

Manner of Speaking

More of the Mailbag

by John Ciardi

Shortenin' Bread: The lumps one may observe on my head will testify to the fact that I have been called to proper account for thinking that the term was "shortenin' and bread" and that it had a sexual connotation.

I can only apologize for the sexual connotation as an error of my youth, in which everything suggested sex. The misrendering of the term is explainable only as an item of my own ignorance, by which I have never been surprised. I attest by my lumpy head that I now know "shortenin' bread" to be—at root, though with many variations—corn bread baked short to lighten it.

Gringo: Many readers persist in etymologizing "gringo" as deriving from this country's 1846–1848 War with Mexico, and they are wrong.

My good friend F. J. Espinosa writes to cite *Etymological Dictionary of the Castilian Language*, by C. J. Coronimas, which locates the word as far back as 1615 and describes it as an alteration of the word *griego* in the sense "the incomprehensible language spoken by foreigners." (It's Greek to me.)

Thank you, Espi. And my further thanks to Joseph P. Kemendo of San Antonio, Texas, who supplied confirming citations from *Diccionario Castellano* by Estaban de Terreros y Panda (Madrid, 1781) and from *Dictionnaire Espagnol-Français* by Melchior Nuñez de Taboado (Paris, 1838).

Dear Old Siwash: The derivation of "Siwash" (the name of a tribe of northwest Indians) from the French *sauvage* (savage) is firmly attested. The Siwash were noted for their primitivism and for their ability to live off sparse land on long journeys. "To siwash" became a northwestern regionalism for "to rough it," and the term was used by lumberjacks in connection with the roughest jobs of snaking logs out of broken country. The question was: "How did 'dear old Siwash' [primitive or

backwoods college] come into general usage?"

The phrase—as I learn by reading my mail (and thank you, friends)—was coined by George Fitch; born in Galva, Illinois, March 3, 1877; died August 9, 1915 (for which information I am grateful to Carroll B. Larrabee of Annandale, Virginia).

George Fitch attended Knox College, and "dear old Siwash" has often been taken as a reference to Knox. Mr. Fitch popularized the name in a series of stories that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* from about 1909 to the time of his death. In 1926 Little, Brown published a posthumous collection of those stories, *At Good Old Siwash*. I am grateful to Professor David R. Cartledge of Maryville College, Tennessee, for supplying me with a note written by George Fitch and used in the introduction to the collection:

"Siwash isn't Michigan in disguise. It isn't Kansas. It isn't Knox. . . . It isn't

Tuskegee, Texas, or Tufts. It is just Siwash College. I built it myself with a typewriter out of memories, legends, and . . . tales from a score of colleges."

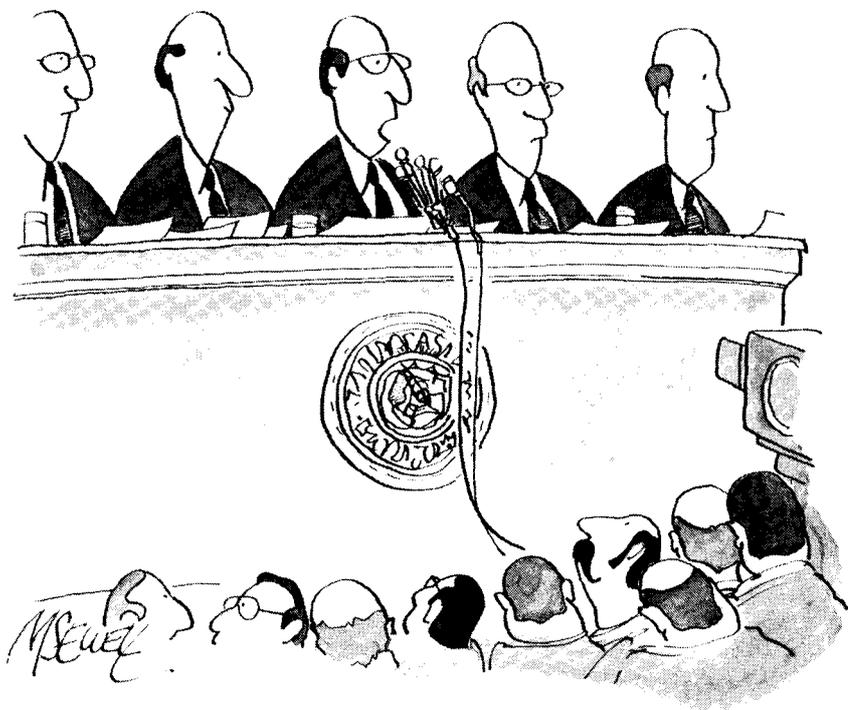
Brass Hat: "Brass hat" was not on my original list, but a note on it received from Colonel Arthur Kramer, U. S. Army (Ret.), is certainly worth sharing. The term does not derive, Colonel Kramer insists, from the gold lace (scrambled eggs) on the caps of senior officers, but from the bicorne cocked hat worn by Napoleon's officers. This hat was called a *chapeau à bras* (an arm hat) because officers, when indoors, carried it flat under one arm. "Brass" is simply the Anglicized form of the French *bras*.

In the Catbird Seat: Martyl Langsdorf of Schaumburg, Illinois, writes to ask the origin of this expression, which means "exultant, on top of the world." I can offer no attestation, but I take the phrase to be a southern regionalism, now generally diffused by sports announcers.

The catbird is a relative of the mockingbird and much given to perching at the top of a tree to pour out its exultant song.

So, at least, I render it at the risk of whatever lumps I must take from *SR* readers who have not yet used up their supply of brickbats.

Fire away, friends. ☉



"Not only did we find life on Mars, we found that over 53 percent believed that our visits might serve a useful purpose."

Light Refractions

Maybe He Isn't So Bad After All

by Thomas H. Middleton

WE WERE having dinner with the Abernethys—Bob, the noted baritone and NBC newsmen; his wife, Jean; and their daughter, Jane, who is a freshman at Princeton. I told Jane about the Princeton freshman I met four years ago who, when I referred to her as a co-ed, told me that she didn't like the term *co-ed*. She said she wanted to be called a Princeton man. Jane laughed and said she wasn't too sure about being a Princeton man, but it certainly beat being a co-ed.

Jane's mother said she saw nothing wrong with Jane being a Princeton man. "After all," she said, "I used to be a copyboy." Jean said she thinks she was the first head copyboy with the *Washington Evening Star*, and she said that if anyone had ever called her a copygirl or a copyperson, it would have gone over very badly.

This dinner conversation took place on the evening of the day I'd received a lot of mail in response to "Pondering the Personal Pronoun Problem" [SR, March 5, 1977], in which I'd said that if there had to be a pronoun to replace the standard *he-him-his* in cases where gender is unspecified, I hoped it would not be one of the many inventions that have been pro-

posed: *hisher, himmer, shis, shem*, and so on. I said I'd be happier if we could learn to accept *they* to mean *he or she*. *They, them, and their* at least have the advantage of a history in the language.

I closed that column by saying, "I hereby resolve to try to use *they, them, and their* in defiance of traditional grammar—in the hope of making a start toward drowning out *shis, hisher, himmer, and heshe*—confident that I'm asking for a deluge of letters from outraged grammarians.

"When everybody gets out their poison pens, I'll try to withstand their wrath."

A few letter writers pointed out that I obviously wasn't entirely comfortable with my use of *their*. They said, quite correctly, that if I had been at home with the idiom, I'd have said "their poison pen" instead of "their poison pens."

Others presented different alternative pronouns, such as *thon, hir, one*, and *it* as substitutes for *his or her*. I began to feel queasy. I hate all those suggestions, without exception. I hope fervently that none of them ever catches on.

Of course, I got several of the expected *how-could-you* letters. A number of people, though, agreed with the feeling expressed by Ms. Elaine F. Tankard, who is

production editor of *Contemporary Psychology* and who said, "I was positively delighted to read your column 'Pondering the Personal Pronoun Problem.' While some few holdouts still refuse to acknowledge that the problem exists and won't even deign to ponder the situation, you're correct in saying that 'we're going to have to settle the problem.' It won't go away by ignoring it."

What Ms. Tankard and others suggest is rewriting so that we use plural nouns: "By simple pluralizing, in most cases, the offending *he* can be eliminated and replaced with a plural subject and a plural follow-up pronoun.

"For example . . . instead of 'Each member should supply their own utensils,' why not 'Members should supply their own utensils'? Doesn't it mean the same thing?"

Yes, that's a possible solution; but, at the risk of raising some feminist hackles, I'm reconsidering the whole problem. I've had several letters over the years similar to the one I received recently from Marylou S. Williams, of Wallingford, Connecticut, who says, "Please do not be intimidated. . . . I was a victim of subtle and not so subtle prejudice against women when I was in graduate school . . . but the last thing that ever loomed as a threat was the gender of a pronoun!"

FOR weeks I stuck to my resolve, making a conscious effort to use *they-them-their* to avoid "the offending *he*." I never felt comfortable doing so.

Then one day we were playing tennis—Jeannie and I against two young women, both staunch feminists. We were all playing badly at first. The score went to three-all, Ann Taylor Fleming serving to us. She won her game, and I said, "That's the first time in this set that anyone has won his own serve." It wasn't said willfully, but as it came out I was very much aware that I wasn't saying "their own serve." The only reaction was a somewhat surprised "Hey, I guess you're right!"

I felt comfortable with it, and I think Ann and Kathy and Jeannie did, too—although I didn't feel like rocking the boat by taking a poll, so I'm just guessing.

Anyway, with apologies to Ms. Tankard and the many others who are troubled by *he-him-his*, I'm going back to the English I was raised with. Call me conservative or rock-ribbed. Call me a plastic bottle cap in the compost heap of life. I'm going back, and I'm going to do my best not to feel guilty about it. ©

