Commentary

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The words matter, even when they are in Greek

In Eugene O'Neill's 1937 play "The Iceman Cometh," a "misbegotten lot" of broken men and female "tarts" drink cheap whiskey in Harry Hope's New York bar in 1912.

They console themselves with pipe dreams while awaiting the arrival of Hickey, a traveling salesman who normally helps them sustain the illusions that make their pitiful lives tolerable. On the two days in O'Neill's play, however, Hickey comes in with a convert's zeal for truth-telling that he eventually applies tragically to himself. He admits that the ice man in the proverbial joke did not make love to his wife. Hickey killed her in her sleep because he could not stand her pity for him. Fortunately, there are other ice men to sustain our pipe dreams.

My own pipe dream concerns the past and the future. It is a simple one. At some time in the past, life was simpler and better and kinder, and it perhaps can be so again. Some of you may feel the same way. What are we thinking about?

This all came to a head for me, not on the day of Harry Hope's birthday party, but during a meeting of the small society known as the Verbophiles, of which I recently became a member. We meet once or twice a year at the University of Texas to discuss oddities, anomalies and downright mistakes in the use of the English language and to discuss why those who are charged with caring for language often do not.

At this last meeting, I was expatiating on crucial mistakes in the use of Greek within two small masterpieces: Terrence Rattigan's marvelous tragedy "The Browning Version" (1949) and German author Alfred Andersch's "The Father of a Murderer" (1980). In Rattigan's play, a Greek teacher at a British school for boys named Andrew Crocker-Harris is forced into early retirement. This makes him confront the hard truth of his failed, emotionless marriage and the ruin of his already wasted career.

The first kind gesture that Crocker-Harris allows himself to receive in years is the gift of a book from one of his students, most of whom either fear or ridicule him. It is Robert Browning's translation of Aeschylus' "Agamemnon." The student named Taplow has inscribed it with a heartwarming phrase that indicates that he alone among his peers has sensed the humanity beneath his teacher's stern surface.

The phrase is the Greek in Aeschylus for "God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master." When Crocker-Harris looks at the dedication, he is choked up by this act of kindness. Taplow, however, is worried that his stern master has detected a mistake in his writing of the Greek. He asks whether a particular word is accented correctly. Crocker Harris assures him it is right. Ironically, it is the one word in the entire official French's Acting Edition text that the editors mis-accented.

The same kind of thing happens in the English translation (New Directions Press, 1994) of Andersch's classic. In it, the author recounts an actual day in his German high school in Munich in the 1920s. The headmaster is none other than the father of Heinrich Himmler, infamous leader of the Nazi SS. Himmler's father actually despised the Nazis. But Andersch's point is to show how tyrannical and brutal the father was, specifically in using rules and pedantry to ruin people. Like father like son.

Himmler's father uses his superior knowledge of Greek to humiliate students and destroy the credibility of the instructor in Andersch's class. But the little Greek used here is made into gibberish because no editor at the fabled press — which published Wilfred Owen, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Austin's own Lars Gustafsson — took the time to have a Greek student check the text for 10 minutes.

Was there a golden age when this kind of thing mattered? Or as one of my Verbophile friends remarked, are these kinds of rarified spelling mistakes irrelevant nowadays to the small number of educated readers who read such works as these, most of whom cannot read Greek any way? After all, words in early texts of Shakespeare were spelled any which way.

Admittedly, this all can be seen as trivial pedantry on my part. As you know from reading my columns, I am preoccupied much of the time with war and politics and poverty and the state of our nation and the world, so even I perhaps should think of it as pedantic. But I don't. Why?

It also can be seen as symbolic of the carelessness that has now crept into our lives, the disregard for what unprivileged or marginalized groups care about, ignorance of tradition. In this case, the marginalized group is trivial — people who know, read and care about ancient Greek.

But think about the big issue. The ice man will come next column.

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