Letters

Dear Editor,

Your intoduction to *Eyewash,* "What's wrong with *Private Eye*?", disturbs me. That feeling began with your reference to "the Manby girls and Ricos" used to characterise our contemporary literati. Though I much admire Lawrence's novella, I have always thought that these personages were rather cheaply drawn: cardboard Aunt Sallys put up to vent the author's spleen upon, superficially conceived. And were it not for the presence in the story of the two grooms (Welsh and Native American) who come to focus, together with the horse itself, the positive values by which all else is judged, potent imaginative creations visualised, as the grooms are, both as barely articulate yet conspiratorial work-hands going about their mundane duties, and, in the case of Lewis, a source of inspiration that contrives, against all likely odds, through folk-belief, to re-connect the brittle 20th century with the wonder of Creation as seen in the night sky, I should have deplored that these minor characters lacked the comic substance of a Pecksniff or Bounderby.

My point is, that you do not seem to me to have offered, in this first part of a feature-to-be-continued, a convincing touchstone by which to measure the failures in literature and journalism that you document. But Leavis was inclined to lean on straws too. He chose that very Rico-theme from time to time to characterise the literati of his own day by. But coming from him, at the end of a career in which he had revised and revitalised (with lessons he had learnt from that same Lawrence, too) the past of English literature, his invocation of it as a touchstone (which it is, after all, for you too), together with the living principle which animated his own writing, made it convincing. I can find only bitterness at the bottom of your own effort to grapple with the spirit of the age and desperation in your choice of the stink-bomb throwing *Private Eye* as an ally.

Yours

Barrie Mencher

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Dear Sir,

When some of you fellows in The Old Dart let on you were still

reading *Pivate Eye*, I tracked a copy down here in Australia. It still wanders out to the colonies by mail boat. The interested reader can have a chuckle in November over goings-on in London the previous July. I opened my first *Eye* for a quarter of a century with keen anticipation. Ron Knee (59), ashen-faced Neasden F.C. supremo, over the moon and sick as a parrot, still? Dave Spart and Deirdre Spart, still getting exercised about something or other they reckon is, basically, er ... ? Not in the issue I opened, precisely, but I was disappointed scarcely at all.

You say the *Eye* would have mocked Paul Foot if he had not been one of their own, and I'm sure it would; but only in the way it does mock all its natural readership, in the figures of Dave and Deirdre and the rest. Celeb. reads the *Eye*; or anyway the funny bits. E. I. Addio/Erewego is Fleet Street, and reads the *Eye*. Rev. A. R. P. Blair MA (Oxon.) was a keen *Eye* reader until he sank beneath the flood of dispatch boxes. All Piloti's high-rise architects, and one or two of the more politically-motivated of his councillors and town-planners, read the *Eye*, as do Lunchtime O'Boulez's arts administrators and members of metropolitan symphony orchestras and opera boards.Vice-Chancellors compose Latin honorary-doctorate citations for soap-opera actors and writers of children's amusements, when not reading *Private Eye*. The *Eye* is passed about in the staff room at St Cakes, though carefully; the boys, *Spectator*-readers since 1979, can be unkind. Young British Artists would think it desperately uncool; nevertheless, follow one into a waiting-room and, sure enough ...

The *Eye* is—what? The Brain of Britain, having a chuckle at itself during morning coffee? All right—but how can "St Albion Parish News", apart from the accuracy of the original hit, be such a feeble ongoing unfunny chuckle, when the real Blairs, Bushes and (John) Howards are out there leading their respective electorates to *idiocy*?

Fancy the *Eye* still going strong! "Dad's comic" to generations of children now; wonderful old British institution, really.

Yours fraternally,

Barry Mackenzie

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Dear Editor,

In *Eyewash* 1128 you write: "Where in the works of the recent great names is anybody with any religion, art, love, morality, or any sense of making sense of life? and where is there any recognition by the great names that this is an uncommon state of affairs?"

The second half of the sentence saves the first, up to a point. But I

am afraid you will be taken to be saying that what is wrong with the modern novel in the first place is that it is about the wrong sort of person.

Anna Karenina has people in it who have some religion; some art; some love; some morality; some sense of making sense of life. Konstantin Levin, for instance. His particular burden is the last of your desiderata. Ponderous and wearying it makes him, too, both in the tale and to the reader. But then there is the chapter in which he takes out a gun with a house guest, who proceeds to spoil the day until Tolstoy gives the very gun dogs winged words of complaint! What they want to be, is gun-dogging. It is a perfect, perfect day for it and all the human beings can think of is quarrelling and frightening away the game. The episode ends with Levin astonishing every one and in particular himself by asking his guest to leave. What Levin wants to be, as appears in the world for the first time with his almost unwilled action of turning the nuisance out, is taking hold on life—life as it is given Konstantin Levin to apprehend it, though. I should want it scarcely at all. In Levin's action, possession of one of your desiderata is shown being overcome; or maybe the word is, *transfigured*.

That is one possibility, though no doubt "only Tolstoy can do this", with his unmatched ability to realise world and life as though objectively. There is nothing general about the development in Levin.

Yet for all that there *is* something general about it. Where the characters in a novel have no religion, art, love, morality or sense of making sense of life, there is nothing there; nothing capable of being overcome, or transfigured; nothing that might destroy a man or a woman, as religion may, or love; no life; no possibility of what I like to call tragedy. The new thing in the world, though, is something to be found in the writing. How shall the Parthenon be criticism of life, as surely it is, save in virtue of being the thing it is, a bit of heaven on earth? Or Chartres cathedral; or the Waldstein sonata ... ? Must we distinguish *Anna Karenina* from these because it hath *such* people in it?

When Chaucer writes

> Fair was this yonge wyf, and therewithal
> As any wezele hir body gent and smal

(I saw it in a government office today) or Tolstoy

> Her mother knew that Natasha had too much of something, and that because of this she would not be happy

how much of what this teaches has to do with Alysoun's or Natasha's herself having any religion, or art, or love, or morality, or trouble over what life is? And yet speaking more generally, of course

it must. Does "criticism of life" need a dose of medicine? Or is it all right?

Yours sincerely

Robert Marchant

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Brian Crick, *Love Confounded: Revaluing the Great Tradition*
Edgeways Books, 2004, ISBN 0 708839 80 0, £30.00

Dear Sir,

I read Crick's book with both interest and exasperation, and felt some sympathy with something a friend said: "I don't really know what it means to generally place love based on blood ties *above* the conjugal kind—the concept of love doesn't, I think, admit of hierarchical analysis in that way." The Emily Brontë chapter (which I like, and admire, in itself) seems to me not to belong to the overall argument, for the tie between Cathy and Heathcliff is not a sibling tie, any more than the tie between me and my first girlfriend was a sibling tie, though it wasn't sexually demonstrative either. And I don't think Crick's reverence for the first part of *The Rainbow* can quite bear the weight of its role as antithetical saviour of the marriage principle, though as an opinion it is probably sound. As a book of general criticism of the 19th century novel, I welcome it; but I find his central case advanced rather blurrily. (I disagree with his criticisms of *Women in Love*.)

If *King Lear* is a tragedy of incest, what kind of tragedy is Phèdre of? Isn't this essay based on an understanding that reverses Robert Marchant's *Tragedy Against Psychology* (viz. "Psychology Against Tragedy")? And what becomes of the real tragedy, that of ingratitude, filial ingratitude, even if it takes a madman/senility (Lear) to bring that out, to precipitate it? Doesn't Crick subvert the broad general theme, the moral theme, to a Freudian complex that could all too easily become confused with it? Nevertheless, I'm all for these quixotic enterprises: they keep criticism alive at any rate, even at the cost of bad judgements.

The essay on Jane Austen is essentially an attempt by yet another critic to grapple with the "problem(s)" of *Mansfield Park*, yet, in the

attempt, Crick uncovers a characteristic theme of Jane Austen's fiction, though I think it is a characteristic more of the culture she inherited than a peculiarity of her own. Crick identifies that himself, though hasn't, I think, properly absorbed it. In a correct but syntactically excruciating sentence he writes: "Those readers whose notion of what writing about adult passion ought to be like has been shaped by the romantics and their modern successors, have always found it hard to adjust to those distinctive accents." (Whatever would we have done without that comma?) Though the accents referred to are those of searching the heart of one's neighbour and of oneself for an understanding of its moral character, Crick knows well that such an activity cannot cease at the prospective Intended; but to exercise it there becomes in his account, albeit subliminally, a symptom of cold-heartedness. So, Edmund can marry Fanny, on positive moral grounds, whilst jilting Mary Crawford on similar negative ones. And thus, a real love story is usurped by a union of siblings: family before what Lawrence once called "lions and tigers".

I apologise for seeming to take Crick's argument at a tangent, but his own methodology is far from straightforward.

It has to be said that he is in fact offering corroboration of his own to the well-known case against *Mansfield Park*, without throwing more than a little light on it. His own light is to extend the love-versus-family theme to Jane Austen's work as a whole. I think this was nevertheless a mistake. She may indeed not take her love stories beyond the wedding stage (as Crick says), but they are surely vindications of marriage. If we felt that the carefully studied happy couples, to use the usual phrase, like Elizabeth and Darcy, were indeed doomed to despair and didn't at least stand a good chance of making a good marriage, in the usual sense, then we could, justifiably, claim that she was placing her faith rather in the love of siblings or child-parent love than in the love of men and women, husbands and wives. We emphatically don't, except in the case of *Mansfield Park*. Here indeed she has gone wrong, and I want to add my bit to the great body of puzzlement and dissatisfaction about, not everything of course (it is in many ways an excellent novel and worthy of the strong recommendation the Leavises, for example, made on its behalf) but about the working out of the romantic theme.

To begin with, I wish people would stop lumping the Crawfords together. Henry may be a more or less convincing rogue, with all his 18th century gentlemanly charm, and may function effectively in the drama of the novel, but, for all that, he is a character devised by the author to play a distinctive part, a synthetic creation. Mary Crawford is the outcome of inspiration, a deeply realised being, more suited, I should say, to take part in a novel by Tolstoy than in her own literary circumstances. And, because of this, she is like "lions and tigers". Don't tell me you can "place" her any more than you can the albeit much bigger Anna Karenina. Here we are not playing with themes, with ideologies, dogmas, cultural milieux: we are confronting life direct, where (as Lawrence would have said) it wells up from the source. Sneer if you dare!

And this is why Edmund is such a feeble shadow to complement

her. He belongs to 18th century English bourgeois society; she does not. She, to him, is as a being from another world. Of course she cannot be a heroine of a romantic comedy; and *Mansfield Park* is not exactly that. It is a valiant attempt to take on board the evangelical spirit, a spirit forming the values of her comedies but in this novel made overt. It does not succeed. Christianity needs a more potent representative. Jane Austen would have done better to allow her underlying values to speak for themselves, as she did in her other novels, rather than through an Edmund or a Fanny. But Mary Crawford might have made a Mary Magdalen.

The analysis of *David Copperfield* seems to me too detailed for anything new that is said. Can't everyone see he was a sentimentalist, that his handling of some of his material was morbidly perverse and that he had a problem with clinging little-girl wives and benevolent old men? But I don't think the problem was "suppressed" sexuality. In fact, once again (like Jane Austen's handling of the sibling theme), I think it was something deep-buried in the Age, like female schoolfriends holding hands.'

I see a new orthodoxy developing whereby the first Brangwen generation (Tom and Lydia) becomes the foundation stone of Lawrence's reputation as the saviour of modern marriage; whereas Lawrence's highest genius, in that part of his novel, is shown in his handling of the parent-child relationship in such an episode as that in which Tom soothes his little daughter Anna in the cowshed. Here Lawrence's wonderful evocation of the processes of Nature, as related to English farming in pre-Great War times, is intimately associated with his inexpressibly (so to speak) tender feeling for the child, as mediated through Tom the father. It is this rather than the more obviously romantic theme of Tom's "not belonging to himself" (which, incidentally, I am not at all sure is meant to mean that he belongs to God or to the starry heavens, any more than that he, as convention would have it, belongs, now, no longer to himself but to his intended) that should be stressed. No, however wonderful the writing of that first section of the novel, the section shows other signs of conventionality, such as the flood which is so reminiscent of the flood in *The Mill on the Floss* (cf. the altogether differently conceived flood in "The Virgin and the Gipsy"). For my money, F. R. Leavis's remark that "normative marriage" is best represented in European fiction by the relationship of Kitty and Levin in *Anna Karenina* is right. Furthermore, I would say that, though Lawrence's prose in this section of the novel does indeed constitute a new "language" of fiction, which his many re-writings caused to prevail almost throughout the book, constituting the characteristic richly sensuous and rhythmically vigorous style (which some readers find turgid), the first section of the book is somewhat self-consciously archaic, harking back to the nineteenth century of George Eliot, say.

Using the word "style" like that runs the risk of suggesting a uniformly limiting range of possibilities, but this "style" facilitates the astonishing Will/Anna honeymoon sequence and the equally

astonishing critical-imaginative cathedral episode. *The Rainbow* is a great book; and is, in one way and another, and among other things, an exploratory thesis on the subject of marriage.

That theme is taken up in *Women in Love*, in more sharp focus and, of course, in a yet different style, terser and with a distinctive "gleam", resulting in the composition of a still more original novel, something more visionary than *The Rainbow* and still more of a "poem". A proper understanding of Lawrence's work on marriage would entail the examination of all his work thereon, to include the short stories and the polyanalytics. The new orthodoxy is limiting Lawrence's achievement, hauling it back into the nineteenth century.

And isn't it the bulk and "scope" of *The Rainbow*—a family saga—that makes some admiring readers rate it higher than *Women in Love*?

Yours faithfully

Ben Simon