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That Which Is the Spirit of Christmas

That some authors have been bothered—in a couple of instances incensed—by our proclivity for “which hunting” is shown by their reactions to the edited manuscripts returned to them for approval at the time of acceptance. Perhaps their hearts may be softened a little, especially in view of the imminent Christmas season, by this short and delightful piece that appeared in “The Talk of the Town” of The New Yorker for 25 December 1948, page 11. Copyrighted 1948 by The New Yorker Magazine, Inc., it is reprinted here by permission.—D. R.; C. V. M.

WE had a Scrooge in our office a few minutes ago, a tall, parched man, beefing about Christmas and threatening to disembowel anyone who mentioned the word. He said his work had suffered and his life been made unbearable by the demands and conventions of the season. He said he hated wise men, whether from the East or from the West, hated red ribbon, angels, Scotch Tape, greeting cards depicting the Adoration, mincemeat, dripping candles, distant and near relatives, fir balsam, silent nights, boy sopranos, shopping lists with check marks against some of the items, and the whole yuletide stratagem, not to mention the low-lying cloud of unwritten thank-you letters hanging just above the horizon. He was in a savage state. Before he left the office, though, we saw him transfigured, just as Scrooge was transfigured. The difference was that whereas Scrooge was softened by visions, our visitor was softened by the sight of a small book standing on our desk—a copy of Fowler's *Modern English Usage*.

“Greatest collection of essays and opinions ever assembled between covers,” he shouted, “including a truly masterful study of *that* and *which*.”

He seized the book and began thumbing through it for favorite passages, slowly stuffing a couple of small gift-wrapped parcels into the pocket of his greatcoat.

“Listen to this,” he said in a triumphant voice: “‘Avoidance of the obvious is very well, provided that it is not itself obvious; but, if it is, all is spoilt.’ Isn't that beautiful?”

We agreed that it was a sound and valuable sentiment, perfectly expressed. He then began a sermon on *that* and *which*, taking as his text certain paragraphs from Fowler, and warming rapidly to his theme.

“Listen to this: ‘If writers would agree to regard *that* as the defining relative pronoun, and *which* as the nondefining, there would be much gain both in lucidity and in ease. Some there are who follow this principle now; but it would be idle to pretend that it is the practice either of most or of the best writers.’”

“It was the practice of St. Matthew,” we put in hastily. “Or at any rate he practiced it in one of the most moving sentences ever constructed: ‘And, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.’ You've got to admit that the *which* in that sentence is where it ought to be, as well as every other word. Did you ever read a more satisfactory sentence than that in your life?”

“It's good,” said our friend, cheerfully. “It's good because there isn't a ten-dollar word in the whole thing. And Fowler has it pegged, too. Wait a minute. Here. ‘What is to be deprecated is the notion that one can improve one's style by using stylish words.’ See what I mean about Fowler? But let's get back to *that* and *which*. That's the business that really fascinates me. Fowler devotes eight pages to it. I got so excited once I had the pages photostatted. Listen to this: ‘We find in fact that the antecedent of *that* is often personal.’ Now, that's very instructive.”

“Very,” we said. “And if you want an example, take Matthew 2: 1: ‘. . . there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews?’ Imagine how that simple clause could get loused up if someone wanted to change *that* to *who*!”

“Exactly,” he said: “That's what I mean about Fowler. What was the sentence again about the star? Say it again.”

We repeated, “And, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.”

“You see?” he said, happily. “This is the greatest damn book ever written.” And he left our office transfigured, a man in excellent spirits. Seeing him go off merry as a grig, we realized that Christmas is where the heart is. For some it is in a roll of ribbon, for some in the eyes of a young child. For our visitor, we saw clearly, Christmas was in a relative pronoun. Wherever it is, it is quite a day.

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