



BOOKS

THE MISUSAGE OF MR. FOLLETT

By MARGARET FOLLETT

Modern American Usage, A Guide. By Wilson Follett. Edited and completed by Jacques Barzun, in collaboration with Carlos Baker, Frederick W. Dupee, Dudley Fitts, James D. Hart, Phyllis McGinley, and Lionel Trilling. New York: Hill and Wang, Inc., 1966. Pp. 436. \$7.50.

[Editor's note: On November 6, 1966, *The New York Times Book Review* published my review of Wilson Follett's book, left unfinished on his death but completed and readied for the press by Jacques Barzun, and associates. I said, in my review, that the title did not seem appropriate, since popular usage often shivered the very timbers of people like Mr. Follett and me, and Mr. Barzun, too. And I said that I disagreed with Follett's entry under "split infinitive," which reads: "the temptation to split an infinitive is extremely rare in spoken English, because the voice supplies the stress needed by the unsplit form or conceals by a pause the awkwardness of the adverb placed before or after. It is in written work that splitting is called for, and desk sets should include small hatchets of silver or gold for the purpose."

I also noted that Mr. Follett's widow had released a statement disclaiming the book as a distortion of Mr. Follett's manuscript, but that nevertheless his sprightly pungency was still adequately present, as he argued for the care of language, and for striving to perfect it in one's writing. I print Mrs. Follett's two letters to me, with her permission, omitting the one I wrote her, in between, suggesting that she make her case public in a letter to the editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, or in an article for *The Michigan Quarterly Review*. S.B.]

November 12, 1966

DEAR MR. BAKER:

You are right, of course; *Modern American Usage* was the one title that Mr. Follett had said to his publisher that he would not consent to for his book.

I am sorry you took the remarks in the book

on the split infinitive as Mr. Follett's. A section on the split infinitive had got no farther on Mr. Follett's death than a thickish pack of file cards on which were jottings for a number of troubles and neatnesses he wanted to discuss, and many examples of awkwardnesses and neatnesses. One card said *Hardy*. The reference was to a split infinitive within a split infinitive somewhere in the works of Thomas Hardy. Mr. Follett thought it to be in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and intended to run it down before he called the section on the split infinitive completed. The editors of the published volume apparently ignored the notes left for the infinitive entry, as, so far as I am able to determine, they ignored the many other notes and jottings passed along to the publisher with the manuscript that was left.

I quite agree that the reasons the editors advance for splitting the infinitive (if they are reasons) are silly. I mind the attribution of that particular passage to Mr. Follett for another reason that touches him more intimately. He was a fine craftsman and worker in wood; had been all his life; was the proud grandson of a locally famous worker in wood. A hatchet to him, like an ax, was a man's tool, and a skilled workman's tool. It would never have crossed his consciousness to think of it as a kind of charm on a lady's bracelet, something for elves to tinker with the English language with.

I still hope someday to see the original manuscript in print. You would disagree, I do not doubt, with some of the points of view, if not dicta, that Mr. Follett set forth. Anyone who thinks while he reads instead of running is bound to disagree with any writer on language who does the same. But the text left was sheer delight to read; all the bells were in tune.

Yours sincerely,

MARGARET FOLLETT