

THE DEVIL IN THE INK BOTTLE

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IT appears that the devil is inside some ink bottles. Proof is becoming more and more abundant. For a considerable time there was enough visible evidence to arouse suspicion that the gentleman was at least just outside. Even, on occasion, he was known to be sticking his nose into the ink. But of late he is in with both feet. Indeed, he is in up to his waist.

Those who have made a special study of literary history say that the English sentence has undergone more change in the last quarter century than in all of its previous existence. Taking liberties with words has long ceased to excite extended comment. Lord Dunsany, grieving over the use of nouns in place of adjectives, is a notable exception.¹ But now we have conglomerate words which can no longer lay claim to the ancient definition of a sentence. That the guide-posts of capitalization and punctuation should disappear is, after all, not so disheartening. If a reader gets lost, all he need do is to start out again and feel his way along. He may even be satisfied with a subject without a predicate, or a predicate without a subject. But if, being of sound mind and memory, and allowed to remain outside institutions for the mentally frail, he can no longer understand what the author of a non-technical subject is talking about, it is time, at least, to say something about it.

To those whose literary ideas were acquired from orthodox teachers, there seems to be good reason for engaging in a devil-chasing diatribe. On the other hand, lovers of bedevilled vehicles of expression would perhaps liken the advocates of conservatism to Edgar Allen Poe's watch-setting gentlemen of Vondervatteimittiss. The historic structure of the English sentence is not unlike the borough itself in the matter of architectural uniformity.

In *The Devil in the Belfry*, Poe describes life and attitudes toward life in that little Dutch borough. Vondervatteimittiss, according to the story, had sixty little houses, all exactly alike. On every mantle there was a little Dutch clock, with a potted cabbage on each side. In every house there was a little old fat lady, each with an orange dress, green stockings, and pink

1. *Atlantic Monthly*, March, 1936.

shoes. Yellow ribbons, puckered into the form of a cabbage, tied the shoes. At each house entrance sat a puffy little old Dutch gentleman, with double chin, big round eyes, and large belly. Watch in hand, each gazed at the steeple of the House of the Town Council as the hand in the belfry clock neared the figure twelve. The sole purpose in life of these Dutch gentlemen was to keep their watches set exactly with the borough clock. "It is wrong to alter the good old course of things," was the borough motto.

But one day an unusual character ran through the borough streets and into the belfry as the clock was about to strike the hour of twelve. He was in strange dress, and under one arm he carried a huge fiddle, with which he began to belabor the belfry man.

The clock began to strike. The little Dutchmen, seated comfortably in their leather-bottomed chairs, watches before them, began to count the hour. "One," said the clock. "Von," echoed each little man. "Two," struck the clock. "Doo," repeated the men. The clock continued to strike, and the men, in their Dutch accent, continued to count. The clock struck twelve. "Dwelf," came in unison from the little men, each dropping his voice in ultimate satisfaction. "Und dwelf it iss," uttered each little man as he proceeded to put his watch in his pocket.

But hold! The clock was striking thirteen. "Dirteen?" asked the little men in one voice. "Mein Gott, it iss dirteen o'clock. Der Teufel!" And the devil it was. The devil was in the belfry. Vondervatteimittiss was never again the same.

The English sentence has, indeed, an analogy in the structure of Vondervatteimittiss. Sentences always begin with a capital letter, and commas have a standard use with which every grammarian is familiar. At the end of the sentence, too, there is a period. Indeed, without carrying the analogy further, as in the Dutch borough, "on every mantle there is a little Dutch clock."

But why such uniformity, certain daring souls have asked. Without waiting for an answer, they have changed the old order of things. Don Marquis in "pride" takes away the sign-posts. Although one is a bit perturbed at first, with a little effort and retracing of steps, there is no reason for missing the trail. The devil, to put the matter a bit differently, can be chased out.

pride

boss it is funny to me
 the things that men get proud of
 i met a flea oday
 who was all hopped up
 with self importance
 he said he had been
 up to the zoo and had bit
 a lion you should have heard
 him roar said the flea
 when i sank my teeth into him
 plenty of fleas have bit dogs
 but i guess i am the only
 flea who ever licked a lion
 little fellow
 i said to him
 dont get so proud
 probably he never knew
 you existed more than likely
 he thought you were only
 a measle breaking out on him
 boss i have known
 some human beings who were
 just as foolish as that flea
 they thought they were heroes
 when they were only cinders
 in the eyes of humanity
 too many creatures
 both insects and humans
 estimate their own value
 by the amount of minor irritation
 they are able to cause
 to greater personalities than themselves

The devil is somewhat more difficult to get rid of in the writings of Gertrude Stein. For many years she was a famous literary figure of France. Born and schooled in America, she is said to have been the most brilliant student of William James. With this explanation the unwary reader will not confuse her productions with those of a high school pupil who has failed in English composition.

Those who have heard Gertrude Stein read her own writing report that her passages, when she reads them, make unmistakably good sense; that this comes from knowing just when to pause and just what to accent. A commentator in an important journal¹ remarks, "We may have taken one horrified or amused dip into one of her serious books—but if

1. *New Republic*, December 5, 1934.

we did, we hardly stayed a minute; the water was too cold, and there were too many queer fish around." Her own explanation for her method of writing is that she writes the way she speaks. At any rate, for the ordinary reader, chasing the devil away is somewhat of a task, and for that reason many do not read her works who otherwise would. This sample of her writing appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*:¹

Well we all came out and they liked it and I liked it and Hutchins said to me as he and I were walking, you did make them all talk more than we can make them and a number of them talked who never talked before and it was very nice of him to say it and he added and if you will come back, I will be glad to have you do some teaching and I said I would and he said he would let me know and then I said you see why they talk to me is that I am like them I do not know the answer, you you say you do not know if you did not know the answer you could not spend your life in teaching but I I really do not know, I really do not, I do not even know whether there is a question let alone having an answer for the question.

After all, what has just been quoted is understandable when the reader discovers when and where to pause. Trial and error will master that difficulty for most people. But the question of meaning is still more important. Can the following, taken from her *Geography and Plays*, be made to register in the consciousness of the average reader?

Lightning has no meaning, gleanings has choosing descending, bread has origin, a taste is spreading.

There is no evidence presented thus far, some will say, to prove that the devil is actually inside the ink bottle. He may have been playing around, they will admit, but that is all. Therefore, another example of modern writing will be given, this time from the pen of Bernard De Voto. De Voto is no candidate for the hospital for the insane. The devil is not in possession of his brain. He is a highly esteemed American literary critic, and has done such outstanding things as editing the *Saturday Review of Literature* and writing *Mark Twain's America*. The author of this article must admit that he does not know what De Voto is talking about in the following quotation from *We Accept With Pleasure*:

Hear America singing Jonathan off key turning over those books and in his hand and hallowed and snickered knew by then you and I and it would happen and you quite honestly you were

1. *Your United States*, October, 1937.

that tall rock quite really Loring, anyone could see that but never you anyone for nothing else had mattered, just to get someone between his image and a street anyone might travel or just to conquer may be just to defeat him who ever was at hand and Gage.

Perhaps, in the presence of such distinguished literary company, it is not at all appropriate to say it, but the author remembers that Henry Van Dyke, in *A Writer's Request of His Master*, wrote in part:

Help me to deal very honestly with words and with people, because they are both alive. Show me that as in a river, so in writing, clearness is the best quality, and a little that is pure is worth more than much that is mixed.

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POSTSCRIPT

On second thought, it may be that the devil is not in the ink bottle at all. By training, the author is likely to want to keep his watch timed, like the little Dutch gentlemen of *Vondervatteimittiss*, by the clock in the literary steeple of the House of the Town Council. In other words, he worships at the shrine of the "good old order". There are many things, too, that he does not understand. He has no working knowledge of such items, for example, as heavy water, Einstein's theory of relativity, the real nature of vitamins, or the mathematics of parabola. He is shamefully aware that his mind is not keen enough to grasp De Voto's reach for the disorganization of thought. Perhaps, instead of resembling a hero in any particular, he is a "cinder in the eye of humanity". Could he be so simple in his flea-like pride as to think he has sunk his teeth into a lion?