

***Eyewash* no. 1128** March 18, 2005

We pointed out that the weakness in the *Eye*'s often excellent literary column is a narrowness of horizon. The review of John Updike's *Villages* in 1126 was exemplary. "No object, no human activity or thought process is reliably described and everything is subservient to the look-at-me-lads elfin prose style." This piece chimes with something we said about Martin Amis, and it would be niggling to make it a protest that Bookworm uses the elder Amis as correction both of the younger and of John Updike. "They finished their drinks and left" [... *as we have also said*, Ed.] can in its way be as mannered as the "luxuriant linguistic fireworks" of Amis' fictions: but we do not wish to niggle. "Uncle Sham", the anti-obituary of Hunter S. Thompson in 1127, was also good and truthful. "He ceased to be worth reading when the effects of heavy drinking and smoking took hold of his prose and he stopped going out to report" Yes. Now that suicide is politically correct the accompanying *Eye*-tasteless cartoon of Thompson reporting the event as he blew his brains out [*but isn't that just what he did ... to his wife?* Ed.] produced the usual tribute of angry letters.

But in this issue "Publish and be damned boring" was a blatant example of provincialism. Tom Maschler, who for "somewhere near three decades . . . presided over the affairs of Jonathan Cape", has published boring memoirs. That they should be boring is incomprehensible to Bookworm because Cape is "described without the least vainglory as 'the greatest literary publishing house in England'" in those days. "Anyone who was anyone got published by Cape circa 1960-90", and the great names follow: "both the Amises, Barnes, Brookner, and any number of overseas heavyweights*" How can it have come about that an intelligent literary columnist in a satirical magazine does not see that Maschler is necessarily boring because the great names are boring? "He was John Fowles's guide and mentor." John Fowles is boring. "This man published Salman Rushdie." Salman Rushdie is very boring; "and Roald Dahl's fast friend". Roald Dahl was not quite boring, but not quite original either. "What will he, their editor and sponsor, have to say about them, eh?" Naturally, something boring. The great names are boring because they write about boring people without any sense that they are boring. Leavis objected that Snow's characters lead lives of "unrelieved and cultureless banality". Where in the works of the recent great names is anybody with any religion, art, love, morality, or any sense of making sense of life? and where is there any recognition by the great names that this is an uncommon state of affairs? This is no doubt the age we live in, at least as that is understood within the couple of square miles that include Carlisle Street. The spirit of the age. But has there ever been such a claustrophobic age in England since the mid fifteenth century? Bookworm cannot ask the question because his world is the London Literary World and, as we said, he is cut off from literature. Literary journalism does need literature.

* *Heavyweights*? What self-respecting satirical journal talks like that—willing to judge but not in terms it can't disown? "Heavyweights" is what Heseltine and Clarke used to be, as well as "Big Beasts" (or was it "Hitters"?); it's what Naughtie and Humphreys still are (but, curiously, not Stourton). Shouldn't the *Eye* commission Craig Brown to parody its own style?

Street of Shame

Also known as:
No Mote (in my Brother's Eye) Too Small to See
or
Pursue Trivialities until the Space is Philled

“Street of Shame” is a marvellous title, but not for a column Polly or Glenda would be ashamed to have written.

There were nine items:

1. *The Times* said the Tory spokesman said the Tories had no hope. *The Times* printed a letter from the Tory spokesman saying they had. The Tories served a libel writ on *The Times*. *The Times* reprinted the Tories' spokesman's letter. Er. That's all.

2. *The Daily Telegraph* called an American publisher “the publishing director of Burke's Peerage”. A few weeks later, in his obituary, *The Daily Telegraph* said serious newspapers had been careful to refer to him as “head of Burke's Marketing Limited”. Er. That's all.

3. One hack jumped over another hack's back. Will the second hack get his own back? Er. That's all. (Except for the salt of satire, of course, a sprinkling of phrases like, “departed his position as”, “firmly out of favour”, “unceremoniously handed over to”, “honed his role as”, “the looming royal wedding”, “the denizens of Buckingham Palace”, “the farce of the royal wedding plans” ...) [*That's enough of other people's clichés*. Ed.]

4. In three issues *The Sun* said, prominently and (for *The Sun*) at length, that an RAF plane had “most likely” been brought down by a bomb. When an official RAF board of inquiry found that it hadn't, *The Sun* said so, briefly, once, on p.2. Er. That's all. (Except that the first mention was an instance of “shrieking” and the last of “tucking away”.) [*What did I say?* Ed.]

5. *The Sunday Times* said there was no “cultural point” to Peter Doherty. Three weeks later a newspaper used 1,700 words to describe the “cultural significance” of Peter Doherty. Guess what newspaper it was “needless to say” it was (but which the all-seeing *Eye* did say, all the same)?

6. A sports hack who didn't win a prize resigned from a prize-awarding association for sports hacks. When he did win a prize he rejoined. Then when he didn't, “Yup”, he resigned again. [*Can I say, “Er. That's all” again, Ed.? Hack*]

7. Worth the one-and-a-half inches given it.

8. Worth the three-and-a-half inches given it too.

9. A hack drinks a lot (enough to fill three-and-three-quarters inches at any rate).

What difference is there between the *Eye's* reporting of what others do and the doings it reports? The *Eye* and the rest aren't just neighbours, they're family.