

The Rebuilding of Babel

The Treasure of Our Tongue, by Lincoln Barnett. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964. 304+xxxiii pp. \$5.95.

MR. BARNETT, a well-known journalist and sometime associate editor of *Life*, has been serving principally as a sort of honest broker between the esoteric world of science and the imperfectly initiated reader, expounding for him, as simply as may be, such mysteries as paleontology, human evolution, and the Einsteinian cosmology. It is work that requires, besides a good deal of assimilative skill, some precision in the use of words. This latter, it appears, is an art no longer much valued in some academic quarters; for in passing, Mr. Barnett complains that when he was employed on "one of those portentous projects . . . which the big foundations like to put their money into," he was rebuked by his editorial supervisor, a Harvard professor, for having said too much in too few pages and for an altogether unscholarly and unseemly "straining for lucidity."

Here Mr. Barnett undertakes to expound the advantageous peculiarities of the English language to those who, despite the obstacles and discouragements placed in their way by the educationists, have acquired enough of it to read his book. The book itself grew out of a series of articles for *Life International*, prompted by the discovery that English is now the most widely spoken language on earth, the nearest thing to a universal speech since the destruction of Babel; hence the title, taken from Samuel Daniel's *Musophilus*, written at the end of the sixteenth century and expressing what must then have seemed a fantastic hope that

worlds in th' yet unformed Occident
May come refin'd with th' accents that are ours.

Mr. Barnett attributes the sudden spread of English into the *lingua franca* of both Occident and Orient to various historical, political, and technological factors, but principally to its interchangeable parts of speech and the almost complete absence of inflection which distinguish it from other Indo-European tongues and make it, so he thinks, "the language in which man can best communicate to his fellowman in a small, crowded and interdependent

world." This is a point, however, that many teachers of English might be inclined to dispute, seeing how relatively few of those to whom the language is presumably native ever acquire an effectual use of it. Indeed, in subsequent chapters Mr. Barnett seems at some pains to retract the assertion, as he assembles evidences of virtual illiteracy among many American high school students and college freshmen, of the epidemics of official and academic jargons, of the utter opacity of much contemporary English poetry, of the "contant, conscious corrosion of language" by advertising experts and of various other disconcerting phenomena, all suggesting that English may be losing its value as a means of accurate communication. Thus the book that begins on a note of gratification at the realization of Daniel's dream ends with the foreboding of semantic catastrophe. On page 38 Mr. Barnett rejoices that in many lands people are learning for the first time the concepts that underlie such noble English words as "liberty," "justice," and "independence"; but on page 231 he reminds his readers to beware of such words when employed by politicians, especially those of totalitarian states.

This ambivalence may indicate that Mr. Barnett had a change of heart as he got deeper into the mass of materials assembled by his industrious research assistant. The appended bibliography is certainly an elaborate and impressive one, though many names, among them Trench, Skeat, McKnight, Greenough, and Kitteridge, and the invaluable Oxford English Dictionary are curiously missing from it. There is a long and interesting but somewhat irrelevant discourse on the various theories—"bow-wow," "ding-dong," "poo-h-poo-h," and so on—of the origin of human speech, borrowed mainly, it would appear, from Jespersen. The chapter on the evolution of English is needlessly interspersed with a good deal of political history, taken mostly from J. R. Green. Some of Mr. Barnett's etymological observations are a bit curious. He tells us, for example, that the reason we call a church (Old English *circe*, from Greek *kyriakon*, "Lord's house") by that name instead of by one derived from the Latin *ecclesia* (Greek *ekklesia*, "assembly") is because the Anglo-Saxons thought of churches as "pleasant places to be pillaged and plundered for profit." He ascribes the place-name "California" to a Catalan word meaning "hot oven," though there is better reason for supposing it to have been named by Cortés after an imaginary island paradise in one of the romances of the Castilian Garcia Ordoñez de Montalvo.

It is mainly the last chapter that makes the book worthy of special attention, for it is there that Mr.

Barnett's enthusiasm gives way to alarm, as he enumerates the many and formidable influences that are working toward the destruction of the English language by reducing it "to a babel of regional dialects, social stratifications, vulgarities and juvenile slang." Among these influences are the radio and television voices with their incessant and incestuous rapings of the mother tongue, the priests of the new pedagogy with their "look-say" primers and readers, the pedants of the social science departments with their hierophantic gibberishes, the bureaucrats with their obfuscated lingo, the cryptographical poets and the "free-write" beatnik novelists. These, it seems, conduct the frontal assaults on the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and the Brothers Fowler, but there are also those insidious poisoners of the "well of English undefyled," the professors of structural linguistics.

The diminishing defenders of "standard English," of literary tradition and of normative grammar and syntax have been steadily losing ground and are almost in rout; lately they have seen two great bastions of the language fall to the enemy; first the King James Bible, now superseded by a version in the "idiom of Rotary," then the Dictionary, captured and looted by those for whom distinctions between good usage and bad are no more than snobbish affectations. Dr. Philip B. Gove, chief editor of *Webster's New International Dictionary* has explicitly repudiated all "artificial notions of correctness or superiority" in language. Like that other great apostle of lingual democracy, Jack Cade, Dr. Gove and the structural linguisticians have no patience with "men that usually talk of a noun and a verb and such abominable words that no Christian ear can endure to hear." Proper usage, for them, is the usage of one's "peer group"; and if one persists in saying "these things" when one's compeers say "them things" one is quite properly set down as a prig.

Formerly it was boasted that "the reason for the fundamental and thorough soundness of the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is that it is 'A citation dictionary.'" The citations were drawn from classical English authors and from such modern writers as were deemed to employ "the best colloquial usage." These have now been discarded in favor of examples from the sayings or writings of Bob Hope, Billy Rose, Ethel Merman, Polly Adler and Willie Mays. Dr. Gove and his colleagues have also eliminated more than a quarter million words from the vocabulary, excising everything for which no reference later than 1775 can be found, and which are therefore considered of no use to anybody. Thus the *Merriam-Webster International* has abdicated its re-

sponsibility as the preserver and protector of "the tradition of literacy," the indisputable authority to which writers, teachers and proofreaders were wont to turn "in their extremities of doubt." The defection of its editors to the enemy, Mr. Barnett believes, represents

the final rout in a long series of retreats from the former strongholds of literacy in many desolated sectors of American culture. To some observers it held ominous auguries [sic] for the future. For the state of the language reflects the state of the culture, and the decay of language is both a symptom and a cause of the decay of institutions; its degeneration abets and accelerates them.

No doubt Mr. Barnett has found some small consolation in recent reports from booksellers that a second-hand copy in reasonably good condition of the 1935 edition of *Webster's International*, prepared under the direction of Dr. William Allan Neilson, now commands a considerably higher price than a mint copy of Dr. Gove's edition. Indeed the demand for the older edition is said to be almost great enough to warrant a reprinting of it; so let us hope the plates have been preserved.

Mr. Barnett seems to feel that the destiny of Western civilization is somehow bound up with the future of the English language. It may well be so. The notion that the debasement of a language is symptomatic of moral and political decay is hardly a new one. Toward the end of his life John Milton wrote (in Latin) that it is by no means

of small consequence what language, pure or corrupt, a people has, or what is their customary degree of propriety in speaking it. . . . Nay, while it is Plato's opinion that by a change in the manner and habit of dressing serious commotions and mutations are portended in a commonwealth, I for my part would rather believe that the fall of the city and its low and obscure condition were consequent on the general vitiation of its usage in the manner speech. For let the words of a country be in part unhandsome in themselves, and in part debased by wear and wrongly uttered, and what do they declare, and by no light indication, but that the inhabitants of that country are an indolent, idly-yawning race with minds already prepared for any amount of servility?

Alas, a strange "enthusiasm for servility," according to M. Joseph Barthelmy, constitutes "the most significant phenomenon of our age."

Reviewed by J. M. LALLEY