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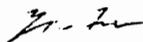
Dear Colleague:

At a University Press Committee meeting, a member objected to a manuscript because of the turgidity of its prose. There was some discussion as to whether this should be considered a serious objection. A professor of English noted that, after all, the faculty of English thrives on the incomprehensibility of texts. What else was there for the English faculty to do? In the old days, English professors tried hard to help readers understand difficult works. Consider C. S. Lewis's little book The Words. It was written to help students understand Medieval and Renaissance texts. Lewis's own explication is, needless to say, lucid. For Lewis it must be so, for what use would it have if it were not? Well, times have changed. Out of envy, modern critics try to match the ambiguity of the literary works they comment upon. They refuse to be mere guides to literature. They see their commentaries not as contexts for literary works but as themselves texts, worthy of textual analysis by graduate students.

Jacques Barzun writes: "Clarity exposes every joint of the structure and leaves no difficulties for textual critics to build a career upon. Note how Kant and Hegel have given employment by their ambiguities, how Marx has generated flourishing schools by being obscure and confused. Nobody could make a name in this fashion by setting up as a professional clarifier of the lucid, of Descartes, Berkeley, or Schopenhauer, Berlioz, Diderot, or William James" (A Stroll With William James, p. 288). Philosophers in philosophy departments still go about their humble task of trying to clarify the works of the masters, but professors in English departments, I suspect, no longer try to clarify the works of the masters but instead they wish to emulate or replicate the density and subtlety of the masters and thus lay claim to being masters themselves.

When I am not too tired I aspire to clarity. Why? At one time I would have answered, "because it is an intellectual virtue." I now know that there is a deeper reason. It has to do with the need to establish direct and intimate contact with another. My principal means of doing so is with words. I want them to be unambiguous, not subject to misinterpretations. Most people don't need words for purposes of intimate contact because they can do that far more effectively (i.e., without ambiguity) with a hug or a touch.

Best regards,



P.S. I trust that readers understand that these letters are light, conversational gambits, not professions of faith or dissertations!