

What's wrong with *Private Eye*? 1

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

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

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

Anyone who looks back to the style of newspapers before the encroaching days of the booming (or boomed) Australo-Yankee globalized media-economy must notice (if things haven’t already gone too far) that the model for journalism was literature, the style of critical thought deriving from the nineteenth century, Mill, Huxley, Chesterton, Tyndall, Arnold. An idea of writing dominated journalism, but now things are the other way round, and journalism has become the idea of writing. Language, freed from its connection with literature and criticism, and without any possible check to it from the world of information technology or literary theory, becomes *materiel* to fill up spacetime, the world made column inches, page- and time-filler.

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

Private Eye has been a fortnightly injection against some of this for some time now. Half, or now more, is itself straight, investigative reporting. (It used to be endless earnest Paul Foot, with all his would-be corrective left-wingery. If he hadn’t been their own man, they’d have mocked him, like Benn.) But while the exposure of venality, hypocrisy, stupidity, gullibility, vanity, success-mania, swarming top-down, is valuable, it isn’t in principle so very different from what you might find elsewhere

and it isn't what makes *Private Eye* distinctive and invaluable. Ethical disdain, or political outrage or "academic" analysis, are excogitated every day on our "national institutions"... every, every morning on *Today*, where the presenters are sages and celebrities themselves, and full of excitement, at horrors or a singing dog.

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

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

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

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

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

literature is. And unsupported by the prevailing, unliterary culture around it, the difference between *Private Eye* and what it hates, but is continuous with and depends on, is giving way.

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

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

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

Two decades later such articles no longer appear. For there are

practically no centralising tendencies in modern British fiction; simply a great mass of novels spilling out each autumn on to the bookshop shelves with nothing to connect them ...

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

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

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

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

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

The second failing of the “Literary Review” is related to the insecurity of style:

the *Eye*'s perspective is virtually limited to the last twenty years. If we are discussing the present state of the English novel, the first and necessary context for the discussion is the English novel: it got going in the eighteenth century to become the great literary form of the nineteenth. If terms of comparison are wanted for Booker entries it isn't Martin Amis or Julian Barnes (who may—haphazardly—win the prize again any year) but Austen, Eliot, Dickens, Conrad, Lawrence—and James properly understood.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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