

66

Dy

Dysprosium

162.5

A Letter from Hell

My dear Wormwood,

In your last letter you asked about the dissemination of the element of confusion and miscommunication in language?that which we call "dysprosium." As it chanced, dysprosium is one of the Infernal Establishment's great success stories, and so widely distributed in government, military, business, and even literary circles as to scarce need encouragement. However, it has been a slow week in Hell (Congress is not in session), so I shall indulge your curiosity.

When the Americas were first "discovered" (or, originally, conquered) by Europe, Americans spoke only prose. A man was a man, a horse a horse, and war was war. Treaties were signed for "as long as the sun shall shine and the grass shall grow." It was impossible to go back on one's word without admitting to it.

This sorry state of affairs could not last. The vast amount of ill-faith (coupled with an equally vast amount of self-regard) that Europeans brought to the New World required a more flexible language, one in which a word could be twisted to mean approximately anything the speaker wished it to. So our Infernal Father introduced dysprosium.

Now, instead of armies, there are "peace forces." Rather than sneak attacks, there are "preemptive strikes." Civilians are no longer massacred?there is only "collateral damage."

Such language makes war?or, rather, "police actions"?far easier to justify to oneself.

Michael Swanwick's Periodic Table of Science Fiction

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Meanwhile, prisoners are not punished but "rehabilitated." Goods are not taxed but "value enhanced." Workers are not fired but "outsourced." And so on, and on, and on, in virtually every field of human endeavor. So ubiquitous is dysprosium, that not one person in a hundred even notices its presence

anymore. The little darlings think that language was always this congenial to their will! Nor must you imagine this is only a little thing. For language shapes the world every bit as profoundly as action does.

Under the influence of dysprosium, the human race can confidently look forward to a time of love, harmony, understanding, and universal peace. Then, the Age of Sanity will have arrived at last.

Your affectionate uncle

SCREWTAPE

(with apologies to C. S. Lewis)

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