William F. Buckley Jr. has almost completed the journey from ideologue to icon. Author of *God and Man at Yale*, founder of *The National Review*, host of the television show *Firing Line*, supporter of Barry Goldwater, and sponsor of Ronald Reagan, Buckley was the *enfant terrible* and then the *eminence grise* of the conservative political movement in the United States for half a century. At 82, he's mellowed. Or we have. He's acclaimed these days less for his politics than for his persona—and his elegant and erudite employment of the English language.

A reprise of selections from the "Notes & Asides" column in *National Review*, *Cancel Your Own Goddam Subscription* may well burnish that reputation. To be sure, the book is a mixed bag. Buckley is not at his best when settling scores with Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Eric Sevareid, and Vassar College, publishing puffery from Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon, or delivering disquisitions on trade union threats to free speech. His running gag with Art Buchwald about membership in the Hertz Platinum Club is eminently unfunny. Nonetheless, the book is a delightful celebration of literacy and wordplay. Buckley's readers give as good as they get. And "The New England Nasal Nip" is winsomely witty and waspish, punctilious, preppy, and pugnacious.

With bemused detachment, Buckley cedes center stage to correspondents obsessed with his appearance. A conservative, they insisted, should look like one. Instead, each week on *Firing Line*, Buckley was disheveled, with an ill-fitting shirt and a crooked tie. He slouched. And he scratched his head with a pencil, which he then put in his mouth. "I can't sit upright," Buckley confessed. "Congenital." Nor did he really want to. He was trying to distract his
audience “from the hypnotic quality of my reasoning. Otherwise my points of view would overwhelm the public; and that would be the end of *Firing Line.*”

The English language, however, was no laughing matter. After all Buckley’s favorite occupation is "the correction of other people's errors." So he settles a Scrabble squabble by disqualifying the word "jader" (the comparative is inappropriate for a mineral) but accepting "whiter," even though "white" connotes the absence of color. And he lambasts a teacher for suggesting that Buckley invented the phrase "to imantize the eschaton." The term, he explains, subjects to human dominion that which is beyond time.

You don't have to be an academic to marvel at the passion and precision displayed by Buckley and his interlocutors. Shocked that Buckley quoted Juliet as saying, "Wherefore art thou, Romeo?," Eva Moseley pointed out that Juliet wasn't asking her lover why he exists. With Montagues feuding with Capulets, Romeo's name was the problem. "What's in a comma?," Mosely asked. Sometimes quite a lot." "Quite right, and nicely corrected," Buckley replied.

*Cancel Your Own Goddam Subscription* is well-stocked with these delicious discussions. Is "who'd" an appropriate contraction for "who had"? Is "Tsarytsyn" or "tsarevich" the Russian word for "heir apparent"? Should "a man who respects infinitives" use the phrase "early on in"? And, best of all, should Buckley begin a sentence with "And"? This question stimulated learned letters with dozens of relevant examples, including the first word of Genesis. "Stop! I can't stand anymore," Buckley cries, raising the white flag. "Massive retaliation was repealed at the summit last week."

At the end of 2005 Buckley ended "Notes & Asides" as a regular column in *The National Review*. He was no longer getting a sufficient number of letters—"inquisitive, zany, confused, annoyed, piquant"—that merited inclusion. The feature had had a good run. And so had
Buckley, who retired as editor-in-chief of the magazine in 1990 and relinquished ownership of the magazine of 2004. In the age of the internet, with text messaging, spell checks and sloppy "macprose," he's a relic—and a reminder that we’ve cancelled our curiosity about the English language and crippled our capacity to use it.

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