An introductory note

Words in Edgeways will combine literary and political comment, and will consist of little but continuous prose. Each issue will contain two or three longer essays plus a miscellany of shorter articles and squibs. For anyone familiar with *The Human World*, *The Haltwhistle Quarterly* or *The Gadfly*, this magazine is their successor but will be less academic, more topical and pay more attention to journalism. Despite this difference of emphasis, general political, moral and philosophical questions can still be raised in it. We invite contributions, including to our "Letters Other Editors Didn't Print" feature; and the only limitations on length will be practical ones. (*The Gadfly* once got a 247 page handwritten letter from Bribie Island, off the Great Barrier Reef, which it would have liked to publish but couldn't. *Words in Edgeways* wouldn't be able to publish it either.) We may insert articles without waiting for the month to be up, but usually the magazine will be a monthly, published on the first day of the month. (The second issue will appear on August 1.) If there is anything new before the month is up, it will be announced on the website Home page. We don't exclude "creative" writing but, in general, what we anticipate publishing is various sorts of criticism.

The editor is named above. We shall occasionally have signed essays, but anonymity will be usual, as with the editorials of newspapers. We don't anticipate a rush of professional journalists wanting to publish with us but we do hope to attract the odd piece or two which no professional could publish under his own name. Journalists need anonymity to be able to pursue their careers in peace; and, in this free country, with no thought police, no KGB likely to turn up with guns at dead of night to enforce the politically correct views, our establishment nevertheless behaves as if we *were* living in the old Soviet Union. Some things just can't be said by anybody who hopes to go on contributing to the "media". The best literary reviewing at present published in England is in *Private Eye*. Their "Literary Review" pages are not flawless—can be just bitchy, and more seriously are restricted to the immediate literary sensations of the day—but quite reliably twice a month give well-argued judgements. This would not be possible if the articles were signed.

Contributions must be emailed to the editor as .rtf (rich text file) attachments. Anybody who doesn't know how to do that is welcome to contact us for advice.

Editorial

Is there something *peculiar* about the English now, or is it me—old enough to remember when nil per cent of undergraduates thought "presentation" the "skill" they most needed to develop (now 55 per cent according to research by CRAC—Careers Research and Advisory Centre—an "educational charity", *Telegraph*, June 9)? It isn't just the country's constitution that seems to have been made-over—by Tony Blair—but its entire character—by common consent. We certainly don't keep ourselves to ourselves any more or a stiff upper-lip. We like to share one another's grief and pain. I want to feel what you feel. And you want me to feel it. Princess Di was like our own daughter. Jill Dando too. And if a neighbour's child is abducted and horribly murdered, or merely run down by a car, we measure our solidarity with the grieving parents in flowers by the roadside and by seeing them interviewed on tv—where what used to be private is made public, a bit of News and (sort of) entertaining.

Something *really* peculiar has happened to the News. (This is *not* just me.) Have you noticed?—the presenters (they're not readers any more) have become weirdly sociable with one another—and with the viewer too We're not just hearing the news anymore, we're watching *Friends*. As one of Andy Hamilton's characters in *Bedtime* says, "It's like a cocktail party there." And we're practically at the party ourselves. The most brilliant of the smiles is for us (each of us) and "Bye-ee" too as we go out the door. The old-style readers delivered their lines impersonally, as having to do with a public order of seriousness; the new ones come on as if they take it all personally, are really, really, *personally* interested in it all. (Did you watch Neil Dixon on BBC News—going round the country, where *we* are—finding out from us, and then retailing to us, what we all thought about the war in Iraq? Have you ever seen anyone so soberly excited? He made very good television.) What a weird sort of "personal" it is. They're all "personal" but identically so. Ever so personal but never inappropriate. They all feel, really feel the things they tell us about but, weirdly, are never ever carried away by their feelings into anything the slightest bit incorrect. They're role-models, every one, personal but perfectly correct politically. The body-snatchers have invaded again. This is seriously *not* a cocktail party you want to go to. (Perhaps we get the presenters we deserve.)

The airwaves are smothered in ingratiating oiliness. Radio presenters buttering up their listeners, oozing fake mateyness and flattery, telling them things a moron couldn't believe: "It's your programme/your opinions/votes/choices that count." (= "Send us your emails or we'll lose our jobs.") And their listeners giving it them back again, as if they really do think you can be mates with disembodied voices and filled-in pixels. The latest evolutionary development: Non-threatening Football Phone-in Man.

Surely, no generation before our own can ever have been so

good, or at least compassionate, caring. We care, dreadfully—about all sorts of things everywhere but especially deaths-on-the-road, here, at home. Even one is one too many. And if they're drink-related (now mobile phone-related too) we are outraged. As I heard last night, it doesn't matter how long you imprison the offender for, it's still insufficient compensation for the loss of a loved-one. Having said that. Of course. A certain number of casualties annually—even kiddies—is only to be expected. It's an acceptable part of the price we pay for living in a free and democratic society—just so long as it doesn't include any cases of drink- (or mobile phone-) related driving.

We like to help one another—not, as we used to and (as I have heard) they still do elsewhere, mainly family, friends and neighbours—but complete strangers. Nowadays, from compassion and to help, we *go to war*. We supported the war on the Serbs for the sake of the Kosovo muslims. We supported the war on Iraq for the sake of all the Iraquis except the Baathists (though not if innocent lives were going to be lost). And at home, for the sake of the Peace Process and from an excess of sympathy, a very popular minister of state calls an enemy of the state, "Babe". We need never fear going without counselling. There are now more professionally qualified counsellors in the country than members of the armed forces. We want—young people especially want—to make a difference, and to *share* (not goods, experience). We reconcile contradictions (like Walt Whitman, we are big, we can contain much). We are there for one another to a degree perhaps never before seen, caring, supportive and non-judgemental. But as well as this warm and yielding feminine side that feels, we also have a hard-edged masculine side that *does*, that acts directly upon the visible materio-mechanical universe, putting policies in place, launching initiatives, delivering quality, being not-in-the-business-of, like Patricia Hewitt.

We no longer look down on other races or classes or any one else's religion. To us, no man *is* an island. We are one vast (multicultural) community, united by a belief in equality which makes all judgement … inappropriate. All music is equal now, so Radio Three boldly champions Rodgers and Hammerstein, and defies its listeners to use the phrase "pop music" of *any*thing. Having said that. Some music must still be more equal than others, because, although Thom Yorke doesn't have an orchestra and never gives concerts, Christopher Hogwood does have a band and does do gigs (shows too).

Even our faults have been modernized. Illiteracy is no longer any mere, corrigible inability to read and write. People can read and write who never write, and not only never read anything worth reading but have no idea that anything is any more worth reading than anything else. Our newspapers, the posh, heavyweight, quality broadsheets, aren't for reading. They're almost nothing but graphics, with a residue of text—often a graphic itself—separating one graphic from another. You don't read, you look at them. The fashion pages in the *Telegraph* are worth looking at: Kylie's lovely and inviting arse, beneath a jolly backward look … Sophie's *amazing* tits and

thighs—all genuine … On Saturday, after Fashion, *I* look first at John's motoring column, on Sunday at Jeff on house maintenance. You?

It's now possible to be (did it use to be?) as thoroughly schooled as only the best schools can school you and be as uneducated as … only the most thoroughly schooled can be: Chris Smith, Charles Clarke, Tony ("Education, Education, Education") Blair—the nation's Dave Brent, or Weather Girl—the epitome of our new governing class, not educated, just *risen*, to the tip-top of the class of people who have developed not just the skills of presentation, which 55 per cent of undergraduates think they need, and of negotiation, which 45 per cent think they need, but of teamwork too, which—to CRAC's concern—only 25 per cent think they need. Of course, such a conception of education is fantastically, bizarrely primitive—possible only in a country as widely educated as our own—but, still, you couldn't say it wasn't modern. *Today in Parliament* is mostly embarrassing because mostly the speakers are people who haven't got, have never had, the habit of reading. Just as prose and poetry need to stay in touch with speech (" … the language of men …") so speech, certainly public speech, in a culture that's literate, needs to stay in touch with prose. But the speech of our modern parliamentarians has lost touch with prose and that part of the language's past that prose makes available to the present. So all they have in their heads is fragments, of the present ("So let there be no mistake. If we're serious about wanting to—reach for the sickbag [*sic*]—save the planet … "). And then, on the other hand, there is John Bercow, the last man on earth still talking like the Tite Barnacles of *Little Dorrit*.

But perhaps this is all just vanity—thinking one's own time uniquely awful? When couldn't there have been such a funeral as Princess Diana's, such Reports as the Dearing or Macpherson, such obituraries as George Harrison's? When would a Martin McGuiness denouncing drink-drivers on a Dimbleby Show *not* have been applauded? ("Behint a wheel, an IRA mon's a sober mon.") Of course, the IRA is nothing if not a conspiracy to murder; and a senior member of the IRA is nothing if not a murderer; and Martin McGuiness would not be in government (let alone on the Dimbleby Show) if he hadn't been a senior member of the IRA. But if he's sound on drink-driving … . But when might we not have witnessed similarly gross symptoms of public feeblemindedness? Except … hasn't it become chronic? In its public life, isn't the country *senile*?

Of course, present-day England has no shortage of clever, well-educated and cultivated individuals still, men and women of ability and character who might have distinguished themselves at any time. Our newspapers may no longer be written to be read but many of those who write for them *can* write: Charles Moore, the Hitchens brothers, David Sexton, "Theodore Dalrymple", Jenny McCartney, Kevin Myers, Melanie Phillips, Simon Hoggart, Minette Marin, Janet Daley, Aidan Rankin, Nick Cohen, Andrew Gimson, Peter Oborne, Craig Brown, Anatole Skidelsky, Frederic Forsyth, Roger Scruton … . And, alongside all the rubbish on television, there *are*

programmes with some dramatic and literary depth to them—often in various ways mimicking or otherwise exploiting the rubbish—programmes which really do try to tell the truth about people's lives nowadays: Andy Hamilton's *Bedtime*, Ricky Gervais' *The Office*, Peter Kay's *Phoenix Nights*, those two sets of tragi-comic monologues, the one with Joanna Lumley in and the other about the Welsh cab driver. And then Ali G's first two sets of fake interviews weren't created by a nonentity either, nor Steve Coogan's. What has Bremner "not" captured of Blair? All these—*Happiness* too—are written and performed by people who have seen and—like Conrad's Mr Kurtz—judged.

Yet, somehow, it doesn't seem to matter how distinguished individuals are or how many there are of them. They still seem to have no discernible influence on the thing-as-a-whole we're all part of. The *Telegraph* leader on the Macpherson Report must be as good a piece of journalism as has ever appeared in an English newspaper but it hasn't been able to stop the BBC asking whether racism is still institutionalised in the police force, as if that were the same sort of thing as asking whether policemen still wear helmets. But perhaps that's not surprising when the strain of comment that that leader exemplifies doesn't even influence the rest of the paper it appears in, which, apart from anything else, really does deserve *Private Eye*'s jibe, *The Daily Pornograph*. Have you ever, by the way, seen a naked *white* nipple in it? I saw a black one once. (Is this racism, inverted racism or anti-racism?)

Why is our national life as a whole so much less than its parts? For one answer, see immediately below.

The End of Prose?

We seem to be living at the end of the age when *prosa oratio* was the straightforward mode of written language.

On the one hand the writing of prose is no longer, for instance, the general requirement for public examinations. Imagine history tested by multiple-choice questions! This is no longer imagination: in the new AS level history no essay writing is required by at least one board. Carlyle could not help writing spasmodically and eccentrically, because he felt and judged that ordinary Johnsonian prose in the 1830s was breaking up from its foundations. I doubt whether he expected the break-up to go as far as spider charts.

When the local museum reopened with a new display of wall boards and miscellaneous junk, the display was introduced by a copy of a social survey kept alongside the visitors' book. This document was composed *entirely* in bullet-points, some but not all of which were also, coincidentally, well-formed sentences. If prose is found there it is as an exhibit, introduced by bullet-points.

On the other hand, the difference between prose and verse is breaking down. The Church of England for instance publishes prayers in huge quantities, which are neither prose nor verse. They are printed in lines like verse and frequently lapse into bad examples of verse-forms, blank verse being the commonest. But they are not consistently verse. "Encouraged by the example of your saints" we pray for something or other, but we are not sufficiently encouraged to try to discover a way of saying so. "Keep us running in the race that lies ahead" we pray on the same page, no doubt imitating the motion in the metre.[1]

Who can tell whether most of what is subsidized year in and year out as English poetry is prose or verse? It is printed for the most part in lines, but usually has no other mark of verse. In particular it is quite hard to find contemporary verse with any naturalness of rhythm.

All language is rhythmic in the sense of making living wholes by ways of joining parts. Spider charts are by nature arhythmic, the not-quite-verse arhythmic by instinctive habit. Language is *naturally* rhythmic: non-rhythmic language is the beginnings of a contradiction of language altogether. (How much *information* is lost by the non-rhythmic aritificial construction of announcements at railway stations out of bits of recorded speech?)

This situation gives the novel a *terminus* at both ends. The novel comes in with fluent ordinary prose, and looks like going out with it.

So the unity of well-formed sentence and prose rhythm which even twenty-five years ago seemed unshakeable is in fact dissolving into not very competent *vers libre* in one direction, and bullet points in the other. It is still worth asking whether we have any genuine alternative for the formation of public opinion to the use of the prose essay. Sometimes a television interview or even a soundbite may provoke to thought. So, let's hope, may a poem. But generally, we just have to think in prose.

The Financial Times and the novels of Martin Amis are still written mainly in prose, which perhaps makes them both archaic; but could it be otherwise? The attention-span of what is claimed, by those without experience of teaching it, to be the best-educated generation we have ever had, is, however, well-known to be small. The same prose-based broadsheets, the daily formation of public opinion, could never dream of publishing one printed page unalleviated by cross-heads, bullet-points, photographs, cartoons, advertisements, summaries, spaces, changes of type-face and other graphic hoo-hah.

Both *The Times* and *The Spectator* obligingly save us the trouble of reading their articles by giving one-line summaries. *The Week* saves us the trouble of reading even the summaries, by summarizing *them*. "All you need to know about all that matters"—so you *don't* need to know anything about the thoughts and arguments that have gone to deciding what matters.

The very first step towards restoring something like standards of judgement must be the return by journals to arguments of the kind that need some attention from readers. Automatic response:

Journalism has to be lively. The bright chatter in the “heavies” is as a matter of fact quite deadly and boring as well as unserious. Some sobriety and gravity is called for if there is to be any life in British journalism.

So what can be done? The situation is not an effect of causes that can be identified and rectified, nothing of a kind that might be cured by even the most determined implementation of policies. The belief that all wrongs can be righted by five-point strategies and initiatives is one of the symptoms. On the other hand, we don’t regard the situation as inevitable. What we *can* do, and what we stand or fall by, is to offer some critical thinking ourselves, in English prose, thereby demonstrating that something better is possible.

[1] Examples from *Common Worship: Pastoral Services*, 2000, p. 363 and copiously on every page of this open-ended multivolume

"Competition" between filling stations—a penny a litre off petrol, when three quarters of what you pay goes in tax and more than half of what's left to the oil supplier.

Against Competition

New Labour has embraced competition as a universal good, turning its back on the bad old days when a number of its MPs listed themselves as Labour and Co-operative. This makes the belief in competition as a general and absolute good one of the examples of all-party consensus in the Commons, a state of affairs that should always put the general public on the alert.

Competition will always ensure the efficient provision of goods and services, will drive prices down and prevent the providers of goods and services from feather-bedding themselves: so it is not only thought but taken for granted. Naturally, there is some sense in this. Let us remember the days of local authority workforces, when the comfortably plump elderly men used to turn up at around ten in the morning to paint the council houses, would do a little unsupervised work, not very well, as if for the good of their health, take an extended luncheon break, resume their not very demanding labours after a couple of hours and then be on their way home for a comfortable tea and evening well before the winter evenings settled in. Now that that work is done by private firms employed by councils it is more likely to be done economically and well. Can one generalise even from this? Might there not have been a well-run local authority?

What, anyway, makes this a general rule? Ruskin's example, long since, was the army. Would we get better and more cost-effective protection of the realm by putting the service out for competitive tendering? As a matter of fact that is quite imaginable. New Labour caused a ripple in the Commons in 2002 by flying the kite of mercenaries. Perhaps the "peace-keeping" attacks on civilian populations which is so recognizable a mark of their modernization of international politics would be more cost-effective if the British Army were not involved. There remains, though, a quite rational feeling that the defence of the realm is too important to be left to competition.

In 2002, five years after the reintroduction of competition, our railways are in a state which it is hardly an exaggeration to call chaos. You set out of Paddington on a journey timed to take one hour and forty-eight minutes to get to Newport, and find yourself on an *ad-hoc* tour of Wiltshire, before rushing back towards London at 125 mph, in order to back into Swindon, before another hour's delay

because, as the "train manager" explains, "there is another train on the line"—a circumstance not envisaged. Trains regularly fail to complete their journeys, which happened rarely in war time. One turns up at Worcester Foregate Street to catch the advertised Paddington train for an important engagement to be told to make one's way on foot to Worcester Shrub Hill because the driver has arrived late and there is no time to bring the train round the two-minute route. At Worcester Shrub Hill the train then departs without waiting for the more obese or elderly pedestrians. A rail is broken between Hereford and Ledbury, so the train starts its journey at Ledbury, and a bus is laid on to take us from Hereford; at the end of which ten-mile journey we find that the train has departed without passengers. Despite the preference for not running at all over running late, "The late-running" so-and-so train is regularly announced almost with the tone of pride that used to be reserved for Pullmans. The shortage of drivers is regularly given as an acceptable reason for the lateness or cancellation of a train. The train companies have to keep costs down, and make profits within the few years of a franchise; they assumed when management (often with no experience of running railways) took up office that being public utilities the railways must be overmanned, and so cut so many jobs that now, often, not once in a blue moon, the trains simply don't run. There is a shortage of drivers purely and simply because of competition.

Competition in the supply of gas, water, electricity is a wholly artificial notion applied for reasons of ideological conviction. The water and the gas, whatever company puts its name on the bills, will come from the same reservoirs through the same pipes. The electricity will use the same wires. Is it really to anyone's economic advantage for British Gas to have to try to recapture customers from competitors by accosting us in the streets? As one very experienced administrator puts it, "The logical conclusion of some of the … theories being promoted is back to the fire brigades of different insurance companies racing to jostle one another for on-course premiums, and thwarting rivals by lowering the water pressure or table." (Lewis Stretch, *Nuclear and Worse Disasters*, Denton, 2002, p.187)

House and contents insurance has become so competitive that last month I received twelve separate offers each guaranteeing to cut costs in the first year. I can't be bothered: my insurance is reliable and not expensive, perhaps because general costs are kept down by the cut-throat competition. If so that's the only arguable good it does: keeping costs generally low. But so much effort goes into marketing and special offers that it is hard to believe there is any general economic benefit. In the same month I had rather fewer offers of new credit cards, most of them offering an initial period of low interest rates. I do sometimes accept these offers, though hopping around between credit cards is quite a nuisance and as I always cease to use the card at the end of the low-interest period I never do any good to the shareholders of the companies concerned (which are usually, one way or another, either American or the Royal

Bank of Scotland). How is this supposed to be generally an economic good?

But are public services and utilities really improveable by the introduction of competition? Even after the railway bubble of the 1840s had subsided, new lines were built for which competition was the only other justification. The Great Central Railway provided a *third* mainline route between London and Sheffield. The passengers then had a choice of Great Central, Midland or Great Northern. Whether this was anything more than confusing to them I don't know, though some people certainly had preferences for one company over another. The competition between routes survived into the days of British Railways. Why was it not just wasteful? In the end the huge waste of capital was recognized by the closing of the most recent route.

Competition, however, now extends even to the provision of public examinations. The non-profit-making examining boards for GCSE and A-level have been "rationalized" into three, which compete for customers. One of them had a very bad run 2001-2, issuing faulty examination papers (in one of which, on *genre* in writing, a sonnet had its lines numbered in the margin, to the number of sixteen), losing scripts and so on. There was a clamour for the concern to be wound up, but the *Financial Times* in an editorial objected that if so there would be only two service-providers left and competition would be reduced. All the schools want lots of A grades to get their students in the universities and in this case the competition is between which board will provide most. This goes far to explain the oddity of a situation in which statistics prove beyond challenge that year by year we get more and more successful A-level students just when anyone who has anything to do with the poor youngsters knows they are worse educated than ever before. A properly administered public service, such as we used to have, would avoid the nonsense directly caused by competition.

These reflections were ignited by the plans to open up the British postal services to competition. At the height of the privatisation era Mrs Thatcher was clear that the Post Office should not be denationalized. The Post Office is a natural monopoly and has developed into a very useful and actually loved national institution. It could even be called a detail of the national character. The letters on the whole are delivered efficiently. The local post office is also a representative of the state, handing out pensions, making passport forms available, giving advice about how and where to do things. The postmen and postwomen know their patches, are often local characters and even have a pastoral role keeping an eye on the old and infirm and spreading village news. They brave dogs and hostile letterboxes that draw blood from amateurs. Note: there is no inevitability about any of this. Whether letters correctly addressed and stamped for Canada get there in reasonable time or at all is on the lap of the gods, for Canada Post, also a national monopoly, is comparatively hopeless. Our post office happens to be a well-established and well-run institution; but perhaps that owes something to something more reliable than luck: for instance to a very well-

established tradition of public service.

This, however, is not the opinion of the managerial classes of the Government and the City, who know so well how to run everything whatever—a National Health Service in which treatment is a race between waiting-lists and death, with the odds often on the latter, a railway system as above, where in the days of Railtrack there was much more regular and direct government intervention than in the days of British Rail, roads on which it is frequently impossible to move, telecommunications firms like Energis, which managed to lose *all* its money despite an established and promising use of power lines to transmit phone messages, or Marconi, the successor of General Electric , impelled by City wisdom to use up its "cash pile", which it most effectively did on "acquisitions" that turned out, unlike the cash pile, to be without value—or Vodafone, still in business, though worth only about a quarter of its market valuation of two years ago. (Let somebody like Sir Chris Gent loose on the Post Office and watch him award himself a £10,000,000 bonus for buying a German firm that loses most of its value within two years.)

The Post Office as we know it must inevitably be destroyed by competition. There won't actually be two or three new post offices in every town representing the competing firms. Even if there are some new offices they will not be the local centres that the present post offices are. What there will be is services offering cut-price deliveries of some categories of mail, and putting constant downward pressure on the services still offered by the Post Office. Unlike the railways the Post Office is usually a net contributor to government funding, but competition will force it to deliver at less cost. The first sign of this is the abandonment of second daily delivery where it still survives, a simple consequence of the cost-cutting made necessary by the prospect of competition.

The destruction of the Post Office is not altogether to be explained by the received wisdom of the City as understood by New Labour. It is also decreed from Brussells. The European Union, surely the biggest and least efficient bureaucracy on the face of the earth, nevertheless decrees competition in some places and at some times. It is treaty law that the Germans must be allowed to run postal services in Britain if they so choose, and *vice versa*, though oddly enough, though much of our electricity and water is supplied by French and German firms, no British utilities operate in France or Germany. Howbeit, in this enthusiastically free-market and global economy there is no lawful escape from the destruction of public services as long as we remain within the EU.

In 2002 the financial markets were rocked by a series of scandals involving accounting practices ranging from the fanciful to the outright fraudulent. Future revenues had hopefully been listed as actual; the proceeds of auction sales in full, not just commission, had been reported as cashflow; current expenditure had been listed as capital investment, and so on. (By the way, fraud is never difficult to understand. The scandal of the fraud cases that drag on for more than a year, punishing the defendants in advance, along with the jury if there is one, is just for the benefit of the legal profession. There is no

good reason why the Athenian practice should not be imitated and any case not completed within a day thrown out. Frauds always involve the misuse of funds in ways anyone can understand.) How did all this get past the supposedly eagle eyes of the auditors? Absurdly, auditors are appointed by companies. Auditing should be a department of state, and particular auditors appointed by the state. Whether the state should pay the expenses is an open question. By present practice there is an inbuilt incentive to companies to appoint friendly *and cheap* auditors. If auditors compete for business, how can competition not tend to drive their standards down?

But what about competition in the most ordinary contexts of trade? We have about half a dozen big supermarket chains that between them dominate the market. New Labour curried favour with the electorate by setting up inquiries to establish that they were not properly competitive and the enquiries by and large failed to oblige. They are competitive. With the government's blessing one of them, Asda, was taken over by the world's largest retailer, Walmart of the U.S.A., and shivers ran down the spines of investors in the others, because the financial size of Walmart is such that it could run the whole Asda supermarket chain as a loss-leader for whatever time it took to get market supremacy.

Price wars between supermarkets give consumers temporary presents but is there any evidence that in the long term price wars bring down costs or improve service?

The great turnaround in Marks & Spencer brought about by its Dutch c.e.o. is largely due to its scrapping the policy that 90% of its goods be made in Britain by manufacturers with whom it has had dealings for many years, and going overseas to whatever supplier is cheapest for the time being. Whether ten years from now Marks & Spencer will still have its reputation for good quality remains to be seen.

One should bear in mind that as well as the consumer there is the supplier. The consumer in present-day Britain gets the advantage of cheap manufactured goods because local manufacturers cannot compete with those of the "emerging markets" of Asia because of the low wages paid in the latter. Is it really a good thing that our own manufacturers should be put out of business because of competition that is able to undercut them because of lower rewards to overseas workers? In fact we are always being told that our future depends on skills, but what is the point of having skills if they cannot be employed?

If the benefits of competition are cost-effectiveness and being kept on one's toes the disadvantages are cutting quality, cutting corners, driving standards down and generally making life uncomfortable. Competition is really not the same as capitalism. Capitalism is an invention that for better as well as for worse has brought modern global prosperity. In its way and on its own terms it does work. But "venture capitalism" like "political history" is a pleonasm. Capitalism by nature is venture capitalism. One person has an idea for a business; another person (or, of course, the same person) finances it and shares the risk; if it succeeds both share in the

profits. This perhaps (though it's one of the weighty moral questions ignored in the modern world) differentiates capitalism from usury. It isn't just a case of lending your money in order to get more back, but risking it for the creation of economic activity that would otherwise not occur. Competition is an enemy of venture capitalism. If your competitor has the same idea at the same time both you and he are likely to lose without any noticeable benefit to the public. Research and development would cease if the fruits could not be exploited without immediate competition. That competition is not an absolute good is shown, for example, by the general acceptance of the need for patent laws.

Economic well-being is the effective organisation of useful work. As we are human beings not ants the work ought wherever possible to be humanly satisfying; the rewards for it should be what Langland calls "measureable hire", i.e., appropriate. Work is one of the great constituents of our life, according to Genesis a curse, but also a possible blessing. Who sweeps a room as for thy laws / Makes that and th' action fine. Nothing similar can be said for competition. History is full of examples of an idea escaping from its proper zoo and causing havoc to the general public. There are causes and effects, so *everything* is cause-and-effect. There is evolution (by way sometimes of literally cut-throat competition) in the plant and animal kingdoms, so *everything* is evolutionary. Engineering design progresses, marvellously; science progresses, so *everything* progresses. Competition is one of these escaped ideas, different from the rest in that its proper field is much smaller, and that when it gets out of its proper field the damage it does is therefore punching out of all proportion to its weight.

Access

or

"If th'referee's gonni gi'y'it, then tak'it …"

Kenny Dalglish, on diving in football

New Labour has recently uncovered a new social problem: that too few working class go to the better universities. It has named the problem "Access", as if the working class were all in wheelchairs and the universities didn't have the ramps for them. But in thinking of the matter as a problem, for which, of course, there must be some administrative solution waiting to be discovered, New Labour betrays that it understands neither the working class nor the university.

"Some universities … send out the message that only certain types of people are welcome," Charles Clarke complains. *The Daily Telegraph* objects (April 9th) but not on the grounds that the universities would be right if they did but—conceding that they would be wrong—on the grounds merely that the charge is unfounded, the evidence "anecdotal". But, on the factual point, Clarke is right: the range of types welcomed by universities *is* limited. There are those who fall outside it—who place themselves outside it by being unwilling or unable to accept the invitation the university makes. Universities—while they remain universities—*do* welcome only certain types of people and would be wrong if they didn't. If some universities don't welcome some types (and not all would welcome every education secretary we've had in recent years—not, let's hope, on their staffs at least), all that *that* means is that some are trying to remain universities in fact while others are content just with the name (and the funds).

The former don't need to apologize to Charles Clarke, though, for the narrowness of the range of human types they welcome. They welcome, as it happens, a much greater range than, say, the Houses of Parliament or the BBC or PricewaterhouseCoopers. The outspoken and outrightly rebellious have a freedom to speak out and rebel in universities that they have scarcely anywhere else. The university is an institution (the church, not co-incidentally, is another) in which authority follows only very approximately the hierarchy of seniority, title and point on the pay-scale. It is one of the very great and serious attractions of university life that in it the junior is free to insult or otherwise lay the law down to the senior as he is almost nowhere else. Where else but in a university would that

hierarchy, faced with a Wittgenstein or a Nietzsche, flatten itself so readily? (Where else would David Starkie have got on so happily? New Labour?) The worst penalty facing the outsider is slow or no preferment. Not much of a penalty, really, and with its own compensations too. University life is naturally, intrinsically, competitive, and the race—the everyday race in the common room, lab and committee room and before the students—does not always go to seniority. Leavis, for practically his whole career at Cambridge, was junior but who had the essential authority in his department, the kind of authority all university teachers crave? Who, when he spoke, was listened to? Was it E. V. Lucas? Or Tillyard? Outsiders often call the university an ivory tower. Inside, it more often seems a bear pit. Which is why civility has always been prized and cultivated there: for fear of what would happen if it weren't. Universities give a very wide latitude not just to the rebellious, the eccentric, the impolite and the immoral but even to the clinically insane. Where else but in a university would the schizophrenic mathematician John Nash have been welcome? Or the manic-depressive psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison?

But, of course, neither Clarke nor the *Telegraph* leader writer is interested in whether universities welcome types like these or not. Their argument is about class. The subject here is class—and nothing else. And what the two sides agree on is that all classes ought to be equally welcome and that for universities to discriminate against the working class would be shockingly wrong. Of course, there is one way of taking that in which it is obviously true but there is another in which it is—ought to be—just as obviously false. Although it isn't very often said publicly, everybody knows it to be true that, for the working class, being educated means in very important respects being educated *out* of their class. (And once out, who wants to go back, even if it were possible?) Within certain limits people can be trained with systematic reliability. They can't be so educated *at all*, not within any limits. Education makes an invitation—which can always be refused. And for anyone from the working class the invitation is an invitation to leave behind not merely a "background" but a self. It's an invitation to see, think, feel, judge differently (which is why there can be no going back). It's an invitation to become—in Charles Clarke's phrase—a different "type of person", which makes it an invitation easy to refuse. And if it is refused, it is refused; and there's an end of it. The university is classless only in ideal conception. Its values are ones anybody, from any class, might uphold but in practice, in our world, if it is survive at all, it is necessarily dominated by the educated—that is, the middle and upper—classes, and just as necessarily discriminates against those of the working class who can't or won't accept the invitation it makes. It wouldn't be a university if it didn't.

Of course, Clarke, being New Labour, doesn't use the term "working class"; he prefers terms like "disadvantaged" which make the user sound more of a charity worker and less of a socialist. But, for the user, this new term may have risks too. Firstly, "disadvantaged" is a lot like "disabled" in suggesting that those it

applies to have no distinctive character of their own but must be defined solely in terms of where they fall short of others. But the meaning of "working class" *isn't* "lacking the advantages of the middle and upper classes"—not *to* the working class it isn't—though it was to Bloomsbury and is to Charles Clarke. It isn't like having only one leg when other people have two. (And that New Labour holds its working class supporters in unconscious contempt is already starting to be apparent to them and in the long run may prove more damaging to its political fortunes than any present dislike of a humbled Conservative Party is to its.)

And then if you can't see working class life as a form of life with a distinctive character of its own, with is own virtues and vices; if you can see it only as a sort of truncated middle class life—middle class life with bits lopped off—you're never going to understand the thing you profess to be concerned about, what the leader-writer calls "the low achievements and aspirations of working-class pupils".

The first thing you need to be able to imagine is that working class people *like* their own way of life and aren't typically eager to give it up for someone else's—Mr Clarke's, say, or E. M. Forster's. Usually, understandably and often rightly people *don't* want to be like some other set of people they have no connection with: they want to remain what they already are, and be like their relatives, neighbours, friends. They might want two Jags like Mr Prescott but only on the condition that they remain as much what they are as Mr Prescott has evidently remained what he was. What they don't imagine is turning into Mr Cook or Mr Mandelson or, even, I would guess, Mr Kinnock. When George Eliot's unimaginative squire in *Silas Marner* wants to adopt as a young woman a daughter he abandoned as a baby and who has been brought up by a weaver, she, to his astonishment, rebuffs him, saying, "I don't want to be a lady—thank you all the same. I couldn't give up the folks I've been used to. … I like the working-folks, and their victuals, and their ways." (Not everyone feels like that all the time, of course. My father used to like to say—conscious of the irony—"I 'ate the working class.")

So what Mr Clarke and the *Telegraph* agree to call "poverty of aspiration" is something with more sides to it than any such phrase could ever suggest.

The suburban Essex grammar school I was at (Buckhurst Hill C.H.S., founded 1938, since 1989 the Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa College) had two distinct social catchments when I was there in the fifties—one, "local" and middle class, the other moved from bomb-damaged "slums" in East London to newly built council estates. All the pupils at the school had passed "the scholarship", and there's no reason to suppose that in 1950 the examination or its marking favoured the working class, or that the boys off the council estates who passed it were *less* clever than their middle class counterparts. Nevertheless, it was, predictably, the middle class boys who regularly did best in the yearly competitive examinations; so the "A" stream was predominantly middle and the "C" stream predominantly working class. The sixth form was, of course, composed overwhelmingly of boys from the "A" stream. But going into it from

a "C" stream didn't seem to be a disadvantage. The boys there from the "A" stream, who all through school had got much better marks, did not seem to be cleverer or to know more in proportion as their marks had been higher. Without doubt lots of boys who had left school at 16 with "O" levels could profitably have stayed on into the sixth-form and gone on to university.

But what is the meaning of the fact that they didn't? Perhaps it ought to be called as Charles Clarke and the *Telegraph* leader writer agree to call it, a case of "low achievement" and "poverty of aspiration". But that wasn't how it seemed to the "C"-stream itself. There was a good deal about our suburban grammar school that suggested a socially transplanted public school: religious "Assemblies", the "House" system, the school song, (from memory) "Fair set above the Roding stream/By wide and grassy leas/Our House stands fairly to the winds/'Twixt Essex lanes and trees …", regular homework, regular competitive examinations, an elaborate system of punishments (including for offences committed on the way to and from school, such as, for example, not wearing an identifying school cap), prefects (with powers of punishment and their own common room), a staircase for sixth-formers only, school uniform (colours those of the first Head's Oxford college), teachers' gowns, compulsory cross-country, cricket and football matches that were all friendlies, outside any league … . This was all alien to the council estate; and however else it might be construed, it could hardly *not* be construed as an invitation (or something more pressing) to undertake a kind of social migration, not just to take a different path from that of one's parents but to make oneself a different type from them. The school presented the council estate with an opportunity, made it an invitation which, it was hardly surprising, the council estate, on the whole, preferred not to take. But who can be sure it was so very wrong? To see this not at all in the light of Eppie's loyalty to where she belongs but merely as "poverty of aspiration" … is to be even more stupidly unimaginative than George Eliot's squire. It comes from the habit of looking at these things as statistics only and as "social problems", without catching any glimpse of the persons involved. Is *this* a habit of the educated? (If it is, what could better vindicate the council estate's preference?)

There was an incident in about my third or fourth year which made it clear not only that the council estate did prefer its own to the school's but that it was capable of giving the school lessons on the subject. The school had become dissatisfied with the turn-out for after-school House football matches. Players were being selected but sloping off home instead, so that games were regularly having to be played without full teams. It was letting team-mates down, letting the House down and showing a kind of disrespect for the school as a whole. And to show how seriously the matter was being taken, in future, boys who wouldn't play for their House team on school days *would not be permitted to play for the school teams at weekends*.

At which threat, the council estate first sniggered, then laughed outright, then clapped and cheered. What did the school think? That they *wanted* to play for its teams, rather than their own, with their

mates? Did it imagine it counted for something in their lives? Or as anything but a set of demands they found insolent, arbitrary and incomprehensible? Didn't it *know*? Apparently not.

Of course, education doesn't have to take the precise form it took at Buckhurst Hill C.H.S. in suburban Essex between 1950 and 1958 (good though I believe it was). And there are, no doubt, forms it could take which would make it more attractive to the council estate. It might perhaps have done more, in more cases, to bend itself to the estate rather than the estate to itself (though, in my own case, I must record, that it could, in co-operation with my parents, scarcely have done more). Nevertheless, if it's education—not another thing, training, say—that the estate is being offered, there are things about the estate that have to be left behind, on it, if the offer is to be taken up. A change of character—of type of person—is, for good or ill, a necessary part of what's on offer. It's a common joke to say, "You can take X out of Mile End/Newbiggin/ Salford. You can't take Mile End/Newbiggn/Salford out of X." But that is precisely what education does try to do, to take out of X what there is of Mile End, Newbiggin and Salford that is incompatible with itself.

And if the joke likens education to a rough sort of surgery, well, it can be that too, and, like surgery, go wrong or leave scars. Among other things education has the power to do is damage. Africa must be full of people educated out of tribal society but not into any other, left stranded. And who hasn't seen the similar power Oxbridge can have? Surgery's all very well but you don't want to lose too much or the wrong bits. You do want to come out intact.

One glimpse of what there might be in working class life that's incompatible with education can be had at just about any park football match. It's not so much that, whenever, for example, the ball goes out of play, players from both sides claim to the referee that it's "their ball". It's a bit more that they routinely do so even when they know perfectly well that it isn't. And it's a bit more still that there isn't a footballer in the country at any level capable of feeling any shame at doing so. (Kenny Dalglish can utter the sporting equivalent of "Never give a sucker an even break" in front of several million people, and not even that nice Gary Lineker thinks he's said anything remarkable.)

But what I think really *is* something is the unconscious parody of disinterestedness players from time to time put on. Several times in every game—when the referee awards a foul perhaps—players will raise their hands above their heads and clap the referee, pointedly, even earnestly. A stranger to the scene might, at first, think he was witnessing the behaviour of something like a jury, passing its own judgement on the verdict of a judge—applauding a right decision in a hard case. But he'd soon notice things to change his mind: that the applause came from all different parts of the pitch (including those remote from where the incident took place), that the opposing teams never clapped the same decisions and that the only decisions anybody ever clapped were those that went in their own favour. And amongst the supporters—one set on one side of the pitch, the other on the other—any sense of justice is, if anything, even less in

evidence than amongst the players: while the game is in progress it is positively *wrong*, a disloyalty, to applaud the play of the other team; it would be like giving comfort to the enemy.

For it isn't that these footballers and their supporters lack a morality but that they have a different one from that of the educated middle class. A virtue *is* being upheld here, a real one, which no conceivable form of human life could do without and which, in a crisis, may seem all-important to almost anyone: group solidarity or loyalty, surrendering oneself (including, unfortunately, one's sense of justice) to the common cause. By talking, encouraging, calling out to one another (often it doesn't matter what), all remind all that they're a *team* and bound together. By exhorting and encouraging one another—especially when behind—you both show your heads haven't gone down and keep them up. "We've gone quiet, lads" is a reproach and a reminder that games aren't won by skill alone. To the educated spectator, clapping the referee only when he gives decisions in your favour may look like a parody of judgment; to those clapping and their supporters it is just part of everything that cements team solidarity and identity.

But, it has to admitted, whether genuinely a morality or not (and it's more a code than anything else [1]), it isn't a very good preparation for university. Disinterestedness—the cardinal academic virtue—is (so I would say myself) markedly *not* a virtue much regarded, or regarded at all, in working class life. You stick up for yourself and your own, that's your part and your duty. It's a point of view from which disinterestedness and the wish to do justice look either like disloyalty or like simplemindedness, the promptings of someone who doesn't know either where his duty or where his interest lies. If pressed to say why he "'ated" the working class, my father would generally say, because they'd got no sense of justice, that in the army you might expect to get justice from an officer but not from an NCO, "one of your own". And in that last phrase, one can see what is partial and untrustworthy in that working class virtue of sticking by your own: what if "your own" don't recognise you? Being from the working class ought to be no barrier to university entrance, of course; being of it has to be.

New Labour—perhaps "the left" generally—seems to look on the human world as if it were something made from Lego, and composed of elements without any organic relation to one another. Taking this one example of the relation between university education and class alone, isn't it obvious that the university is an invention of the higher social classes, with roots in the daily life of those classes which it just doesn't have in the lives of the working class? The university is native to middle and upper class culture in a way that it just isn't to working class culture. So, *of course*, a higher proportion of the former classes will go to university—rather as a higher proportion of the working class will be found playing football on Sunday morning in your local park. As long as the classes exist, the universities will be found to have a "bias" against the working class—rather like the bias water has to run downhill (or that football

teams have against aristocrats). Before it can overcome it, New Labour will have to become Old Labour again and make the whole class system disappear. Until it does so, a vulgar (working class?) description of its attempts to "widen access" might be "pissing in the wind".

There is, though, as far as the universities go, one way it might piss into the wind without soaking itself, and that is to re-make the university as an institution compatible with working class culture, that is, as one which trains instead of educates. And this, of course, New Labour (following the example of the Conservatives) *is* doing, systematically. We could call it "proletarianizing" the university, or, then again, we could call it destroying it.

The other thing we might do is buy back Buckhurst Hill C.H.S. from the Sikhs.

[1] It's a sort of shrunken version of the clan morality Alan Breck gives Davie Balfour a lesson in, in *Kidnapped*: "Hoot! the man's a Whig, nae doubt; but I would never deny he was a good chieftain to his clan. And what would the clan think if there was a Campbell shot, and naebody hanged, and their own chief the Justice General? But I have often observed that you Low-country bodies have no clear idea of what's right and wrong."

The House of Stakeholders

"Stakeholding" is one of the words associated with New Labour (which has succeeded in keeping largely unnoticed the fact that it has much in common with Mussolini's idea of the corporative state). Sometimes the idea, which has long been familiar under different names, can make sense. For instance, the prodigious salaries paid to high-flying chief executives of FTSE 100 companies are just incomprehensible if they are taken to be payment for work done. The high-flyers are said to be very special; no ordinary person could do the things they do, etc.—a mystique of management that rarely survives attendance at the AGM. Chairmen and chief executives are not usually so far out of ordinary range that we can't judge them; they are for the most part hardworking ordinary people who, if the company is lucky, will make money by their good sense and judgement. Such men, or more rarely women, are just as likely to be running a local building firm as Marks & Spencers. If the latter, they get far more money because their larger-scale responsibility can be thought of as giving a stake in the company, though of a different kind from the shareholders' or those who work lower down the company. This logic would come clearer if the astronomically-figured payments were made in a special class of non-saleable equity and, by the way, it cannot apply to building societies. The idea that anyone can *earn* (as the word is ordinarily understood) £400,000 a year as chief executive officer of a middle-sized building society is obviously absurd.

New Labour's "stakeholder" idea applies particularly to the House of Lords, but New Labour is quite unable to make the application.

Peers of the realm are sometimes descended from companions of William the Conqueror who acquired from him, in the manner from which his title derives, lands which the family has held ever since. "What I have I hold" is a solid aristocratic family motto, and what they held and in some cases still hold is in the simplest sense a stake in the country—a phrase that goes back to the agitations of the late eighteenth century about representation in parliament. It was argued then, sometimes in favour of the extension of the franchise, as Mr Blair argues now but in different contexts, that those with a stake ought to be represented.

In the present House of Lords the "law lords" by convention do not intervene in non-legal matters, and there are seats for senior bishops. The latter represent the clerisy—whether effectively or not we need not ask here. Life peers are appointed, often after distinguished careers in one of the professions (though even more often as the elevation of superannuated or hostile members of the Commons), so as to be able (in theory) to offer their experience and wisdom. The original stakeholders are still there, if reduced in number.

The very best thing that could happen to the House of Lords would be a reform to make its stakeholder nature clearer. The stakeholder principle now needs to be extended; towards which, perhaps, the system of life peers was a dim groping. There are still great landholdings in this country and it is right and proper that the heads of families which have the stewardship of great estates should have a say in parliament as hereditary peers. The universities should be represented. So should the professions. Whoever is head of the B.M.A. should have a seat while in office, as should an architect or two. The Confederation of British Industry and the Chambers of Commerce should have a voice, along with the secretary-general of the T.U.C. Religious representation should not be confined to the Church of England which, however, as the established chuch, should retain several bishops. There should also be a fair proportion of free members of the clerisy offered life membership: philosophers, authors. (Don't ask me who: if enough sense were recovered for this idea of the Lords to be acceptable there would *eo ipso* be candidates.)

On the path of some of the more representative temporary members there will have been elections, if only of the Trades Union variety, but it is necessary to this conception that the house should not be elective by popular vote. The free members should be chosen, not appointed or elected. The present (June 2003) prime minister is in favour of an all-appointed House because he is confident that it could not challenge the Commons, as no doubt would be the case were he to be the appointer. It needs no great effort to imagine the likely level of independence of judgement in the appointed. There are many candidates in waiting on the Labour back-benches. Choices should be made not by any prime minister and not by popular vote but by the monarch, acting on advice but with a power to veto which I hope would be kept active by exercise. With the retention of some real lords and this power to choose being the monarch's, a useful element of heredity would be retained—which of course is unthinkable. (British politics would be much improved if the extent of the unthinkable were not so huge.) Constitutionally this would be a return to the days when Parliament was the great Council of the Realm, membership of which was by invitation of the monarch.

The phrase "the accident of birth" will at this point make itself heard if it has not already done so. Why should power depend on the accident of birth? But why, in these days of planned families, is birth thought to be an accident? The members of the House of Lords have traditionally come into this world as the result of dynastic marriages that are anything but accidental. And, from the point of view of the begotten rather than the begetter, are we going to say that we are only accidentally ourselves? We really need the word *fate*. Poor Princess Margaret! It was her fate/the accident of her birth to be, as the younger sister of a very dutiful queen, without much of a role in the world, making do with parties and lovers. But that is who and what she *was*, a senior member of the royal family, with that role to play in the world. What sense is made by calling this an accident? Had her father not been unexpectedly elevated to the throne her life

would have been different; but the Abdication of 1936 was not an accident either.

The motive for the ejection of most of the hereditary peers from the Lords was, in the absence of principle or argument, sheer spleen, of a “democratic” flavour. (The inverted commas are called for because nobody ever thinks of democracy as real government by the people.) It is so taken for granted that “the hereditary principle” is indefensible that hardly any actual arguments against it were heard. In fact the emotional reaction against “the hereditary principle” is selective. Simultaneously with the destruction of the Lords other more popular agitation was being conducted by the middle classes to ensure their own inheritances: the state ought to maintain their decrepit parents at public expense so that their stake in the country would pass to them undiminished. It seems to be a question of scale and names: if it’s your mother’s bungalow the hereditary principle is sacrosanct. Though *The Independent* is a republican rag, there is no serious agitation for a republic to be declared. So inheritance is all right at the top or the bottom, but indefensible in the middle. The onus is on those who suppose the hereditary principle to be in principle wrong to say why.

Meanwhile, in practice, which the British are said to prefer, heredity works at least as well as head-count. Really bad monarchs are far rarer then really bad prime ministers—bad in the sense of undutiful, unprincipled, immoral, inadequate, or so stupid as to be unable to take advice. In my lifetime there have been six British prime ministers really bad in some or most of these terms, but no really bad monarchs. (The last one, just referred to, abdicated before I was born.) It could be wished that her present Majesty had taken a more active role, especially about constitutional matters in which after all she has an interest, but who would call her a bad queen? Are we to say that that is an accident? I also know by reading Hansard and seeing some of them elsewhere that the hereditary peers are not as a class less effective or wise than the elected members of the Commons or than the nominated members of the Lords. Why should they be?

The members of the Commons are chosen, in a sort of way, by the people. Primogenitary inheritance leaves the choices to God, who is unlikely to choose worse than the people.

On the question of the reform of the House of Lords itself the Commons have hardly set an example of wisdom. Rushing into major constitutional change without, it seems, a moment’s thought about principles or consequences, the incoming Labour government, driven simply by a dislike of lords—that is, of the hereditary principle which they take to be incompatible with their own “democracy”—got rid of most of the real peers and then took years and years wandering unenthusiastically around sundry proposals for replacing them. Most recently seven different possibilities were laid before the Commons and all rejected. Why ever does anyone think that the Commons is the right originator of constitutional reform? And why have the opinions of those better qualified to judge not been heard more prominently?—those of the hereditary peers and of

the monarch? They are, of course, interested parties. What else is "stakeholding" supposed to mean? (Rushing thoughtlessly into constitutional change has developed into quite a habit of New Labour, which has now abolished the most ancient post in government without a moment's thought about how to replace it, as part of a government reshuffle. Regionalization and the dealings with Ireland are other examples of unintelligent tampering with the constitution.)

The proposed constitutional reform of the Lords would have the further beneficial result of making the monarch more than a figurehead though still well within the range of what counts as constitutional.

For such a constitution to work there has of course to be a widespread sense of duty. Despite the best efforts of "the media" this does still survive in the country, and after a century of democracy and nearly a century of Lloyd George's death duties, and despite the destruction of so much of the squirearchy, it still has a solid backbone in the surviving gentry, whose resilience is remarkable. There are still plenty of stories of playboy peers, and for a long time English history has been spiced with the eccentricities and occasionally the vices of lords, but would anyone on the whole say that the hereditary peers in the House of Lords are lacking in the sense that *noblesse oblige*?

In the Commons the convention is for the members to refer to each other as "honourable" or, if members of the Privy Council, "right honourable". Honour, I submit, is more likely actually to be found in the Lords, but not in the Lords replaced either by placemen or popularly elected members.

The advantages of being above the electoral process are not sufficiently attended to. The allegations of sleaze so freely bandied around in recent years have almost all been about members of the Commons. (Lord Archer is an outright crook, not sleazy: *he* is an example of the folly of leaving any choice of peers to elected politicians.) There is nothing more tangible than a common sense of right to stop a monarchy becoming corrupt; there are still some examples in the world. On the other hand nobody in fact accuses our present royal family of anything worse than giving unwanted presents as perks to members of their households. (What are they supposed to do with them?). There still is a certain dignity in the office which makes sleaze less likely than in the Commons.

The upper chamber ought to represent both the interests and the best judgement of the nation, which in its historic constitution it at least has the *idea* of doing. This is possible because it is not democratic, though other conditions are necessary too. In fact the Western nations are run by political élites which, if ever they begin following the mood of the people, are at once accused of becoming "populist". So we have democracy in which the people are assumed to be incapable of judgement. The virtue of an upper chamber is that this can be openly recognized and acted on.

For many years now we have had in our midst good examples of the kind of exercise of public judgement possible to statesmen

free from democratic chains. The things elected politicians cannot say because of electoral constraints are often said by the Duke of Edinburgh or the Prince of Wales, who have both made good and honourable use of their constitutional position. They can also say things that *should* be said by the elected but which are ignored because there are no votes in them either way, like the Prince's recent plea for English poetry and English history to be taught in schools. The *good* of a constitutional monarchy remains even, or particularly, if you disagree with some of the things said: they have some freedom from the electoral strait-jacket of saying only what will get votes, and their constitutional position ensures attention.

Simultaneously with its reconstitution the powers of the House of Lords should be restored. An upper chamber without power to veto new legislation is bound to be a shadow, as indeed Mr Blair wishes to ensure by making the appointments to it—though in fact the anti-government majorities in the present Lords dominated by life peers do not support his case. No doubt he means "safe" appointments of the kind made by the mainstream political parties when choosing parliamentary candidates. There is no point to the House of Lords unless it has the power of restraining the excesses of the lower house. With a restored House of Lords Parliament would have a much better chance of becoming again a seat of national judgement.

As to democracy, that is one of the many ideas, good in their own place and in moderation, which then get out of hand and try to take over the world. "Stakeholding" must be a notion that limits democracy. "No taxation without representation" was originally not a democratic slogan. Those with a stake and therefore taxable should be represented; those with no stake, not. Popular election would not, it was thought, throw up representatives or delegates who would govern the country well, so, as it might be said, no representation without taxation. The modern notion that only head-count confers legitimacy is just a superstitious ideological excess and is not in fact practically believed. It is never applied in schools, limited liability companies, churches or football clubs; nor is there much agitation to break off relations with all monarchies or even to abolish our own. My own opinion is that the British constitutional monarchy of the eighteenth century had a good balance between the autocratic excesses of the continent and the democratic excesses of the present world. It recognized both that some power is hereditary and that some power is representative, which are quite possibly general truths about politics. (It can hardly be maintained that a person of such modest mental hereditary endowment as President Bush II could have acceded without the "accident of birth".) I am in no doubt, anyway, that the balance has swung far too far in the direction of

> Count of Heads to be the Divine Court of Appeal on every question and interest of
> mankind; Count of Heads to choose a Parliament according to its own heart at last,
> and sit with Penny Newspapers zealously watching the same … .

WORDS IN EDGEWAYS - 1

Thomas Carlyle, *Shooting Niagara: and After?* 1867, para. 2

Believe it or not, this was once thought to be exaggeration to the point of madness. The recognition of the limits of democracy expressed by a stakeholder House of Lords within a constitutional monarchy would be a good in itself as giving a check and a balance to the Count of Heads.

REVIEWS

Easter 2003: a time when Larkin comes into his own

Night of sadness : Morn of gladness evermore.
Eia! eia!
After many troubles sore,
Morn of gladness evermore, and evermore.

(This Christmas/Epiphany carol, adapted from "Resonet in laudibus" (*Piae Cantiones*, 1585), may yet be found in its anglicised version, in *The Cowley Carol Book*. We used to sing it, with heart and voice, at Prep-school carol services, in the late 1940s.)

My flesh in hope shall rest,
And for a season slumber:
Till trump from east to west
Shall wake the dead in number.

(Anglicised words written for the tune of *Hoe groot de vrugten zijn*, from David's Psalmen, Amsterdam, 1685. We, that is, the choir, sang it from the Gallery, on Easter mornings, at St Mary's Church, the Boltons, West London.)

In his "End Column" for the *Daily Telegraph* (April 4th) A. N. Wilson confessed:

It is a curious fact, but if I want a poet who will get me in an Easter frame of mind,
I turn not to [George Herbert, Milton, W. H. Auden, etc.], but to that out-and-out
atheist and self-confessed nihilist Philip Larkin.

Mr Wilson goes on to quote Larkin's three-stanza-poem, "The Trees", with its soughing conclusion:

Last year is dead, they seem to say,
begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

There is more than one curious fact here; and a number of interesting questions surface. Auden, "an Orthodox Christian poet", we are told, " 'believed' in a risen Christ." That is, we are not told that he *actually believed* in him, but that he 'believed' in him—a qualification calculated to bring Auden comfortingly closer to his perplexed post-modern readers, who find it impossible, now, to stand up and say "I believe" (not simply in the C of E Creed and rubric, but even, I dare say, in … well, anything). T. S. Eliot, a poet who seems to have made himself finally unpopular (with the sort of "intellectual" reader who admired his scepticism of the 1920s) by confessing—at least, to the extent of attending various West London "High Anglican" churches—the Christian faith, is not mentioned in Mr Wilson's "Easter" context. A question of column inches? Or is Eliot too obscure, too mystical, for the coffee-table?

But to the curious facts, and questions.

What *is* "an Easter frame of mind"? Of what nature is the compulsion of a man-who-cannot-believe-in-the Christian message of "the Resurrection" to get into an Easter frame of mind? What is an "Easter frame of mind", for him? What are its origins? What will it accomplish for him?

What is it (other than the grisly turmoil of the Cromwellian period) that separates, say, George Herbert's lyrical acceptance of the Gospels' resurrection doctrine from a scepticism which claimed Milton (so Mr Wilson alleges) "in grown-up life", so that he "abandoned orthodox Christianity, as his *De Doctrina Christiana* proves, and became a sort of Judæo-Stoic." Of course, we don't *know* that he died in the sure and certain hope (as the Prayer Book puts it) of the resurrection; by the same token, we don't know that he didn't. William Empson's book *Milton's God*, hilarious as it often is, marshalls its assault on the assumption that it is Christianity, not Scepticism, which Milton champions. But perhaps, like Auden, old Milton just used to like bashing out hymns on the chamber organ in his house, to please himself and his visitors, because they reminded him of boyhood Sundays, of "Faith". Philip Larkin's last words (to the nurse who held his hand *in extremis*) were: "I am going to the inevitable."

Mr Wilson does not, one assumes, disassociate himself from the rational uncertainties of "grown-up life"; in other words, he too has abandoned orthodox Christianity. What does he mean, then, by "an Easter frame of mind"? What is left for us, when the Creed (especially in its post-ASB formulations) dies on our lips and we "no longer believe in Christ's resurrection as a historical reality"? Ah. Then the "great [Christian] festival of rebirth and coming back to life" is simply something we associate with "the return to earth of the spring". Why am I reminded of that 1920s Underground poster for May, showing Kenwood (slim young women, deckchairs—as if by magic etc.)?

> … Where the dogs play,
> Where the larks sing,

Where the rabbits sport
And where you too can play and sing and sport.

There. Isn't that nice?

So that's it? I have to suggest that the "spring" on which Mr Wilson focuses is not the dangerously ambiguous, savagely pagan, thing celebrated by Stravinsky; nor do any Hughes-ian images spoil the picture. This must be a spring of frisking lambs and greening trees. A spring which can reconcile us to "pushing up the daisies", as we used to hear folk say—our dateless dissolution. The haunting bathos of the Underground's Kenwood blurb has already set the tone for our embarrassing predicament. If we can no longer believe in the great Gospels, what makes us think we can say anything meaningful about "spring"? If this is what we mean by "an Easter frame of mind", let's not claim that it embodies any sort of substitute for the Faith. For the Faith is "the transmission of the living body of Christ himself" and "to enter into it is to share his suffering as the essential preliminary to receiving his glory", as Edward Norman (*Out of the Depths*, Continuum Press) reminds us. Painful as the fact is, there simply is no "Easter frame of mind" for the non-Christian. Edward Norman doubts if the real thing enters at all into the consciousness of most modern Christians: "The religion of Jesus is no longer perceived as a body of teaching, but as a sensation for emotional gratification." What is needed, says the Chancellor of York Minster, "is a call to the Holy Spirit". And I accept that. As someone who can no longer (after fifty years of saying it) stand up and say "I believe …" I accept that there can be no "Easter frame of mind" for me. The attempt to create, or infuse, such a thing is not spiritual striving, it is sheer sentimentality; sentimental moping. "Moping up England", that was the cruelly witty expression a pupil of mine came up with after two or three of Larkin's train-journey poems.

As for Larkin's "Trees" poem, "one of the most beautiful poems in our language", according to Mr Wilson, well many years of school-teaching familiarised me with the sense of uncomprehending glumness (not, I hardly need to point out, confined to this piece of Larkin's in particular) which most young readers, after being put to the effort of *reading* it, brought away from "The Trees". It had no more to offer them than Eliot's "April is the cruellest month" line, of which it offers barely more than an extended paraphrase. But as far as I am concerned, the trees' greenness is *not* "a kind of grief", and I acknowledge nothing tender, or pathetic, or heroic, or noble, or wise, in saying it is. *Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.* A call to "begin afresh" is not the same as a call to the Holy Spirit. And look where it brings us, this determination to save—if not all appearances—an appearance of some sort. Flinching from Herbert's "quick-eyed Love",

Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust, and sinne … ("Love")

we pass with relief to Larkin's unresting castles, that "thresh" (isn't

it sexy!) in full-grown thickness, every May.

This is not Playing the Game, is it? It is not gentle, not bonny. Questioning the *donné* of a poem was about the worst thing you could do, in the "academic" poetry-reading circles I used to be admitted to. It showed you were not just "not in the vein", but also barbarous, really. *I'll get my coat.* And for the *donné*, isn't letting last year be dead and beginning afresh the best most of us can rise to, now, at the start of another, almost post-Christian, millennium? Well, perhaps. But in the wider picture, Larkin's "Trees' is no more (no less) beautiful than, say, Tennyson's "Tears …".

I am no longer a teacher, or the parent of youngsters. Do children read poetry, still? I don't know. Are they given the Faith (which Matthew Arnold predicted poetry would, in many lives, replace)? If they are Moslems, or Jews, maybe. But little English Christians (the non-Catholics anyway) are required only to learn about religions so as to avoid political incorrectness and racial prejudice. Who now opens his mouth in a parable: who declares hard sentences of old, which we have heard and known: and such as our fathers have told us? that we should not hide them from the children of generations to come? … To the intent that when they came up, they might shew *their children* the same? If the wonderful words I've just quoted don't move you as much as trees do, you haven't the root of an "Easter frame of mind" in you, not by a long chalk.

"If the Bible is the great book of life [a friend encourages me], why isn't the best literature a continuation of that, that tells you how to live?" Oh, a good question: what a good question! But who, out there, wants his dried tubers, his nice, dry weekly column, his poetree-pleeeeze poems, his coffee-table, disturbed and rained on like that? No. I should think not.

Best Seller

or

The Triumph of Cliché

It must be true to say that, if you don't read a book to the end, you might miss something good, but what if it's like plunging your head into boiling water?

Dr Iannis had enjoyed a satisfactory day in which none of his patients had died or

> got any worse. He had attended a surprisingly easy calving, lanced one abscess,
> extracted a molar, dosed one lady of easy virtue with Salvarsan, performed an
> unpleasant but spectacularly fruitful enema, and had produced a miracle by a feat
> of medical prestidigitation.

This facetious style introduces the cliché, of that engagingly backward Mediterranean world where distinctions between doctors, dentists and vets are easily blurred, and a sympathetically knowing reader can enjoy a Rabelaisian moment provided by the conventionally supercilious “surprisingly fruitful”. Dr Iannis is a cliché in himself: benevolent, wise and having the intellectual reach to be writing a history of Cephalonia.

It may be that the political-historical ground upon which the novel is based appeals to the current orthodoxy but such “political maturity” seems to be compatible with an extraordinary literary naïvety. “Absolutely brilliant”, says Jeremy Paxman in *The Sunday Express*, which presumably includes the schoolboy psychology of this account of Mussolini:

> Come here. Yes, you. Come here. Now tell me something; which is my best profile, right or left? Really, do you think so? I am not so sure. I think that perhaps the lower lip has a better set on the other side. O, you agree do you? I suppose you agree with everything I say? O, you do. Then how am I supposed to rely on your judgement? What if I say that France is made of bakelite, is that true? Are you going to agree with me? What do you mean, yes sir, no sir, I don’t know sir; what kind of answer is that? Are you a cretin or something? Go and fetch me some mirrors so that I can arrange to see for myself.

Heartening as it was, during the Second World War, to be told that Mussolini was a pompous self-dramatising ass, that Hitler was an evil demagogue, the joke has become stale—even with “bakelite” to assure us the account is chronologically authentic.

Any cliché you can think of could have its place in this book:

> New empires were now lapping against the shores of the old. In a short time it would no longer be a question of the conflagration of a valley and the death by fire of lizards, hedgehogs, and locusts; it would be a question of the incineration of Jews and homosexuals, gypsies and the mentally afflicted. It would be a case of Guernica and Abyssinia writ large across the skies of Europe and North Africa, Singapore and Korea. The self-appointed superior races, drunk on Darwin and nationalist hyperbole,

> besotted with eugenics and beguiled by myth, were winding up machines of genocide that soon would be unleashed upon a world already weary to the heart of such infinite foolery and contemptible vainglory.

Journalese, cliché, cant. Yet: "an emotional, funny, stunning novel which swings with wide smoothness between joy and bleakness, personal lives and history … it's lyrical and angry, satirical and earnest" (*The Observer*); or, "Louis de Bernières is in the direct line that runs through Dickens and Evelyn Waugh …" (A. S. Byatt, parodying F. R. Leavis—whereas, if Leavis *were* to be invoked, shouldn't it be his analysis of cliché, in the lecture on C. P. Snow?).

This being a contemporary novel we are given the homosexual angle, but through a stereotype, a set of attitudes, accompanied by an idiom that is self-consciously heroic in the "mediterranean" style: "I Carlo Piero Guercio, write these words with the intention that they should be found after my death, when neither scorn nor loss of reputation may dog my steps nor blemish me … etc." Dr Iannis has a daughter, Pelagia, a cliché of nubile femininity:

> She left off slicing a pepper, brushed a stray hair from her face, and replied, "You're as fond of him as I am." "In the first place, I am not fond of the ruminant, and in the second place you will not argue with me. In my day no daughter argued with her father. I will not permit it." Pelagia put one hand on her hip and pulled a wry face. "Papas," she said, "it still is your day. You aren't dead yet, are you? Anyway, the goat is fond of you." Dr Iannis turned away, disarmed and defeated. It was a most damnable thing when a daughter pulled feminine wiles upon her father and reminded him of her mother at the same time.

Isn'it every gesture, every turn of phrase, every thought, a fragment in a mosaic of commonplaces? A gathering of literary and cinematic memories?

Pelagia has an admirer, Mandras, accidentally shot in the backside by a showman, a giant of a man, the pièce de résistance of whose act is to fire an ancient cannon from the hip. Mandras's buttocks would be marked for life with certain terracotta spots—all part of that zany Mediterranean world shortly to be shattered by war, a world of cardboard characters and *Beano* jokes. Do we care what happens to it? Doesn't it travesty the real people who suffered that fate?

Father Arsenios is the local priest, a fat drunk stereotype. In the following passage, he has been drinking the wine his parishioners leave him (among other things) to make up for indignities they heap upon him:

> Father Arsenios peeped through the hole to ensure that he would not be heard, lifted his cassock, and released a formidable

stream of urine into the bottle. It hammered against the glass of the bottom, and then splashed and hissed as the bottle filled. He noted with alarm that as the neck of the bottle narrowed, it filled at an exponential rate. "They should make bottles uniformly cylindrical," reflected the priest, and was promptly taken by surprise. He rubbed the splashback into the dust of the floor with his foot, and realised that he would have to wait in the church until the damp patches on his robes had dried. "A priest," he thought, "cannot be seen to have pissed himself." He put the bottle of urine down and reseated himself. Someone came in and left him a pair of socks.

This is certainly better written, and his last thought makes a good joke. But the description of vomiting that follows, which is meant I suppose to be "Rabelaisian" or "Joycean"—Dr Iannis "beheld the supine priest, helplessly recumbent in a pool of urine and vomit"—would be disgusting, if there were any life in it. Compare it with Joyce's description in *Ulysses* of the interior of a Dublin eating-house at lunchtime, where disgust, filtered through Bloom's fastidiously "scientific" mind, is turned into comedy. Here all we've got is schoolboy humour.

A related passage is a politically correct account of Pelagia's menstruation. She is sitting on the toilet. She thinks her period is about due and, in a Molly Bloom type reverie, though couched in syntactically formal prose, she soliloquises:

> Poor little Chrysoula, poor little girl, what a terrible thing to happen. Papas coming home late at night, shaking with rage and distress, all because Chrysoula got to the age of fourteen and no one had ever told her that one day she would bleed, and she is so horrified, she thinks that she has some loathsome secret disease, and she can't tell anyone, and she takes rat-poison. And Papas is so angry that he takes Chrysoula's mother by the neck and shakes her like a dog shakes a rabbit, and Chrysoula's father just goes out with the boys as usual and comes home drunk as if nothing had happened, and underneath Chrysoula's bed is a pile of paper as thick as a bible, full of her prayers to St Gerasimos for a cure, and the prayers are so sad and desperate that they make you weep.

The proper sentiments, the proper thoughts! And good old Dr Iannis (though I don't see why he doesn't put the matter right himself). Could this be a sample of that "whole-hearted prose" (*The Scotsman*)? that "fluid and elegant writer" (*Mail on Sunday*)? who "tells one hell of a story, and he tells it straight, with only interludes of high comedy [why high?] to interrupt the flow" (*The Spectator*)? part of a "vast tapestry woven in tiny, colourful, intricate detail" (*Irish Times*)? by someone who "has only to look into his world, one senses, for it to rush into reality, colours and touch and taste" (A. S. Byatt)?

Odds & Ends

“*Extraordinary*” … as they say on Radio 3

Christopher Hogwood: Yes, well, at this moment, I’m more of a Haydn enthusiast than a Mozart enthusiast. Haydn, you see, has structure, architecture, *design*. One can analyze it. Whereas, you know, there’s something of the self-pitying show-off about Mozart. He does so put himself centre-stage. Hogs the limelight, you might say.

Letters other editors didn't print

(Readers invited to send in their own)

To the *Telegraph*, 8 Aug 2001

As the British working class is so obscenely, and dangerously, racist, why doesn't the Government house people who are seeking asylum in this country in areas in which they would be welcome, Islington, say, or Hampstead?

To the *Telegraph*, 21 Aug 2001

Your leader-writer and your correspondent are both right: we can have too much algebra and grammar (and not enough art and philosophy) or we can have too little. But what's wrong with our schools and universities isn't that they have got the balance wrong between subjects different in kind but equally genuine. It is that they are stuffed full of subjects (and the staff teaching them and the students being taught them) that are fakes. And the more fake education we provide and pay for, the less we seem able—officially at least—to distinguish it from the genuine. The absurdly named "Quality Assurance Agency" is supposed to assure the standards of university teaching but who or what is to assure its own standards? You report it (August 16) as saying of one of Manchester's departments that its final-year work "lacked sufficient academic rigour in terms of theoretical underpinning, critical analysis, and familiarity with current academic research," which sounds like a judgement that might be worth having—but only if you don't happen to notice that the department in question is "Hospitality, Leisure and Tourism", one guaranteed to be made fraudulent by the least touch of anything resembling theory, analysis or research. The Quality Assurance Agency merely reproduces and reinforces the fraudulence it ought to expose. Which is to say what, but it is a fraud too? And then there is your newspaper—making itself party to the fraud by reporting the QAA's judgements as if they were a sort of *Which?* guide to washing machines.

To the *Telegraph*, 10 Jul 2002

If Dr David Hope thinks there's any wonder or mystery in Harry Potter the Church can learn from., he's a fool, and unfit to be a parish priest let alone Archbishop of York. He certainly can't read. The Harry Potter prose style takes wonder and mystery out of wizards and magic as surely as the *New English Bible* and so-called *Common Worship* take it out of angels and miracles. The Church has nothing to learn from Harry Potter. It got there before him.

To the *Telegraph*, 11 Sep 2002

Janet Daley complains about the BBC and *The Guardian* hating the Americans? Where has she been living for the past 35 years? The BBC and the *Guardian* hate the British … well, the English … and the Northern Irish … and the Gibraltarians … and the Falklanders. What's so special about the Americans, that they shouldn't hate them? I don't hate the Americans but I do wish they'd show a bit more consciousness that, as well as being the victims of one sort of terrorist one day last year, they have been the supporters of another sort, in Northern Ireland, for years on end.

To the *Telegraph*, 5 June 2003

You say, the word "university" will mean anything the government wants it to mean from now on. From now on? Mrs Hodge began the corruption of the university system the day before yesterday, when she renamed seven institutions "universities", which the day before that had been mere vocational "institutes" and "colleges"? You do have a short memory. It was John Major who first thought of this wheeze, when he renamed the polytechnics universities in 1991. (And in the face of what opposition from the *Daily Telegraph?*) And it was also Mr Major, four years later, who had the further bright idea of creating a Department of Education and Employment, as if the purpose of the one was to obtain the other. (Again, in the face of what opposition from the *Telegraph?*) The corrupting of the idea of the university, which has made possible the corruption of the institution, has been going on for thirty years at least. If you would like to know what would count as opposition to it, read *The New Idea of the University* by Ian Robinson and me, which came out a couple of years ago (and was judged to be pretty poor stuff by your education editor).