

What's wrong with *Private Eye*

“Like every minority, we compound with necessity, learning to speak the language of the dominant culture because those whose language it is will not speak ours; and in speaking their language, we are always in danger of thinking their thoughts and behaving according to their code.”

T. S. Eliot, address given in the chapel of Magdalene College, Cambridge, 1948; quoted Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England I*, Cambridge, 1980, p. 127

How could we do without *Private Eye*? ridiculing the latest absurdity of a collapsed culture enacted in and (increasingly) by the media? (For this is where our experience of the world is going: into experience of the 24-hour, rolling kind.) We have been depending on the *Eye* for years now, for the relief of a good laugh combined with hearing the truth, the two combined in serious humour, entertaining criticism of our world.

To see the worth of the *Eye* (the only intelligent newspaper in Great Britain?), just put it alongside its targets, the self-congratulatory “serious” broadsheets and the many self-importances to be found in them, increasingly looking like characters from the opening fifty pages of *St Mawr* (all those Manby girls and Ricos writing for the *Saturday Telegraph*), and making it impossible to take “the culture” (as the *Guardian* calls it) as a whole (ourselves as a whole?) seriously. This is where we need *Private Eye*, for its knowledge of how the media begets things and for its judgement of what is begotten, a national life whose reality is as the media makes it (in a new *matrix*?): the deaths of Princess Diana, Jill Dando, Ken Bigley ... David Blunkett’s tears (could he possibly have *little-laddered* it with such conviction if the media hadn’t for years been authorizing it?)—world-disasters. It was left to *Private Eye* to get itself banned from the newsagents for telling the truth about the Di hysteria.

Anyone who looks back to the style of newspapers before the encroaching days of the booming (or boomed) Australo-Yankee globalized media-economy must notice (if things haven’t already gone too far) that the model for journalism was literature, the style of critical thought deriving from the nineteenth century, Mill, Huxley, Chesterton, Tyndall, Arnold. An idea of writing dominated journalism, but now things are the other way round, and journalism has become the idea of writing. Language, freed from its connection

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with literature and criticism, and without any possible check to it from the world of information technology or literary theory, becomes *materiel* to fill up spacetime, the world made column inches, page- and time-filler.

And the novel, for the most part, follows the journalism. Novels aren't written in the shadow of a literary tradition any longer but in the shadow of contemporary journalism. They are well researched, and breathe down your neck with history, biography, facts (Pat Barker) or else have a few "characters" and bags of action (*The Da Vinci Code*); and, either way, are written in a style suggesting it might all be verified, if only we could be there to see that he really did put his thing into her thing, in just that position and no other: neo-novels to go with neo-cons, neo-liberals and the new Labour "project".

Private Eye has been a fortnightly injection against some of this for some time now. Half, or now more, is itself straight, investigative reporting. (It used to be endless earnest Paul Foot, with all his would-be corrective left-wingery. If he hadn't been their own man, they'd have mocked him, like Benn.) But while the exposure of venality, hypocrisy, stupidity, gullibility, vanity, success-mania, swarming top-down, is valuable, it isn't in principle so very different from what you might find elsewhere and it isn't what makes *Private Eye* distinctive and invaluable. Ethical disdain, or political outrage or "academic" analysis, are excogitated every day on our "national institutions"... every, *every* morning on *Today*, where the presenters are sages and celebrities themselves, and full of excitement, at horrors or a singing dog.

What makes *Private Eye* different is that its standard of judgement is, to an usual degree, a literary, or literary-moral, one, and steadily so. It's not content to be a soup of floating self-contradictions, like the *Telegraph*, say: on an inside page defending Prince Charles against the charge that he thinks one shouldn't aspire beyond one's station—on its front page attributing to him (his enemy's) words suggesting he's said that very thing; high-toned morality alongside low-cut dresses; catastrophe illustrated by pictures of swelling boobs under tight blouses.

Private Eye's standard of judgment is literary even when it is doing no more (Lawrence's accusation against H. L. Mencken, a journalistic "icon") than stinkbombing. It still occupies a standpoint outside the thing it despises, telling the truth in a form that owes something to the best that has been thought and read, making judgement individual and not part of some dismal "consensus", making it entertaining: *therefore*: characters, sometimes in action, literary forms (diaries, parodies, play with language), treating the world as fiction ... much of this making the journalistic "novels" about the life of journalists by journalists like Sarah Sands and A. N. Wilson (praising one another like billy-ho) redundant. By their words *Private Eye* knows them: the words of our "Prime Minister", a product (fiction or not?—is he real?) of journalism, speaking, "thinking" in soundbites, bright ideas, small formulae, semi-written semi-sentences, whose model of a speech is always much the same

as a journalist for the *Sun*.

For *Private Eye*, at its best, does for us something of what novels used to do when Dickens and Thackeray were about—or Byron or Jonson. Its style (with the genuine non-theoretic literary criticism of Bookworm, which died out in the University with the death of that man no one now wants to talk about, the one who was so nasty to poor old earnest, stupid old Snow) is one of the last points where literature and what has become of journalism have any influence on one another.

But *not* enough. How would it be possible for one lone voice to be able to say, as a journal, what has become of journalism, or as a literary periodical what has become of literature? Permanent absolute hostility to the world the media have made is too much to ask for a member of the media?

This is where the difficulties for it are beginning to show. It needn't matter so much, that the *essential* symbiosis of the paper is with the very thing it despises most, the *Street of Shame* which provides it with its array of ludicrous “writers” (celebrities themselves) unable not to ruin thought and reason in words for the sake of a loose conception of a good job: Phil Space, Piers Moron, Polly Filler, Amanda Platell, Glenda Slagg and Gobshite Charley Whelan, who used to be employed by Gordon Brown. But the wider the collapse of literary culture spreads, the harder it becomes to escape. The paradox of the paper's existence (to be part of something it finds absurd—but that's life) doesn't *have* to get in its way but it will unless the paper has a sufficiently resilient sense of the literature that helps it to know what is absurd from what isn't. That is the true value of literature—not the values to be dug out of it but the value of *it*, itself. The difficulty for the paper is not just that it, like other papers, like the language of journalism itself, turns to formulae (you can even have enough of Glenda Slagg) but that something Henry James said in 1880—whether true or not then—is certainly true now: “the sentiment of literature, was, he feared, dying” Letters, Vol. II, ed. Edel). If that should be so we'll have nothing to protect us—the language can only be kept up if the literature is. And unsupported by the prevailing, unliterary culture around it, the difference between *Private Eye* and what it hates, but is continuous with and depends on, is giving way.

First minor example: “Dumb Britain” fortnight by fortnight rightly ridicules the people who give stupidly ignorant answers on radio and television quiz shows. It is usually good for a laugh but also for a bit of self-congratulation: *we* know; *we* would do better. But . . . *University Challenge*, quiz-master Jeremy Paxman, a public figure who has published a book on the state of the nation [see an earlier issue of this magazine], pits two teams of university students against each other who have to produce factual answers to questions about the sciences, geography, art, literature, religion, politics, history, sport, pop etc. Nobody shows any sense of knowing that this sort of game has nothing to do with thinking. The readiness of universities to participate is one of the signs that they have lost their minds. It would be too much to expect a satirical magazine to give

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up such a constant stream of material, but it would be a better magazine if it gave the occasional sign of recognizing that the whole quiz phenomenon is its real target. As it is, “Dumb Britain” is in danger of “thinking their thoughts”. Would we be less dumb if we got the answers right?

The same thing wrong can be seen in a more important part, the “Literary Review”. Let us take for granted that it is far and away the best and most serious literary criticism appearing in any contemporary British journal, usually well-argued and invoking real standards of judgement. There is a generally-clear recognition that the books vaunted by the “literati” (Ms Wagner of *The Times* e.g.), Foers, Frantzens, Austers, Eggers, A.L. Kennedys, Faulks, Bernières, are at best ingenious contrivances in a mode now known (without a blink) as “the literary novel”, usually an attempt to distort the “common language” of journalists into a fictional “structure”. And to have that recognition (and not lose it) you’ve got to have a firm grasp of the value of literature —not a bunch of “values”, but the value of the written form. This presumably is why Bookworm is present, a touchstone. He is usually interesting—the book that was a compilation of his best pieces was a good book (Edgeways Books was disappointed, and not just financially, not to be allowed to bring out a successor)—as much a relief from contemporary “literature” as the abuse of Lord and Lady Archole was from their existence and all the *news* of them. But the criticism is growing evasive: it too doesn’t understand its own position. What Bookworm has taken to doing in default is weak: merely doing what the rest of the paper does, picking on those weaker than himself, the easy targets, the flood of “books” that come from the industry of verbal productivity still supposed to produce “great” novels and poetry.. You can’t excuse him by saying that he is overwhelmed by it all—it’s so easy—he’s just handed over self-knowledge to one side of the paradox of his existence: he needs to polyfiller his pages too. And when he feels that he has to give some indication that there is better literature about, he goes sentimental: he gives us news: ah, there’s this little company trying to publish the deserving but rejected, or that Justin Cartwright (or someone else) who might rightly be miffed not to be on the Booker-list: he’s a bit better, but you’re not told why. And no wonder: it’s the most difficult thing to do: Bookworm might expose himself.

Take the column “Autumn Fiction”, no. 1116, 1 October 2004. Twenty years ago, it tells us, there would have been “a rash of learned articles about ‘the state of fiction’. Where was the English novel going, half-a-dozen pundits would zealously have inquired”. But

Two decades later such articles no longer appear. For there are practically no centralising tendencies in modern British fiction; simply a great mass of novels spilling out each autumn on to the bookshop shelves with nothing to connect them ...

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This is serious and could be argued. But get a little further away from the object and there *is* a depressing sameness about the work of (say) Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, William Boyd, which does add up to a kind of spirit of the age, or spiritlessness of the age, for which the formula is “Henry James misunderstood”. It is odd that James should be so influential (one of the Booker “front-runners” is reported to be *The Master* by Colm Toibin, the Master being James) in so peculiar a way but, if so, there is a “centralising tendency”. One sees, though, what the reviewer is driving at. It would be a brave man who claimed to find anything like a growing point of consciousness in the contemporary novel.

But there is another reason for the curious arbitrariness of this and other Booker shortlists, the dispiriting thought that *any* of the 130 or so novels that get sent in would somehow do. This, inevitably enough, is the feebleness of the wider landscape.

Though we might, in passing, wonder whether landscape can be feeble, on the whole this is well said and true. *But how* to enforce the judgement that the world has changed for the worse? Bookworm tries to get there by the route of (after warning himself of the dangers of nostalgia) nostalgia for, of all decades, the 1980s:

Two decades back, in the era of *Midnight's Children*, *Waterland*, *Money* and *Hawksmoor*, it was possible to believe that we were swaggering through the well-tended streets of a fictional boom-town. What happened to all those golden boys?

Hardly a promising way of asking the question about the decline of the novel. Whatever element of possibly defensive irony in the “boom-town” image (and do boom-towns have well-tended streets?) this is (it certainly needs to be) meant straight—and (if it is) so far so good. Critics have to know what they stand by. *But* . . . Twenty years ago it was *not* possible to believe any such thing, and because Bookworm doesn't really believe it himself—and is afraid to stand by it—he puts on the voice of a some old (any old) sportswriting hack: “. . . before one starts waxing all nostalgic about the gleaming early 80s, when Mart, Jules and Ackers were in their pomp . . .” That is, he hasn't any confidence in his own judgement; actually, doesn't *have* a judgement to be confident in. *Hawksmoor* is a boring contrivance, just like the run-of-the-mill biographies (in at least one case embellished by imaginary conversations) by which Peter Ackroyd has made pots of money. *Waterland* is an earnestly-annotated ‘A’-level exercise in “literature” (now studied at ‘A’-level, of course). *Midnight's Children* is pretentiously insignificant and Martin Amis is the incarnation of the spirit of the age: Henry James misunderstood as cleverness without a moral sense.

The second failing of the “Literary Review” is related to the insecurity of style: the *Eye's* perspective is virtually limited to the last twenty years. If we are discussing the present state of the English novel, the first and necessary context for the discussion is the English novel: it got going in the eighteenth century to become the

great literary form of the nineteenth. If terms of comparison are wanted for Booker entries it isn't Martin Amis or Julian Barnes (who may—haphazardly—win the prize again any year) but Austen, Eliot, Dickens, Conrad, Lawrence—and James properly understood.

The “Literary Review” is often right in its judgements: the annual record of what Leavis called “flank-rubbing” (you plug my book I plug yours) in the Christmas recommendations is very revealing, the fortnightly identification of different kinds of rubbish depressing but necessary. But there isn't enough sense of *literature*, either of the literature and literatures within which all reviewing worth the name takes place, or of the possible styles that go with that sense.

The next “Literary Review”, no. 1117, had as the first item a review of Frank Furedi's *Where have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st-century Philistinism*. Here the *Eye* writer was in the awkward position of agreeing with much of the book but being obliged, this being the *Eye*, to attack it. This resulted firstly in offended pride: Furedi's reported complaints include that “libraries have turned into the equivalent of motorway service stations, museums have been stuffed full of ‘interactive’ exhibitions of the ‘ordinary’ and universities opened up to students who can't be expected to write essays because it might make them feel uncomfortable.” The *Eye* comment begins,

All this is, on the one hand, highly patronising to the “ordinary” people it purports to help, as it takes their innate stupidity as a given; and on the other hugely unfair to those of us who think a library should be stocked with books

Not in the account we have just read. By the *Eye*'s own account Furedi's criticism is, on behalf of the general public, of museums that have ceased to be museums, and on behalf of the possible students, of universities that have ceased to be universities. How is it unfair to agree with the author?

Then, in the journalistic-literary-brightness-by-way-of-imagery style that reveals all,

Several brakes should, however, be applied to this careening vehicle as it slides downhill towards the thoroughly deserving target of the secretary of state for education, Charles Clarke. The first is that people have been making these complaints for centuries, from Carlyle and Matthew Arnold in the 19th to Mrs Leavis gnashing her teeth over working class cinema goers [*sic* no hyphens] in the 20th. Practically every civilised man in history has thought his own age a kind of sink of debasement compared to the decent usages of the age before.

Is it being suggested that anything for centuries believed by every civilised man is therefore untrue? The writer's own history contradicts him. Carlyle's attacks on his own age represent a new phase of national consciousness. Where is there anything similar in

the age of Johnson? Who in the eighteenth century did not believe in progress? It is true that from about the third decade of the nineteenth century onwards one of the main functions of the literature has been to criticise this belief, which remains predominant in politics. So Frank Furedi is by the reviewer's account writing in a well-established tradition. If admitted, that would go some way to answering the question implicit on the earlier page: where is literature now? Perhaps, as recently as Leavis, in such criticism. According to this page of the *Eye* F. R. Leavis was "grimly refashioning English literature in his own image". What meaning has the phrase? Here *Private Eye* itself exemplifies the decomposition of judgement in our time. If it understood its own position, it would see both Furedi and Leavis as allies. The "Literary Review" is too often of the world it criticises as well as *in* it. Perhaps this is why the "centralising tendency" is invisible to it.

There are other signs that the paper doesn't understand its own predicament, is turning to formulae and losing its intelligence. Whenever we have seen the editor of *Private Eye* on a literary panel (likeable chap, nice chap, a celebrity himself now—on television the other day doing a programme about his family origins, complete with phoney greetings from long-lost friends in Jersey.), he has usually (and of course engagingly: he's a Dad and writes a family 'soap' about a PM who's a Dad) been puffing children's "literature" as a *locus* of literary hope ... *Harry Potter*, *Tracy Beaker*, products in words as much as an Ikea bookcase is a self-assemble product in wood (or MDF). A self-comforting anxious descent into approving the lower-than-midcult, parallel to Bookworm's silence about what is actually good or whether or not anything at all is.

We need *Private Eye*, but only if it can keep its distance, which it now does—if it does—only with increasing desperation. To keep alive, *Private Eye*'s only recourse is literature and literary criticism (the past is almost the only reference left) in the world where the language is being eaten out by productivity. Moral culture goes with the verbal culture: dead words mean dead truth: Blair, Hewitt, Cherie—deadwood of dead language. There are bad signs that *Private Eye* is bent on not wanting to think about it ... it's too hard ... and it might—as they say—take you somewhere you don't want to go. But why when *Private Eye* is merciless to the media, and Brian Clough in death, should we be less so to it when it fails to recognize itself, turns into its own clique (celebrities!) and becomes part of the thing it feeds on?

What's wrong with *Private Eye*? Increasingly: the same thing that's wrong with the thing it loves to hate: the rest of the media of which it is part.

(to be continued)

***Yellow Dog* (2003), Vintage paperback, 2004,
£7.99**

“A consummate stylist ... constantly and intensely aware of the language he is using, the medium of his art”. This snippet from *The Daily Mail* was presumably intended to be complimentary; at any rate it is quoted on the cover and not as a health warning, and there are half a dozen others to much the same effect. Anyone with any education in “English” knows that this is a dangerously wrong notion of style. Le style, c’est l’homme même, or else it is just a nuisance. With Mr Amis, the latter.

Some of the comedy, it has to be said, is childish: the play with names that novelists usually think beneath the dignity of fiction. “Xan Meo went to Hollywood. And, minutes later, with urgent speed, and accompanied by choric howls of electrified distress, Xan Meo went to hospital.”[p. 1] “I’m off out, me,” he told his American wife Russia.”[*Ibid.*] Hollywood turns out to be a public house in London NW. It takes a few pages to get used to Hollywood and Russia not being used in their usual senses, and there is no point in it. The King’s butler happens to be called Love, and so a glance at Herbert is inevitable: “Love bade her welcome.”[p. 21] A minor character is called And, short for Andrew. And is therefore always doing things when you think he is a mere coupler. The King’s mistress happens to be called He, so He and He are on the sofa. &c., &c. This is very self-conscious but it is not very funny.

In the paperback there are 339 pages of Style of the “choric howls of electrified distress” type, all laboriously flawless. Very occasionally they come off. I liked the image of the wave breaking not all at once but in a line left to right like a train of gunpowder—but having lost the page ref. I don’t like it enough to reread the novel to find it. Much more typical is the image of the dying flies—Xan is a compulsive fly-killer—“The taut rods of their legs became as crinkly as pubic hair.”[p. 134] In the days when there was still literary criticism in the land this would have been called “precious”. It is an example of what Johnson objected to in metaphysical imagery, “the most heterogeneous images and conceits yoked by violence together”.

Mr Amis’s parodies are so good that they might as well be the real thing. The central example in *Yellow Dog* is the *Daily Lark*, the paper devoted with singleminded devotion to pornography and immorality. Clint Smoker, the ace reporter and event-inventor, produces, effortlessly, columns of moral filth. The trouble is that Mr Amis, giving us Clint Smoker, does it with a perfection that misses any invitation to judge. He is “a very fine journalist indeed”[p. 23] Well, he *is*. The first example we get is his account of an encounter between the King’s younger brother and a celebrity at a chinese restaurant (“Did Alf lai chee? Did he oyster into his arms and give her a crispy duck?”[p. 22] and so on.) Well imitated, Mart! seems the response invited. If ever the novel sales fell off he could get a job with the real life *Lark* and do it better than the pros.

This means, though, that the success is limited to sitting ducks. When Amis parodies anything more serious he bounces off. His King Henry IX is clearly a parody of the present Prince of Wales, and the mannerisms of speech and vowel-sounds are captured with Amis's customary expertise. But he has to make Henry insipid and without a thought in his head. He couldn't do a good parody of anyone as intelligent as the actual prince.

Much of the book is very formulaic. Amis has the bright idea of courtship conducted by text message, so Clint Smoker often receives emails (es) from k8. These are immaculately constructed—"the usual r&y stunts with stableboys & diplom@s, not 2 mention some 69 with a lady-in-w8ing ... k-n pepper ... e me all, dear 1." [p. 204] and so on. But a few is enough and they get tedious.

Yellow Dog is actually an elaborately plotted novel, of a Victorian kind. Perhaps it is even meant to be a revenge tragedy. (I can't take revenge tragedies seriously either.) Xan Meo as we meet him is a successful actor second-married to a lecturer in history. He is himself the author of a collection of short stories which much resemble Martin Amis's. It turns out, though nothing in the opening scenes or what we see of the character prepares for it, that Xan is from what it would be misleading to call "a criminal background". His family is the very aristocracy of crime, and he is "done", with serious head injuries, as part of a long-running feud the details of which I have forgotten, by a sort of pope of criminals who happens to be called Joseph Andrews. Joseph Andrews's dictated memoirs are another of the novel's interwoven strands, done to formula like k8's love-letters. Joseph has a distinct sense of decorum, what he can put up with and what he can't. This element in the novel makes possible scenes of violence which manage to be at once extreme and routine. It ends with Joseph Andrews trampled in such wise as to displace his hip-replacement. (Perhaps there are further developments: I didn't finish the novel.) This is not powerfully enough done to make one sick, but is unpleasant. The question whether the reader should sympathise with Joseph Andrews or with Xan Meo's revenge does not arise. There is not an atom of compassion, any more than there is any morality.

This means that the scenes in Fucktown (whether the same place as Sex City I don't remember) are themselves ordinary porn, whether soft or hard I am not expert enough to judge—Karla White *alias* Cora Somebody having a very artistic *fellatio* with the hugely-penisised black Sir Dork Bogarde, for instance, with the free extra of comic historic-film-epic dialogue, [pp. 293–4] or the possibly untrue reminiscence of Xan lifting Cora off the floor with one hand—the hand happening to be between her legs. [p. 241, elaborately narrated]

The attentive reader, which I am not sure I claim to be, will notice that there are in *Yellow Dog* occasional gestures in the direction of an Eliot-like perception of the waste land. "The void" in which all these characters live is mentioned at least twice as such. [pp. 236, 296] Presumably there is something unsatisfactory about life in the void. Even the word *sin* appears once. [p. 242] This is apropos Xan's efforts to resist the advances of Karla, and derives

from an impulse in him to be faithful to his second wife Russia. Whether this is another symptom of his changed mental state, like the earlier nymphomania (Amis uses a more contemporary term I have forgotten) which earlier makes him, perhaps, molest his daughter and make a nuisance and possibly a rapist of himself to his wife, I don't know. Reflecting on the possible rape, Xan himself betrays his lapse into the ethics of criminality with his instinctive belief that a man cannot rape his own wife; and here some sort of moral judgement from the novelist seems present. But why he wants to be faithful is in the world of the novel just mysterious

Just occasionally I did get a hint of what the cover reports *The Guardian* to have found, "moments of magical vigilance and great emotional delicacy, intimations of a quite different kind of writer that Amis could be, or would be, perhaps, were it not for the demands of his devastating comic gift". Sometimes the glimpses of the four-year-old Billie come off and cease to be just Style:

Tender-year-old Billie Meo walked through Casualty with such fascination that the scored lino strained to feel the weight of her tread. Her slippers were landing heel-down, but there was a tiptoe in her somewhere—in the calves, perhaps.[p. 33]

There is sympathy there, for once, as well as observation. That is not the only good moment. The treatment of Billie is later spoiled for me. One of the marks of her alienation from her father on his return, a changed man, is that she no longer does her "exercises" in front of him. It turns out, quite without any glimpse of surprise from the novelist, that these are infantile masturbation. To make a novel out of what is disgusting you do have to have some sense of what is disgusting. Here, I mean, it is the parents (modern civilised people as they are called—don't ask me for a page ref.) who are, the novelist unawares, disgusting.

There seems, by the way, to be no sense of *privacy* in the modernised novel. The omniscient narrator uses his privilege to pry into his characters' intimacies. Amis's King Henry IX has trouble with inflammation of the colon, about which we get intrusive medical detail. This is turning the omniscient narrator into Peeping Tom.

Martin Amis's is not the style meant if one objects to the pulp fiction of the age that it is without style. If this is style it is actually better to be without it. The formula seems to be "Henry James misunderstood". In Martin Amis's novels the page hardly ever vanishes. We are always in the position of the admirer of literary exercises. By the vanishing page I mean the common experience of *getting into* a novel or a play or a poem. Johnson rightly says that the spectator is always aware that he is in the theatre not Egypt or wherever it may be. But in the imagination we can be rapt away, and as Johnson also says, "When his fancy is once on the wing, let it not stoop at correction or explanation. ... Let him read on through brightness and obscurity, through integrity and corruption; let him

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preserve his comprehension of the dialogue and his interest in the fable.”[Samuel Johnson, Preface to Shakespeare (1765), *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh, Oxford, 1908, pp. 61–2] With these so modern novelists, and above all with Martin Amis, I find that my imagination never takes wing.

I hold that the very first question in literary criticism is *alive or dead* and I have to report my experience as a reader that it is not easy actually to finish a Martin Amis novel. There is a certain dreariness that for this reader overtakes the consistent, relentless cleverness. The insistent drawing of attention to itself on the part of the style, the lack of sympathy for any of the characters, the action set in a subhuman life without morality or belief, gets more and more tedious as the pages stretch out the same formulae. Imagine not wanting to finish a Jane Austen novel!

I believe that one of the reasons Ben Jonson is never dreary and tedious is that his absurdities, as vigorously imagined as Martin Amis’s, are always within a moral world that is thereby truer to life.

Mr Amis is a much cleverer man than I, but I am able to judge his work, without much difficulty, because I do understand the humour in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Jonson and Henry James. The possibility of so essentially stupid a misunderstanding of Henry James as Martin Amis’s arises from James’s own weakness with the word *clever*. James occasionally slips into taking it as a term of almost moral appreciation—or confuses aesthetic delight in his characters’ cleverness with moral approbation. But the centre of James, as of Jonson, is comedy of an intensely moral kind. As Leavis put it about *What Maisie Knew*, “And that *What Maisie Knew* is a happy example of marked moral intensity no admirer will question.”[F. R. Leavis, “*Anna Karenina*” and *Other Essays*, 1967, p. 83] James himself referred to “the high and helpful public and, as it were, civic use of the imagination ... a faculty for the possible fine employments of which in the interest of morality my esteem grows every hour I live.”[Preface to *The Lesson of the Master*, edn 1922, p. xi] In *What Maisie Knew* the grippingness and the life of the comedy is just another side of the moral intensity. What is beautiful about that book, as well as occasionally heartbreaking, is the child’s wonderful combination of innocence and experience. She knows everything and is untouched. This is only moving, as well as funny, because the depravity which leaves her unscathed is real depravity, hateful, life-destroying, evil (much more so than the rather vague hints thrown out about the evil in *The Turn of the Screw*).

There is nothing comparable in all the Style of Martin Amis. Why has he been such a commercial success? Because even our literary world must have *something* to take seriously—or at least something we tell ourselves we are taking seriously?

Think Less, Acquire More

High school teachers and guidance counsellors seemed serious about university, talking about it as though it were a place filled with thoughtful people. “Higher education” was hoisted upon signs and placed into speeches. If you were among those chosen to go, you were supposed to feel blessed to be included. I was in awe of the university, was scared and was reverent.

When I applied to be *admitted* three years ago, present thoughts were filled with ideas about English language and literature at the university *level*, and teacher’s college. I often wondered what people did at university. I thought that if I was smart enough, I could *be* a high school English teacher.

The mystery was revealed shortly after my first year. This was not a place where many thoughtful people talked to one another, nor was it a place where the majority of the students took their studying seriously. I looked around and saw textbooks, highlighters and one too many Tim Horton’s outlets. I went to my first year science-context-credit class to find zombie students taking down notes and regurgitating them onto multiple choice exams. I still do not know if anyone in that room was thinking. There were still a few older professors who seemed to be thinking and some that definitely were, but they were being pushed out to make room for the new models.

Most of the professors I had encountered put bombs in the books and killed the authors. They referred to textbooks and anthologies, quoted modern studies, and made us do the same, with special formats and footnotes. This is what I was supposed to learn, how to interpret my way out of thinking, and how to follow instructions. I was starting to get it. I was being trained-up for something. Even in a department where language should be fore-grounded, skills still took the first spot.

After one year of studying had passed, I began to study Latin and ancient Greek along with English, only to be greeted from family and friends with phrases like, “What are you going to do with that? What kind of job will you get? What is that?” They were not questions; perhaps they were statements of fear and worry. So I began to worry, not about getting a job, but about why people were talking to me like that. I was walking through the corridor, when I glanced across at some logo with the words “Careers begin here” imprinted upon it, and I overheard a speech where the president called students “clients” and “customers”, and then it started to make sense. We were in some sort of training-up program and we were going to *get* skills, training, of course, and tools. People were worried that my toolbox was not going to have enough in it? I think that was it.

This was higher education, where there were not many conversations, and everything came down to what your professor had instructed you to do on your “course outline”. I still cannot believe

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that some university students hold their status over the rest of the world with any superiority.

I started imagining again what it might be like to be a teacher. Unfortunately, due to the amount of space available on campus, and the university's wish to keep expanding, many of my classes ended up in the "education" building. I started observing what my graduate education might look like or what it might be like to think about. I saw projects hanging on walls, students decorating bulletin boards, reassurance and self-esteem-building-exercises and I even sidled into the back of one of the education-lectures.

I found myself back in high school again. There were cut-out construction-paper leaves on the walls, bulletin boards with colourful pictures and half-baked food-for-thought sayings everywhere. Among this there must surely be some thought. I found things that were disguised as thought, theories, like "antiseptic bouncing". I do not want anyone doing that to anyone I know. I saw a bulleted list with the heading: "Development of Motivation" and a point reading "begin to generalize between right and wrong." This is what people are thinking about in graduate school. All it seemed I would need, besides the minimum requirements, is an overwrought sense of empathy, attention to everyone else's sensitivities, tolerance, construction paper, glue, a permanent smile, and I could be a teacher, too.

Perhaps the most amazing thing I have seen at the university to date is a question on the wall of one of the education rooms. It read: "Is there something about which you are still puzzled?" I hope there is, but I would not count on it, and for this, I have a great fear. So if for any reason you thought that you could not get into university, and that perhaps you were not able to meet the *admittable* standard, do not worry. Just regurgitate like you did in high school, apply the techniques, smile when the professor says something reassuring, and try to make everyone else feel good. With those techniques and some brightly coloured school supplies, you too can be my child's elementary or high school teacher.

Cameron Kroetsch

FOUR POEMS

The Three Ages of Hair

As a girl, her hair was a traffic-light
on red. Boys screeched to a halt.
When dishes were washed, it looked amber:
“Perhaps go. But perhaps not.”

As a young woman, her hair was a terrorist’s
bomb. It exploded in all directions.
It could not be disarmed. Glass
lay around, among several broken hearts.

As a grand-mother, her gray hair
smeeked out like smoke from a log;
drifted by like a farm in a fog.
Yet, in wind, it rose like a pillar
of ash, and went before her day
and night, leading where she had to go.

Swimming with a Hammer-head Shark

Snorkeling off the Galapagos, over a reef that combs
its multi-coloured beards in the current:
suddenly, a hammer-head shark is hugely
beside me, big as a Greyhound bus,
but all lights off, no engine audible.
By fiat, the sea is made not just for,
but of him: fathoms turned to dark
hide and swinging muscle, muscle
to dark, finned and mottled tide.
His giant hammer sways from side
to side. It drives ocean before it
in long, sunlit twisting nails.
Spread-eagled among clanging anvils of gun-metal
grey waves, foam flying
like sparks, I wait to be hammered, forged,
re-struck into an unwelcome new coinage.
But all he does is swim in parallel,
nodding slightly, tapping weeds
gently into place along the surf-lines
like a conscientious boiler-maker; riveting
shoals of creole fish into their ripples.

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This is no knuckle-duster of the deep.
He rolls slightly, to get a better look at me.
His right eye is less of an eye
than a query. He rolls more, to make
me entirely a query, then arches away,
downward. This hammer watches us shyly.
It will not strike. But at night, the ocean
becomes one great whale
under a feeding-frenzy of stars. It is rising
from the global warming of its depths, to take
our brightly-lit coastlines and cities,
returning faeces dutifully to us in the streets.
—In the end, the hammer, ourselves, crushing us.

Five Signs that You're not the Reincarnation of Someone Famous

In heavy rainstorms, when dust turns
into clumps of silvery clay, you feel a need
to mix them with straw, make bricks,
and build something very large and triangular.

When you dream of seven fat girls,
followed by seven skinny girls,
and try, unsuccessfully, to make love to all of them,
no psychiatrist is interested in interpreting your story.

Winos in the street walk determinedly
toward you, holding out mugs of water.
They pass you by, and head for a man carrying
a bag of loaves, a box of fishes.

While working under the sink, to unblock the drain,
with garbage-bags softly caressing your face,
you have an irresistible urge to hand brushes
to anyone who's painting a chapel ceiling.

As you sip warm beer on the stoop,
wondering, with an enraptured variety of gestures,
whether to be or not to be,
a dog runs up and pees on your foot,

simply and undeniably. You realize *this*
is an answer. Like the damp log that burns,
as it must, on a roaring fire. Like the window
that, even though dirty, lets in both dark and light.

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In Search of Continuity

Between this heart-beat and the next,
in the candle-flame's quiet, is no
other pulse to bridge the flickering gap,
and ignite another set of hungers at the hearth.
"All is vanity." "But a kingdom is at hand."
Is all vanity? Is my hand at hand?

Between blackbirds on the roof at dawn
and white birds that take their places after,
between rage and the speckled mushroom
of smoke that pokes its head from a hole
that was hope exploded in the middle of the road,
a woman slips off her cotton dress
and lies on the bed in a petite soul
of fine, white, continuous lace.

Between bulldozers that knock down walls
and the politicians who build streets and subdivisions
from prefabricated words that glitter in mid-air,
between the bill-board of God's beautiful
face, touched among clouds by the pilot
in his war-plane, so alone, and his wife's
photo, zipped in his burning pocket,
between the remembered and the half-forgotten,
the quarter-promised and the deliberate lie,
a snail uninterruptedly climbs the trellis,
leaving a silver trail behind.

Between this line of a poem and the next,
in gods or time should we trust?
Or in the evening humming-bird's neither
fall nor ascent, motion nor rest,
at its invisible pin-point of nectar?

Roger Nash

Reviews

The Isles of Greece! The Isles of Greece!

Rush Rhees, *In Dialogue with the Greeks*, ed. D. Z Phillips: volume 1, *The Presocratics and Reality*; volume 2, *Plato and Dialectic*, Ashgate Publishing

Now that everyone can see that they don't exist, in the sense formerly imagined, only an agreeable tourist destination, it is time to dust our grammars off and do what we can before we die to bring the Greeks back in; treading on the ground, though, now; talking about what it's like. Listen!

While waiting for Rhees' new posthumous book to come out we read Plato. Here was the old familiar feeling, of not knowing where to have him. A monograph on his thought, published by a Cambridge man in 1935, was not a lot of help:

As for immortality, the human soul as a whole definitely does not attain it, since part of it is unequivocally stated to be mortal. Neither physical desire nor ambition survives. So that the human personality as we know it ceases to be at death. It is however said with equal clearness from the *Phaedo* to the *Timaeus* that the highest part of the soul, the mind or intellect, the capacity to apprehend universal truth, does survive. It lives on, presumably, as a focus of soul-force, that is, of the longing for perfection, beauty and truth which is the ultimate origin of all ordered movement and life in the universe. If we ask, further, how far this immortal mind keeps its individuality we must remember that from first to last the aim of the Platonic philosopher is to live on the universal plane, to *lose himself* more and more in the contemplation of truth, so that the perfect psyche would, it seems, lose itself completely in the universal mind, the world-psyche. Hence it remains individual only in so far as it is imperfect, and personal immortality is not something to aim at, but something to outgrow.

Such seems to be Plato's view.[1]

The Rhees arrived. It did not disappoint:

The soul is what brings life to the body. It can do this only because the soul *has* life, or we might say, because the soul *necessarily* has life; this seems to be what Socrates is assuming throughout his argument. ... If you say that the soul brings life to the body, then you have to ask what is the sort of life that *is* characteristic of the soul. That is, first and foremost, the activity of thinking, and of knowing; and also, the activity of striving. That is what the soul brings to the body, or what the human soul brings to the human body, at any rate. ... The soul brings the

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body as far as possible into line with its own characteristic strivings. ... The point is that if the soul brings to the body a kind of activity that is concerned with, and governed by, insight into the intelligible natures of the Forms, then it brings to the body something from outside the world of things that come to be and perish at all. This seems to be the important part of Plato's argument.

One of these authors had a clue. Pretty obviously, it consisted in an obsessive interest in writing sentences that might say something. This was a clue that led into the labyrinth—not out. Nevertheless, it was the other author that was the harder to read. It was harder to keep awake, reading him; and the result of trying was that you found yourself in a dream—why ever fight it?—of floating on the clouds outside the window of the aeroplane. “A focus of soul-force, that is, of the longing for perfection, beauty and truth which is the ultimate origin of all ordered movement and life in the universe”? Talk about the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean!

Rhees is expounding Plato, but taking up and using his language (“when it leaves the body”; “the soul acts on the apprehension”) by way of seeing what there might be in it, and by way of fighting with him, into a sense he strives to make his own. We say “fight”, and mean it: the result is this clarity, if you will give it a chance, read a sentence at a time, a section at a time, beyond anything we have any right to expect.

He goes so straight to the heart of what is interesting to talk about that you look up from the book and wonder, before plunging back in:

The activity of the human soul belongs to the realm of intelligible things in which it is exhibited.

And we might say that the reason why the soul will not perish even when it leaves the body, when it withdraws from the body, is that the source of the life that the soul has is a source, not in bodily existence; not of the things that come to be and perish, but in the things that do not perish. It is to be found in those objects that give understanding, that give knowledge, that give the soul that life which it brings to the body. The life of the bodily existence itself, then is one which, in its essential character, does not dissolve when the body dissolves and decays. [He deals with the Mind-Body Problem, then continues:] What Socrates suggests, for instance, is that no knowledge of physiology will explain why he is sitting there. ... That depends upon a knowledge of the Good ... If the body is alive—the human body, that is—that is because the soul brings life to the body.

The soul *accounts for* the life and actions of the body in a way which the bones and the sinews do not. This has to do with the fact that the soul acts on the apprehension of reasons or causes. ... The senses become not merely

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physical instruments, but organs of knowledge. The Forms are in things, but the Forms are known and apprehended by the soul ... But it is important also to distinguish between the life of the soul and the life of the body. Unless you do that, you cannot see what the life is that is brought to the body. You cannot see how the body's growth and the body's life is a form of *genesis eis ousian* (coming into being). ...

Certainly in some sense Plato wants to say that the soul is eternal, and that you cannot understand what the soul is unless you see that, unless you see its relation to eternal life. In some sense or other he wants to say that the soul is what it aspires to be. This has something to do with the reality of the soul being the destiny of the soul, probably.

The soul is that which the body loses at death. The soul is also that which the body loses through moral degradation.

It is difficult to review these volumes. Rhees did not write books. It appears that he wrote, it must have been every day, philosophy that keeps on circling round and coming back, starting again and going over again, for his own soul's sake and, we can only put it, to the glory of the most high God and that his neighbour might be benefited by it.

Professor D. Z. Phillips it is that makes the books, writing them out with his fountain pen from the sixteen thousand pages Rhees left. Thanks to Phillips, we now have quite a bit.[2] There are several things to say about it. It is reading for a lifetime. It is difficult. It is immensely cultured and utterly unaffected. It goes straight to what is interesting and is as clean as a jump in the ocean.

It might be worth reflecting that most of the work here dates from the Sixties! A period of culture is seen finally as all that isn't its great exemplar; Grube, finally, as not-Rhees. Phillips tells us elsewhere that Rhees lectured without notes, but he always had them by him. It is poignant to think of his Swansea undergraduates receiving the thoughts contained in these pages, write-ups of lecture notes, like Aristotle's works, as apparently they are. Whoever wants them, will want them a lot.

R. M.

1. G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (1935) 1970
2. Rush Rhees' posthumous books so far—all edited by D. Z. Phillips—are:

On Religion and Philosophy, Cambridge, 1997

Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse, Cambridge, 1998

Moral Questions, 1999

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Discussions of Simone Weil, New York, 2000
Wittgenstein's On Certainty—There Like our Life, 2003

A Philosopher Speaks

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Public and Private Occasions*, ed.
James C. Klagge
and Alfred Nordmann, Rowman & Littlefield (USA), 2003

There might be an elderly reader here or there who can recall from thirty years ago the appearance of a book, whose author had got it into his head that Ludwig Wittgenstein was a homosexual, and that it was important to know.[1]

In service of the first of these passions he had gone to Vienna, where, he said, he found old men who told him tales of fifty years ago, of the one-day-to-be-author of *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung* hieing himself—he said—to the Prater park, in search of rude boys and love. With the second of them *The Human World* was able to assist.[2]

Professor Bartley having published the part of his researches concerning old men and rude boys, the philosophical community has awaited, for the light they must bring, publication of coded diaries also mentioned in his book.

Now it had better be said—for here are diaries, by Ludwig Wittgenstein, in part in code—that the sex so far is kissing; with a female person; and with marriage (since we are hieing) prepense. Never mind: *écrasez l'infâme!* We mean, of course, that of the wholly unnecessary, *intimidating*, difficulty of this *Wittgenstein*.

The one commanding sentence in this collection of entirely private jottings (the woman he loved having found a more likely husband) is:

“The bourgeois odour of the Marguerite-Talla relationship I find so gruesome, unbearable that I could flee from it out of this world.”

We rather felt it set out and dealt with the whole topic.

R. M.

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1. William Warren Bartley III, *Wittgenstein*, New York 1974.
2. *The Human World* No. 14 February 1974; comment by Rush Rhees and Major and Mrs J. Stonborough, p. 66 ff.

Letters

Dear Sir,

I wonder whether, in your editorial “Trusting Mr Howard on Europe”, in your last issue, you are quite accurate in saying, “As governed by treaty, the Common Fisheries Policy is part of the legal requirement of EU membership.”

In my understanding, an international treaty is an agreement, worked out by interested states over a long period of time, to conform to certain agreed understandings and rules governing the subject matter of the treaty. If a state signs up, it undertakes as a preliminary to amend its domestic law so far as may be necessary to bring it into conformity, enabling it eventually to ratify the treaty.

Jurisprudence governing treaties between states recognises various ways in which a state may join a treaty without subscribing to the whole. These include interpretive declarations, reservations and protocols. A state which signs a treaty with reservations may attract objections from other states party to the treaty. Depending on the subject matter of the treaty, the effect of such may be to limit relations between the reserving and the objecting parties. A state entering a treaty can also attempt to get up a faction to support pasting a protocol in the front of the treaty modifying what it is about.

I mention these details by way of making two points. First, which of these was Mr Howard proposing? Interpretive declarations, limiting the UK’s participation? Reservations? Surely not! Both are hated by lawyers and civil servants and certain to result in objections from states. Protocols, then. This I take it was roughly the point you were urging.

Secondly, whichever of these he had in mind, it would be very interesting to watch him put it into effect. For the only ground on which any of these reluctances may be opposed is not, as you seemed to suggest, that it is unlawful, but that it is not in conformity with the Object and Purpose of the treaty.

If Mr Howard were enabled to—what? denounce the Treaty of Rome and sign up to it with reservations? Attempt protocols?—the other member states would be obliged to tell the world what the Object and Purpose of the bundle of treaties comprising the EU in fact is!

I take it I am uncontroversial in suggesting that telling the world *why* the European states want to move beyond a common market to a federation of states under common government would be utterly novel and unanticipated. Butter, is it—or guns? Only mountains of marge—or diplomacy and peace in our time with it? Some of us, anyway, think we should be told; even if that ain’t democratic, as now everywhere understood, so to be.

Yours sincerely

Robert Marchant

A letter to another editor

Dear Sir,

Arch Puddington's onslaught (*Commentary* October 2004) takes Noam Chomsky's politics far more seriously than Chomsky does himself. Professor Chomsky's opinion is that all human thinking is scientific. It is natural to him to mention "rational enquiry (that is, the approach of natural sciences)" (Noam Chomsky, *The Architecture of Language*, ed. Nirmalangshu Mukherji, Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik and Rama Kant Agnihotri, New Delhi (2000) 2001, p. 2) without any misgivings that there could be any other modes or styles of rational inquiry. He accepts the consequence that his work in political polemic must be accounted solipsistic: "My political views are my own. Anything that one says about politics, of course, has to do with community and culture. ..." which are not susceptible to rational enquiry. "That is not to say that questions about community, culture and language are unimportant. They are extremely important ... it is just that we have little scientific understanding of them." (*Ibid.*, p. 42) For Chomsky "little scientific understanding" is the same as "little understanding"; his "own" pronouncements therefore in his own view show little understanding and are of no interest to anyone else. It is a nicer question why in that case they are of any interest to Chomsky himself. But the last thing he claims is the intellectual rigour for which Mr Puddington reports Chomsky's political writings are renowned.

Although in my view Professor Chomsky is profoundly wrong about the nature of human thinking, with disastrous results for his grammatical studies, I do not see why here we should not take him at his word and refrain from treating his politicking with a seriousness he cannot himself grant it.

Yours faithfully

Ian Robinson

Born-dead Metaphor

When BBC Ceefax reported the successful candidate as saying, the day after the U.S. presidential election of 2004, “I have political capital and I intend to spend it, I thought it must be a mistake, but *The Week* repeated the report.[13.11.04] It is possible that comments were made on this figure of speech, but I did not see them. So I started by taking it as a leading example of the modern style of dead metaphor. In the bad old days a good lively metaphor used to catch on so successfully that it was worked to death and became a *cliché*. A good example is the word *cliché* itself or the English equivalent *stereotyped*, a metaphor that has lingered on long after the process of stereotyping became obsolete. The new kind is born dead, and depends on our *not* understanding the figure. In a previous column I think we have already mentioned *drawing a line in the sand*. In the real world, of the flickering screens, if you are lucky enough to have capital the thing to do with it is invest it, not spend it. A financial adviser who told you how to spend capital would be had up for mis-selling, and in any case anyone can do it without any advice at all. President Bush is said to be a not very intelligent man, but he seems to have improved on the born-dead metaphor by inventing one that if treated as real does have sense. He does intend to spend the new-found capital entrusted him by 51% of the voters. Having blown whatever political capital he had, he desperately needed more to fund his politically extravagant lifestyle, and we may be sure it will all have gone by the year 2008.