milieus shall forward and/or hand-carry requests to the registrar for prompt processing per Art. 5, Sect. IV, par. 17, issued by this office in accordance with regulations appertaining thereto."

If precise communication is the goal being worked toward in our English classrooms, we should notice a gradual diminishing of officialese and pompous nonsense from on high. Were this so, the enormous expense could easily be justified. But if that goal is being overlooked in the name of "esthetic appreciation" of the "finer qualities" of English, then we are certainly doomed to more years of official fog, bombastic drivel, immense tuition fees, and—finally, perhaps—the *coup de grâce* we shall all recognize as the assination of English.