The Language of Journalism
Volume One: Newspaper Culture
Melvin J. Lasky
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BEING A FIRST VOLUME,
wherein
THE LANGUAGE OF JOURNALISM IS EXAMINED,
ITS SPLENDORS AND MISERIES –
including
CLICHÉS & TRIVIA,
SENSATIONALISM & PRURIENCE,
WIT & WITLESSNESS,
FICTION & FACTION,
PSEUDERY & JABBERWOCKY,
SCOOPS & HOAXES,
RACISM & SEXISM,
PROFANITY & OBSCENITY,
VIRTUE & REALITY,
CULTURE & ANARCHY –
AND THE ABUSE OF SLANG, STYLE,
&
THE HABITS OF WRITING GOOD PROSE
Confucius, it is told, was once asked what he would do first if it were left to him to govern a nation.

He replied:

“To correct language...

If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; If what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone; If this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate; If morals and art deteriorate, justice will go astray; If justice does go astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion.

Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything.”

* * *

And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
and burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

“And hast thou slain the Jabberwock?”
“Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!”
He chortled in his joy.

—Lewis Carroll,
“*The Jabberwocky*”
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Preface

These pages are, I readily admit, the result of a life-long addiction: a compulsive, if also pleasurable, devotion to the reading of newspapers. One of my earliest memories of my father is of him sitting in his chair in our living room, reading the New York Times, pursing his lips to overcome a slight stammer and calling my attention (I was an obedient, if uncomprehending toddler) to some story or other that had pleased him or puzzled him in that morning’s paper. One of my last memories of my aged mother was her reminding me to take away from her night-table, next to the bed in which she spent her last days, a crumpled bunch of clippings which she had been collecting for me, as she always had over long and opinionated decades (they were mostly polemical columns from her favorite New York columnists).

When I reflect for a moment on how I came to write this volume (and those to come) on “newspaper culture” or what the papers say, I find myself nostalgically aware of how the elements of nature and nurture played their role. Like most New York schoolboys I learned at an early age how to fold one’s newspaper and discreetly turn the pages on crowded, strap-hanging interborough subway rides. In those years, consistent with one’s revolt against the father, the morning paper was not his Times but my Herald-Tribune, not his World-Telegram but my New York Post.

As time went by, the side-effects of the addiction became part of the intellectual kicks of a more academic environment. We had a small circle of students in City College, dominated by our awesome mentor in all things historical or topical, Dr. B.N. Nelson. We met once or twice a week, after classes, in some uptown or downtown cafeteria where we chatted earnestly about what happened to be new, by which we meant the news that we had happened to find strange or illuminating in the day’s papers. Nelson dignified the gossip by calling it the study of “the visible surface of things,” and he would regale us (he was a medieval historian) with tales of famous palimpsests and their secret sub-texts.
We were learning to be *penetrating*, to discern "*hidden meanings*"; and we devoured even the sleazy tabloids and stuffed, like bookmarks, our academic textbooks with apposite cuttings. I recall my adolescent pride when I earned the circle’s (and the master’s) praise: I had “solved” a famous prewar murder case. In a lost corner of a jump-story in the *Daily Mirror* or the *Journal-American* (both of which were still being published then) I had found a revealing item reporting the names of the books and authors which the brutal young killer (named Lonergan, I recall) had been reading before the commission of his crime, thus establishing a “deeper” motive or, at least, a literary *motif*. (What had Caesar’s murderers been reading before the Ides of March? What titles were at hand in Canterbury when Thomas à Becket was laid low in the cathedral?)

I think of it now as constituting a special kind of what scholars call empirical research. In the hazy perspective of memory our “investigative reporting” was roughly equivalent to Michael Ventris’ breaking the Greek code of Linear B (and opening up the true history of classical Cretan culture) or Theodor Mommsen’s poking around with ancient coins and epigraphs (in order to re-tell the story of the Roman Empire like-it-was). But, truth to tell, the pastime was for over half-a-lifetime sheer fun and games, and no such newspaper addicts were ever alone. The Nelson circle over five-cent cups of coffee—in one of the Bickford’s cafeterias near Washington Square or Morningside Heights—became, in time, a cosmopolitan international. There were many in far-away exotic places who, above and beyond their intellectual duty to the printed word, pored over the quotidian press, underlining quotations, scribbling in the margin, tearing out as neatly as one could the precious finds which could one day provide exquisite footnotes to history. I exchanged cuttings with François Bondy in Zurich, Edward Shils in Chicago, Dr. Hellmut Jaesrich in Berlin, George Urban in Munich, Leo Labedz in London, Friedrich Torberg in Vienna; and when we chanced to meet, armed with *faits divers*, the occasion soon became a small press festival. We recited our special scoops and eagerly bartered Xerox copies. Torberg was especially good on suggestive misprints, Bondy on embarrassing double negatives, Shils on clichés and buzz-words, Labedz on what in the East European press the GPU/KGB had failed to notice. Some of us were building up a formidable library of clues to the larger meaning of things which had been preserved, according to our hypothesis, in the visible and readable surfaces of the day. The old credo still ob-
tained, as in the early days when we were (as Eliot says) dropping ques-
tions on our plates and measuring out our lives in coffee-spoons.

And so the addiction was both nature and nurture. Still, who knows
newspapers who only newspapers know? This is often one of the short-
comings of our schools of journalism. What the papers say is dissected
in a near-sighted “content-analysis”; journalist pronounces upon jour-
nalist (for good stories, or engaged campaigning, or defective ethics).
But a far-sighted critique would be to focus on that larger set of values,
ideas, and attitudes which the democratic press is deemed to be fulfill-
ing in our media-dependent society...or failing miserably. For my own
part, flaunting no comprehensive philosophy of communication or to-
tally committed politics, I confine my analysis of the language of jour-
nalism, the uncertainties of its faltering style, its hectic quest for inci-
sive meanings (and the other media matters with which I will be dealing
in this book) more to an implicit critique—naturally involving elements
of my personal attitude, my own sense of logic and reason (and, I hope,
of humor)—and rather less to an explicit message and all-encompass-
ing media manifesto. I have been influenced by H.L. Mencken’s² devo-
tion to the drama of the word, not by his half-intellectual tendentious-
ness. I have been attracted by Marshall McLuhan’s thematic
adventurousness, not by his overheated or undercooled categories.

While I am about it, I might as well confess to a number of other
sources which might help the reader to explain what I have been, con-
sciously or unintentionally, doing in these thousand pages. To some, I
fear, the enterprise might appear a gigantic emptying of file-boxes (a
conventional reproach for work studded with detail): outing huge col-
clections of newspaper cuttings, and second-guessing them with glosses
and annotations about style, meaning, vocabulary, and the like. There
was once a book by B.H. Haggin, a distinguished New York critic, en-
titled Music for the Man Who Enjoys Hamlet; and this is a sort of a
companion effort for readers who take thought, take the trouble to work
at—and work through—their newspapers; for the media we may have
may be our best, if not only, source of knowledge of the external world,
offering us a singular chance to grasp what is happening in our times.
Assembling many and diverse things, it will, I trust, be taken to be the
work of a man who was, as befits his calling as an editor and publisher,
subject to many and multifarious influences. Some were intellectual
onslaughts: difficult to accept, painful to resist. Others were eccentric,
if lasting, impressions on a New York schoolboy whose mind was first
exposed to logic and the scientific method by Morris Raphael Cohen and Ernest Nagel\(^3\)… and also to their very opposite: the romantic fallacies of Marx and Trotsky, illogical and unscientific, but which may still have left traces in the pages to follow. Still others taught me to be concerned with “the color of things” and not only with their meaning, with the shape and sound of words and not merely with their artless message. Among them were two old-timers at the *New Yorker*: Frank Sullivan who instructed a generation of literary aspirants – standing at the crossroads, looking through the window of opportunity – how to sneer (with a smile) at a cliche; and A.J. Liebling on how to laugh at “the wayward press.” Without further explication my ideal reader will be detecting further traces of influence from that elegant master of language, Jacques Barzun; from the late Sidney Hook, an indefatigable polemicist who nevertheless preached “the culture of controversy”; from S.M. Levitas, publisher and fatherly censor at the *New Leader*, a social-democratic paper in Manhattan, with whom I learned how it is that some difficult truths sometimes, somehow, get lost in the printing shop, on galley, on page-proofs just before press-time… and from his young managing editor of the time, Daniel Bell, who wrote an enviable weekly column entitled “Clippings without Comment” (I often provided the comment by sub-editing into the text pointed captions). The earliest professional advice came at a green teenager from his curmudgeonly “faculty advisor” at the *Clinton News*, Raphael Philipson… and equipped with the elementary journalistic rules of how to write a lead (who-what-how-when *etc.*), and where to cut a story (from the bottom), together with a dozen proof-reading marks (to *stet* what had been cut), I went on to become a sports writer, a film and theater critic, a book reviewer, and a special foreign correspondent for the *New York Sunday Times* – what a distinction in its day!—associating with the likes of Lester Markel, James (“Scotty”) Reston, A.M. Rosenthal, Sydney Gruson, C.L. (“Cy”) Sulzberger, et al.

One last prewar recollection and acknowledgement: of my gratitude to Dwight Macdonald,\(^4\) unforgettable editor of *Partisan Review* (and, later, *Politics*) who became before his death in 1982 (and especially after) a so-called “American cult figure” (largely because of his intensely eccentric criticism of the movies). He published in *Partisan Review* my very first serious article and invited me to my first Greenwich Village cocktail party (1941) at which I, to my eternal embarrassment, asked only for a glass of milk; but as a result of which my very
sober conversations with Mary McCarthy, Philip Rahv, and Clement Greenberg left me with a new sense of intellectual acuity. Macdonald was a Yankee cracker-barrel ideologue with whom, after inviting him to London to help edit *Encounter*, I fell out uproariously. But for me, and for many young writers whom he favored, he was present at the creation of a special New York intellectual culture: in part political commitment, in part high journalism, bound together by an admirably cranky devotion to language and personal style. I thought of him often in the writing of the book.

I shall leave to the unswayed opinion of the reader what I owe to the lesson of the subsequent forty years during which, in Berlin and in London, I edited two international intellectual journals, *Der Monat* (1948-1962) and *Encounter* (1958-1990), both devoted to literature and politics and enjoying some recognizable relationship to the newspaper culture of our time.

Last and least—but still pertinent to the wild profusion of echo and allusion in the pages to come—I must mention that grand and infuriating work by that seventeenth-century master of flamboyant allusiveness, Robert Burton. I was introduced to his classic but little-read book, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), by a once famous London man-of-letters, Daniel George, who was preparing a small paperback edition of what he judged to be “a storehouse of learning, wisdom, and entertainment.” I have been reading in it ever since. I still have not determined what all the three beguiling volumes amount to in terms of theology and/or intellectual discipline, but it profited me even where it corrupted. (Samuel Johnson thought he overloaded the books with quotation; Burton was a “chain-quoter.”) I have not been the same since. Whatever it may have been that Burton was after, possibly to win indisputably a long-forgotten argument and save a precious truth, he drew upon everything that came his way, from “the whole world’s literature, sacred and profane, for precept and example, for legend and history and fiction, for every possible illustration or embellishment of his theme…. Who can fail to envy his magisterial performance?

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The original book, published in 1621, went through five editions in Burton’s lifetime (he died at the age of 63 in the year 1639).
If, in the beginning, there was the word or, as the biologist Richard Dawkins might say, the literary gene, compelling and word-devouring; and then there came to it an intellectual and academic element which the German philosopher Hegel, also a newspaper addict, considered a stimulant to insight and even truth...there is a third influence which derives from the transatlantic factor. It is the fact that I have lived most of my professional life as an editor and journalist as an American in Europe. This has proved to be “a defining moment” in several senses.

Most Europeans have had two souls in their breast, cultivating (on the one hand) their Eurocentrism with a pride in the Old World as the still living source of civilization and alternating (on the other) with a secret Goethean surmise that “Amerika, du hast es besser,” a notion of America having it better—doing it better, making it better—as befits the last best hope of mankind.

Most Americans had their roots in the Old World and uprooted them, exhibited pride in having established a New World, but periodically showed pious signs (as in the troubled credos of Jefferson, of Hawthorne, of Henry Adams and Henry James) of admiration and envy of lost motherlands.

Journalists are no exceptions to the rule of ambivalence. There have been recently two notable judgements on the state of Anglo-American deference, one from an editor of the New Republic, the brilliant American weekly, who happened to be a Briton, the other from the American editor whom he replaced. The former (Andrew Sullivan) comes down on the Goethean side: American journalism, he finds, is indeed “better.” It doesn’t have the flash and the wit and elegance of English writing but, then again, it doesn’t have its superficiality, irresponsibility and, in the end, its unseriousness. His reply to the query, “Why do the British chatter so wittily but say nothing of any substance?” is, substantially, a contrast with

the admirable earnestness of The New York Times and the Washington Post, with their po-faced foreign reporting and deadpan political analysis....The subjects of race, ethnicity, pluralism, feminism, sexuality have all seen their most vivid exploration in the US. When the Brits discuss race or the underclass they import American writers....The London Zeitgeist tends towards entertaining dilettantism, rather than addressing serious public concerns....[What is] readable, witty and sprightly, reeks of lassitude and decadence....The country positively sighs with cultural exhaustion.

Be that as it may (and it is true), the opposite—as in the famous paradox of Karl Kraus—is also true. The Oxford man’s “Yankee-philia”
is matched by the Washington man’s “Anglophilia.” As Michael Kinsley admitted, in the mirror-imagery of recurrent transatlantic illusionism, his own deference ran the other way—in admiration of the nimble quickness, the fluent finish and, to be sure, the good grammar (most of the time) that is expended on a London newspaper’s daily output: “Perhaps it’s just my Anglophilia, but I still think that English journalism is remarkably lucid and intelligent, on average, compared with that in America.” We will leave it at that: a tie, a draw, a Mexican stand-off, and yet another example of the Anglo-American difference which is that of a shared culture separated by a common language.*

The standards and innovations, virtues and vices, differ in transatlantic perspective, but I treat them together in an interchangeable and, at times, a unified perspective, just as a literary critic, inquiring into the state of the contemporary novel or poetry or modern English-language literature in general, must perforce deal with writers from both sides of the Atlantic: James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway, Evelyn Waugh and Saul Bellow, Kingsley Amis and John Updike. Paying attention in this way can illuminate the inter-related manner the Americans as well as the British report on the world around them.

The reader will also note my effort to introduce a third “newspaper culture,” in order to have a sort of control-test in matters of national parallelism (sophistication, populism, taboos) and international diffusion (slang, profanity, buzz-words). And so I have used in many chapters the serious German press, above all that distinguished West-German daily, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, which matches up with the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the International Herald-Tribune (published in Paris but owned jointly by the Times and the Post). In England the sources for most of my references are to the Times (now owned by the ur-Australian, Rupert Murdoch), the Daily Telegraph (now owned by the Canadian, Conrad Black), and the Guardian (formerly of Manchester distinction). Occasionally I have added some

* I have delimited this Anglo-American comparative strategy to modest proportions: for I intend to be mainly concerned with English-language journalism, and within that vast enterprise the mainstream publications of New York, Washington, and London.

It would be fascinating and instructive to examine how the controlled Chinese press and the free Japanese newspapers have coped with the difficulties of modernism: slang, profanity, new coinages, buzz-words, etc. I have taken only an occasional side-glance at what the Germans have been doing as they wrestle with such problems of newspaper culture.
weekly and monthly magazines in accumulating examples to attest to the splendors and miseries of our Anglo-American journalism. Two London dailies, both of which in their way aspire to be taken "seriously," also figure in the handbookish case-study materials assembled (viz. the *Daily Mail* and the *Evening Standard*). I have written as if the *New Yorker's* famous "old lady in Dubuque" (immortalized in Harold Ross' phrase for the great non-reading reader in tennis shoes)—even if she doesn't subscribe to any of the publications herein examined for what they tell us about the state of life and letters today—will be influenced or even, sooner or later, be caught up by the "cultural mechanisms" I have been considering. For better or worse, I see the "filtering through" or trickle-down effect everywhere in our copy-cat cultures.

I used to try and follow more newspapers than I do now, picking up at the nearest international kiosks *Le Monde* fairly regularly, along with the *Corriere della Sera* (not to miss a reportage by Luigi Barzini) and, later, Indro Montanelli's *Il Giornale*. Rather more frequently I took the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, leafing through them all diligently, clipping them assiduously. The cannibalized remnants were, mostly, stuffed away in small used envelopes, but every now and then an odd batch of miscellaneous cuttings were air-mailed to a friendly editor abroad or to a foreign correspondent who might be stimulated to do a bright, thoughtful piece.

But I never lived long enough in France or Italy or Switzerland to feel any special empathy with their journals, to peer over the top of my newspaper and make out the three-dimensional realities in strange local colors which the reporters were supposed to be recording. With some effort I discouraged myself from trying to match what these papers were saying with the kind of life-and-letters I had come to experience in lands where I had lived long chunks of my own life. So I decided more modestly to confine the research for this book to the United States, where I was born and educated (and in whose armed services I did wartime duty); to postwar Germany where I edited and published a German-language monthly magazine (and it achieved a certain cultural influence and notoriety); and to Britain where my Anglo-American intellectual journal, *Encounter*, rarely gave me (and, I dare say, my readers) a dull moment.

And now that my life is approaching a ninth decade, and I still manage to devour my bundle of the daily and periodical press, I realize poignantly, almost with a sense of distress and displacement, that my autobiography is a pieced-together patchwork, a tale of three cities.
Without renewing daily contact with the latest messages coming from New York, Berlin, and London I can no longer be sure—as the philosopher said (to refer to Hegel once again), explaining his own nervous devotion to the morning press—that the realities are out there. To be sure, I pay attention less to the "new appointments" than to yesterday's obituaries but, for all that, I continue to be curious, as an old and obsessive devotee should, as to whether my former schoolmates are still around and what my old clan of writers and poets, those ever-warring intellectuals, have now been up to. Over and above that, the unfolding account of yesterday's events, of what by tomorrow will already be history—the continuing story, the headlines for what happens next—still keeps me on tenterhooks. We all live our lives with print and paper, and sooner or later we too become a news-item or, with luck, a jump-story to be continued next day.

In all of this I have tried wherever possible—and it has not been uniformly possible—to repress my own subjective value-judgments as to the merits and demerits of the American, the British, and the Continental European traditions of journalism. I have spent most of my life reading what these papers have to say, and I have, as an American publisher, tried to pick and choose among attractive foreign models for printing a page, telling a story, for supporting a cause or winning an argument. As an inveterate magpie—my first published pieces were published in a schoolboy journal of that name in the Bronx—I have always succumbed (alas) to the sentimentalism that, wherever I was, the grass was always greener on the other side. This is the nervous tic of bi-national, and indeed, cosmopolitan experience. The past induces nostalgia—my father reading his copy of the *New York Times* for fifty years of his life, and trusting every word the paper thought fit to print. The future is another country: now England (where every writer knows his Shakespeare and the King James Bible, and his prose echoes accordingly), now Germany (where they compose stories and dispatches, editorials and feuilletons, as if the high-brow readership included Goethe, Heine and Nietzsche). As for my first loves—the New York press which included such defunct unforgettable rags as the *Daily Mirror*, the *Sun*, Roy Howard's *World-Telegram*, Hearst's *Journal-American*, and the superb *New York Herald-Tribune*—one's provisional prejudices and tentative judgements vary, as I say, with the

distance or the _locus in quo_ of the reader, and also what I, a transplanted American in Europe, have been forced to recognize as the recurrent "transatlantic illusion." The great ocean divides; sail across it, fly over it, turn our backs on it, the great tides still unite and separate New and Old Worlds.

I have chosen some thousand "practical examples" and have made an effort to relate them to some general attitude toward life and letters. I do not pretend, as I say, to have a general theory either of literature or language; and I like to think of Rousseau—discoursing in his essay on the _Origin of Language_ (written in the early 1750s but published only after its author's death in 1781)—rather modestly closing with an apology for his "superficial reflections, but which others more profound may arise." What might arise would be the subject of a very philosophical examination to show by examples how much the character, the morals and the interests of a people influence their language.

I can only hope that my collection of examples, my _chrestomathy_ (the tag is Mencken's), can lead the reader in the right direction to a greater critical reflectiveness.

Finally, three lines of heartfelt acknowledgement. To my patient wife, Helga Hegewisch, who was busy writing her own books and generously refrained (most of the time) from taking umbrage at the litter in the house, and from criticizing my "messing about" with "mere" newspapers. To my beloved sister Floria Lasky Altman, keeper of the family tradition, who kept the clippings coming. And to my friend and self-styled amanuensis Marc Svetov who (like most admirable and indispensable assistants, with an eye for bibliography and an ear for punctuation) earned the classic encomium: without whom this work would have been finished so much earlier.

M. J. L.
February 1999
Part 1

A Question of Style

“For words of a feather tend to stick together, and if one strays behind, it is likely to incur danger in life.”

—Edward Sapir, Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech (1921)

“It is not the word that I fear, but the emotion which produces the word....”

—Epictetus (50-138 AD), “Discourses”

“But words are things, and a small drop of ink falling like dew, upon a thought, produces that which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think...”

—Lord Byron, “Don Juan” (1818)
Words Win, Language Loses

The Infinity of a Split

The appalling casualness of the current use of language, remarked upon by so many literary critics today—deficiencies in grammar and vocabulary, ignorance of shades of meaning, indifference to traditional and/or reasonable rules of proper usage—could be a subject for a thousand-page lexicographical study. For the purposes of this work—which only occasionally, in a very few places also aspires to be a contribution to the "semantic sensitivity awareness" of aspiring journalists on some utopian ideal paper—I will confine this opening section to a few representative notes illustrating the cultural zero-sum game in which the new words win and the old language loses.

First, a word of defeatism. Let me begin with the fiasco which amounts to the least of our troubles—the vain struggle to maintain that splendid old grammarian's precept not to split infinitives. The last-ditch sticklers for that tiny rule of literary rectitude have been repulsed, rebuffed, routed. Here are the casualties strewn across the battlefield of just yesterday's newspapers. My "body count" is taken from a week's perusal of the Anglo-American press:

He emphasized the government's failure to effectively enforce the immigration laws.... He decided to personally attack Columbia after six years of service there.... An industrial tribunal also criticized the TSB for failing to fully investigate the allegations.... Damon Hill even went so far as to playfully advise photographers to position themselves on the outside.... The protocol always called for him to confidently greet visitors.... She had problems when she began to voraciously eat everything in sight.... Hartford, Connecticut, is the first community to completely privatize its public school system.... Salem, the sheikh's bodyguard, used a tape-recorder of his own to covertly monitor his conversations with FBI controllers...
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How old this bad habit is can be surmised by a paragraph reprinted recently in the *International Herald Tribune* under its rubric "75 Years Ago." It was a report of a London riot in Trafalgar Square (1919) against an American prohibitionist who vainly tried to convert an apparently pro-alcoholic "crowd of frenzied collegians":

The students intended *to publicly duck* Mr. Johnson into a barrel of beer.³

Even Africans, who obviously learned proper English in the West, are doing it. A spokesman in Mobutu's Zaire was quoted as saying in Kinshasa about the chances of gaining political power for a new reformer on the scene, named Kengo wa Dondo:

The trick for us is to incrementally extend legitimation to Kengo without letting Mobutu hijack it for himself.⁴

He must have felt free to split and splatter in this way because he was talking to the State Department’s deputy secretary of state, who is a former editor of *Time* magazine (now no longer a bastion of old fashioned values as in Henry Luce’s day). The prize for the longest rupture of the year (at least among the splits that have come my way) was captured by the *Daily Telegraph* when it reported on a TV broadcaster’s exposé of P.R. shenanigans:

During the programme, he used the names of 14 MPs to, according to another motion, “establish Ian Greer Associates’ credentials with its prospective clients.”

The most unkindest cut of all is when the split is elevated (from the unobtrusive 8-point text) to the blatant headline, and the 24-point Bodoni type screams out at you—

**D.A. THREATENS TO PUBLICLY EXPOSE SECRET FILE**

Sometimes it is a cozy matter of bunching up the phrase to keep you warm.

Unfazed in the chilly air, Marla Maples in a slinky dress marched to the ladies room and buddied-up to the hot-air dryers *to better heat up her ample torso.*⁵

With so many colleagues who share my mild horror and chronic dismay at this kind of thing—indifference to grammar is, I suspect, linked ultimately to indifference to meaning and truth—I have long since admitted defeat. But I still, like the hapless Charlie away from his assembly line, twist and twinge, and go on to register irritation at each day’s specimen (naturally excepting those dozen classic cases where there’s no sensible alternative to splitting). Still, there is mounting evidence that reporters or their sub-editors go out of their way to show how liberated they are: to really and truly write well is to
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consistently and blatantly split infinitives. The mood on the other side is, alas, triumphalist. The poet (T.S. Eliot, somewhere) had it right: words split, language breaks up, the wasteland cometh...

We didn't think we have the creativity to dramatically distinguish our products on our own.

Mr. Barry announced sweeping changes in the Defense Department to better cope with the danger.

Indeed General Mladic traveled from one execution site to another to personally oversee the extermination.6

The usual sub-standard delinquencies have almost made a normal rhythm of the bifurcated infinitive, for this is the way that ill-clad sentences can appear in public these days. The gait is pedestrian but no longer seems conspicuous.

The new European Commission will find it difficult to quickly resuscitate a piece of [TV-Quota] legislation.

A computer hack who blocked radio-station phone-lines so that he could be the winning contest-caller admitted using his computer to fraudulently win two Porsches and at least two trips to Hawaii.

NATO commanders can deter attacks to an extent, but it's very difficult to actually prevent the place being occupied.7

See a verb coming and you reach out to fill the open space. I sense a note of aggressiveness in the practice, and also a bit of an effort to be somewhat unusual and even original. The *Herald-Tribune* headline writer contrived this head across three front-page columns for a *Washington Post* story about how to (almost) get away with political corruption:

HOW TO (LEGALLY) GET FOREIGN GIFTS

Foreign languages have their own native problems with verbs, not necessarily akin to the splitting of the Anglo-Saxon infinitives, but in English everybody is doing it, if one believes Alessandra Stanley (reporting from Russia for the *New York Times*) who is quoting one of her Moscow sources, a Mr. Umar Dzhabraiov, about his quarrel with a high ex-Soviet bureaucrat: "He has the ability to initially convince people he is right." Does Russian have splittable verbs? or was he prompted or interpreted, and otherwise helped along by the up-to-the-minute Ms. Stanley?8

Chaucer, as academics have reported, split a handful of infinitives, but the modern practice may have begun by giving wide latitude to the raw, untutored
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talents who were permitted to write as they pleased. Now it is on the verge of becoming a grammatical imperative. Sub-editors, and indeed headline writers, move the adverb crisply into the once-forbidden space, splitting the infinitive with the pioneer spirit of an Abe Lincoln splitting rails. No, our district attorneys will not be exposing the secret files publicly; nor will our ministers be confessing their failures publicly (or even publicly confessing those selfsame failures). The four-column headline in the International Herald Tribune presumably following the style books of its sponsors, the New York Times and the Washington Post (with an assist from the Los Angeles Times), read:

E.U. MINISTERS TO PUBLICLY CONFESS FAILURES.9

I am afraid it's time for the rest of us to publicly confess: We just can't stop them. The split is infinite, and permanent.

One would have to risk being totally humorless to go on about it (as I am, half-heartedly, trying to do), when the whole matter of grammatical proprieties has become a subject for jokes and a peg for fun columnists. One wag (Dave Barry of the Miami Herald) has been posing as a "Language Person" who was named "the Official Grammarian for the 1996 Summer Olympic." In that capacity he would be "testing the athletes' urine at random for split infinitives and traces of illegal gerunds." As for the "diphthong," there was nothing suspicious about that and, in fact, he was persuaded by one dictionary or another that it was "a word that is used to form a good name for a rock band (e.g., Earl Piedmont & the Diphthongs)."10 This may well be, as I say, the least of our troubles in a raging sea of adversities. We probably won't be, as a direct consequence of barbarian practices in our language, approaching the End of Civilization as we have known it. Yet the admirable Karl Kraus spent a lifetime in tragic Vienna arguing just this—if a shade too melodramatically, but then the apocalyptic wasteland did come in the form of two great world wars.

As Kraus insisted in his philology of nit-picking, they who violate the essence of language will in turn be violated. They are the condemned victims of a society plagued by dark and pernicious ambiguities, and increasingly alienated from proper standards of order, truth and meaning. And for Kraus—as for H.L. Mencken, our greatest philological critic—grammar and rhetoric were the clues to catastrophes. Kraus seized upon every little item in the press or erratic phrase in parliament as pieces of evidence for the dire future, what he called in his formidable play of that name, Die Letzten Tage der Menschheit (The Last Days of Mankind).*
I will not withhold my sneaking admiration for an old-fashioned and recalcitrant school of thought which is attempting, against all odds, to hold fast to traditional rules of grammar and syntax. In his weekly department on "Usage and Abusage," one newspaper columnist has been arguing for years against splitting the infinitive and was especially upset when the Chambers Dictionary people, in the summer of 1996, finally gave up the ghost and conceded that the once-taboo practice was now "perfectly in order." The Daily Telegraph's authority on the subject (whose brief, alas, does not extend to any other column or page in his own paper) was "insulted." As he wrote,

Free speech includes the freedom to mangle it, as we all do at one time or another, in informal circumstances. But, as I wrote here only a year ago when Oxford kindly sanctioned the dreaded split, anyone with an ounce of feeling for speech rhythm knows that it is ugly and angular, and will avoid it.

Some of the thousand bits of favorable evidence, beginning with the Bard, were again trotted out in support of the case for the prosecution. How odd and indeed absurd it would have been had Shakespeare written "To be or to not be" or "A consummation devoutly be wished"! The split puts a limp into the natural flow of words, although no one will deny that Shakespeare ignored grammar when it suited him; but not euphony (and he knew enough Greek to know it meant "good sound").

Insulted traditionalists keep on cringing and groaning. A BBC reporter said the other day, "They are intending to now study it closely." And what is wrong, pray, with "now to study it closely" or "to study it closely now"? Yet how long will we want to expend our ingenuity by rephrasing all the split infinitives that come our way in the course of a day? If we maintain our beleaguered and almost lost positions, then it must surely be not a mere matter of literary style but more than that, one of essential life-style. As one English lexicographer (Fritz Spiegl) writes, pulling himself up to his full cultural height—

Our freedom also allows us to decide whether we wash, shave, or scrub our fingernails. When out camping or mountaineering we let niceties go by the board and offend no one. Equally it is good manners in the drawing room to observe conventions when not to do so might make others uncomfortable, or think less of one. Nobody complains about good manners—or good grammar.

That is why I faintly resent being told by Chambers that a four-day stubble and dirty nails are now acceptable.

Acceptable to whom? Or should we write, "Who to?" I share little or none of the emotional involvement of my grammarian friends who in their pedantic loyalties cheer on all who dare to employ the traditional rules and chastise or otherwise condemn to obloquy those who carelessly or deliberately herd themselves among the splitters. But I do aver that when I
unexpectedly find, rare as this is becoming, an unsplit infinitive a special rhythm and even an extra shot of persuasive power seems to hover over the construction. Here is an English columnist discussing pregnancy and the state of the abortion debate; and she is arguing for more candor about the little-mentioned after-effects of terminal foetal surgery, suggesting only that “Violently to interrupt this delicate and powerful process is likely to cause trouble.” This sentence as constructed is, I submit, a touch stronger, or more expressive and elegant, than if violence had also been done to the infinitives.12

Railing in their very own self-interest against the imaginary rules that petty linguistic tyrants have sought to lay upon the English language, novelists, poets, and other serious craftsmen in modern literature have often insisted that there is simply no grammatical reason whatsoever against splitting an infinitive. Often the avoidance of one lands the writer in trouble; Fowler and other texts are full of examples, and the general liberal conclusion is that “We will split infinitives rather than be barbarous or artificial.” Among the literary men who lined themselves up in opposition to the “anti-split infinitive fanatics” was Kingsley Amis, but despairing that the old “rule” would ever yield to reason, he made in the end his own reasonable, if gloomy, compromise in his guide to modern usage, The King’s English (1997):

> whatever anybody may say, split infinitives are still to be avoided in most circumstances.... I personally think that to split an infinitive is perfectly legitimate, but I do my best never to split one in public and I would certainly not advise anybody else to do so, even today.

He was not quite aware that it was no longer a matter of ungainly departures from natural word orders by a careful writer eager to get on with his felicitous phrasing. Good prose in our time is being overwhelmed by forces much larger than quibbles about solecisms. Fowler’s successor, Robert Burchfield, is still trying to keep his finger in the hole of the dam:

> Avoid splitting infinitives whenever possible, but do not suffer undue remorse if a split infinitive is unavoidable for the natural and unambiguous completion of a sentence already begun.13

This guidance makes a sensible arrangement with the faits accomplis in serious prose wherein a Philip Roth shows “a willingness to not always, in every circumstance think the very best” of being natural—when a John Updike “shares a curious dry ability to without actually saying anything make” him feel unambiguous—and even Kingsley Amis “managed to quite like” the rule-of-thumb.

In daily journalism it is another matter. The avalanche which has been triggered by the enthused faction of our newspaper splitters—as in our many examples—comes from (to paraphrase one of the splitters) “seeming to just deliberately and maliciously draw attention” to the fact that anything goes, no
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rules obtain, everything is as good as anything else. We are all post-modernists now.

The Times of London was judicious, if a tad light-hearted, in its summing-up (1992) of the grand debate over adverbial deployment: “The most diligent search can find no modern grammarian to pedantically, to dogmatically, to invariably condemn a split infinitive.” Well, this may be as good a place as any at which to formally conclude our discussion, before running the risk of trying flatly to forbid enlisting a reader in a lost cause. Is this last clause ambiguous? Is it a flat prohibition? A flat try? So be it.

In the Passing Parade of Words

When wars over words break out—and verbal animals, or bipeds with a gift for speech, have never been able to keep the peace for very long—there are usually two opposing camps confronting each other in the hostilities. The one has styled itself for as long as literacy has been known as classically tone-giving heroes. Their message—from Jahweh’s monolinguists in Babel (Genesis 11) to the Hebrew formalists (in Judges 12.6), from Homer’s Greek to Napoleon’s French—rings down in history, loud and clear and unmistakable. The others, upstart strangers from beyond one’s own frontiers, speaking an alien tongue, or some shibboleth of a language, sometimes armed only with an obscure argot or a broad dialect, have always been dismissed as barbarians. Since human language grows and changes, and even victorious vocabularies get transformed over the centuries, some speech forms become richer, some increasingly obsolete. Barbaric usages continue generally to circulate until the appointed guardians of the language, hidebound or permissive as they may be, sit and pronounce judgment. Classical grammarians defend the old locutions; liberal etymologists are prepared to concede yet another prescriptive stronghold to the offenders. We are continually making war, trying to make peace. In our days, new up-to-date standard editions of great classic dictionaries are a sort of armistice, a kind of solution.

As I write, the Oxford University Press has just published the New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998), and it flaunts an impressive association with the immense authority of its august grandmother, the O.E.D. Language is now described with a fresh eye (and newcomers include bimbo, phone sex, dumb down...). Odd words are authenticated for proper and approved use (like lunch box for an athlete’s bulging male genitals, or to bobbitt, named after the jealous woman who vindictively cut off her husband’s penis, an act, so etymologists assure us, quite different from castration). Controversial twists and turns in grammatical usage get to be finally resolved: viz., since he or she is tiresomely long-winded one is permitted to say, “Every child needs to know that they are loved.” These changes usually cause some mild relief in pedagogical
circles, weary of dithering, and arouse a modest stir of criticism, as in the
traditional objection that what is legitimate is determined by the people’s hab­
its and are no longer decreed by their betters. On all such issues the people
vote comfortably for what comes naturally. Small wonder that some skeptics,
including humorists who habitually depend on nuances of meaning, accent,
and inflection, despair in a semantic world where words have lost their bear­
ings and are given no new guidelines, except that anything goes if enough of
you out there go along with it. Controversy raged, for the English still feel that
after all it is their language and, accordingly, its legitimate defenders; but it
was hard to distinguish in all the brouhaha the high indignation from the hijinks.
The first letter the Times printed in the putatively furious discussion that was
to follow was one sentence long, under the head “To boldly go”:

Sir, May I be the first to roundly condemn The Oxford Dictionary of English for
allowing the use of split infinitives?...Yours, etc.15

In 1906, in his “The Enlarged Devil’s Dictionary,” Ambrose Bierce defined
“Dictionary” as

A malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of the language and making
it hard and inelastic. The present dictionary [namely, his own] is, however, one of
the most useful ever produced. It is a compendium of everything that is known up
to date of its completion, and will drive a screw, repair a red wagon or apply for a
divorce. It is a good substitute for measles, and will make rats come out of their
holes to die. It is a dead shot for worms, and children cry for it.16

There is a reasonable element of absurdity in many of the rules of a mature
and sophisticated language, and even excitable literary polemicists persist with
a Biercean sense of irony. The playwright Keith Waterhouse thought that the
Oxford green light for the split infinitive was “a slippery slope” and predicted
the coming of the Association for the Annihilation of the Aberrant Apostro­
phies (AAAA). He reported that the Confederation of Trader’s in Bananas have
already petitioned dictionary’s editors for a carte blanche “to scatter their pro­
duce with random apostrophes like glitter on a Christmas tree.” Kindergarten
teachers, concerned for the well-being of their pre-literate charges, have asked
for the apostrophe to be abolished entirely, as have lobbyists for the replace­
ment of gas meters. The dictionary makers are impressed with the phenom­
enon of casual, if momentarily incorrect, punctuation and give signs that if
this is the calm before the storm, they may well be ready to give up the ghost,
or throw in the towel. Thousands of aberrant apostrophes have been collected,
as Waterhouse reports in the Daily Mail, and

they include ladie’s wigs, a visitor’s car park, and rule’s for member’s of a dog
owner’s club to the effect that puppie’s injection’s must be entered into their vacci-
nation book's, and that flat shoe's must be worn for training session's. There are references without number to toilet's, surgerie's, college's, security camera's, to childrens portion's always being available, and—a rare find—a Royal Society of Medicine scale of fee's.

The AAAA has also spotted the recent strain of apostrophic deviation: the slipped apostrophe (reported by readers to be more painful than a slipped disc), as in "Antiques,...Saturdays,...Hairdresser's."17

Be that as it may, in the case of the split infinitive there are still two formidable camps, although mugwumping in the middle has for almost the whole of the century reinforced the school of compromise. We are reminded that as long ago as 1926 the mighty traditionalist H.W. Fowler in his Dictionary of Modern English Usage said there is nothing wrong with splitting infinitives, and he mocked "those who do not know but do care, who would as soon be caught putting their knives in their mouths as splitting an infinitive but have only hazy notions of what constitutes that deplorable breach of etiquette." Fowler thought that such people were guilty of "tame acceptance of the misinterpreted opinions of others, for they will subject their sentences to the queerest distortions, all to escape imaginary split infinitives."

"That's me," confessed a distinguished British journalist, now editing the Spectator. All his life, as his friends and readers know, he has suffered under the fear of being thought the sort of person who splits his infinitives.18

The anxiety over correctness or rectitude has only grown—paradoxically enough, for a permissive age—but, then, so have dissidence, contrariness, and eccentricity. One writer notes with distaste that "aboriginally" has been dropped because it is no longer used, not because it might offend native Australians; consequently, he is tempted to join in a crusade to restore aboriginally to its former adverbial glory. Others object to the dismaying nod to topicality (viz., the inclusion of the word Eurosceptic); the saddening loss of the old-time religion (e.g., the dropping of "Christian name"); the awful anticipation that the next edition will feature a "Monica" as a term for the sexual act popularized by that woman...a Miss Lewinsky.

If this latter is one of those earthier terms ingested with glee into the language, would they not have appealed more to Boswell than to Samuel Johnson? Would the classic English lexicographer have balked at the Oxford pronunciation that infinitives may now be split at will? The consensus appeared to be that grammatical rules are all a matter of taste and snobbery; and, in a free country "with no language gestapo," who prefers to be slightly snippy about the current exercises in "plastic language" may continue to go his or her—*their*—way. Still: language is, among other human fundamentals, part of the ground we stand on, and when words slip and stumble the earth seems to move and quake. Two-letter prepositions and even tiny misplaced apostrophes—although the Germans do their quotation marks, and the Spanish their
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question marks, upside down—appear to matter. One historian (Andrew Roberts in the *Sunday Times*) reconciled himself to the idea that, after all, history is only one damned battle after another: “The citadel of the split infinitive having been stormed, it is now time to man the barricades in defence of the beleaguered apostrophe.” One last word about lost causes which, apparently, will always be with us. But then no cause is ever finally lost until the last straggler surrenders the flag. I detect no sign of defeatism from Simon Jenkins in the *Times*:

Grammar is serious. The capacity to use it is what separates us from the apes. It defines our species and enables us to do more than grunt, warn and mate.... We recognise, judge and react to each other through the subtleties of grammar. Its rules hold the key to human diplomacy and should never be changed without the utmost care.

Given this high seriousness, it is no easy question whether to split or not to split. Words are free, argues Jenkins, but grammar is too important to be left to grammarians who don’t see why infinitives matter. The *Times* columnist waxes lyrical:

Whole departments are devoted to the infinitive as verbal and as substantive. Others study the many grammatical cases in which this noble mood so glories. It appears as a nominative in, *To know is to love*; accusative in, *God gave us to see*; and dative or purposive in, *He has gone to visit his mother*.

Here the battle is to defend that “paragon of grammatical subtlety,” namely the English infinitive, that “grammatical titan.” Some are already plotting to get rid of the preposition, and by eliminating the *to* from the infinitive render the split obsolete. Are we in the English-speaking world ready for *Know is Love* or *God gave us see*? These notions and sentiments can be said (and have been) in other languages (French, German, *inter alia*); but Jenkins sees here the threatening shadow of pidgin and Creole. Lose the battle of Oxford, and night has fallen:

These fine scholars are the space scientists of the language. They are lost in its black holes and quasars. When they tell us to shift course, we can shift. Until then, the Earth is still round, time does not bend and splitting infinitives is not normal or useful. It is ugly and sloppy, to be done only in emergencies.

This is not to be confounded with old-fashioned absolutism; it accommodates the concessions which grammarians from Fowler to Burchfield have made. The emergency also includes, be it noted, the urgencies of poetry. One of the most famous splits is Byron’s “*To slowly trace the forest’s shady scene.*” Jenkins’ defense is an admirable example of what I have called rules of reasonable absurdity, here moderated by poetic needs. Byron overcomes ugliness only by
the purity of his meter and the balancing strength of *slowly* and *trace*. Had he written “to slowly go” he would have (so Jenkins) killed the line.

The split infinitive debate is always welcome. It emphasizes what is vital to language, the rhythm and power that grammar bestows on the passing parade of words.  

Or so, as I hope, say all of us. This firm, apodictic tone is an echo of a self-confident century which produced that classic work of 1879, the first, formidable edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I have frequently in these pages dwelt on the many virtues and a few of the vices of this many- volumed achievement; but one historical incident in the scholarly story of its compilation throws a provocative shadow, and it should not go unmentioned. It is told in a recent biography by Simon Winchester of Dr. William Minor of the United States, who contributed to the *O.E.D.* It is a weird story—even in “A Tale of Murder, Madness and Love of Words”—for Dr. Minor was an American surgeon and a homicidal lunatic.* It was only when James Murray, the editor of the first edition of the dictionary, went to visit his collaborator that he realized that the doctor was a resident in an asylum for the clinically insane.

Perhaps the anecdote should be left there. But the whole history of language—from its highest flights into philosophy, theology, and poetry to its low tabloid usefulness—has been connected with a measure of manic obsessiveness. It suggests that the ideal love of words can be darkly associated with other, even fatal attractions, and that way lies madness.  

### The Uses of Illiteracy

But back to the split infinitive and related crack-ups. In a Dublin story which first explained why an IRA bomb “failed to fully explode” the writer went on to offer this maxim of wisdom, for whatever good it does for the Irish peace process: “In a zero-sum society, perception is all.” Where no grammar is (i.e., no sense in sentences), gibberish can’t be far behind.

This leads us to another related misdemeanour which is surely more troubling: blindness to the color of words and their shades of implicit meaning. On the same day, in the same paper, in a story from Cairo about the first successes in the world conference about “female fertility rights” (which had been criticized by Islamic governments and welcomed by militant Western campaigners), a leading New York spokesperson named Ellen

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* From the Simon Winchester book, originally entitled *The Surgeon of Crowthorne* (1997), the *Sunday Times* resident etymologist picked up the tidbit (16 August 1998), p. 5): “…Dr. Minor eventually cut off his own penis with the penknife he used for cutting book pages, an action dignified in the latest edition of the *OED* with its own verb ‘to Bobbitt’…”
Chesler was quoted as saying with some pride: "Women will really be collaborators..." And this in the same week when the French wartime sins of collaboration with the Nazis received world-wide attention with President François Mitterand's confession that he had been a Pétainist in Vichy France. Certain tainted words can’t be washed clean; nor should they be spoken mindlessly. Language is a beautiful thing: what a shame to waste it on political illiterates.

And on cultural illiterates too. For years the word “culture” has been bandied about and so systematically abused that its meaning has been contorted to extend to a thousand omni-cultural situations, all thought to be included in the so-called scientific meaning of the term as used by the classical anthropologists (Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Claude Lévi-Strauss, et al.). We are told of the “culture of poverty” in urban slums (so poor there’s no room for culture at all); the “culture of murder” in civil war-wracked Yugoslavia; the “culture of dependency” in crisis-ridden welfare states; the “culture of corruption” in the Tangentopoli of contemporary Italy; the “culture of evidence” when lawyers and judges get together to sing the praises of justice and fair trial; the “culture of deviance” in the gay bathhouses of New York and San Francisco; the “culture of the black-market” in post-Communist Russian society.

In recent years, as black intellectual discourse has moved into a place at American centers of discussion, culture as an argumentative concept has served as a weapon on both sides of a racial debate. One black writer in the New Yorker tries to explain sympathetically why the black community was almost unanimous in its approval of the trial decision of not guilty in the O.J. Simpson murder case. The white community was practically unanimous in its opinion (nay, certainty) that he was the murderer, and that it was a sign of madness to ignore the mountain of persuasive evidence. Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is saddened at the cultural divide. He writes,

How can conversation begin when we disagree about reality?...For many whites a sincere belief in Simpson’s innocence looks less like the culture of protest than the culture of psychosis.  

Gates goes on to mention Simpson’s “ironic status in a culture of celebrity”; the possibility that other villains were involved in our “drug culture of violence”; the influence of “the white gatekeepers of a media culture” (convinced that black folk are “not merely counter-normative but crazy”); and he winds up with something called “outlaw culture” (by which he says that he means, in case we are still with him, “the tendency—which unites our lumpenproles with our post-modern ironists—to celebrate transgression for its own sake”). Culture seems to have its finger in every pie.

Nor is this all. I will be, subsequently, devoting a long chapter in explanation of the 57 varieties of cultural experience. In this place, before one gets swamped and drowned in despair, I want only to ask, hopefully: What will
happen when we will be needing the word in its luminous earlier meaning? It used to be conjugated: high culture, middlebrow culture, low or popular or mass culture; and then, no-culture-at-all, what the Russians disdainfully call nyetkulturyny. Who will grasp that something ideal-aesthetical was originally implied and not some verbal shards of an anthropologist researching in the field?

**Culture Lives!**

The day may have already come. I note that when the pundits have exhausted the nostrums which have failed to be pertinent to the on-going carnage in the Balkans (U.N. Peace-keeping...Redrawing the Maps-and-Frontiers...Blockade...Air-Strikes...Humanitarian Aid...Embargo...Safe Havens...etc., etc.), they are turning to...culture. The *New York Times* (14 September 1994) came up with the surprising headline:

**BOSNIA: CULTURE OFFERS THE SEEDS OF SURVIVAL**

In view of the prevailing hunger and starvation in Sarajevo, it might have been supposed that seeds were offering the culture of survival, or, alternatively, survival was offering the seeds of culture. In any event the culture being referred in this case was not the old prevailing humbug (the “culture of despair ... of fratricide ... of ethnic cleansing”) but, quite simply, music and art and theatre, and even fashion shows. These were beginning to flower in Bosnia, and (opined the hopeful *Times* analysts), “these moments of culture” could “save the nation.”

In a not unrelated development (as the sub-editors like to say, “combining dispatches”), another pundit desperately invoked the old culture of lost meaning, in order to make vivid the warning against the latest European strategy to move along “two tracks” in the process of unification. This would be, as Brian Beedham argued (in the *Herald Tribune*, 14 September 1994), “the folly of uniting Europe while slicing it into two.” Journalism when it gets aggressive is like the intelligentsia going to war: culture is conscripted, and history is recruited off the streets.

The glory that was Greece in the 4th and 5th centuries B.C., required no All-Greek Parliament sitting in Thebes, no commission with an office in Corinth, no pan-Hellenic army commanded (one fears) from Sparta. The great new philosophy and culture and politics that burst upon the world in those centuries was at least a product of Greece’s very diversity and variety. When Greece was eventually made into a single state by that cold outsider, Philip of Macedon—the light never shone so brightly again.

One can almost hear the futile argument going on, with the Continental pundit manipulating quotations from Herodotus and Aeschylus—and did not Philip’s
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son, Alexander, uniting the whole known world of his day, an empire from the Mediterranean to the Ganges, have as his cultural adviser none other than Aristotle?

In order to fully and vividly comprehend the dangers of all this, and to possibly effectively avoid them, I suggest the following two rules-of-thumb in the context of "the culture of grammar" and "of intellectual discourse."

Cease-and-desist from the linguistic mayhem of the day, its splits, cracks, and fashionable seizures. Avoid splitting infinitives unless under grievous duress: expatriation, repatriation, or other forms of cruel and unusual punishment. More than that, refrain modestly from the sexual harassment of the muse of history, Clio. And indeed when you hear the historic word Kulchur (Ezra Pound's spelling, not mine), reach for your blue pencil or punch sharply on your delete key.

Full Confrontal

On a memorable Tuesday in December—it was the day before the Pearl Harbor anniversary—hopes ran high for peace between the hostile grammarian camps. The Washington Post published a book review (IHT, 6 December 1994) about that "gentleman spy," Allen Dulles; and although the author of the biography, Peter Grose, was a former member of a friendly and allied institution, the New York Times, he came under obligatory fire from the sharp-shooting critic: "A bit frustrating is the reluctance of Grose...to confront fully the sense of elitism and self-righteousness that imbued Dulles and his comrades." It might well have been easier, in these times, to fully confront such delicate problems. But if a man is reluctant to split an infinitive, how sharp can the cutting edge of his pen be?

Was, then, the Post and the IHT relenting on its ongoing grammatical assault? No, it was a false lull. The guns kept firing. On the same day, in the same edition of the Herald Tribune and on the weightier editorial page, a dispatch from Washington pointed up the new challenges which the incoming president of Mexico would face. One half hoped he would be able to confront them fully all on his own. No such luck. U.S. policy was "pushing Mexico to fully embrace dramatic democratic reforms in the short run." And if that were not enough for the day, the writer went on to advise, "He needs to radically restructure a corrupt judicial and legal system." As for us, forlorn souls, if we can push ourselves to fully confront our increasingly corrupted language, then we will need to radically restructure the acceptable rules of language.