

National Dementia (1)

Michael Wallerstein's *Liza Doolittle Syndrome* makes no claim to completeness. An unending stream of additional examples would be easy, and he could have made a long book.

A few of our favourites are missing. *Reticent* misused to mean *reluctant*. We mentioned *passionate* in our last column. The Prime Minister is not alone in his passion. *Wye Valley Brewery is a family-run business, passionately brewing in the traditional way (The foodie's free guide to the Essence of Herefordshire, 2011, p. 14)* Let us hope that the passionate brewing doesn't fling hops and barley all over the floor, or otherwise damage the beer. And traditional? Did the Herefordshire peasants really brew passionately? The placard advertising Purbeck Ice Cream on sale in Sherborne 20 August 2011 read *All our ice creams and sorbets . . . passionately produced*. One imagines the ice-cream makers throwing themselves around in a state of pathological abandon. "A psssion [*sic*] for the Church's mission". (Church of England web ad for a new executive to promote weddings, 12.09.2011) *Passionate about Private Label* (motto on the annual report of McBride p.l.c. for 2011 Was passion the cause of the subsequent report of a half-yearly loss?) *Passionate* is used to excuse absence of reason. "I feel passionately about . . ." stands in for argument.

This example gives a hint that Wallerstein's little book is not just a collection of unfortunate errors. He is right to call the condition he is reporting a syndrome: the errors all come from the same cause, which is a decline in ordinary English prose and formal speech. And ordinary prose is pretty much the same as civilisation.

Ever since the late seventeenth century any ordinarily educated English or Welsh or Irish or Scottish person has been able to read and write quite passably good English prose. The reasons why this is no longer so are various but in some cases obvious. Children no longer read solid-prose comics and many people's prose is practised mainly in text messages and Twitter. Examination boards drop prose in favour of multiple-choice questions. But these may be effects of cultural atrophy as well as causes. A culture that thinks good prose unnecessary will lose good prose and with it ordinary national intelligence.

The first step towards cure is to recognise that the age of ordinary prose is ending. In the nature of the case this will *not* be recognised. Readers and writers happy in present-day literary London (many of Wallerstein's examples are from *The Times*) expect the new non-prose and are unhappy outside it. We have several times pointed out that the Prime Minister's prose is such as to make clear or deep thought impossible to him. This is not something that could be rectified by lessons akin to elocution. It goes deep into the psyche, individual and common.

One of the most telling passages in Wallerstein's earlier book *Dear Mr Howard* (still available) puts together a passage from a quite decently ordinary book, and the same passage as rewritten for a new edition. The rewriting is into a prose of a peculiarly recognisable kind, much less well written than ordinary prose should be; which is to say less meaningful. Whether this rewriting was a careful exercise of skill or the instinctive rephrasing in the language the present world demands is a rather academic question. Either way, the world in which we live and move and have our being is being drained of common sense which, in retrospect, was a major constituting element of a great culture. The common consciousness is getting shallower as well as more muddled. The word *great*, by the way, is becoming unuseable. Have a great day!