

What's wrong with *Private Eye*? 2

Arentcha sicka jokes, as Glenda Slagg might say ... Having to be funny all the time ... having to earn a living at it ... Remember Bookworm?—*A girl can't go on laughing all the time ...* ? The unspontaneous search, the inevitable establishment of catch-phrase patterns, the patter, wisecracks, the *reductio ad absurdums* (a joke?) of jokes fed to those (Bob Hope, the Macdonalds of comedians) who keep officefuls of jokesmiths on tap; on *I'm sorry I haven't a clue*, Barry Cryer, the background laugh, laughing at everything in exactly the same way; the one liner, Bob Monkhouse, with his book of jokes ... who everyone, one thought, thought *was* a joke, rather an unpleasant one, until he died, and it turned out that in the meedyar, he was a someone to admire ...

What is it but productivity? Like the pornmags. The one thing, always different, always the same which no-one gets tired of looking at. What Dirty Des made his money out of, the man made a (true) joke of by *Private Eye*.

Like the tumescent penis of male folklore, a joke has no conscience.

Is that a joke? Or just humour, near to a proverb? (A real literary form.) Jokes are (mostly) humour reduced by the need for accelerated mechanical productivity.

That's what the *Eye* needs to understand (Bookworm, that literary chap, should be able to tell the rest of them—it's his attitudes it all depends on, even with a celebrity editor who speaks up for Tracy Beaker), rather than falling into the condition where anything's a joke, coming out of every orifice, on all channels, new-minted tokens from the one-armed bandit, a hail of jokes hitting you in the face, no subject discriminated against ... via the meedyar *Industry*. "It's a living ... " which excuses everything ...but not if the position from which your jokes come is high-up, considering yourself topdog top-of-the-heap, of being cleverer than others in your Dumbed-down Britain, your Pseuds Corner, your Colemanballs, seeing through everything, being knowing, the cynosure of the *Meedyar* upon whose absurdity in the atrophy of verbal intelligence (of which the media itself is the main cause) in the fourth largest economy in the world, you *depend*.

Don't your jokes have to be serious, too, *critical*? Otherwise you're just like everyone else: an *Eye* that's half "serious" and "investigative", half yahboosucks. Isn't there a dissociation there? At the same time as there's a connection?

Where must the jokes be better than on the vaunted covers that are published as books? Three or four words and a picture have to gather in to themselves a topical item expressing a condition of society that recognizes the nature of the condition. Difficult. We want a Bill Shankly joke, but one too true for football. We get: a picture of the Adams family, saying *Vote Conservative*; one where the person who thinks of himself as a President, in reply to *It's a great day for Freedom*, says *Now I'm free to attack Iran*. Another where the man who thinks he is a PM replies to *It's a disaster Prime Minister*, with *I know, I should have come back last week*. (On the tsunami.) And another where Hitler says *I've come dressed as Prince Harry*. None of my children (who hate, they say, Bush, Blair, the Royals, and Tories) laughed at any of these. The last one baffled the entire household. And if a joke doesn't even get a laugh, it may have the form of a joke, but isn't one. What's wrong here is that they're all *safe*, by being trivial, by being careless about the truth, by personalizing: it is no better than throwing stones, and running away. There is no judgment involved in the joke, no implied reason.

Though it is seriously-funnier than anything else, there are signs that what it doesn't

know well enough is the effect on it of being part of what it criticizes and loves to hate, the thing it can't do without—the effect of being, itself, surrounded by media whose only self-recognitions take the form of cynicism (it's an economy, stoopid). So its resistance to the liposuction of verbal intelligence from what used to be called England (“governed” by Blair, the first “prime minister”—you may have thought it was Major but then Blair turned up—to have no verbal culture beyond that of the *Sun*, at all) isn't determined enough. It might be topdog, but it is a pussycat as well.

To pick on the right subjects, topics, having the right ideas, isn't enough. The only way of handling an equivocal position, for a literary journal, is, Bookworm needs to remind them, to depend on literature (and himself too, since he's equivocal enough already to need to remind himself not to be a mere journalist). Jokes are a literary form, and like any other form, can lose their form. Rather than going slack like most forms today (“Why *is* that poem in the *LRB* called a poem?”—there's a question for the *Eye* to put in its *Scenes You Seldom See*), jokes under the pressure of productivity turn into pellets, mechanically produced, automatically about sex, sex mechanical and affectionless, as uttered by the joke-producing standup mechanism uttering them. This unpleasant derivation within postmodern commodification (another question in passing: *What is a celebrity but a commodity fetish on legs?*) is something again that the *Eye* can recognise—it is why sextalkin' Glenda is such a good character: what makes you laugh isn't a joke, it is recognition, relief, a locus of social awfulness made pitiful.

As wisecracks, one-liners, pellets (take your joke-pill) as *quantity*, jokes fall into a neutrality. Any subject, in the interests of productivity-topicality: therefore the general indifference to audience. Who cares whether anyone is offended by class, category, belief, affiliation, by subject ... You've no rights with jokes. You see, they're not serious. But this false neutrality won't do for *Private Eye*: confused by its alter-ego as a journal of earnest report, its *raison d'être* is the superiority of seeing the stupidity of things. It claims to be more intelligent (it is) about its own world than the other denizens. It is, or ought to be, our *Vanity Fair*. As it is, it's not good enough.