

the Attic

irregular
the newsletter from English by Design

Issue no. 1

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Well Salted

The Attic is the term used to denote not only a native of Attica in ancient Greece but also a literary style. This style is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as being “...refined, elegant, classical.” The scribes at *the Attic* have been given instructions to produce content that adheres strictly to these lofty ideals: Attic prose.

Fat chance. To begin with, the editor of *the Attic* starts breaking things whenever he hears the word ‘refined’. The publisher of *the Attic* doesn’t believe refined newsletters sell; you can’t even give them away. And nobody, but nobody, at *the Attic* has a clue what classical means.

That leaves elegant. We’re not promising anything but we’ll see what we can do.

The attic is best known to most of us as that small space at the top of the house under the rafters. A place of spiders and dust, dryrot and broken tile. The place to store memories in the form of old clothes that no longer fit; antique hi-fi that last grooved vinyl in 1989; retired toasters and back issues you never finished but always meant to.

From time to time the attic gives up a gem. All sorts of precious things can be found in attics. Family photos, old masters, manuscripts, money, mad relatives, marijuana. It’s all in the attic. An English lady recently discovered an Attic bonus in her attic dust: a refined, elegant and classical painting. This dusty Attic number turned out to be valued at thousands of pounds.

The editor hopes that from time to time *the Attic* will offer some little insight, some wise observation that will have lasting value; something you can sell for lots of money.



It’s all in the attic.

the Attic is described in the masthead as “the irregular newsletter from English by Design”. The key word here is ‘irregular’.

The newsletter will be published irregularly. That is to say, it will appear when *the Attic* scribes feel they can be bothered. (It is not easy to find good scribes these days.)

Some of the language will be irregular. Be prepared for the extensive use of funky past participles and other scary grammar.

Some of the language will be very irregular; our Anglophone scribes like their text well salted. To quote the shop steward committee of the Scribblers and Piddlers Union, “This language is our Shakespearean heritage, it is our God-given national archive, it is our natural bloody right.”

Queen’s English

It is said of the English that they are a very polite people, always friendly (if a little reserved) with strangers. A correspondent who recently spent time in England reports that the old country is not what it once was. Our intrepid expat decided to use buses and trains instead of a car to get around. This brave decision brought her into direct and

frequent contact with the great British public (or that bit of it to be found between London and Milton Keynes).

It seems that a politeness, of sorts, is still the order of the English day, but the 2008 version of polite has a rather threadbare quality. Manners, while formally correct, now do little to hide an underlying sense of competitiveness and aggression. In the past some have said that all that British politeness and bonhomie was perfectly superficial. But at least those Brits of yesteryear were making the effort to appear polite; nowadays it seems they hardly bother.

A number of encounters during her road trip convinced our correspondent that England had become a harder place since she left it twenty years ago. One incident in particular made the point very eloquently. Boarding a bus (departing late, on-board toilet out of order) she watched as the grumpy driver threw the passengers’ luggage into the hold with grumpy violence. She stepped forward and asked meekly if she could deposit her bag in the hold herself. To which Grumpy replied, “Lady, you can do whatever you fucking want with your fucking bag.”

Does the Queen know about this?

All Greek

Ask most people about semi-colons and they will tell you that it’s all Greek to them. They really don’t know what to do with these odd but appealing bits of punctuation. The funny thing is, the semi-colon is in fact half-Greek. Ancient half-Greek to be precise.

The word colon derives from κολων which meant limb or clause. Care should be taken not to confuse this with κολων which referred to meat or food. (There is a difference in the pronunciation of the first ‘o’; if you are an ancient Greek

you can hear it immediately.) The first κολον (long ‘o’) gave rise to colon, as in punctuation. The second κολον (short ‘o’) produced colon, as in the large intestine extending from the caecum to the rectum.

However, colon, when pronounced with a French accent, refers to a settler or colonist in a French colony. (Since this is an English newsletter no tips on Gallic pronunciation can be given here.)

Vaguely related, and included only to fill some space, is the Spanish-origin ‘colón’. This delightful *palabra* comes from the Spanish name of Christopher I-found-the-sea-route-to-China Columbus (Cristóbal Descubrí-el-rumbo-a-China Colón). Today the colón is the name of the currency of Costa Rica. El Salvador also used this name for its currency until 2001, when it opted for a dollarized economy and the mighty greenback (bet they’re sorry now).

‘Semi’ is, of course, a well-known word, originating in Latin, and meaning half. Even a semi-idiot knows this. Quite a number of words employ semi- as prefix. These include some old favourites (semi-automatic, semi-conscious, semi-nudity), along with more rarely used words (semi-monocoque, semi-plume, Semi-Saxon). It is not considered good form to mix your Greek with your Latin but from around the time of the Visigoths most people have not been too bothered about such details. And just as well, because this purity law for language would have given us ‘hemi-colon’ which sounds like a serious medical condition. The miscegenation of ‘semi’ and ‘colon’ gives us something much friendlier, something only semi-serious.

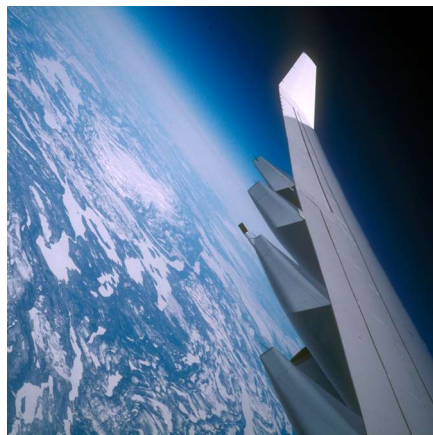
As to what we actually do with this cute little Latin-Greek irregularity, well, there you’ll have to ask someone who knows.

Moving Story

From time to time in life it is necessary to move. Maybe to a new country or to another part of town. Maybe to a new job or to a new project. Maybe to a new lover, or perhaps you take up jogging. The French say, You have to move or

you’re dead. They say this in French of course, but as *the Attic* has no French scribes it must provide the gist in English. Anglophile readers will appreciate the convenience.

And, yes, the French are quite correct; not moving is one sure sign of deadness, as we’ve all seen in the movies. Faced with this stark alternative, moving seems like a good idea.



Maybe to a new country.

I now live in Cologne. I lived in Berlin many happy years and I can truly say I was sorry to leave. (I haven’t felt that about every city I have lived in.) I thought I had found my perfect place. I had settled down. I was done rolling and was gathering moss very nicely. But fate, in the form of a good job offer for my wife, intervened, and here I am learning the *Kölsch* for moss.

When there’s talk of leaving the Big Donut it is customary to say something about Berlin and old suitcases. Well, sod that. Suffice to say, I really enjoyed living in Berlin and I plan to enjoy Cologne as well. They have an Italian supermarket in my new hood which stocks excellent cheeses, sausages and hams. There is a lot to be said for a city that has good Italian food but is not run like Naples (well, maybe a little bit, but *the Attic* is casting no aspersions and is merely saying that in Cologne the garbage gets picked up on time).

My new city’s local brewing tradition is first class. Very good beer halls with robust, beer-drinking food (although I pass on the blood sausage). Corner shops have big refrigerators full of beer, just like in New York. (This is something Berlin could learn from.) On

the other hand, while Cologne offers lots of entertainment, it has a limited selection of original-version movies. I never thought I would miss Potsdamer Platz.

And changing cities has its costs. The truck can take the furniture and the books, but friends and colleagues must stay behind. Losing contact with people is part of the price of moving.

Luckily, the Internet is there to help us stay in touch. No, you will not find me on Facebook, nor will I be doing a daily blog. No moving pictures, just this PDF. An easy way to pass on some news, and share a story or two. And, this newsletter will not only be irregular, it will be infrequent. Your in-tray will thank me.

And...

In the city of my birth, Palmerston North, at around nine o’ clock of a recent Tuesday morning, a duck crossed the road with her ducklings, and thereby caused a car to swerve into an oncoming van. Happily, both drivers and all the ducks were unhurt.

This heart-warming adventure story from New Zealand raised an interesting question. Would Mrs Duck’s brood make it across Fifth Avenue or Regent Street on a weekday morning? Oddly enough, I can imagine New Yorkers swerving for a duck. Big Apple is more sentimental than it likes to let on. In London I suppose the traffic would automatically stop and some loyal citizen would call the Royal Society for the Protection of Ducks (and all would be on the security cameras). But, in both cities, what I’m less sure about is: would they stop for me?

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