

BEZTAKTIST

No. 10

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WRITING : A FEATURE



I READ A BOOK
ONCE. IT WAS
A GREEN ONE!

MULTICULTURALISM QUIZ

1. What is an ethnic ?
 - a. Some one who lives here but doesn't speak English ?
 - b. An Englishman who lives here but doesn't speak French ?
 - c. A fart in the wind ?
 - d. The Boat People ?
 - e. Grey Owl ?

 2. How would you define the Anglo-Canadian establishment ?
 - a. A bunch of English colonists who think they are still running an Empire ?
 - b. Fat cats who work for Imperial Oil ?
 - c. Pierre Trudeau's mother ?
 - d. Peter Pocklington ?
 - e. The Toronto Argonauts ?

 3. What is a Canadian ?
 - a. Someone who speaks English without an accent ?
 - b. Someone who speaks English with an accent ?
 - c. A Scotsman who says "eh ?" at the end of each sentence ?
 - d. Anyone who lived here before the Europeans came ?
 - e. Someone with an identity crisis ?
 - f. All of the above ?

 4. What is ethnic literature ?
 - a. Literature written by Canadians who wish they were back in Europe ?
 - b. Canadian literature written in a language other than English or French ?
 - c. English and French literature written outside England and France ?
 - d. Anything not published by an American-owned publishing company ?

 5. An Italian leaves Milan in 1928. In 1972 he writes a book entitled My Early Poetry. Is this:
 - a. Italian literature ?
 - b. Italian-Canadian literature ?
 - c. Canadian literature ?
 - d. Canadian literature but can't go under that classification because, well, who do these guys think they are anyway, WASPS or something ?

 6. Which of the following is not an ethnic ?
 - a. Rene Levesque ?
 - b. Ray Hnatyshyn ?
 - c. John Diefenbaker ?
 - d. Edward Schreyer ?
 - e. Paul Yuzyk ?
 - f. Cec Purves ?
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AN EDITOR'S LAMENT

Whatever happened to the concise and lucid English language ? Who has despoiled it, filled it up with bureaucratese, worn out metaphors, political terminology and deadwood. Andy Suknaski writes that he took up poetry to avoid having to write one English sentence with correct punctuation. He at least spared the editor. Others have not been so merciful. Take the following sentence:

John sat on the chair, crying. "I've lost my kitten," he wailed. "She must have lost her way in the park, because when I turned round she'd disappeared."

Ok ? Not a literary masterpiece, perhaps, but adequate. But one would never read this. It would appear as:

John reclined awkwardly on the red divan sofa that adorned the spacious Victorian-style lounge, sobbing uncontrollably. "I've mislocated my little Persian tabby," he lamented bitterly, with biting irony. "She must obviously have been bereft of a general sense of a clear direction in the park, because suddenly, after several moments, I wheeled round and to my utter horror and disbelief, discovered that she was no longer perusing the environment in the immediate vicinity.

Note that one never cries, one always "sobs uncontrollably." A worn out phrase that is echoed frequently. The same applies to metaphors. Here is an illustrative quotation:

-When she came out of the surf her hair looked like limp spaghetti. A sauce of seaweed and sand, looking like spinach and grated cheese, had been carelessly applied, the red flower fastened in her tresses looked like a wayward piece of tomato, and the globs of mud hung like meatballs to the pasty pasta of her face. The fork of my attention hovered hesitatingly over this odd dish.-

Another example of the abuse of English is the use of junk words to avoid the process of thought. Consider the grey matter used up in the following abomination:

-With respect to the above, I assure you that I will leave no stone unturned. At this point in time it is not a meaningful dialogue, but I will keep you in the picture as to the general consensus of opinion. Our fortunes appear to be at a low ebb and in the future a serious crisis may not be a total surprise due to the heated opposition to what is basically an acid test of our resolve.-

This is bureaucratese, which has pervaded the language for about fifty years. It consists usually of worn-out metaphors and meaningless phrases like "due to the fact that." A second, distinct area of bureaucratese is politics. Terms like "democracy," "socialism," "fascism," "totalitarianism" and "bourgeoisie" are now meaningless. They may have had a meaning once, but it has been misused so many times as to render it obsolete. Still, they continue to occur in everything from CBC broadcasts to literary magazines, and always without explanation. Every government in the world claims it is "democratic" as though it has attained a unique status, whereas in practice, none of the claims are true. Similarly, "fascist" is a term of abuse, the worst insult that can be thrown at one's enemies with the possible exception of "capitalist."

The worst offenders in this political degradation of the English language are the writers and journalists of the Soviet Union. I would not have wished to see Trotsky in power rather than Stalin. Neither were particularly good statesmen. But had this occurred, I'm convinced that the quality of Soviet works would have been higher. Not only was Stalin inarticulate and dull in his writing, he held himself up as a model for other Soviet writers. Hence the lack of self-criticism, the outlandish insults and the barely credible mediocrity of Soviet writing. The peasants, for example, when under Polish rule are always "living a wretched existence under the heavy burden of landlord and kulak oppression." Once the Red Army has asserted itself, they "are living a happy and joyful life." On the one hand this statement is too general to be universally true, but on the other "happiness" and "joy" are taken as the ultimate goal of the peasant. Were they full, I wonder? Stalin gave our language other gems, such as "nest of vipers," "mad dogs," "Trotskyites," "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists," etc. Once the phrase had been accepted into general use, it was soon picked up by the local communist parties in the English-speaking countries.

This problem has two solutions. First, the writer must try to keep his language as simple as possible. Why write "utilize" when "use" is available, "facilitate" instead of "ease" and "individual" instead of "man" or "woman," which is actually a grammatical error. Second, he must think about a sentence before he writes it. What is the use of a metaphor that has been used before? It has lost its originality. Who wants to read about "a bolt from the blue," a problem which "rears its ugly head," or a disease that is "nipped in the bud." The writer is being lazy and unimaginative. Most of those phrases have been around since the thirties. To close, an example of bad and good writing. First, the bad, which, typically, is from Macleans magazine:

- Whether these men [Chapman and Hinckley] are merely the isolated articulators of their own compulsions or whether they are bellwethers of a more wide-scale unrest is no longer taken for granted.-

Jane O'Hara, Macleans, 14 September 1981

The sentence has everything, the clutter, the obscurity and the meaningless cliché (wide-scale unrest). She means "were they alone?" In contrast, a writer who tries to be original:

- Now in the early evening the sun is flashing everything in gold. It bathes the blunt grey rocks that loom yearningly out toward Europe and it touches upon the stunted spruce and the low-lying lichens and the delicate hardy ferns and the ganglia-rooted moss and the tiny tough rock cranberries. The grey and slanting rain squalls have swept in from the sea and then departed with all the suddenness of surprise marauders.-

Alistair McLeod, "The Lost Salt Gift of Blood"

Unfortunately, Mr. McLeod is in a minority.

D.M.

Beztaktnist is late. Due to being off campus, I didn't accumulate the usual quotable quotations. I also had the feeling that it could not continue indefinitely in the same vein. This issue looks at two serious topics in a humorous, or at least semi-humorous way, namely language and multiculturalism. Neither piece is meant to be offensive, but I hope that both can attract some response, so that Beztaktnist can be more than a humour magazine. It seems like a good forum for informal discussion of topics or thoughts that we might otherwise keep to ourselves. So I welcome comments, letters or even insults ! Your input is needed !

D.M.

READ:

IVAN L. RUDNYTSKY ed.

RETHINKING UKRAINIAN HISTORY

x, 268 pp., \$14.95 (cloth), \$9.95 (paper)

A new publication from the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, Rethinking Ukrainian History contains nine papers from the Ukrainian Historical Conference held at the University of Western Ontario in May 1978. The book was edited by professor of history at the University of Alberta, Ivan L. Rudnytsky, assisted by John-Paul Himka, visiting assistant professor with CIUS. The contributors are Steven L. Guthier, Patricia Herlihy, Zenon E. Kohut, Omeljan Pritsak, George Y. Shevelov, Orest Subtelny, Frank Sysyn, Roman Szporluk and Peter Woroby.

The book examines aspects of Ukrainian history from Kievan Rus' to the present day, emphasizing nobilities and the evolution of the Ukrainian city. In part, it is a response to the state of historical studies in the Ukrainian SSR, an attempt to apply "free, critical thought, untrammelled by dogmas of any kind, whether Marxist or nationalist."

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