

*Dwight Macdonald, language,
and the discourse
of the downward spiral*

TADEUSZ LEWANDOWSKI
(Opole)

The American intellectual and critic Dwight Macdonald (1906–1982) is best remembered for his essays on the implications of World War II and the Holocaust from his short-lived magazine *Politics* (1944–1949), as well as his role as “the high priest of the culture snobs” in the 1950s and 60s (Wreszin 1994: 353). Macdonald’s writings on the English language, however, have largely faded from memory. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of today’s debates on the potential dilution of English due to its ubiquity as a global language, Macdonald presented a noteworthy counter-discourse that designated the source of English’s corruption in one of its primary homelands: the United States. In “Updating the Bible” (1953), his analysis of the third edition of *Webster’s New International Dictionary* “The String Untuned” (1962), and finally “The Decline and Fall of English” (1962), Macdonald called for a restraining of linguistic change and a preservation of standards in the face of a cultural and academic climate permeated by permissiveness – which under the aegis of democracy, he charged, debased English by rendering it less precise, less aesthetically beautiful, and increasingly ineffective in communication. Together, the essays comprise a critique of both structural linguistics and the so-called “dumbing down” of American culture, raising issues surrounding English usage, slang and tradition, and offering prescriptions on how to counter what Macdonald perceived as a downward cultural and linguistic spiral.

Macdonald made himself a public intellectual in the 1950s and 60s by penning "A Theory of Mass Culture" (1953) and "Masscult and Midcult" (1960), contributing articles to *The New Yorker*, *Encounter*, and *Esquire*, and providing ten minute spots as "the Film Ripper" for the *Today* show (Wreszin 1994: 382). As a staunch opponent of Hollywood and mass culture in general, Macdonald's major theme was maintaining artistic and cultural values in an increasingly commercial and "massified" America, where "merchants of *kitsch*" grossly pandered to the tastes of the common man. In "Masscult and Midcult" he wrote of mass culture's threat to high culture as "a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, and taste, dissolving all cultural distinctions" (Macdonald 1960: 11-12). The only solution to such aesthetic obliteration was a walling off of high art from the degraded masses below. "Let the majority eavesdrop if they like," he counseled, "but their tastes should be firmly ignored" (1960: 73). Macdonald envisioned a cultural elite, removed from any basis in wealth or class, that would safeguard the West's cultural heritage. Meanwhile, the intellectual weapon against mass culture, to be employed by anyone seeking to avoid its downward pull, was discrimination. Only the ability and willingness to distinguish wheat from chaff could resist the pull of "massification."

As would be expected, Macdonald's essays on English constituted an extension of his discourse on mass culture, specifically its simplification of virtually everything in the name of democracy. "Updating the Bible" (published in the *New Yorker* the same year as "A Theory of Mass Culture" - 1953) took aim at the Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the 1611 King James Version (KJV), issued in 1952 as an attempt to revamp its old prose style for modern cars. The RSV was fifteen years in the making, formulated by a team headed by the Dean of Yale Divinity School, and buttressed by a million-dollar advertising campaign. Over 2,300,000 copies were sold in the first year, catapulting it to the top of the best-seller lists. Though both the editors and publishing house, Thomas Nelson and Sons, claimed to uphold the mantle of the KJV by preserving its "timeless beauty," Macdonald forcefully argues otherwise, casting the revision as little more than an unnecessary stylistic dilution of the English language tradition (Macdonald 1953: 263).

Macdonald writes that the "King James Version of the Bible came at the end of the Elizabethan age, between Shakespeare and Milton, when Englishmen were using words more passionately, richly, vigorously, wittily, and sublimely

than ever before or since" (1953: 263–64). When the translation from Greek and Hebrew was completed the KJV gained acceptance gradually, becoming the standard in the English-speaking world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and continuing on into the twentieth despite several intermittently successful new versions in 1885 and 1901. The creators of the RSV, feeling that these previous revisions had proved inadequate, attempted to take advantage of new archeological discoveries to improve the translations in the KJV – but more importantly, and much to Macdonald's vexation, their primary motivation rested in making the text more "readable" for the American public by employing the "language of the common man in our day" (1953: 268, 272).

Regarding the revisers' ostensible desire to achieve a more precisely translated Bible, Macdonald offers no quarrel. Yet with the second aim he forcefully argues that "they have gone beyond legitimate and useful revision to produce a work whose literary texture is quite different from the KJV, and they have mutilated or completely destroyed many of the phrases made precious by centuries of religious feeling and cultural tradition" (1953: 272). As a ghastly illustration, Macdonald compares the RSV to postwar Cologne – little more than a great cathedral standing strangely among an immense wasteland of sad debris:

Reading their work is like walking through an old city that has just been given, if not saturation bombing, a thorough going over. One looks around anxiously. What is gone? Does that still survive? Surely they might have spared *that!* And even though many of the big landmarks are left – their fabric weakened by the Revisers' policy of modernizing the grammatical usage – so many of the lesser structures have been razed that the whole feel of the place is different [emphasis in original]. (Macdonald 1953: 273)

Consequently, this "military necessity" to reach the common man has produced a leveling of poetry to "modern expository prose," which is "direct and clear" but also "flat, insipid, and mediocre" (1953: 273). Troublesome pronouns such as *Thou*, *ye*, *thy*, and *thine*, have been replaced by the basic *you* and *your*. These alterations, along with the deletion of archaic verb endings, take a bit of steam out of the Ten Commandments: *Thou shalt not* becomes the decidedly less prohibitory *You shall not*. Meanwhile, Nathan's condemnation of King David – "Thou art the man!" – is transformed into the "police-report" subdued matter-of-factness of "You are the man!" (1953: 274). Macdonald wonders why such changes were ever deemed essential, as the old forms are familiar to any

literate reader. Thus while the RSV may “slip more smoothly into the modern ear, ...it also slides out more easily” (1953: 273).

The cumulative effect of the revisers’ modernizing of lexical convention, states Macdonald, is to rob the Bible of its textural rhythm, which is “all-important in a book so often read aloud,” and quite separate from the concurrent diminishment of the KJV’s “literary grace” (1953: 275). To demonstrate, he contrasts each version’s account of Ecclesiastes. The KJV “moves to a slow mourning music” enhanced by complex language that lends the passage a ring of authority:

What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth and another generation cometh, but the earth abideth forever. ... For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever, seeing that which now is in the days to come shall be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? As the fool.

The RSV, on the other hand, speeds up the tempo, grossly convolutes the text, and creates a considerably less powerful effect:

What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. ... For the wise man as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise man dies just like a fool!

Concerning such rampant amendments Macdonald posits that there is not only a “misguided” principle of modernization at work, but a “restlessness that causes people to pluck imaginary or microscopic bits of fluff off coat lapels” (1953: 276). The unhappy outcome is an even further wave of senseless changes that too often disfigure phrases that have become common English expressions. “Den of thieves,” for example, inexplicably becomes “den of robbers” (1953: 276). Also suspect, the revisers appear to have injected a distinct 1950s prudishness into their efforts, likely to “avoid adolescent giggles in church” (1953: 281). The potentially laugh-inducing phrase “any that pisseth against the wall” from Samuel 25:22 has been tactfully deleted, while “My bowels boiled” is replaced by less scatological “My heart is in turmoil” (1953: 282). Finally the nasty word *whore* becomes the more archaic *harlot*, while *virgin* becomes the unequivocally less sexually suggestive *maiden* (1953: 282).

Given such tinkering, Macdonald is confident in declaring that despite expressions to the contrary, the revisers’ goals have been much more stylistic than scholarly. This blighted endeavor to produce a cleaner, more “readable”

Bible stands representative of 1950s literary *Zeitgeist*, in which people prefer "skimming rapidly over a large quantity of journalist prose than to dwelling intensively on a few poetic works" (278). In other words, the contemporary reader just wants to know: "What's It All About?" (278). Macdonald further explains:

[I]ntensity or prophetic exaltation interferes with this easy, rapid assimilation partly because such language is idiosyncratic and partly because it strikes down to the depths of response which it takes time for the reader to reach. Literature, especially religious literature, is not particularly concerned with being clear and reasonable; it is connotative rather than direct, suggestive rather than explicit, decorative and incantatory rather than functional. (Macdonald 1953: 284)

The inevitable consequence of modernization in this case is the dilution of "a great literary monument" (1953: 284). And why, Macdonald asks, embark on modernization the first place? The justification for making the Bible more accessible, he argues, is misguided. Purposely doing away with English's older forms in favor of less dramatic and affecting prose is like updating Shakespeare, which aside from the inherent textual desecration can be seen as a distinct underestimation of the public's ability to read and comprehend. Those willing to "give a little thought and effort to it," Macdonald is certain, will appreciate the KJV, and those who find the task too tiresome "can hardly claim a serious interest in the Bible as either literature or religion" (1953: 284). Thus, if the RSV continues its commercial success, a literary and stylistic "catastrophe" will be consecrated, replacing the KJV's "pungency of genius" with the "flavorless mediocrity" of the RSV's middlebrow prose (1953: 285). Ultimately then, the consolidation of the ensuing cultural climate, in which the difficult is rapidly modified for the benefit of consumers in the name of a reverse snobbism, promises nothing but the lowering of standards.

The deterioration of English's traditions that Macdonald warned of in "Updating the Bible" was clearly borne out, to his mind, in 1961 with the appearance of the third edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary*. Macdonald was not alone in taking offense to the revision, which sparked a fierce debate among lexicographers as to whether dictionaries should be prescriptive or descriptive in purpose. *Webster's Third*, under the influence of structural linguists, had jettisoned convention in accepting lexical items previously categorized in the 1934 second edition as *slang*, *colloquialisms*, *incorrect*, and *illiterate*. Its editor, Phillip Grove, meanwhile publicly and

explicitly condemned such “artificial notions of correctness” (1961: 290). In “The String Untuned” Macdonald launches a harsh critique of this mindset, arguing that it signals a precipitous decline in “our cultural climate” throughout the mid-twentieth century, driven by a “trend towards permissiveness” under the guise of a generalized but injudicious sympathy for democracy (1962: 291). Those structural linguists who view the dictionary as a scientific “recording instrument” rather than a linguistic “authority,” he insists, have opened the door for the respectability of ignorance (1962: 291). Macdonald points out that in their compiling of commonly used words and slang, the makers of *Webster’s Third* have been compelled to make space in order to accommodate this deluge of new arrivals. The second edition has thus been subject to an “incredible massacre” in which 250,000 words have been cut in an effort to modernize the lexicon (1962: 292). Formerly, the second edition included literary and technical words dating from as far back as 1500, but the *Third* has cut everything in these categories, including all the words from Chaucer, before 1755. In their place rest 100,000 new entries. Considering such sweeping revisions, Macdonald observes that *Webster’s Third* would be better seen as a whole new dictionary, more happily utilized as a supplement to the *Second* than a replacement of its historically reverential ancestor.

Yet the question lingers as to how scientific and therefore inclusive the *Third* is. Taking Grove and his colleagues to task, Macdonald focuses on the treatment of *ain’t*, which is labeled “*substandard* for *have not* and *has not*,” and described as “disapproved of by many and more common in less educated speech” in place of the contraction of *am not*, *are not*, and *is not* (1962: 303). Here a contradiction emerges that clearly brings to the fore issues of culture and schooling in the decisions as to what language is approved. Hence, the *Third* uncomfortably straddles both the descriptive and prescriptive ideals of lexicography, only to eventually fall back on technical euphemisms such as *standard* for *correct*, and *substandard* for *slang*, *illiterate*, and *incorrect*. The fact then remains that the revised dictionary still gives prescriptive advice, however incongruously melded with its permissive approach of “not objecting to errors if they are common enough” (1962: 305). Specifically, Macdonald points to instances where words that had been formerly distinguished are now conflated, such as *nauseous* and *nauseated* (*nauseous* previously meaning *causing nausea*, *nauseated* meaning *experiencing nausea*), and *disinterested* and *uninterested* (before meaning *unprejudiced* and *not interested*, respectively). These new

creations of synonyms on the basis of common but flawed usage irks Macdonald, as "it doesn't seem to have occurred to the not very perspicuous Groveites that to decide that an error has become so firmly entrenched as to be standard is just as much of an exercise of authority, or at least discrimination, as to decide the other way" (1962: 305). Why not resist the tide of misuse? As well, Macdonald charges that such formalized semantic ambiguity inevitably renders language ineffective, a phenomenon that dictionaries should counter, rather than encourage. For while there is nothing wrong in itself when it comes to recording contemporary usage (or misuse), there is equally nothing terribly amiss in warning the reader of departures from previously established meanings, just as little is lost from labeling certain items as *slang*. The result of not doing so is, arguably, that in the near future all qualitative divisions will be erased, and *Webster's Fourth* will indiscriminately record any number of invented words and novel usages that happen to proliferate. English and those who speak it will lose the defining distinctiveness of the language's past, which will give way to rapid, leveling decline. If one dares "untune that string" of tradition, Macdonald ominously warns in a reference to Ulysses' paean to conservatism in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, the entire world will devolve from celestial order into self-devouring chaos (Macdonald 1962: 316).

Together, the coarse abandonment of the King James Version of the Bible, the permissiveness of *Webster's Third*, and as always, the seemingly inexorable rise of mass culture, led Macdonald to envisage the eventual death of English's aesthetic and historical traditions. "The Decline and Fall of English" proclaims that the world's most commonly used language, the *lingua franca* of the modern era, has begun its degeneration in its most politically powerful center, the United States. Macdonald writes that this trend is "not a question of the language changing" or an obsession with the "grammarians' fetishes," but a case of English being "massacred" by a host of offenders from journalists, beatniks, and advertising men who propagate slogans such as "cigarette me," to universities that are "factories of bad prose" (1962: 319). But again, as in "The String Untuned," Macdonald places culpability on American structural linguists who legitimate relativism in the usage of grammar and lexical items. He lays blame and names names, singling out Robert A. Hall of Cornell University, whose *Linguistics and Your Language* (1960) states that: "A dictionary is not as good an authority for your own speech as the way you yourself speak," continuing on to argue that:

“Correct” spelling, that is, obedience to the rules of English spelling as grammarians and dictionary-makers set them up, has become a major shibboleth in our society. ... Consequently, anyone who goes through our schooling system has to waste years of his life in acquiring a wasteful and, in the long run, damaging set of spelling habits, thus ultimately unfitting himself to understand the nature of language. (Macdonald 1962: 324)

Macdonald ironically points out that though Hall ostensibly refuses any submission to authority in language, in fact he does, as surprisingly: “every word in his book is ‘correctly’ spelled” (1962: 325). The purveyors of structural linguistics thus violate their own principles, which logically lead to the idea that any sentence that communicates meaning is equal to any other that communicates the same meaning. This approach has proliferated just when the nation is in greatest need of education in the use of English. As evidence, reports by the National Council of Teachers and the Council for Basic Education have found that thirty-five percent of all American students are “seriously retarded in reading,” and two-thirds of universities have been forced to offer remedial English courses to incoming freshmen (1962: 325).

To Macdonald the above statistics indicate the broader need for literacy as a cultural, rather than purely communicative, pillar of society. English is not a simple means to transmit messages, but a connection to a shared history as vital as art, literature, music, and architecture. As such, language exists as “an especially important part of a people’s past, or culture, because everybody is exposed to it and has to learn to use it” (1962: 332). English’s evolution is “a capsule history of the race” that constitutes a tradition. And though this tradition is always challenged by novelties, the approach to such alterations should be selective, not permissive – lest the “vague and formless” prevail (1962: 332). As an example, Macdonald writes of how beatnik expressions such as *like* and *man* have “degenerated into mere interruptions, more stammer than grammar” (1962: 332). Thus while Macdonald is happy to admit that language does change, as structural linguists record, it is one’s duty to scrutinize and evaluate the process, not surrender to its leveling onslaught. Language, as is stressed in “Updating the Bible” and “The String Untuned,” bears a crucial aesthetic element “compounded of tradition and beauty and style and experience” (1962: 333). It is not merely what happens when “two individuals meet in a barroom” (1962: 333). In closing, Macdonald notes that Brecht enjoined writers to write for the people in “the language of kings” – but in contemporary times – “Americans seem to be reversing his maxim” (1962: 333).

The invocation of Brecht's call for cultural enlightenment again raises the issue of Macdonald's primary peeve: mass culture. To him, the modernization of KJV is not merely an attack on English, but one on "high art," indicative of the downward cultural spiral in which American is caught (1962: 283). Any difficulty encountered reading the KJV is not a reason for simplification, but instead the "price of quality" willingly paid by discriminating readers (1962: 283). While such defenses of artistic hierarchy have condemned Macdonald to the status of Cultural Studies' lumbering dinosaur, it is possible to perceive that some of his fears have arguably been realized. The RSV, thirty years after its initial appearance, paved the way for the *Reader's Digest* condensed version of the Bible (first published in 1982, the year of Macdonald's death). Known as the RDB, the severely truncated and cut down revision is intended for "the average reader" who desires to comprehend the KJV, but is "overwhelmed by the size of it" (Anderson, online). Likewise, though Macdonald, always looking through his discursive prism of the downward spiral, may seem alarmist and old fashioned in his defense of English's traditions, his fear of declining levels of literacy has as well been – at least quantitatively – borne out. Recent studies have shown that in the first decade of the twentieth century the number of adult functional illiterates in the United States grew by two million a year. These numbers include twenty percent of students graduating from high school ("The United States of America and the Functional Illiterates who Contribute to its Decline," online). The growth of descriptive linguists in the United States has also meant that some in the academic community have once again sprung to the defense of contemporary slang, even the multiple and superfluous usages of *like* that Macdonald deemed in "The Decline and Fall of English" as "more stammer than grammar" in the speech of beatniks (1962: 332). Professor Penny Eckert of Stanford University, to cite one representative example, argues that *like* is rightfully utilized to "achieve some kind of interactional and stylistic end." Unsurprising, then, is the recent inclusion of *like* in *Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition*, defined as "apparently without meaning or syntactic function, but possibly as emphasis." The entry sample reads: "It's, like, hot." Eckert, nevertheless, underlines that "language changes very fast," and maintains that those who pioneer such slang deserve full credit for introducing new forms of ornamentation (Quenqua, D1).

The proposed value of such novelties, which proliferate in the mass culture of reality television, sitcoms, and Hollywood films, is open to debate far beyond

the scope of this paper. It remains, however, to indicate that while Macdonald would have certainly bristled at such open acceptance of slang and declared it leveling degradation rather than modernization, his criticisms of English's evolution in the United States is less reactionary than one might gather from his rhetoric, and arguably persuasive. Macdonald's point was, after all, not that language should remain unaltered throughout time, but that changes should be rigorously assessed, determined good or bad, and then adopted or rejected – in other words, limited on the bases of aesthetics and efficacy. As he writes at the close of "The Decline and Fall of English": "Language does indeed change, but there must be some brakes and it is the function of teachers, writers and lexicographers to apply them. It is their job to make it tough for new words and usages to get into circulation so that the ones that survive will be the fittest" (1962: 333). If these acts of discrimination fail to occur, and aesthetic and linguistic standards are pronounced level as opposed to hierarchical, there will remain no argument for why the works of Shakespeare or Melville can claim superiority over Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* or Stephenie Myer's *Twilight* series. Conservative and unfashionable as these sentiments might sound, one denies Macdonald's logic with difficulty, whether in agreement with his perspective or not.

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of the downward spiral*

Dwight Macdonald's writings on English designated the source of the language's corruption in one of its homelands: the United States. In "Updating the Bible" (1953), "The Decline and Fall of English" (1962), and his analysis of the third edition of *Webster's New International Dictionary* "The String Untuned" (1962), Macdonald presented a discourse that amounted to a call for the maintenance of standards in the face of a cultural and academic climate permeated by permissiveness, which to his mind debased English by rendering it less precise, aesthetically beautiful, and effective in communication. Countering this perceived downward spiral, therefore, became his main concern.

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