Words Fail Me

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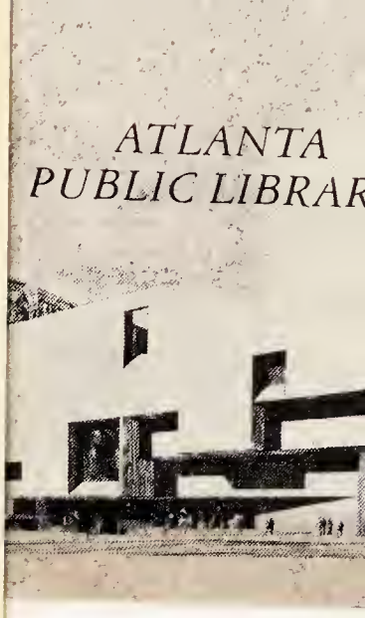

The English language is changing, as we use it, probably faster than it ever has before. *Words Fail Me,* the successor to *New Words for Old* and *Weasel Words,* examines the state of the language as we chatter our way into the eighties, using, abusing, improving, and altering our rich, untidy treasure of English. Philip Howard explores the coining of new terms and the fading away of old ones, asking such questions as whatever happened to the Near East and what is the designation for the woman or man one is living with but not married to?

Words Fail Me discusses words that have changed their meanings in the seventies, in the way that Philip Howard does in his column in *The Times* of London. It is too late to save *alibi,* which even careful writers now use to mean any old excuse. But is *to refute,* because of the demands of political rhetoric, doomed to mean no more than "to deny vehemently"?

The book also examines some ancient puzzles of the language. Who first conceived the notion that Cheshire cats smiled (a century before Carroll)? Where did we get the idea that the *jumbo,* in, for instance, *jumbo-jet* and *jumbo-burger,* meant elephant? Why do crocodiles weep? When did mermaids get tails? How many angels can dance on the point of a pin? These questions are puzzling, though not beyond all

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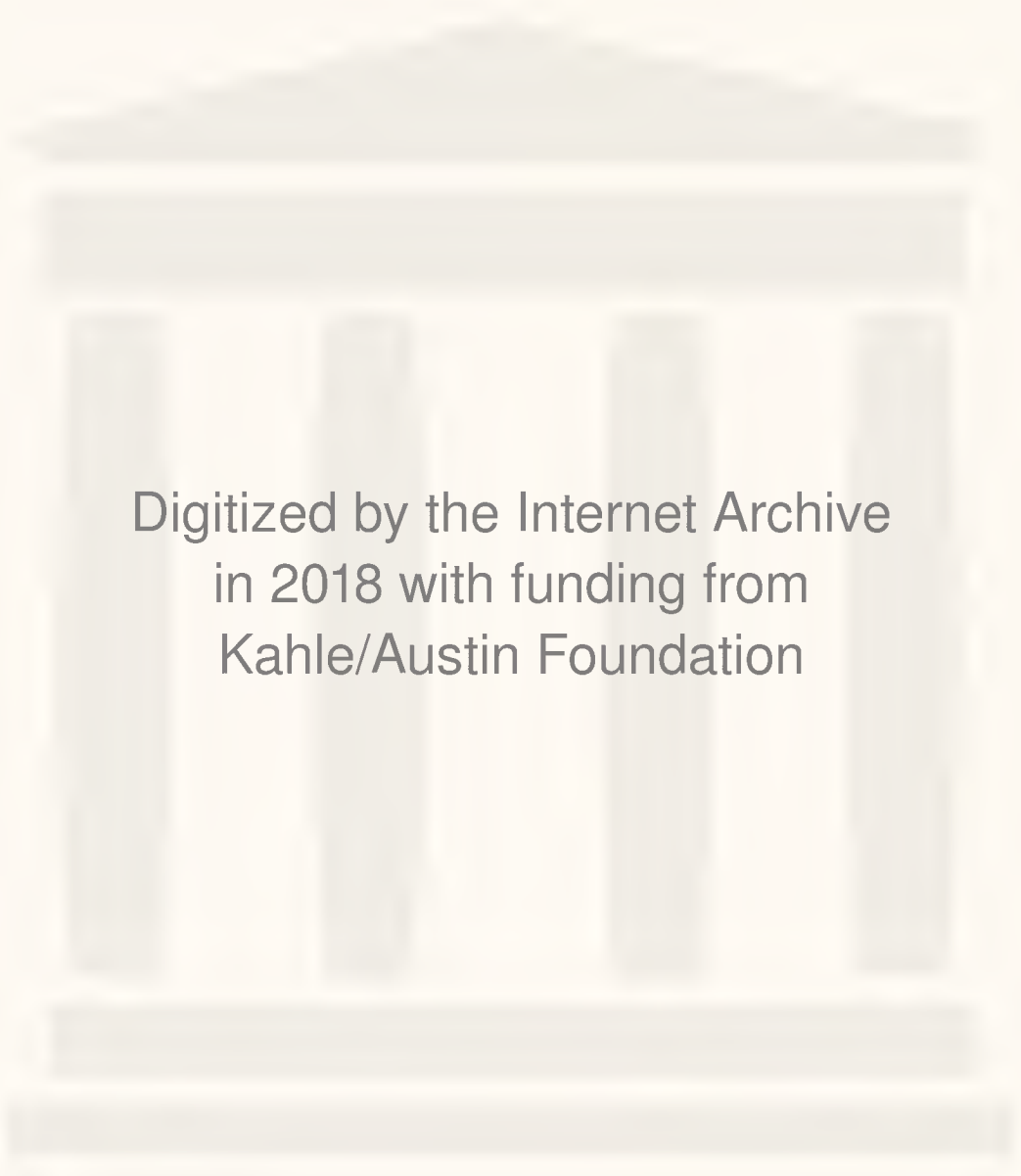

WORDS FAIL ME

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

New Words for Old
Weasel Words

PHILIP HOWARD

Words Fail Me

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Tibi: namque tu solebas
meas esse aliquid putare nugas.

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INTRODUCTION

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the English language is having one of its periodic fits of rapid change, as it did after the Norman Conquest, and again after the invention of printing. The new question is: is this change different in kind as well as in scale from the changes that continually adapt a living language to meet new needs and new generations? And even, if you are feeling pessimistic as well as apocalyptic, is it terminal? Instead of becoming the world language, is English cracking up?

As we babble and scribble our way into the Eighties, worrying about the state of the language has become as fashionable as worrying about the state of one's own health, or the end of civilization as we know it. Like the last two, it is a self-fulfilling activity. The worrywart hypochondriac imagines aches and hears muffled knockings in the outlying provinces of his (or her) body at three in the morning. If he sets his mind doggedly to it, the determined doom-watcher can find the gloomy satisfaction of 'I told you so' in every issue of his newspaper, and every time he turns on the radio or television.

Similarly the eyes of the purist fretter about language pass over any virtues on a page without a flicker, and are drawn exclusively to misprint, catachresis, misspelling, solecism, barbarism, and other evidence that English ain't what it used to be. It never was. It is never clear when English was at that golden peak of perfection from which it is supposed to have declined. But it often seems to have been when the parents of the worried wordFowler were at school, being taught old-fashioned parsing and grammar (preferably the Latin sort) by Mr Chips or Miss Popham.

In extreme cases the worrier takes the alleged decadence of English as a cause and not just a symptom of our supposed general decline. As the Dark Ages roll over us, he/she and a small élite of literati who still use the Queen's English correctly will be besieged

in their Gowers-towers, while outside the troops of Midian will prowl and prowl around, splitting infinitives and grunting 'hopefully' to each other.

The notion of correct (or Queen's, or standard) English has become a difficult one for our generation, which is correctly suspicious of authority. Like what we bees needin is beaucoup cognizance that brothers and sisters rappin on am not necessarily talkin a substandard creole, but don disprove that in living vibrant color.

That may be incorrect *Times* style, liable to make the chief sub-editor Gasp and Stretch his Eyes, and the night lawyer wake up with a start from dreams of juicy libels. But it is *correct* in Watts County, where the language of *The Times* would seem, if spoken, grotesquely stuffy, alien, and unintelligible.

Each of us uses many different dialects of English for different occasions (writing to one's bank manager, writing an informal letter, talking to a friend, talking to a stranger, talking to a child, talking to oneself, talking on the dreadful telephone . . .), and each dialect is 'correct' in its proper context. What goes wrong is not deviation from some notional absolute standard of correctitude, but the use of an inappropriate dialect in an incongruous context, as in, 'Ta-ta, Your Holiness, baby; see you soon, luv', or, 'With the completion of that progression of beverages may I hazard the opinion that it falls to me to procure the next one?'

One of the principal reasons for the present rapid change and expansion of English is that many more people of many more races and cultures are speaking it as a first or second language, introducing their own national idioms and idiosyncrasies.

Most Indians learn English not by the spoken word in their homes, but at school from books. So Indian English tends to be characteristically formal, even pedantic. An English-speaking father says to his son: 'You are advised to meet your mother.' A British father in the same circumstances would say: 'Why don't you ask your mother, darling?' Indians characteristically tag 'isn't it' on to the end of sentences, regardless of the number and gender of the subject: 'They went to the cinema, isn't it?' Australians, who are extremely inventive with the language, insert the Great Australian Adjective *passim* in their English: 'Cripes, Pommy, it sticks out like a bloody moment of fun at a Rolf Bloody Harris concert; I mean, we just don't speak the same bloody language.' Other national and regional groups of English-speakers have their

own dialects. But they enrich rather than impoverish the central language. The centripetal forces of the printed word and other media of modern mass communication are stronger than the centrifugal forces of regional variation.

The proliferation of knowledge is another cause of the rapid change in English. It spawns new jargons that are often so far removed from everyday speech that they are unintelligible to those of us outside the Fancy. A philosopher writes; 'There is a number of kinds of sets of infinite numbers of nomological propositions to each of which we must attribute zero intrinsic probability.' His colleagues understand what he is saying. The eyes of the rest of us glaze over.

At the Ministry of Defence the ize have it. Here is a small sample of their current jargon for communicating with each other inside NATO: synopsize, prioritize, impossibilize, parameterize, architecture (no, not that meaning), technoboggling, definitize, channelize. And here is an advertisement of 1980 by the Institute of the London Centre for Psychotherapy: 'The course will be experiential and can be used for self-exploration through role-playing and psychodrama in the context of an on-going group process.'

We may suspect that the last two clumps of jargon could be more simply expressed without losing precision. We may even suspect, if we are hardened and shameless cynics, that the last example is witch-doctor mumbo-jumbo designed principally to impress the gullible. But presumably mathematically-inclined philosophers, Royal Naval Captains on the make, and aspiring practitioners of psychotherapy understand their respective jargons and find them useful shorthand. If they do not, the jargons will rapidly die anyway.

The language is changing because there are more sources of new slang, and because slang spreads instantly around the world. Almost everybody has access to such media of mass communication as trannies. Slang has always been around. Most language starts as slang, the vernacular of ordinary people in the cave or on the Clapham omnibus, if they can catch one. If slang is successful, it is adopted into the language. It should therefore not vex us or worry us that the American young today use 'bad', pronounced 'ba-a-ad', to describe something or somebody easy on the eye; 'foxy' as a sexy compliment for a pretty girl; 'dynamite' to mean super; 'brick house' to mean a good-looking, well-stacked girl; and

'buns' to mean bum. No doubt young Brits, influenced by television, films, and magazines, will pick up the slang. But other terms will soon become fashionable, as the old ones become boring. Chesterton said that all slang was metaphor, and all metaphor is poetry.

English is changing because many more people are speaking it as a first or second language. The grammar is becoming simpler and coarser, as it is taught by teachers for whom it is not the native language. 'Whom' will be as old-fashioned as wing collars and corsets by the end of the century. The distinction between 'will' and 'shall' is dying. Under American influence the difference between 'I haven't got' and 'I don't have' is dead. 'I haven't got indigestion' means that I am not suffering from a belly-ache at the moment. 'I don't have indigestion' means that I am not dyspeptic. 'We haven't got any bananas' means that there happen to be none in the shop, but we usually have them. 'We don't have bananas' means that we don't stock them: blackberries and breadfruit yes; bananas never.

In these and other ways English is losing some useful distinctions. This weakens the language, because the more distinctions there are available in a language, the more powerful and useful it is. There is nothing that we can do to halt this gradual simplification of English grammar, which is welcomed by democratic levellers, except deplore it and perhaps slow down the process a little. It has been going on for centuries. Those who care for precision can carry on using 'whom', 'shall', and 'I haven't got' for the present, without appearing to be linguistic Luddites.

English is changing because people, some through ignorance, others deliberately in order to persuade or deceive, attach new meanings to old words. It does not much matter that many of us led by Ted Heath, now confuse 'flout' and 'flaunt', although it can lead us to say the opposite of what we mean: 'It sheds light on his character that he was willing to *flaunt* the conventions of his time.' But it is sinister when somebody calls his master's previous statement 'inoperative', when what he means is that it was a lie; or calls a dissident a psychiatric criminal; or uses 'pacification' as a whited sepulchre of a euphemism for killing everything that moves. But our generation did not invent such weasel words. According to Tacitus, the British chieftain Calgacus accused the Romans of inventing the last one: '*Ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*'; they make a desolation, and call it pacification. Calga-

cus was not fooled; and nor are we, yet.

It may be true that English is under greater threat to its precision, versatility, and concreteness than it has been for some centuries. Relativists and exponents of structural linguistics rush to defend almost any solecism or neologism as an 'alternate mode of communicating'. Pessimists and purists reply that they are no more alternative modes of communicating than shooting the referee is an alternative way of playing football, or upsetting the board is an alternative way of playing chess.

But we are still a long way from Orwell's Newspeak of *1984*, when 'every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten.' English in the Eighties is an exciting and deafening Babel of dialects. It has grown prodigiously since the war because of the vast increase in knowledge of all sorts, as well as the vast increase in numbers of people of all sorts speaking it as a first or second language. It makes little sense to talk about language being 'correct' or in decline. Eskimo may not suit our life, but the language is perfectly adapted to the material culture of the Eskimos. Latin did not 'decline' from golden into silver, and bronze after the fall of Rome. It was merely spoken by different chaps; and Helen Waddell has reminded us that they used it magnificently for their different purposes.

'Where shall we look for standard English but to the words of the standard man?' Let us worry, if we must worry, about the return of the Dark Ages, or the state of our health. The language is in rude health, so long as we can go on using it, abusing it, complaining about it, and changing it in so many rich and varied ways.

This book examines some of the ways in which English is changing in the Eighties. It asks (and tries to answer) such questions as why cowboys have deserted the rolling prairie for the motorway; whatever happened to the Near East; and what is the best designatory handle for the woman (or man) one is living with but not married to. It explores such ancient puzzles as why crocodiles are supposed to cry; when mermaids got their tails; and how many angels can dance on the point of a pin (to be exact, who first asked such a silly question).

About half the chapters are based on pieces that have appeared in my column 'New words and new meanings' in *The Times*, in the

column on English English I write in *Verbatim*, and on articles in other publications. They have been expanded and improved in the light of hindsight and the correspondence they provoked.

For ideas, improvements, argument, and laughter about the language I thank: Anatole Abragam, Margaret Allen, Denis Baron, Francis Berry, Robert Burchfield, Sir David Croom-Johnson, Derek Darby, Judith Eversley, Gay and Tony Firth, Alfred Friendly, Roy Fuller, Jimmy Greenwood, Jamie Hamilton, Louis Heren, James Holladay, Elspeth Huxley, Nicholas Kurti, Bernard Levin, Theo McEvoy, Edwin Newman, Betty Palmer, Leon Pilpel, John Poole, Randolph Quirk, Isabel Raphael, William Rees-Mogg, Alan Ross, Jan Stephens, Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson, John Sykes, Philippa Toomey, Laurence Urdang, Harold Wilkinson, and all other wordsmiths and word children who have corresponded with me.

1/ ALIBI

Oh Sammy, Sammy, vy, worn't there a alleybi!

Clearly 'clearly' is in an ongoing perspicuity situation as a transparently vacuous vogue word. 'Clearly' has replaced 'obviously', which long ago replaced 'manifestly'. It is also an argumentative word that speaks with forked tongue. Prick up your ears and be on your guard when a speaker launches into an argument with 'clearly', for the chances are that what he is about to say will be as clear as the argument: all lexicographers are bachelors; Henry VIII was a lexicographer; therefore Henry VIII was a bachelor.

In a similar way in our Age of Hyperbole such intensifying words as 'very' and 'extremely' and 'the greatest' have come to be turncoat words that mean the opposite to what they say. They actually weaken the words that they qualify. A good pop singer is likely to be a better performer than 'the greatest group since the Beatles'. 'I am pleased to see you' sounds more sincerely pleased than 'I am very pleased to see you'. O tetracopros, blight radio commentators who wish one a VERY good morning first thing. In the Yiddish curse, may he or she inherit a shipload of gold; may it not be enough to pay his doctor's bills.

When an economist or econometrician says, '*Clearly*, direct estimation of β will produce biased and inconsistent results', he probably means, 'Though it is not immediately obvious, two or three lines of algebra will reveal that . . . '

If he says, 'Of course, *it turns out* that . . . ', you are to understand that after toiling through pages of messy calculations on the back of old computer print-out (old envelopes are now recycled), the same (surprising) conclusion will be reached. If the result is really clear, then it will be *trivially* the case.

This mixture of technical terminology and fluff is a signal that

the speaker belongs to a recognizable group. In their insecurity politicians keep themselves warm at night with such devices; they feel comfortably identifiable, if only with the other members of the group which (say) habitually diminishes the impact of its metaphors by appending the words 'as it were' to statements in interviews. The appeal of modish catachresis and catch-phrases is enhanced by frequent changes: new passwords are admitted, and old ones lapse.

Have you ever bent your mind to the phenomenon of the De-emphasizing Emphatic? St Fowler the Scolder observed that *doubtless* and *no doubt* have been weakened in sense till they no longer convey certainty, but either probability (You have doubtless/no doubt considered this) or concession (No doubt this is a fine point; it is doubtless very élitist). Fowler recommended that if one wanted to convey certainty or real conviction one had to use *undoubtedly*, *without (a) doubt*, or *beyond a doubt*. Emphasis has been further discredited since Fowler wrote.

All such emphasizers as *undoubtedly*, (AlsopSpeak: *indubitably*), *beyond a doubt*, *without a doubt*, and often *surely*, and *certainly*, and not just *doubtless* and *no doubt*, diminish, if they do not actually destroy the assurance of a statement. 'Surely, Alexander intended to return to Macedonia', or 'Joan of Arc was undoubtedly a sweet kid', indicate merely that those facts may be true, but that there is no proof to hand. Leave out the emphasizers and you get positive statements. Memo to myself: when in doubt, leave out *doubtless*, and of course always leave out *of course*. How ever did it happen that dubiety and mistrust came to be implied by words intended to signify the complete lack of it? We live in a cynical and disbelieving age.

No doubt has decayed so far that it means its opposite. If you read a paragraph that said:'*No doubt* Lord Goodbody has an entirely innocent explanation of the fact that he was found in bed with two black ladies, a goat, and a quantity of rubber underwear', you would make two assumptions: one, that Lord Goodbody most certainly did not have an innocent explanation, and that indeed no such explanation could exist; and two, that the writer intended you to come to this conclusion. Bernard Levin pioneered this rhetorical discovery a year or two ago when beginning a sentence with something like, '*No doubt* X (an obvious but litigious politician) is an honest man.'

With all respect is another Benedict Arnold turncoat phrase. In

academic circles the man who begins his remarks *with respect* actually means 'I am about to demolish your argument and if possible you with a buzz-saw of disrespect.' Alfred Friendly, the witty *Washington Post* journalist (not to be confused with Fred Friendly the American broadcaster and journalist), was disconcerted by the phrase when he took to spending half the year in London: 'When, in argument, an Englishman says to me, "With all respect . . . ", I know he means that he has no respect at all for what I have said. The expression is almost never heard in the United States, but I rather like it. In telegraphing the punch, it gives me a moment to prepare myself for the fact that he is about to knock the neck off a bottle and ream me a new arse-hole with what remains.'

These lying reversible phrases are probably as timeless as human nature. But British English seems particularly rich in them, which may indicate something about the British character. 'In my humble opinion' means: 'I am Sir Oracle, And when I ope my lips let no dog bark!' Others are: 'As members will have read in the report . . . '; 'It takes more than that to make me angry, my friend'; 'I don't envy anyone with money these days'; 'Your little boy is *so* much more advanced than mine'; and (from the London Underground) 'No Exit'.

'We must keep in touch' means: 'I never want to see you again.' 'I am perfectly ready to admit', much employed by writers of letters to *The Times* who have lost the argument, means: 'I should have thought of that, dammit, but I refuse to let logic or facts come between me and my prejudices.'

Clearly *alibi* has been in the linguistic doghouse for ages before all of these, as an erstwhile precise word that is being progressively weakened. Everybody from Fowler to Gowers and Fraser has protested vehemently that the modern diluted use of *alibi* to mean any old excuse is reducing the precision of the language by depriving us of a word for *alibi*'s exact meaning. For all the attention that has been paid to those dear old precisians, they might just as well have been conjugating Greek irregular verbs at Speakers' Corner; though, come to think of it, that would have been more intelligible and prettier than some of the hot air that is spouted there.

The new enlarged use of *alibi* is given respectability and made fashionable by educated writers and speakers who ought to know better (what sort of priggish 'ought' is that?). 'The Victorians

allowed great scope to individuality and masculinity, strong passions and high spirits, and other *alibis* for overweening egomania, insecurity, and aggression.'

When Sir Keith Joseph recently wrote: 'Is the *Evening Standard* preparing an *alibi* for a *pax Sovietica* stretching from the Pacific to the Atlantic?', we saw what he meant, but wished that he had written 'justification', 'defence', 'pretext', or 'excuse'. On the same topic a leader-writer of *The Daily Telegraph* typed or used whatever shrill instrument of writing is preferred by *Telegraph* leader-writers: 'British editorial writers who try . . . to provide a gratuitous *alibi* in advance for a possible Soviet attempt to swallow Yugoslavia.' A book has been published with the title *The SS: Alibi of a Nation*. It all sounds like the Irish MP, who 'not being a bird, could not be in more than two places at once.' Stout Tony Weller, in his agitation over the case of Bardell versus Pickwick, sounds as hazy as we lesser men about the sharp point of the word: 'If your governor don't prove an alleybi, he'll be what the Italians call reg'larly flummoxed.'

Alibi was once pure Latin. It is the old locative case of *alius*, meaning 'other', and therefore means 'elsewhere, in another place'. It was taken directly into English without modification in the eighteenth century, originally as an adverb: 'The prisoner had little to say in his defence; he endeavoured to prove himself *Alibi*.' Hence the useful little specialized word was adopted by the lawyers into their jargon as a noun, meaning the plea of having been elsewhere at the time when the prosecution alleges that one was breaking into the Bank of England with fire and the sword, or otherwise misbehaving. This was the potent legal talisman that Mr Weller was in awe of. An admirable example illustrating it was written by that precise master of the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings, T. S. Eliot:

He always has an *alibi*, and one or two to spare:
At whatever time the deed took place—MACAVITY WASN'T THERE!

From there the word started to show signs of wanderlust, traipsing off after vague excuses and pretexts. Fowler and Gowers both blamed the vogue of detective stories for the corruption. So many of them use an *alibi* as the core of their plot that ignorant readers think that *alibi* will do as any means of rebutting a charge. The rot started in the United States. Big Bill Tilden, of the

cannon-ball service and the cannon-ball prose, gave an early example of the extended use in his book *Lawn Tennis* published in 1922: 'Don't offer *alibis* for losing.' That is excellent advice but a double fault with *alibi*.

From the United States the word has been widely extended to mean somebody providing an excuse, as in 'Mary-Lou is my *alibi*'; and also as a transitive verb meaning 'to clear by an excuse' or 'to provide with an *alibi*', as in 'I am not lugging in the fact to *alibi* myself away from anything'. Yuk. An intransitive use is also possible though not advisable: 'They *alibied* for not giving money to the teachers' organization.'

The lawyers may manage to preserve their technical and exact sense of *alibi*. For the rest of us the battle has been lost.

All, or nearly all, words are tools. As a mechanic or workman of any sort is equipped with many tools, the more he has, the fewer he will use on any one job; so the more words a writer or speaker knows, the fewer he needs to express his meaning. The well-equipped workman who needs to make a hole of $\frac{5}{32}''$ diameter has a drill bit of that size, and does not have to use one of $\frac{1}{8}''$ and enlarge the hole with a reamer (or rimer). And so it goes with screwdrivers, saws, chisels, and other instruments for doing unintentional injury to one's thumb. If he uses the wrong one, he is likely to damage both the work and the tool, for instance by using a spanner of the wrong size to shift a nut.

However, an old tool no longer needed for its original purpose may be altered for a new one without spoiling the usefulness of the tool-box. So it is with words, a good example being 'weird'. Although Raphael Holinshed in his *History and Description of Scotland* wrote of the 'Fate Sisters' as the 'Weird Sisters', and Shakespeare followed him, and although professional Scots may still gibber 'Ye maun dree your ain weird', British English has adapted the word for quite a different meaning, without impoverishing the tool-box of the language. For pretty Hecate's sake, we have 'fate' and its associated string of words to do the original job of 'weird'.

But the change in *alibi* is a nuisance. It meets no new need. What is wrong with 'excuse'? And it has spoilt a useful little word and reduced the number of tools in the great box of English. Any old *alibi* is just not good enough. But to say so is as much a waste of wind as whistling in a hurricane. Conjugation of Greek irregular verbs, anyone?

2/ ANGEL

If man is only a little lower than the angels, the angels should get their fingers out

Our texts, this morning, children, are Ephesians 1, 21, and Colossians 1, 16, concerning the vexed question of how many angels can dance upon the point of a needle. Protestant theologians are embarrassed by angels, and tend to shrink from definition and speculation in angelology. Others of us find the dear creatures irresistible, and their appearance in poetry almost always unintentionally humorous. Remember the inquisitive angels in Dryden, as the English fleet goes out to meet the returning Charles II:

> To see this fleet upon the ocean move,
> Angels drew wide the curtains of the skies;
> And Heav'n, as if there wanted lights above,
> For tapers made two glaring comets rise.

And how about Isaac Watts inviting the quire of angels to take up permanent residence in Whitehall and join a mixed choir with Brits to welcome William III?

> Brigades of angels lin'd the way,
> And guarded William to his throne;
> There, ye celestial warriors, stay,
> And make his palace like your own.
>
> Then, mighty God! the earth shall know
> And learn the worship of the sky;
> Angels and Britons join below,
> To raise their hallelujahs high.

Every schoolboy knows that the medieval theologians spent much of their time arguing about the precise number of angels who could stand on the head of a pin. It is one of our most popular

proverbs and catch-phrases. But is it? If you try to pin down those crowded angels through the *odium grammaticum* of *Notes and Queries*, through majestic correspondence in the bottom right-hand corner of the Letters Page of *The Times*, through the dark woods of *Summa Theologica* and Duns Scotus, you will find that they are as elusive as the Snark.

There are plenty of proverbs about angels in English literature, from the satisfying oath 'By this fire, that's God's angel' to taking one's stand on the side of the angels. There are plenty of proverbs about needles, even about standing on their points: 'For so on needles' points My wife's heart stands with haste of the revenge' (George Chapman's tragedy *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, 1613). But the angels never get together to stand on the needles.

The first clue is found in *Curiosities of Literature*, the discursive collection of literary and historical anecdotes published by Isaac D'Israeli (Benjamin's father) between 1791 and 1793. Under the heading 'Quodlibets, or Scholastic Disquisitions' Isaac wrote: 'The reader desirous of being *merry* with Aquinas's angels may find them in Martinus Scriblerus, in Chapter VII, who enquires if angels pass from one extreme to another without going through the *middle*? And if angels know things more clearly in a morning? How many angels can dance on the point of a very fine needle, without jostling one another?'

Eureka, we cry; or since we are bound on a quest that is the apotheosis of pedantry, *Heureka*.

Turn quickly to Chapter VII of the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, which were initiated by the Scriblerus Club in about 1713. Pope, Swift, Arbuthnot, Gay, Parnell, Congreve, Lord Oxford, and Atterbury were members. Their satirical memoirs, written mainly if not entirely by Arbuthnot, were intended to ridicule 'all the false tastes in learning, under the character of a man of capacity enough, that had dipped into every art and science, but injudiciously in each'. They were never finished, but the first book was printed in the second volume of Pope's prose works in 1741.

Chapter VII does indeed contain a number of recondite questions about angels culled from the works of the Angelic Doctor, Aquinas, and Francisco de Suarez. But there is no whisper of the notorious question about angels dancing on the point of a needle, which seems to have been an embellishing invention of Isaac D'Israeli; God damn it.

There is a reference to the habit among medieval schoolmen of debating the question of how many angels could stand (or dance) on the point of a needle in William Chillingworth's *Religion of Protestants*, 1638.

The hunters of the formation team of angelic dancers are forced back into the primary sources, where they will find much sound stuff. According to Aquinas angels are not composed of form and matter, but are subsistent forms, each differing from the other and forming a species in himself. From their immateriality it follows that they are by nature immortal and incorruptible. Because they have neither extension nor dimensions they cannot be in a place, but can move and act on material beings by applying their power to the place in which they want to be.

There is nothing about needles. The nearest that St Thomas gets to the notorious question is in *Summa Theologica*, book 1, questions 52, where he considers three questions: Is an angel in a place? Thomas answers yes. Can an angel be in several places at once? No. Can several angels be in the same place at the same time? No. He observes: 'Some, however, have been deceived in this matter. For some who were unable to go beyond the reach of their imaginations supposed the indivisibility of the angel to be like that of a point; consequently they thought that an angel could be only in a place which is a point.' Could this be our original pinhead or Boojum?

Aquinas was often called upon to answer trick questions and frivolous conundrums like the one about the angels and the needle. His answers were usually pointed. For example, when asked whether the names of the elect were written by the hand of God in heaven and whether there was an equivalent list in hell, he replied: 'For all I can see, it does not seem to be true, but there is no harm done in saying it.' Perhaps some mischievous student did ask him how many angels could dance on the point of a needle, and the folk memory of the joke has survived. Aquinas's answer, alas, has not.

The other great angel-fancier of the Middle Ages was Duns Scotus, whose doctrines were foreshadowed by those of St Bonaventure. He takes angels to be composite beings consisting of form and matter, though the latter is an angelic, non-corporeal matter. There may be several angels in the same species, and several angels may occupy the same place. This last doctrine of the 'Doctor Subtilis' popularized and handed down as a joke may be

responsible for the angels stepping up on to the pinhead, when the Reformers and humanists invented the word 'dunce', meaning a dull pedant, to ridicule the subtleties of Duns Scotus and the Schools. The precise point of the needle does not occur in Duns's commentaries or in the post-medieval synthesis of Thomist and Scotist angel-doctrine developed by Suarez.

So far angel-hunters have been unable to trace the alleged problem about the needle in any scholastic source. M. O'C. Walshe, an eagle-eyed angelologist and German scholar, found an apparent reference to it in the fourteenth-century *Swester Katrei* ('Sister Cathy'), wrongly ascribed to Meister Eckhart, the German Dominican mystic and possible heretic. In the English translation the Master is represented as saying: 'Doctors declare that in heaven a thousand angels can stand on the point of a needle.' *Verdammt*! When the admirable Mr Walshe turned to the original German, he found that what was actually written goes: 'Doctors declare that in heaven a thousand *souls* can sit on the point of a needle.' Nevertheless, even though we have souls rather than angels, and even though they are sitting so that the iron enters into their souls, rather than standing or dancing, the essential idea is there, and it is medieval, not merely the invention of some humanist bent on making a fool of the schoolmen. Behind the fluctuation between souls and angels we might conjecture the variant readings, *angeli* and *animae*.

Although the medieval Schoolmen came to no very clear conclusion about the problem, it has become a theological area of modern mathematics. In the same way that the theologians fretted about the extension of angels, mathematicians fret about whether one can make a line out of points, which by definition have no dimensions, and whose positions in space are located by means of their coordinates; just like angels, in fact. The mathematicians have worked out an abstruse solution from Set Theory, which was developed from the work of Georg Cantor in Infinite Sets.

As the Schoolmen postulated hierarchies of angels, so the mathematicians postulate different orders of infinities, so as to join points together to make a line. They assert, in terms that admit no argument or even nervous coughing, that any countably infinite set of points or angels can sit upon the point of a needle, but not every uncountably infinite set. Professor Howard Rosenbrock explains: 'In the same way in Set Theory it is possible to define a space which is connected but not locally connected, in

which an angel can dance from any point to any other, but cannot dance, in a continuous manner, in a circle around any point.' If we locate the angels at mathematical points (the view condemned by Aquinas, although he admitted that some theologians held it), then the question about the angels and the needle becomes a question about Set Theory. In the Middle Ages this was a paradox. In the twentieth century the mathematicians have generally agreed on a definitive though implausible answer.

There are other mysteries about angels that have not yet been satisfactorily explained, if explanation is reverent or even possible in such airy company. Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (*c.* 500) finally settled the league table of the celestial hierarchy. According to him angels are arranged in three hierarchies containing three choirs each: Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones; Dominations, Virtues, and Powers; Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. Of these only the last two choirs of the third hierarchy have an immediate mission to men.

There is a grammatical and orthographical mystery about angels. The word 'cherub' came into the Old English language in the Dark Ages from Latin and French, but ultimately from the Hebrew of the Old Testament, in which 'cherubim' is the plural of 'cherub'. The English misunderstood this alien plural, and invented a new one for 'cherubim': cherubims or cherubins. In a scholarly reaction in the seventeenth century such purists as Bacon and Milton managed to oust cherubins from the language. But the differentiation between cherub and cherubim had been established.

A cherub still tends to be seen in English as a podgy, naked, baby boy or *putto*, to which the adjectives cherubic and chubby apply: a naked new-born babe, striding the blast. Heaven's cherubim, hors'd upon the sightless couriers of the air, are seen in English as more formidable creatures, guarding the way to the tree of life with a flaming sword. According to Ezekiel's vision each of the cherubim has four faces and four wings: 'Their legs were straight, and their hooves were like the hooves of a calf, glittering like a disc of bronze. Under the wings on each of the four sides were human hands; all four creatures had faces and wings, and their wings touched one another . . . Their faces were like this: all four had the face of a man and the face of a lion on the right, on the left the face of an ox and the face of an eagle.'

Cherubs are all right, if you are good with swaddling-clothes.

The cherubim are not the chaps for a nervous man to meet on a dark night in a lonely road. The seraphim are almost equally alarming living creatures with six wings, according to Isaiah, but their adjective 'seraphic' has come to mean blissfully happy. One can be seraphic without being cherubic.

And somehow the dear creatures have trouble getting into English poetry without seeming absurd. Here they are giving the recently deceased Mr Purcell a flying lesson:

Good angels snatch'd him eagerly on high;
Joyful they flew, and soaring through the sky,
  Teaching his new-fledg'd soul to fly;
  While we, alas! lamenting lie.
  He went musing all along,
  Composing new their heavenly song:
A while his skilful notes loud hallelujahs drown'd;
But soon they ceas'd their own, to catch his pleasing sound.

Chesterton was right when he suggested that angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. J. B. S. Haldane calculated that an angel whose muscles developed no more power weight for weight than those of an eagle or a pigeon would require a breast projecting for about four feet to house the muscles engaged in working its wings, while to economize in weight, its legs would have to be reduced to mere stilts.

3/ ARABIC

Nationalism in language is as silly as the political sort

Thomas Wilson was one of the first Saxonists. In his *Art of Rhetorique*, published in 1553, Elizabeth I's privy councillor and secretary of state urged the importance of writing on English matters in the English tongue, avoiding affections, latinisms, and fancy foreign phrases.

'Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that we never affect any strange inkhorn terms, but so speak as is commonly received, neither seeking to be over fine, nor yet living over careless, using our speech as most men do, and ordering our wits as the fewest have done.

'Some seek so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mother's language. And I dare swear this, if some of their mothers were alive, they were not able to tell what they say; and yet these fine English clerks will say, they speak in their mother-tongue if a man should charge them for counterfeiting the King's English.

'Some far-journeyed gentlemen at their return home like as they love to go in foreign apparel, so they powder their talk with oversea language. He that cometh lately out of France will talk French English and never blush at the matter. Another chops in with English Italienated, and applieth the Italian phrase to our English speaking, the which is, as if an Orator that professeth to utter his mind in plain Latin, would needs speak Poetry, and far-fetched colours of strange antiquity. The Lawyer will store his stomach with the prating of Pedlars. The Auditor in making his Accompt and reckoning, cometh in with *sise sould* and *cater denere* for vis iiiid.

'The fine courtier will talk nothing but *Chaucer*. The mystical

wisemen and Poetidal Clerks will speak nothing but quaint Proverbs, and blind Allegories, delighting much in their own darkness, especially, when none can tell what they do say. The unlearned or foolish fantastical, that smells but of learning, (such fellows as have seen learned men in their days) will so Latin their tongues, that the simple cannot but wonder at their talk, and think surely they speak by some Revelation.

'I know them that think *Rhetoric* to stand wholly upon dark words, and he that can catch an inkhorn term by the tail, him they count to be a fine Englishman and a good *Rhetorician*.'

That is a fine piece of English prose, though not notably plain and Saxon. If Wilson is saying, in writing as in life, when in doubt, simplify; avoid circumlocution, gobbledygook, pretentiousness, and fancy foreign words merely to show off, we can all (well, most of us) give him three Saxon cheers.

If he is saying with the Saxonists, translate all Romance and other foreign words into plain Anglo-Saxon, he is talking codswallop, or, to put it in Old English, balls. Fowler shot down that misguided form of purism when he said that one's choice or rejection of particular words should depend not on their etymological pedigrees, but on considerations of expressiveness, intelligibility, brevity, euphony, or ease of handling.

O Iuppiter irrumator, English is the world's great pickpocket of language. It borrows pretty or useful words from every other tongue that has spread out from the Tower of Babel, from Eskimo (igloo, for a start) to Arabic. It would be daft not to make use of our great wealth because of linguistic chauvinism.

It is pure chance that the English word for the department of mathematics using general symbols is 'algebra', not 'almucabala'. The full, original Arabic term for algebraic computation was *ilm aljebr wa'lmuqabalah*; meaning the science of reuniting broken parts and equation. In the fourteenth century some English writers hi-jacked the first half of the Arabic expression, algebra. At the same time writers of medieval Latin in England were using the second half of the Arabic expression, almucabala, in the same sense.

The earliest user of the mathematical term in English spelt the word 'algeber', directly transliterating the Arabic. The anglicized pronunciation, with the stress on the first instead of the second syllable, was first recorded in Butler's *Hudibras*, published in 1663:

For he by geometric scale
Could take the size of pots of ale,
And wisely tell what hour o' th' day
The clock doth strike, by algebra.

Dr Johnson found the etymology uncertain, and the definition tangled. He wrote that the Arabic word was derived by some from *Geber* the philosopher; by some from *gefr*, parchment; by others from *algehista*, a bone-setter; by others by *algiatarat*, the restitution of things broken. That is a buckshot etymology that sprays the horizon and hopes to hit something.

Herodotus, the father of history and father of some merry lies, was the first European to adopt the name Arab. With its vast vocabulary and concomitant taste for nice differentiation, English has established distinctions in its adjectives for describing Arab matters. Arab means of the Arabs. Arabian means of Arabia. Arabic means of the language, literature, or writing of the Arabs.

So in English, if we pick our words with discretion, we speak of an Arab League, or sheikh, or horse, or statesman, or terrorist. There can be Arab traditions, or fatalism, or fanaticism, or philosophy. But if we want to speak about nights, they are Arabian Nights, or desert, or cheetahs, or gales, or flora. The correct sobriquet for the phoenix is the Arabian bird. An Arab village is one inhabited by Arabs. If it happens to be in Arabia, it can also be correctly described in English as an Arabian village. An Arab conference is one between Arabs. An Arabian conference takes place in Arabia, and may be exactly the same get-together as an Arab conference, provided that it is not attended by others as well as Arabs.

Arabian can still be used in English to qualify things of the past. Accordingly it is correct, but not obligatory, to refer to Arabian monuments, prophets, philosophy, empires, conquests, or records. Arab and Arabian were used indifferently for some centuries in English. But the distinction we have now established is useful.

Arabic should always be reserved for the language or literature. Chaucer was one of the first Englishmen to make this distinction, when he wrote, 'To Arabiens in Arabik'. Arabic numerals and letters stand contradistinguished in English to the Roman. There is an exception. There usually is in English. For more than five centuries the English have been using 'Gum Arabic' to refer to the

juice exuded by an African species of acacia, and 'Arabic Acid' to refer to what is obtained from it.

In its fecundity English has tried other Arab, Arabian, and Arabic words, and rejected most of them. Araby is an obsolete word that we have used in our time to mean an Arab, a native of Arabia, an Arab horse, and, as an adjective, Arabian or Arabic. As the old-fashioned and poetic name for the country, Araby is another word of a different derivation, as in: 'Spicy gales from fragrant Araby.' English toyed with Arabical: 'This Prince was almost the Arabical Phoenix.' It tried Arabican: 'The Arabican writers.' It has rejected both variants as otiose. We have enough words for most everyday purposes.

An Arabist is a professed student of Arabic, or, in antique contexts, a follower of the medical system of the Arabs. An Arabism or Arabicism is an Arabic idiom or peculiarity of language, as in: 'Hebraisms and Arabicisms, which might send the best scholar to his lexicon.'

And in archaic English, because of the nomadic character of some Arabs, an Arab (originally an Arab of the city, city Arab, or street Arab) was used to mean a homeless little wanderer or wandering child of the streets. Lord Shaftesbury, the social reformer, declared in Parliament in 1848: 'City Arabs are like tribes of lawless freebooters, bound by no obligations, and utterly ignorant or utterly regardless of social duties.' These days the British are better acquainted with Arab customs, Arabian history, and the Arabic language, and with Arabs themselves, whose language we have been borrowing for six centuries.

4/ BILLION

A man accustomed to think in millions—other people's millions

A million million spermatozoa,
All of them alive;
Out of their cataclysm but one poor Noah
Dare hope to survive.

We are in a hopeless muddle about precisely how many spermatozoa Aldous Huxley was summoning up in his verse. An Englishman would say one billion; an American a thousand billion. This is an unnecessary muddle, not the necessary one that Bertrand Russell had in mind when he said: 'Mathematics is the only science where one never knows what one is talking about nor whether what is said is true.'

In traditional British mathematics a million was a thousand squared, or 10 to the power six, or 1,000,000. Consequently and logically, a billion was a million squared, 10 to the power of 12, or 1,000,000,000,000. Next came the trillion (10^{18}), as useless for everyday purposes as a pterodactyl, and so on. John Locke introduced these names for big numbers in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, the philosophical treatise he published in 1690:

'But to show how much distinct names conduce to our well reckoning, let us see all these following figures in one continued line:—

Nonillions, Octillions, . . . Trillions, Billions, Millions, Units 857324, 162486, . . . 235421, 261734, 368149, 623137. The ordinary way of naming this number in English, will be the often repeating of millions, etc.'

American mathematicians, and other Lesser Breeds without the

Law, subsequently changed the meaning of billion. They divided figures in numeration into groups of three instead of sixes, so that over there a billion denotes not the second power of a million, but a thousand million, that is 10 to the power of nine, or 1,000,000,000. For the British billion they used milliard.

No doubt this is deplorable: the poor creatures did not have the benefit of an English education. It is unetymological and illogical. But it has happened. And worse, it is confusing. As inflation continues to rip on both sides of the Atlantic, we are all going to have to become familiar with these big numbers. Financial disaster or at any rate embarrassment lies ahead if the British billion continues to be a thousand times greater than the American billion.

Weight of numbers is already beginning to tell. The American usage has driven out the historically accepted and logical billion (million million), especially in business and financial circles—more economic neocolonialism. It is pointless as well as hard for Brits to kick against the billion pricks. This is a case where consistency in international English is more important than logic or etymological exactitude. We must end the dangerous confusion by conforming to the American style of billion.

Professor Denis Baron, of the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, edits a book called *Units, Symbols, and Abbreviations* on behalf of the Royal Society of Medicine, and is his profession's watchman against verbal and symbolic confusion. He strongly recommends that we should use only spaces, not commas, between groups of three figures: 1 000 000 not 1,000,000. This recommendation complies with the advice of the International Organization for Standardization and the British Standards Institution.

Do I hear you say that commas are free, and that it will be a sad world in which a man cannot scatter them among his billions regardless of the recommendations of standardizing bureaucrats? Well, there is a practical point in the recommendation, not mere lust for conformity. In a large part of the world the decimal point is indicated by a comma, not a full stop as in England. Horrific legend abounds, as of the unhappy German who ordered from a British firm exactly 10 grams of a chemical, which he wrote as 10,000g on the order form. The British firm naturally interpreted the order as one for 10 000 grams. The German was astonished by the size of both the shipment and his bill.

Almost as confusing is the lack of uniformity in the general and financial press in their use of symbols for these large multiples beyond the nightmares of our average overdrafts. One million pounds is written as £1m, or £1M or £1 million; and one billion dollars as $1b, or $1bn, etc.

There already exist long-standing and universally familiar and accepted symbols for the multiples that are used in science. Many of them, such as kilo- (k) for one thousand times (10^3x) as in kilogram (kg) are also in daily use by the general public.

The precise and judicious Professor Baron thinks that we should adopt these universal scientific symbols for large sums of money, and so avoid all ambiguity. The symbol m for million is ambivalent. To a scientist it can mean mill- (one thousandth) or metre, depending on position and context, but never million. One million times to a scientist is mega- (M); so one million volts is one megavolt or, in symbols, 1MV.

If we adopted scientific symbolism for our wage packets, one million pounds would be 1M£: the multiplier attaches to the unit, not the number. In the United States a megabuck is already an accepted colloquialism for a million dollars. One thousand million times is giga- (G). So one billion dollars in American billions would be 1G$, or G$1. One million million times, the traditional and now obsolescent British billion, is tera- (T). So, thanks a billion, or TTa.

5/ BYZANTINE

Et Saint Apollinaire, raide et ascétique,
Vieille usine désaffectée de Dieu, tient encore
Dans ses pierres écroulantes la forme précise de Byzance

Loose modern rhetoric tarnishes *Byzantium* the golden, the custodian of our western heritage for ten centuries. To describe some activity, usually political, as *Byzantine* has come to be a popular insult. It means that it is unnecessarily intricate and inflexible, and has other similarly unfashionable characteristics. 'Only in the *Byzantine* world of Mineworkers' politics would a wage claim knocking on 65 per cent be labelled a victory for moderation.'

Now it is true that only a cursory reading of Gibbon or Sir Steven Runciman is needed to come to the conclusion that *Byzantine* politics were at times complicated. The curious reader has to keep his wits sharp to distinguish between his Comneni and his Palaeologi, the family whose imperial line stretched out across the early middle ages to the crack of doom made by the Turkish cannon. It is a millennium rich with complication, particularly that most complicated of simplicities, religious enthusiasm.

But for our generation to suppose that the distinguishing feature of *Byzantium* was the complexity of its politics is as one-eyed a view of history as to suppose that Rome declined and fell because of sexual promiscuity among the upper classes, or that British is simply another word for industrial anarchy, or that East Germans can vote democratically to change their government because they live in a state officially called the *Deutsch Demokratische Republik*.

It was not a mistake made by Mohammed II, the young man whose janizaries finally sacked Constantinople on 29 May 1453, one of those days like 24 August 410 when civilization seemed to contemporaries to have come to an end. For the destructive

followers of the Crescent, who had not yet adopted the Crescent, *Byzantium* represented wealth, western culture, Christianity, and the last obstacle to their expansion. And it went down with a bang, not a whimper. Constantine XI, the last Emperor of the East, chose to remain with his city, although his advisers wanted him to withdraw to the Morea. Runciman describes him memorably: 'The last Christian Emperor standing in the breach, abandoned by his Western allies, holding the infidel at bay until their numbers overpowered him and he died, with the Empire as his winding sheet.'

Nor was it a mistake made by Henry James, that supersubtle and analytic master of nuance. In *The Wings of the Dove* published in 1902 the dovelike Milly Theale indulges in a typically Jamesian interior monologue about the pleasures of being metaphorically *Byzantine*. 'If one *could* only be Byzantine.—wasn't *that* what she insidiously led one on to sigh? Milly tried to oblige her—for it really placed Susan herself so handsomely to be Byzantine now.'

I guess that Milly means by *Byzantine* something like inscrutable, deferential, worshipful, romantic, and rich, although nowhere in the extended passage is it quite clear exactly what she does mean. This, after all, is James at his most opaque, in his ultimate persona as the Old Pretender:

> In Heaven there'll be no algebra,
> No learning dates or names,
> But only playing golden harps
> And reading Henry James.

He once wrote of himself: 'It will take a lot cleverer person than myself to discover my last impression—amongst all these things—of anything.'

But when Teddy Roosevelt described Woodrow Wilson as 'A Byzantine logothete' (a logothete was a functionary, usually financial, of the Byzantine emperors), he did not mean it as a compliment.

Our one-eyed modern use of *Byzantine* obscures the fact that *Byzantium* is the umbilical cord to our classical mothers of Rome, and especially Greece. So some of us grumble about the *Byzantinism* of academic criticism, which can be uninteresting and even impenetrable to outsiders, and quite possibly to insiders also: 'To hint that one does not quite catch the drift of their *Byzantine* prose pierces to the heart of their intellectual pride.' The European

Economic Community, with its green pounds, and snakes, and other boring jargon of EuroBabel that are indeed as complex as any of the actions of John Cantacuzene, has been a stimulus to the metaphorical abuse of *Byzantium*. When the United Kingdom was negotiating to join the EEC, and Edward Heath's detailed reports to the House of Commons about such minutiae as tariffs on kangaroo-tail soup were earning him the sobriquet of the Grocer, it became a commonplace of political journalism to refer to the Government's *byzantine* approach. *Byzantine* is still a favourite adjective for putting down the obscure activities and obscurer jargon of the Eurocrats in Brussels since the Treaty of Rome, who so far seem duller men than the previous rulers of a Roman Empire.

Richard Nixon's presidency also provided frequent opportunities for the new use of *Byzantine*: 'The CIA empire grows, *Byzantine* in its complexity.' In fact a better analogy was with the simplicities of Istanbul. Over the years the White House came to resemble the Yildiz Kiosk, where the Ottoman emperor, Abdul the Damned, made a virtual prisoner of himself. Locked in the seclusion of the Yildiz, the Ottoman got rid of reformers, reduced his ministers, whom he rarely saw, to executive officers, transmitted orders to them through the Mabeyn, his intimate secretaries, and left the Chief Eunuch to deal with other matters. In Nixon's Yildiz, Erlichman and Haldeman were the Mabeyn, and Dean was the chief Eunuch. Nixon as Abdul the Damned is a more persuasive metaphor than Nixon Paleologus.

As well as meaning 'too difficult for intelligent but straightforward chaps like me', our new use of *Byzantine* carries implications of obstinacy and refusal to change. Latin American armies used to be smiled at for their *Byzantine* structure, while it was still safe to smile: all those antique ranks, and uniforms that consisted principally of epaulettes and gold braid.

As we should expect from a man who handles most European languages as easily as the rest of us handle our spoons, George Steiner found a historically exact hierarchical connotation for *Byzantium* when he wrote: 'It was precisely on this occasion that Stalin struck the new ominous note of the cult of personality, of the *Byzantine* homage to the leader.'

The Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary suggests that *Byzantine* became popular as a derogatory epithet in journalism in the 1960s. The *Byzantines* would have been offended by our

narrow view of them. They considered themselves an eastern and superior breed of Romans, and claimed to be inheritors carrying on the Roman Empire in the East after Rome itself had sunk:

> When Caesar's sun fell out of the sky
> And whoso hearkened right
> Could only hear the plunging
> Of the nations in the night.

Byzantium preserved the treasures of the Hellenic rather than the Roman world for a thousand years: these treasures are the unique legacy of the *Byzantines* to Western Europe, far more important and interesting than the devious politics. Modern scholarship is revealing the continuity between the *Byzantine* world and the world of antiquity, especially that of ancient Greece.

Our debt to *Byzantium* has seldom been acknowledged. We modern journalists think *Byzantine* is a learned synonym for complex. The Western European of the Middle Ages regarded *Byzantines* as eccentric, uncivilized, and impossible schismatics, good only for anathemas and other bad-tempered pedantry. He was dazzled by the completely alien Saracen civilization, choosing to take Aristotle, Galen, and the other masters of classical Greek thought indirectly from the Arabs rather than directly from the natural keepers of the Greek heritage in *Byzantium*. There was Western intellectual snobbery in this attitude. The *Byzantines* were foreign Christians, and Eastern, and evidently decidedly inferior epigoni of the ancient Greeks, who seemed from all accounts to be honorary Englishmen.

Even after the disastrous Fourth Crusade, which ended with the Crusaders sacking Constantinople and establishing the Latin Kingdom there, the Latins learnt very little from their more civilized *Byzantine* subjects. It was only in the fourteenth century that Western scholarship started to recognize what classical treasures of learning were stored in Constantinople. When the Turks sacked the city, the *Byzantine* libraries were destroyed or plundered in the general confusion.

A contemporary letter from Laurus Quirinus to Pope Nicholas V reports that one hundred and twenty thousand manuscripts disappeared in the sack. You could buy ten volumes of the classics for a single ducat. Gibbon considered this humiliating price too high for any ten books of theology, but the same money would also

have bought the complete works of Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and the other founding fathers of our literature and science. The eloquent scourge of the clerics wrote: 'We may reflect with pleasure that an inestimable portion of our classic treasures was safely deposited in Italy; and that the mechanics of a German town had invented an art which derides the havoc of time and barbarism.'

Western Europeans came to appreciate *Byzantine* culture when they realised that the *Byzantines* held the key to understanding the ancients: the language. Westerners had already rediscovered Aristotle and his philosophy, and the enthusiasm to live and die in his works. They had heard of Plato and other philosophers. In the Greek lands that they invaded they found that it was possible to read the writings of the masters in the original language. Medieval Western Europe knew no Greek. Greek dictionaries had survived from the third century, but they were useless because the language had been forgotten. Humanists had to find their way back to Greece by way of Constantinople. It was Greek learning transmitted through *Byzantine* learning that transformed the world at the Renaissance.

The crafty *Byzantines* were not just too clever by half politically. They were the linguists and librarians of the Middle Ages, and *Byzantium* preserved Greek as a universal language for ten centuries before the Renaissance. Alexander's conquests had vast geopolitical and cultural effects. One of the vastest was their effect on the Greek language. A unified Hellenic earth needed a simplified common language that could be used by its Babel of polyglot nations. Language evolves to meet needs. To meet this need the *Byzantines* evolved the Hellenistic Koine (common) that is the taproot of modern Greek. Scholars and philosophers of the period, however, found the vulgar spoken Koine inadequate for literary purposes. They considered it a falling-off from the standards of ancient literature, in the same way that modern linguistic snobs affect to find modern English an inelegant falling-off from the language of Milton and Shakespeare. Hence came the purist (or pedantic, if you prefer) *Byzantine* schools, which, throughout the history of *Byzantium*, were concerned to restore the language to the pristine Attic, as if it were possible for rivers to run back uphill. In the development of Greek two roots grow beside each other and intertwine: the spoken Koine and the written Greek of the classical tradition. Modern scholarship considers that the

standards of education at *Byzantium* were high. At the same time *Byzantium* deserved its reputation for the sort of pedantry in which the morass of glosses drowns the thin trickle of text at the top of the page.

There were plenty like the pedantic orator of Tyre who would not sit down to a meal without first reassuring himself that every word on the menu had sound authority from the classical authors. *Byzantine* does mean pedantic, but it means scholarly as well.

Used historically *Byzantine* should carry still wider and richer ramifications. Our classical heritage is complex, and its largesse spreads beyond the obvious literary and humanist heirs. The classical tradition can be found in unexpected places, the most influential of which is Christianity. Christianity was not the opposite of the pagan world, but the product of it. It wears the family heirlooms of the Greek tradition. The *Byzantine* cults, the legends of the saints (clear sequels of the classical novel), and the allegories used by the fathers of the early church are all directly descended from the classics. *Byzantine* art carried forward and continually revived the art of the ancient Greek world. Themes from classical antiquity survived in such art-forms as wall-paintings down to the fall of Constantinople. The frequent masks either of a lion's head or a human face, which were popular in fourteenth-century paintings, are descended by way of the ornamental pages of *Byzantine* illuminated manuscripts from the Medusa or Gorgoneion, the ubiquitous apotropaic symbol of classical Greece. The old girl gorgonizes on down the centuries in the most improbable paintings. The late *Byzantine* combination of the lion heads with acanthus can be traced to the acanthus or *rinceau* decoration on ancient Greek temples.

As the *Byzantine* world darkened towards its nightfall, its politics did become devious and nervous, as politics tend to in societies under stress. But art and scholarship still shone brightly. Steven Runciman, our generation's shining *Byzantinist*, has said: 'The scholarship of the last *Byzantine* renaissance may not mean much to us today. But the scholarship was there, genuine and intense; and it deserves our respect.'

In addition to its oversimplified new use as a political term meaning stiff, stuffy, Machiavellian, and complex, *Byzantine* owns a number of technical meanings in different jargons.

In the language of architecture *Byzantine* describes the style that developed in the Eastern Roman Empire from the reign of

Constantine until 1453. Its idiosyncrasy was influenced by the abundance of hard stone, the shortage of wood, the eastern love of surface ornament, and the classical tradition. The central structural features of *Byzantine* architecture were the dome carried on pendentives over a square and the round arch. Its chief decorative feature was the incrustation of walls, vault-faces, and spandrels with marble veneering and with richly coloured mosaic on grounds of gold.

In art jargon *Byzantine* means the school of painting that originated in the Eastern Empire, was influential throughout Western Europe until the fifteenth century, and survived until quite recently in such countries as Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Russia. To summarize brutally, the principal characteristics of *Byzantine* art are formality of design, stylized outlines, absence of relief, liberal gilding in the background, and those old echoes from antiquity.

In ecclesiastical jargon *Byzantine* has several meanings close to the modern vogue use for such *Byzantine* matters as creeds and councils. The *Byzantine* text of the New Testament has become the standard one used in the Greek-speaking church. The creed popularly called Nicene is more properly and gradiloquently called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, which would be a stumbling-block even for a bishop high on Mulliner's Buck-U-Uppo.

Byzantine cruelty should be avoided. It is practised by those who delight in inventing new forms of torture.

There is no agreement on how to pronounce *Byzantium* and *Byzantine* in English. Modern Greeks begin them with 'Viz', which is bold, but no use to us. Some authorities, including Byron and Runciman, make the first syllable rhyme with fizz; others rhyme it with wise. Some slur the middle syllable of *Byzantine*, others stress it. Some, not all the fizzers or all the wisers, make the third syllable rhyme with wine; others, especially Americans, rhyme it with teen or tin. There is *Byzantine* confusion in the pronunciation.

To many *Byzantium* sounds more magical in English poetry with a long 'y':

> 'And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
> To the holy city of *Byzantium*.'

For Yeats the name *Byzantium* as well as the history and image of

that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea was a potent incantation.

Strictly speaking *Byzantium* is the name of the city and *Byzantine* its adjective from the date of its foundation until Constantine refounded it as New Rome on 11 May 330, after which it was known as Constantinopolis. There is no need to believe in an eponymous founder called Byzas, son of Neptune and King of Thrace, unless you are an addict of popular etymologies.

The cults and institutions of *Byzantium* support the tradition that colonists from Megara founded the city between the Golden Horn and the Propontis on the finest site in the world, but emigrants from the Peloponnese and central Greece probably also took part. Eusebius, the careful ecclesiastical historian of the third and fourth centuries AD, gave the date of foundation as 659 BC. But according to Herodotus Chalcedon on the Asiatic side of the Bosporus was founded seventeen years before Byzantium. If you believe him, you get a foundation date of 668 for *Byzantium*. Herodotus also recorded the epigram of Megabazus, the star general of Darius, that Chalcedon (the modern Üsküdar) was the city of the blind. If its founding fathers had had eyes, they would not have chosen the inferior site on the Asian side of the Bosporus, when they could have had the magnificent empty grandstand and harbour on the north. Tacitus reports the same piece of *Byzantine* braggadocio as an oracle of the Pythian Apollo, who advised the original colonists obscurely before they set sail 'to seek a home opposite the country of the blind'. By this riddle the oracle meant the Chalcedonians, 'who arrived there first, and having had first look at the advantages of the two sites, chose the worse'.

The crescent moon that has become the emblem of Islam is derived from *Byzantium* by a suitably convoluted *Byzantine* descent. Philip of Macedon's final war that extinguished the independence of the Greek city states began with his famous siege of *Byzantium* in 340–339 BC. The city survived behind its massive walls with help from Persia, Athens, and the adjacent islands, and because Philip abandoned his minor objective of *Byzantium* for the major objective of Athens itself. The tradition spread that Hecate, the chthonian and lunar goddess, had protected the *Byzantines* in this siege, which seemed for a few years a glorious victory to the Greeks. Shortly afterwards Hecate's symbol, the crescent and star, appeared on the coins of the city. When the

Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople eighteen centuries later, they adopted its powerful crescent symbol. Thence the mark of Hecate has spread to the whole Muslim world.

The Turkish name for their great city also has a *Byzantine* etymology. Istambul or Stamboul is a corruption of the Greek words εἰς τὴν πόλιν' 'into the city'.

The *bezant* was an early example of the common European currency that Eurovisionaries still want. It was a gold coin that was given its name because it was first struck at *Byzantium*. This *Byzantius nummus* or coin of *Byzantium* was identical with the Roman *solidus* or *aureus*, but later varied in value between the English sovereign and half-sovereign or less. It had a wide circulation in Europe from the ninth century until about 1250, and was current in England until it was superseded by the noble, a coin of Edward III. There were silver *bezants* also worth from a shilling to a florin depending on exchange rates. John Wycliffe used the word instead of the traditional talent in his translation of the Bible, for example in Luke XV, 8: 'What woman hauynge ten besauntis . . . ' The crusaders introduced *bezants* to heraldry, which even today represents them by gold circles on the shield.

Bezantler, the name for the second branch of a deer's horn, has no connexion with *Byzantium*, alas. It comes from the Old French *bis* prefixed to *andouiller*, 'antler', which popular etymology derives erroneously from popular Latin *antoculare* (*ante*, before, *oculus* the eye). This derivation is phonologically untenable. The origin of this rare, not to say useless, word remains agreeably obscure.

In theory after Constantine's new foundation of *Byzantium*, its adjective should have become Constantinopolitan. This proved too gross a mouthful for everybody except theologians and other nice precisians, so that the haunting spell *Byzantine* has survived to adorn the English language. But it is a very old, very rich word. There is more to *Byzantium* than the modern vogue intimation of tricky politics.

6/ CHESHIRE CAT

A cat may smile, and smile, and be a mystery

'Please would you tell me,' said Alice, a little timidly, for she was not quite sure whether it was good manners for her to speak first, 'why your cat grins like that?'

'It's a Cheshire-cat,' said the Duchess, 'and that's why.' . . .

'I didn't know that Cheshire-cats always grinned; in fact, I didn't know that cats *could* grin.'

'They all can,' said the Duchess; 'and most of 'em do.'

The Cheshire Cat is a friendly cliché that grins from ear to ear. It was so pretty a puss in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that we fell in love with it on the spot, and use it without thought in contexts where a cat is as inappropriate as at Cruft's. It may not be quite as dead a cliché as a dirty dog, or a holy cow, or Shank's mare, or the Iron Duke, that rusty sobriquet for the First Duke of Wellington, which is no longer an amusing way of describing that foremost captain of his time, who exhausted both glory and sobriquets. Even the Iron Duke has recently had a new lease of life by siring after death a granddaughter in Mrs Thatcher's sobriquet of the Iron Lady.

But the Cheshire Cat has lost most of its fur. To say that someone is grinning like a Cheshire Cat is not telling us much more than that someone is simply grinning, unless he or she really is grinning from ear to ear mysteriously, and for no evident reason.

Although the Cheshire Cat itself is stale, its origin is a Sphinx wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Why Cheshire Cats are said to grin is a question that has puzzled those who allow themselves to be puzzled by such questions for more than a century, though it has not stopped them making conjectures in the

form of conclusions. The termagant Duchess never explained why; and, anyway, 'Lewis Carroll' who published *Alice* in 1865, did not invent the phrase. Curiouser and curiouser, the Cheshire Cat is not in the original manuscript of *Alice's Adventures Underground*.

The first reference in literature to the smirking, slightly sinister, cat was made by 'Peter Pindar', the *nom de plumé* of John Wolcot, the physician turned comic scribbler. At some time between 1770 and 1819, when he died, he scribbled: 'Lo! like a Cheshire cat our court will grin.' Thackeray also used the expression. A century later a Cheshire cat was a colloquial nickname for an inhabitant of the county of Cheshire, though whether the two uses of the phrase were connected is not known. In the nineteenth century people often used the phrase in full: to grin like a Cheshire Cat eating cheese, or chewing gravel, or shitting bones. More than a decade before Alice met the Cheshire Cat in an encounter that was to influence the language, the experts and amateurs were already discussing why Cheshire Cats grin, without coming to a unanimous or persuasive conclusion. They are still discussing it.

Here is a summary of the principal explanations so far offered:

1. THE CAT SNOBBISH

The earliest explanation appeared in *Notes and Queries*, the periodical founded by William Thoms to furnish a means for the interchange of thought and information 'for literary men, artists, antiquaries, genealogists, etc.', and a medium of communication with each other. Its motto was Captain Cuttle's, 'When found, make a note of'. In 1850 a correspondent offered someone's ingenious theory that the native cats know that Cheshire is a County Palatine, and that the idea is so absurd that they are perpetually grinning at it. A County Palatine is a feudal definition of the dominion of Earl Palatine, a County over which the Count had royal privileges. The title is obsolete. But (because of English affection for antique nomenclature and meaningless snobbery) Cheshire and Lancashire remain nominally Counties Palatine. Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* favours this derivation, with cross-references that lead the reader quickly to Romulus and Remus, the Foundation of Rome, and irreversible brain damage.

2. THE CAT CHEESED OFF

In the same year a correspondent to *Notes and Queries* wrote that some years previously Cheshire cheeses had been sold in Bath

moulded in the shape of a cat, bristles being inserted to represent the whiskers. Ergo, Cheshire Cats grin. What sort of ergo is that, Holofernes, apart from being facetious pedantry? In her psychoanalytic study of Carroll Dr Phyllis Greenacre writes magisterially of this solution to the mystery: 'This has a peculiar Carrollian appeal, as it provokes the phantasy that the cheesy cat may eat the rat that would eat the cheese.' There is no answer to that, except possibly, 'quite so'. Could it be that Carroll was using the image of cat eating rat eating cheese as an illustration of the cybernetic principle of feedback?

3. THE CAT UNLIONIZED

In 1852 a correspondent to *Notes and Queries* recalled having heard many years before (as usual from somebody whose name he had forgotten) that the Cheshire Cat owed its origin to the unhappy attempts of a sign-painter of that county to represent a lion rampant, which was the crest of an influential family, on the sign-boards of many of the inns. The lion was presumably depicted heraldically subrident. The resemblance of these lions to cats caused them to be generally called by the more ignoble name. The correspondent asserted that a similar case was to be found in the village of Charlton, between Pewsey and Devizes, in Wiltshire. A public house by the roadside was commonly known by the name of *The Cat at Charlton*. The sign of the house was originally a lion or tiger, or some such big cat, the crest, he believed, of the family of Sir Edward Poore.

4. THE CAT I' THE ADAGE

There is a carved dripstone (a cornice to throw off the rain) over a door in the parish church of St Nicholas in Cranleigh, Surrey, which is said by the feline to look exactly like a grinning cat. Local patriots declare that its stony grin suggested the Cheshire Cat to Carroll, who was briefly a curate to St Mary's Church in the nearby town of Guildford, and whose niece lived in Cranleigh. The theory is implausible, *pace* local pride, because Cheshire Cats were said to grin for a century before Carroll wrote about them.

5. THE CAT PARONOMASTIC AND UNPERSUASIVE

Another architectural etymology explains that Carroll derived both the name and the nature of his animal from a stone carving on the outside of the church tower at Grappenhall, near Warrington.

The grinning cat was carved as a play on the name of the local Catterick family. This grin truth is also anachronistic, since Carroll was not the inventor of the Cheshire Cat. Thumbs down to this stone cat for the same reason as its predecessor, number 4.

6. THE CAT CASTIGATORY OR TORQUEMADA

Another gloss of scholiasts comments that the original Cheshire Cat was not a cat at all. A legend is said to record that the original 'Cheshire Cat' was a certain Thomas Caterlin, a Cheshire forest warden in the Middle Ages, who was notorious for the frightful grimaces he made as he tortured or killed any poacher he caught. To grin like the Cheshire Caterlin was metamorphosed into to grin like a Cheshire Cat. If you are in the mood to believe two impossible things before breakfast, it could also be the reason why male cats are called Toms. If you will believe that, you will believe anything. In fact a male cat is called a Tom from *The Life and Adventures of a Cat* published in 1760, in which the hero, a male cat, is called Tom the Cat. Tom superseded the earlier name for a male cat of Gib (abbreviation of Gilbert), found in the fourteenth century inscription 'Gibbe Oure Cat', and the medieval proverb 'To play fy gib' (to say 'fie' to the cat, to utter threats and scowl like the opposite of a Cheshire Cat).

7. THE CAT PHOTOGRAPHIC MODEL

It is said that the Cheshire Cat was so called because he was always saying 'cheese'. Daguerre and Fox Talbot had made their invention in time for Carroll to have referred to it.

8. FELES PERDIX (a bird as mythical as the Phoenix)

Eric Partridge in his *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* surmised, but could not prove, that a Cheshire Cat came from a cheeser, a cat very fond of cheese, a cheeser having become a cheeser cat, and a cheeser cat a Cheshire Cat, in a metamorphosis as gratifying as vanishing quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remains some time after the rest of it has gone. Partridge suggested that to grin like a Cheshire Cat would mean to be as pleased as a cheeser that has just eaten cheese. Alternatively the development could have been from cheeser to Cheshire-cheeser to Cheshire Cat.

'Cheshire Puss,' Alice began, rather timidly, as she was confused by now, and did not know whether it would like the name:

however, it only grinned a little wider. 'Come, it's pleased so far,' thought Alice, and she went on: 'Would you tell me, please, which is the correct derivation of your name?'

'That depends a good deal on whether you want a scholarly one or a popular one,' said the cat.

'I don't much care—' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which derivation you choose,' interrupted the cat.

'—so long as I get a convincing one,' Alice added as an explanation.

'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the cat, 'if you only approach the derivations with a smile.'

7/ CONCORDAT

Quid velit et possit rerum concordia discors

Politics is the art of the possible: politicians need a steady supply of words full of sound and fury signifying as little as possible, or signifying different things to different people. Burke described one politician well-armed with such political buzzwords as being resolved to die in the last dyke of prevarication.

In its dying days in the spring of 1979, the British Labour Government, trying desperately to save both its faces, devised a *concordat* with the Trades Union Congress, and so introduced a shiny new metaphor into the tinsel toolbox of political rhetoric. It wanted an impressive word that the general public would take to mean an agreement that would stick, and the trade unions would not take to be an infringement of their privileges. The *concordat* did not work, because nobody believed in it. Labour lost the election. But the word became an instant success, and has been widely adopted by politicians to mean a peculiarly solemn and binding sort of agreement ('this one is going to be different, I promise').

'How infinite,' wrote a master of the specious art of political doubletalk, 'is the debt owed to metaphors by politicians who want to speak strongly but are not sure what they are going to say.'

In its primary sense, before the politicians picked it up in 1979, a *concordat* was an agreement between the civil and ecclesiastical authorities upon some matter of vital concern to both parties. More specifically it meant a pact concluded between the Pope, as head of the Roman Catholic Church, and a temporal sovereign for the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs in the territory of such a sovereign (in papal Latin *pactum concordatum*).

The most famous one, which comes to mind first when *concor-*

dat is mentioned, was the *concordat* of 1801, by which Pius VII and Napoleon Bonaparte, then First Consul, agreed to the formal restoration of the Roman Catholic Church in France. But there have been plenty of others since the first *concordat* was concluded for England with Henry I in 1107. The Pope made *concordats* with Mussolini for Italy in 1929, and with Hitler for Germany in 1933.

In its new, extended, political sense we were supposed to cast Jim Callaghan, then Prime Minister, as Pope, and Len Murray, General Secretary of the TUC, as Napoleon; though Jim has always seemed more like one of Trollope's henpecked Anglican clergymen than a Roman dressed in infallibility.

The *concordat* of 1979 rapidly and predictably came unstuck. But the word stuck. The Brandt Commission, considering the economic gulf between the rich and the poor worlds (in Diplomatese, the developed and the developing worlds), recommended a *concordat*. Discussing the matter in *The Times*, Ted Heath, that master of the leaden phrase, wrote: 'A *concordat* covering a package of these items would be necessary to satisfy both sides.' Not for nothing is he nicknamed Grocer. Politicians of all parties started to pope it with *concordats*.

It is unlikely that this new kind of *concordat* will make as much of a footnote in the history books as the ecclesiastical sort. But it is encouraging to see a religious term for once used as a compliment by a politician. Remember how Sir Harold Wilson used 'theology' as an insult, evidently even ruder than 'academic', to disparage those who put principle before pragmatism.

Since Aristophanes reported the Athenian demagogues, political doubletalk has always pinched strong descriptive language to dress up flabby old ideas. The descriptive meat is consequently sucked out of the strong words, as a weasel sucks eggs. And the weasel words then suck all the life out of the surrounding context, leaving only empty shells, broken promises, and lies.

The 'social contract' (devised by Sir Harold Wilson in place of *In Place of Strife*, his plan to limit the overmighty powers of the unions) was a sad example. It was neither social nor a contract; and that passionate socialist and libertarian Rousseau, whose phrase was plagiarized (*Du Contrat Social* was published in 1762), would have denounced it as an antisocial and provisional bargain between unscrupulous individual power blocks against the general will.

Its sibling the 'social compact' (sometimes they called it a

contract, other times a compact) was the sort of language that gives face powder a bad name. And Solomon Binding (Harold Wilson also tried 'a solemn and binding agreement') has become a farcical laxative that no politician with any shame or sensitivity for language can use.

Pragmatic politicians live in a world whose lexis is as slippery as its motives are hypocritical. For the moment *concordat* is still quite a strong word. It retains some of its descriptive meat. But give the suckers time. Once that, too, has been sucked dry, there are not many handy words left for our political weasels to debauch. They could try pledge or troth from the marriage service before the new liturgies sucked the language out of that; charter or Magna Carta as in Dunkirk spirit; or word of honour, except that really would be laying it on a bit thick.

Politics in a democracy works by persuasion; so it is not surprising that its vocabulary is controversial. Here follow some other words and phrases which have been sucked dry of descriptive meaning:

Industrial action: a strike or disruptive action by employees in any occupation, not necessarily industrial. Civil servants, teachers, firemen, postmen, journalists, and others who are not horny-handed sons of toil take industrial action frequently, when it would be more accurately described as non-industrial inaction. But the metaphor from the factory implies that all trade unionists are brothers under the jargon.

No alternative (usually followed by 'except to take industrial action'): 'There are plenty of alternatives' (the notion that because it is derived from the Latin alter, one or other of two, there can be only one or other of two alternatives, is a fetish); 'but my lads have no intention of adopting them.'

Productivity: a fiddle by which the books can be cooked to make it look as though I am doing more, or doing the same work in less time, and can consequently be paid more. It is unnecessary and distasteful that I should actually produce any more for the extra money.

Actually: usually superfluous, as in the preceding paragraph.

In fact: can mean a) indeed b) in the event c) in truth; and is therefore another lazy cottonwool phrase useful to politicians.

The case of: otiose.

The area of: more precisely, the subjects, topics, matters.

The field of: ditto.

Or whatever: all-purpose vague suffix, as in, 'This kind of Tuc-Speak, jargon, gobbledygook, or whatever.'
The existence of: invariably superfluous.
Problem: used for difficulty, obstacle, objection, or whatever.
The level of: used loosely for quantity, volume amount, etc.
Public: a euphemism for government, as in public services.
Quality: noun used as adjective, as in 'quality press'; in the commercial world nothing is ever of bad quality.
Adjust, *identify*, *translate*, *present*, and other examples of the new Sociologese: transitive and reflexive verbs used intransitively.
Situation: another recruit to sociology and politics, as in 'the schoolroom situation'.
Ongoing: What is wrong with 'continuing'?
Look at: too late to stop, but still a bad phrase because lazy, ill-defined, and vague. Why not examine, re-examine, appraise, re-appraise, or simply think about?
The reason is because: 'The reason for this ongoing situation is because the Government give us no alternative'; tautologous.
Unique to: 'This idea is unique to Welshmen' for 'peculiar to', or a paraphrase, 'Only Welshmen have this idea.'
Try and do: colloquial, and has a shade of meaning that can justify its existence; but often used when 'try to do' would be better.
Misplaced only: 'The man is only mentioned twice in the book' has a different meaning from 'The man is mentioned only twice.' Marghanita Laski has a jolly paradigmatic sentence to rub in the importance of placing 'only' correctly:
Only the peacocks are seen on the western hills.
(You see nothing else)
The only peacocks are seen on the western hills.
(Peacocks nowhere else)
The peacocks only are seen on the western hills.
(You never hear one or catch one)
The peacocks are only seen on the western hills.
(Same as the preceding example)
The peacocks are seen only on the western hills.
(But not on the eastern hills or the central plain)
The peacocks are seen on the only western hills.
(There are no other western hills)
Barbarous *these*: 'These kind of problems'; 'These sort of men'.
Readership and other *ships*: a book has a readership instead of readers; similarly with leadership. This is a common sort of

political abstractitis. BBC news bulletins regularly start with British Leyland's final warning 'to the workforce', and in the next sentence refer to the same people more directly as the workers.
Comprise: The meeting was comprised of . . . for 'composed of' or simply 'comprised'.
The *intrusive preposition* (to introduce an indirect question):
'They considered the problem of how this was to be done';
'He told the audience about how he had achieved this';
'There was a discussion about (or of) whether there should be a variety of tests'; just as ugly is 'the question as to whether', which is on many political lips.
Unacceptable: 'Others might accept this, but we are bloody well not going to.'

8/ COWBOY

The cowboy goes west

Cowboys have suffered a rapid decline in reputation semantically as well as at the movies. 'Cowboy' as epithet has come down in the world as fast as the cowboy as cattleman used to ride down the last stage of a trail drive into Abilene to the warm consolations of the district known as the Devil's Addition.

For the first half of this century cowboys were the kings of the wild western in their regalia of stetsons and chaparreras, galloping down the Santa Fe trail as eternally as the tumbling tumbleweed or dying with their boots on, as quick on the draw with a guitar as they were with a six-gun, stepping through the swing-doors of a saloon into the sudden silence of an unfriendly new town, drawing up to death in the white sunlight of an empty high-noon street, and always branded with the lonely badge of honour that a cowboy has to do what a cowboy has to do, usually leave the girl and ride off into the Technicolor sunset, while the music by someone like Dmitri Tiomkin swelled to a wail like a williwaw in the high sierras, and blew the front stalls helter-skelter out of the exit past the lavatories, into the harsh world outside, before the national anthem could be played.

Cowboys were folk heroes in Britain and anywhere else that watched Hollywood's principal artistic creation, as well as, presumably, on their native prairie. They rode bucking broncos or pintos, and could throw a lariat (or, in the dude's name, a lasso) with amazing dexterity. When they were not just riding the range, or yodelling, or making monosyllabic love, they were protecting the property of their masters against such undesirables as rustlers and Indians.

In short:

Out where the handclasp's a little stronger,
Out where the smile dwells a little longer,
That's where the west begins.

Well, we have changed all that. There has been a shift in the genre of westerns towards realism (showing how unpleasant life in the real West must have been) and towards message (showing sympathy for the Indians, the Mexicans, the women, and even the dudes). Concomitantly, in the wider language outside the Odeon 'cowboy' has ceased to be a compliment, and has become an insult.

In particular, a cowboy is now used to mean a reckless driver of a juggernaut lorry rather than a prairie schooner: the sort of cowboy who thunders past you on the inside lane of the motorway and then cuts across. Each for himself, and God for us all, as the elephant said when he danced among the chickens. Your modern cowboy does not *have* to be on wheels, though it helps. Over the past twenty years 'cowboy' has become a derogatory appellation for any wild young man, and hence for an untrained or inefficient workman. A pretty example of the latest use was recorded in the autumn of 1979, when the British press reported that the garden of the Bishop of Truro had been bombarded by golf balls from the neighbouring golf course. Members of the golf club blamed the trouble on 'cowboys' who did not know how to play properly. In Zimbabwe/Rhodesia opponents of Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front regime sneered at it as the cowboy government. In London if a plumber takes your deposit and then decamps without mending your plumbing, he is a cowboy. In rural Wales immigrant and by definition incompetent hill-farmers are called cowboys. What in the name of St Martha Jane Cannary can have happened in so short a time to turn the cowboy from hero to villain?

The cowboy is older and more mixed-up than he seems. He was the boy who looked after the cows in English before cowboys went West: Swift, *Receipt to Stella*, 1725:

'Justices o' quorum
Their cow-boys bearing cloaks before 'um'.

During the Revolutionary War, or, if you prefer it, the War of American Independence, cowboy was a contemptuous appellation applied to loyalists, or, if you prefer, traitors: Tory guerrillas of Westchester County, New York, who were exceedingly brutal in their treatment of their opponents who were fighting for American

independence. A military journal of the Revolutionary War gives an early definition of the ruffians: 'Banditti consisting of lawless villains within the British lines have received the names of *Cow-boys* and *Skinners*.' Another early source asserts that the rebel marauders were known as skinners, while the pro-British loyalists were the cowboys. The rude rhetoric of that intestine war was as confused as its strategy. Cowboy's next appearance as epithet was to describe the gang of wild riders led by Ewen Cameron, who specialized in beating up Mexicans soon after Texas became an independent state in 1835.

After Independence cowboy became the regular name for the principal hired man on the ranch in the West, a rider who worked cattle. His function included such activities as trailing, cutting out, roping, branding, rounding up cattle, and ultimately, when Gene Autry appeared on the scene, yodelling wistful ballads to a guitar and the imminent moon. 1849: 'The Mexican rancheros ventured across the Rio Grande, but they were immediately attacked by the Texan "cow-boys".' The inverted commas signpost the novelty of the word.

In the West the cowboy was more often known as a cowhand, or a cowpuncher. If you called him a cowpoke, you were prudent to duck as you said it, to avoid a poke in the eye. In the elaborate hierarchy of the range the cowpoke had approximately the same relationship to the cowboy as the boy who did the boots had to the butler below stairs in a Victorian stately household. He was employed to ride with cattle in a cattle-truck while they were being moved by rail on their way to be turned into steaks. His job was to prevent any of his travelling companions from lying down and so causing others to stumble. The tools of his trade consisted of a short, sharp stick, for prodding beasts, a lack of cowboy's pride, and a tolerant nose. The cowpuncher, a recent synonym for cowboy, is derived from the pole tipped with metal with which cattle were herded when being loaded into cattle-trucks.

Effete tenderfeet and townees from farther east and across the Atlantic rightly thought of cowboys as leading rough and ready lives, which tended to make them rough and ready in character. From the beginning there was wildness as well as romance in the popular image of the cowboy. In the West there were no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short; and even worse than worst of all, all those

goddamned cows. *The Spectator*, in one of the first references in British English, got the picture right: 'The rough-and-ready life of men who have cast their lot among cowboys.'

Over the past twenty years your cowboy as metaphor has migrated from the ranch to the concrete Rockies of the city and the asphalt trails of the motorways. A dictionary of American slang published in 1942 defined a cowboy as a reckless driver, who ignores the rules of safety, the law, and the highway code. The urban cowboy does not have to be on skidding wheels, though it is usual. In another slang metaphor current in Britain since about 1950 a bow-legged man is called a cowboy, because he looks as if he has been doing a lot of riding. A drug-store-cowboy is an idle loafer who hangs about drugstores or street corners, possibly cowboy-dudded in the authentic John Wayne gear, but behaving in a weak and noisy instead of a strong and silent manner.

Transferred to the United Kingdom coffee-bar-cowboys are the teenagers with black jackets and big Hondas who congregate in caffs and roar down the main roads like a stampede. 'Cowboy' has been another name for Teddy boys and youthful gangsters since the 1950s. Cowboys as metaphor have been adopted in the rough argot of Teddy Boy cowboys as a rude name for the police: 'They didn't seem to me like cowboys. I can smell a copper, in the dark, a hundred feet away, blindfolded.'

In the jargon of American politics 'cowboy' has been an insult for some time. It means a political rebel or maverick, often one who has revolted against party discipline. Its most famous use was when President William McKinley was shot by a murderer in 1901. The Chairman of the Republican National Committee and leading Republican strategist while McKinley lived told J. P. Morgan: 'Now look! That damned cowboy is President of the United States.' Events showed that he was less than fair to Teddy Roosevelt of the 'Rough Riders', but one can understand Mark Hanna and those who follow in his bootsteps today.

In the slang of the Royal Navy cowboys have meant baked beans since about 1920, though neither Nelson, nor Partridge, nor Heinz knows why.

The extension of cowboy as a metaphor and an insult is not as new as it seems. Cowboys have always been selfish drivers, and the attitude of the civilized world to them has always been ambivalent (a word I am in two minds about), partly admiring their freedom, partly fearing their lawlessness.

9/ CROCODILE TEARS

If that the earth could teem with woman's tears
Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile

Enough crocodile tears are shed annually to burst the banks of the Thames and the Hudson as well as the Limpopo. This increase in crocodilian misery may indicate that we are becoming more hypocritically malicious. It certainly indicates that the cliché has become as indispensable to the language as white elephants and Cheshire Cats and other useful creatures.

Our wits from Shakespeare to Carroll have found the image for a false sympathizer, gloating while his tears splash, irresistible. Spenser took a whole stanza of *The Faerie Queene* to paint the picture:

> As when a wearie traveiler, that strayes
> By muddy shore of broad seven-mouthed Nile,
> Unweeting of the perillous wandring wayes,
> Doth meete a cruell craftie Crocodile,
> Which, in false griefe hyding his harmefull guile,
> Doth weepe full sore, and sheddeth tender teares;
> The foolish man, that pities all this while
> His mournefull plight, is swallowed up unawares,
> Forgetfull of his owne that mindes an others cares.

As usual, Bacon took less space to carve the cliché in sententious marble: 'It is the wisdom of crocodiles, that shed tears when they would devour.'

There are two questions, the first scientific, the second literary. Do the crocodilia really blub? Who first recorded the phenomenon or invented the metaphor?

The zoologists are agreeably divided on the first question. Some state that crocodiles, although having eyes equipped with large

nictitating membranes, cannot strictly be said to weep in the Niobean sense. The weeping school, on the other hand, suggests that the origin of the crocodile tears is physiological and not due to any inherent deceitfulness in the creature. The nerve supply to the parotid and salivary glands (saliva) and that to the lacrimatory glands (tears) are similar and situated close together in the crocodile, though not in man. When the crocodile is presented with a mouth-watering chef's special of the day, it cannot help weeping crocodile tears: its salivary and lacrimatory glands are being stimulated simultaneously.

Another gluttonous rather than hypocritical explanation for crocodile tears is that sometimes solid gobbets of food impress the soft palate in the roof of the mouth. Because your croc has a flat head, this in turn squeezes the glands near the eyes, producing moisture. So the crocodile is crying because it is enjoying a good meal.

Next comes the salt tears school. This holds that although the majority of crocodiles, those living in fresh water, cannot be said to shed tears, those living in estuaries do. Certain marine reptiles, for example the great salt-water crocodile (*Crocodilus porosus*), accumulate an excess of salt in their bodies through swallowing salt water. This has to be excreted. For this purpose they are equipped with salt-excreting glands or much enlarged tear glands. When one of them swallows a bellyful of sea, it seems to cry its eyes out. It is actually excreting salt.

The school that visits the zoo has a less repulsive explanation: if you watch a crocodile lying at the bottom of its tank, you may notice a continuous stream of bubbles being emitted from the corner of its eye and rising to the surface of the water. This is the origin of the legend of the tears.

This explanation is more than hot air. The world's leading crocodile expert says that he imagines that this must be due to the air entering the lachrymal duct from the nose (into which it opens) and travelling back and up into the lachrymal canaliculi, which are situated just inside the front of the lower eyelids. Tears, of course, would normally flow in the opposite direction, down the nose.

We can leave the zoologists arguing among themselves, and turn to the literature. Our earliest expert on crocodiles was Herodotus, who visited Egypt at least once in the fifth century BC. He reported delightfully about the crocodile: 'Some of the Egyptians consider crocodiles sacred, others do not, but treat them as

enemies. The people who live around Thebes and Lake Moeris treat them as very sacred. In every village there one crocodile is kept, trained as a pet. They put ear-rings of glass and gold on its ears and bracelets on its forefeet, feed it with special food and sacrifices, and spoil the beasts dreadfully while they live. When they die, they embalm them and bury them in sacred coffins. On the other hand around Elephantine crocodiles are not treated as sacred, but are eaten.' And so on, like creatures escaped from the black lagoon of Rider Haggard's imagination. So curious an investigative reporter as Herodotus would surely not have left out crocodile tears, if the fable had been current at the time.

The geographer Strabo visited the Nile four centuries after Herodotus and saw the sacred crocodiles: 'A crocodile that has been tamed by the priests is kept in a lake. Its name is Suchos (the Greek name for the Egyptian Water God, Sebek, of whom the crocodile was the living incarnation). It is fed with bread, meat, and wine, which tourists bring when they come to see it. Our friend and host, who was one of the notabilities of the place and took us everywhere, came to the lake with us, having kept from lunch a cake, a bit of roast meat, and a small jug of honey. We met the crocodile on the shore of the lake. Priests went up to it, and while one of them held open its jaws, another put in the cake and the meat, and poured in the honey-wine. After this the creature dived into the lake and swam towards the opposite shore. Another visitor arrived, also bringing his offering. The priest dashed round the lake with the food he had brought, and fed it to the crocodile in the same way.'

There is plenty of crocodile saliva in Strabo, but no tears. Nor does Pliny the Elder mention them in his encyclopaedic *Natural History*, although it includes many fascinating and fabulous details about the crocodile.

As late as AD 355 Strabo's priests at Crocodilopolis were still feeding their sacred crocodiles. But the pampered brutes still did not weep, even though monotheism in the shape of Christianity and then Islam was about to end their soft life of honey and cake.

The best guess is that at some date soon after this somebody observed a crocodile weeping while it salivated, or some monk invented the fable with an improving moral to adorn his bestiary. Austin Seckersen, the king of crocodile-watchers, has traced the first known reference to crocodile tears to the work of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople, who lived from about 810 to about

895. His most important work, his *Bibliotheca* or *Myriobiblion*, describes several hundred books, often with exhaustive analyses and copious extracts, and is an invaluable mine of information. It reproduces a homily by Asterius the Sophist, the Arian theologian, who died after AD 341:

'Forget the pleasures of the table and practise fasting, thereby imitating Christ . . . If you are still attached to Jewish things, what good is fasting to you? Are you bent on imitating the crocodile of the Nile? They say that these crocodiles mourn over the human heads they devour and weep over the remains of the dead—not from motives of repentance, but from regret that the head has no flesh they can eat.'

This first allusion to the legend is agreeably scientific in attributing crocodile tears to greed not hypocrisy.

The Dark Ages substituted crocodilian behaviour for the study of crocodiles. But when learning revived in Europe, the legend revived. Crocodile tears were known to Bartholomaeus Anglicus, a Franciscan who taught at Paris around 1225. In his encyclopaedia he wrote: 'If the crocodile findeth a man by the brim of the water, or by the cliff, he slayeth him if he may, and then weepeth upon him and swalloweth him at last.'

Bartholomew the Englishman's story was repeated in *Mandeville's Travels*, a notable literary forgery written at Liège in 1357 by an unknown author. The 'Voiage of Sir John Maundevile' purports to be a guide to the Holy Land in the footsteps of Sir John's journeys in the East. In fact it is a compilation from previous travel books made by an author who probably never set foot outside Europe. Suspicion points to Jean d'Outremeuse, a writer of histories and fables, who lived at Liège at the right time. 'Sir John Mandeville' took his readers to Turkey, Tartary, Persia, Egypt, India, and darkest Fantasia, as well as the Holy Land, treating them en route to such romance as the fountain of youth and anthills made of gold-dust, as well as natural history and geography.

Here is the old rascal on crocodiles: 'In that contre . . . ben gret plentee of Cokadrilles. Theise Serpentes slen men, and thei eten hem wepynge.' The work was originally written in French. But it was so popular with the non-travelling public, who broadened their minds by staying at home and reading the equivalent of the colour magazines of the day on the subject of exotic marvels, that it was translated into English, Latin, German, and other languages.

Erasmus referred to crocodile tears. The first definition of the phrase in English is in Thomas Cooper's Latin-English thesaurus of 1548: 'A proverb, applied unto them, which hating another man, whom they would destroy, or have destroyed, they will seem to be sorry for him.' Hakluyt in 1600, describing Sir John Hawkins's second voyage to Hispaniola in 1565, wrote: 'In this river we saw many Crocodiles. His nature is ever when he would have his prey, to cry and sob like a Christian body, to provoke them to come to him, and then he snatcheth at them, and thereupon came this proverb that is applied unto women when they weep, *lachrymae crocodili*, the meaning whereof is that as the crocodile . . . so doth a woman when she weeps.' This hard masculine view of women's weapons being water-drops became tediously fashionable:

> 'Oh! too convincing—dangerously dear—
> In woman's eye the unanswerable tear.'

Crocodile tears flood English literature from then on. Captain Francis Grose, the eighteenth-century British antiquarian, included them in *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785), which has been the foundation of every treatise on thieves' cant and likewise on ordinary slang that has been made since. Mencken noted that many of Grose's terms have survived to our day, some still as slang, others having climbed to a more respectable standing, for example crocodile tears. *Pace* Mencken, a dangerous man to *pace* were he not dead, crocodile tears were respectable in literature long before Grose included them in his pretty parrot-house of pickpocket eloquence. But the judgment of what is slang and what respectable has always been a fine one.

The most ancient proverb has lasted well and become a valuable cliché: that is a cliché that puts something neatly that could not be said otherwise without circumlocution. Without crocodile tears how else would we describe the weeping hypocrite holding his pocket-handkerchief before his streaming eyes to cover up his *schadenfreude*? There are tears in the old croc yet.

Crocodile tears have been adopted into medical jargon. In 1928 a Russian neurologist, F. A. Bogorad, wrote the first full description of a rare condition in which the patient weeps out of one or both eyes while eating. This is formally known as paroxysmal lacrimation during eating or the gusto-lachrymal reflex. But Bogorad had the happy notion of calling the syndrome he had

described 'the symptom of crocodile's tears'. Doctors do not often have cause to use the jargon. Only ninety-two cases had been described at the last count.

The ancient logical puzzle or dilemma called 'the crocodile' has lasted less well than those grey-green, greasy old crocodile tears. In this sophism a crocodile grabs a child in its jaws. Mother screams. Crocodile, speaking through saliva with full mouth: 'I will give it back, if you tell me the truth.' Mother, either frantic or cunning: 'You will not give me back my little Astyanax.' Conundrum: is it the duty of the crocodile to give back the child?

There is no satisfactory solution to the conundrum. If one must puzzle one out, one could say that it allows two possible views of the crocodile's character: 1. the crocodile was a liar behind its crocodile tears; 2. the crocodile was not omniscient, and was caught in its own conundrum.

If the crocodile was a consistent liar, or, more exactly, a consistent user of the contrary meaning of speech, the child would be handed back.

If the croc was neither consistent in this way nor omniscient, we are left in deep opaque waters of uncertainty; as this cannot have been the intention of the conundrum, we must answer that the baby is safe, and move on to think about something else.

In fact the purpose of the conundrum is entirely different. It illustrates the female approach to life making a mockery of man's logical pretensions.

10/ DYSTOPIA

Charting new maps of hell

It must be a sign of the times. We seem to have stopped believing in Utopia and to need a word for its exact opposite. In British political discourse there has recently sounded a discord of Dystopias and Cacotopias, meaning places or systems of government where everything is for the worst in the worst of all possible worlds: Nasty Nowheres, in fact, or Democratic Kampuchea (avoid if possible, countries that feel the need to describe themselves officially as democratic).

Perhaps on this side of the increasingly fishless and polluted Atlantic we too are becoming more pessimistic, or even more realistic. A defining example of the new use is: 'The modern classics—Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*—are Dystopias. They describe not a world we should like to live in, but one we must be sure to avoid.' A Dystopia or Cacotopia is a vision of hell on earth like Anthony Burgess's TUCland.

These new terms of rhetoric are politically interesting because of the need we evidently feel today for such words in the kit-bag of English. We no longer expect things to get better, politically, socially, or scientifically; quite the reverse. Let us snap out of it, if we can.

The words are linguistically interesting because of their eccentric derivation. Dystopia and Cacotopia are children of *Utopia*, derived from the misapprehension that Sir Thomas More's imaginary island republic was Eu-topia (Everything-in-the-garden-is-lovely-place) rather than Ou-topia (No-place, that is Nowhere or Never Never Land). Until now the etymologists have judged that it was the latter.

In *Utopia*, the political fantasy written in Latin and published at Louvain in 1516, More pretends to have met at Antwerp a traveller called Raphael Hythloday, who has discovered Utopia or Nowhere Land. In that happy island everything is shared in a practical form of Communism or Christianity; the entire population, including women, is given a state education in comprehensive schools that work; nobody is persecuted for his religion. The fantasy, so different from the intolerance of the sixteenth century, became popular at once. The book was translated into the principal European languages, and within thirty years Rabelais could refer to Utopians and be confident that his readers would recognize the reference.

Erewhon, which is 'nowhere' spelt approximately backwards, was Samuel Butler's Utopia, published in 1872. In it Higgs, the narrator, comes upon an odd community in an unexplored part of New Zealand, whose institutions provide the author with material for satirical attacks on the English way of life: for instance, criminals are sent to the doctor, the sick are punished.

In fact both Dystopia and Cacotopia are quite respectably elderly arrivals into British English. They have been intermittently used by English writers since the nineteenth century for imaginary places or conditions in which everything is as bad as possible. Dystopia is rather the more common; Cacotopia the older. As one might have guessed, each seems to have been introduced into the language by political philosophers, who are the fellows for such gloomy speculation. Jeremy Bentham wrote (as early as 1818): 'As a match for Utopia (or the imagined seat of the best government) suppose a Cacotopia (or the imagined seat of the worst government) discovered and described.' John Stuart Mill declared in a speech to the House of Commons in 1868: 'It is, perhaps, too complimentary to call them Utopians, they ought rather to be called Dys-topians, or Caco-topians. What is commonly called Utopian is something too good to be practicable; but what they appear to favour is too bad to be practicable.'

The words were popularized in the jargon of social science in the United States in the 'Sixties'. An influential source was the Daedalus Library Volume of *Utopias and Utopian Thought* (Houghton 1966), edited by Frank E. Manuel. In this collection of essays, most of which first appeared in the spring of 1965, Professors Lewis Mumford, Crane Brinton, and Frank Manuel use Dystopia thirteen times and discuss alternative words to describe

Utopia in reverse. Here is Mumford in his 'Utopia, the City and the Machine': 'And, if the ancient city was indeed utopia, what qualities in human nature or what defects in its own constitution caused it to change, almost as soon as it had taken form, into its opposite: a negative utopia, a dystopia, or kakotopia?' In one of his essays Manuel discusses 'the satirical utopia or what has been variously called the dystopia, anti-utopia, or contra-utopia'.

More's Utopia is impeccably derived from its Greek parent: Ou-topia, no-place. Eu-topia is, if not a barbarism, at any rate odd, because it uses the adverb Eu (well) to qualify a noun 'topos' (place). The more natural Greek for such a place would be Agathotopia or Kalotopia. In the same way the natural Greek for its opposite is Cacotopia, not Dystopia, since Dys- is an adverbial prefix meaning the opposite of Eu-. Dys- is like the English un- or mis-, and always has the notion of hard, bad, or unlucky, destroying the good sense of a word and increasing the bad. If your Ancient Greek had wanted to qualify the noun 'topos', he or she would have used the adjective (Cacotopia) rather than Dys-.

However, we English-speakers have never felt bound to stick to the rules of the languages from which we borrow. We breed barbarous Centaur-words such as quadraphonics from Latin sires out of Greek dams—and perfectly good words they are: the 'correct' alternatives, tessaraphonics or quadrivocals, are no improvement. We rear hybrids, such as the fashionable 'dysfunction', which is mere pretentious varium lectum for malfunction. And we abuse Greek adverbs to qualify nouns, as in 'euphoria'; though I suspect that this may be conventionally derived from the older English word 'euphory', in which Eu- is used to qualify a verb.

The faecal variant 'Cacatopia' was recently published in *The Times*. This word has no connexion with the Greek *kakos*. Its derivation is obviously from the French *caca* (whose meaning can be found in any decent French dictionary) and Greek *topos*. Broadly and loosely this macaronic (or is it mock ironic?) hybrid means a place that is in a ghastly mess, or Shitland. At times recently incurable pessimists, usually American journalists, have been driven to thinking of modern Britain as a Cacatopia made real.

German sages seem particularly inclined to think of Utopia as a Eu rather than an Ou place. A memorial notice to the late Ernst Bloch in *The Times* pointed out that, according to Bloch, 'Utopia is not "nowhere" . . . It is that indispensable tomorrow, the

practicable ideal at which we aim.' And the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann has written of the necessity of devising 'concrete Utopias', that is, I think, plans for the reform of society. Concrete is too solid a material for building a nowhere.

The ambiguity between Ou and Eu (Nowhere and Lovely-where) is useful and pretty rather than a misunderstanding of More's *Utopia*. It can be argued that More himself recognized the pun, and gave authority for the modern coinage of Cacotopia and Dystopia. He represents the island of Utopia as saying: 'The ancients called me Utopia or Nowhere because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato's *Republic*, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence. Deservedly ought I to be called by the name of Eutopia or Happy Land.'

Eu- was a jack-of-all-trades prefix in Greek. It could mean plain good (eueides: good-looking), noble (eugenes: of noble race or high descent), brave (euenor: abounding in brave men), auspicious (euphemia: the use of words of good omen), easy (euphoros: easy to bear or patient), or quite (euthumos: in quite good spirits). The Greeks used caco- and dys- to manufacture the antonyms to eu-compounds.

Since there is clearly a need for a word for a Black Utopia, let us settle for Dystopia. The alternatives suggested by the American social scientists are less attractive. A negative Utopia is clumsy and makes a clumsy adjective. The same is true of an inverted Utopia, which sounds both clumsy and Antipodean. Contra-Utopia and anti-Utopia are misleading: they might mean the state of being opposed to Utopias rather than the state of being in the worst of imaginable worlds. Cacotopia has an extra syllable and is uglier to say. On grounds of euphony, history, and need Dystopia wins. The pun in Utopia has been recognized since Utopia was originally discovered. Let us talk about Dystopia when we feel the need amid the encircling gloom; but let us not entirely abandon hope of working gradually towards a better life in the real world.

11/ ECONOMICS

'As I interpret the President, we're now at the end of the beginning of the upturn of the downturn.' John F. Kennedy, when Senator

There are as many different forms of obscurity as there are styles of English.

Brevis esse laboro,
Obscurus fio.

I try to be brief, and I become obscure. The decent obscurity of a learned language is bad manners and showing-off, unless you are very sure of your audience. However, certain Latin phrases (*a priori, bona fide, mutatis mutandis*, *nem. con.*, *pari passu*, *quorum*, *prima facie*, *sine die*, *via*, *etcetera*) have been used in English for so long that they have become naturalized. It is impossible to express their meaning by translating them into English without circumlocution and obscurity. *Bona fide* can be anglicized in some contexts (though how about that obsolete Sunday boozer in Scotland, the *bona fide* traveller?). But you try to find as tidy a way of saying *mutatis mutandis* in English.

There is obscurity through euphemism, which uses periphrasis as a substitute for blunt precision. Here is a recent account of a wedding in the *Solihull News*, that clarion of the Midlands: 'The bride, who attended Sharmans Cross High School for Girls, is a secretary. The bridegroom, *a used vehicle merchandising co-ordinator*, attended Sharmans Cross High School for Boys.' Why not say 'second-hand car dealer' and have done with it?

The Deceptive Euphemism is a conspicuous feature of present usage, notably in such dialects as politics and advertising, where fooling people is very much the *nomen ludi* (*vide supra* for the patronizing obscurity of latinism). Consider the vogue epithet *unacceptable*. When some spokesperson says, 'XYZ is totally and

categorically *unacceptable*', his real meaning is, 'I and my friends intend to go on being bloody-minded about XYZ'. But the latter would be too revealingly honest. So Deceptive Euphemism is invoked: a statement of intention about the speaker and his friends is made to seem like a statement of fact about XYZ.

Up to is another example of modern Deceptive Euphemism to produce obscurity. The innocent little prepositional phrase is used to generate confusion or ambiguity between the extreme case and the average or probable case. 'You can save *up to* 35 per cent . . . ' 'Salary *up to* £12,000, by arrangement . . . ' The sucker, so hooked, will usually save 3 per cent, or be paid £4,000. The figures specified in the advertisement were not exactly false, but they were highly exceptional and unlikely.

There is obscurity through aposiopesis and anacoluthon, faulty logical subordination, and other odd constructions. Waitrose, the chain of supermarkets owned by the John Lewis Partnership, label their baked jam rolls ('serve hot') (Yuk) 'Eat within 1 day of sell-by date'. A man could die of food poisoning while trying to work out what that meant, and a glutton for hot baked jam rolls would deserve to. A recent contributor to the personal advertisements in *The Times* wrote: 'Mr N. M. thanks his friends for the tributes he has received upon the death of his dear wife.' One sees what he meant, but it could have been less obscurely expressed. A correspondent recently wrote to *The Times*: 'I have been either the daughter or the wife of a public school headmaster for 41 years.' You really should have found out by now, dear. Try everything once, except incest and folk-dancing.

Another letter to *The Times*: 'Yet at the same conference Mr Agee was allowed ten minutes in which to air his views, because they happened to coincide with more people than not. Though this hypocrisy sickened me, it also served to illustrate the inherently undemocratic nature of Marxism.' What was that? Do you mind writing that again?

The obscurity of the literature of research is a sub-species of the last two species of obscurity, Deceptive Euphemism and logical muddle. In this pretty jargon 'Correct within an order of magnitude', means 'wrong'. 'It is clear that much additional work will be required before a complete understanding . . . ' means 'I don't understand it.' 'Unfortunately, a quantitative theory to account for these results has not yet been formulated . . . ' means 'Nor does anybody else.'

There is the obscurity of being so carried away by one's introduction that one never arrives at the point of the chapter. Come on, Philip, *festina lente* (*vide supra*). But of all the obscurities that are obscured in this obscuring world,—though the obscurity of hypocrites may be the worst,—the obscurity of economics, finance, and the tax inspector is the most tormenting. Economics cannot be an exact science like chemistry. 'As soon as questions of will or decision or reason or choice of action arise, human science is at a loss', Professor Chomsky, 1978. Right on, Noam baby!

If all economists were laid end to end, they would not reach a conclusion in plain English. It would be a disgusting sight, anyway. When Sir Alec Douglas-Home, during his short term as Prime Minister, declared: 'There are two problems in my life. The political ones are insoluble, and the economic ones are incomprehensible,' his political opponents scoffed at him for being an honest simpleton. Since then, with the change in fashion from Keynes to Friedman and the clatter of economists turning about-face and dropping their slide-rules, we are all in the same boat with dear Sir Alec, including the economists. Nobody pretends any more (if they ever did) that economics is an exact science. We have to ask ourselves whether the obscurity of the jargon of economics is caused by the difficulty of the subject, our own incomprehension, or the disingenuousness of economists.

Here is a recent example of the official obscurity of Taxman's English that could be simplified with a little trouble: 'I propose that your earnings from this source be assessed on an accounts year basis from 1979/80 i.e. the emoluments earned in the accounts year is taken as the sum assessable for the income tax year in which the accounts year ends. The strict earnings basis is used in the year of cessation of the source and also the penultimate year. I will review the position if the accounting date is changed or you make a claim for earnings basis to apply. I look forward to receiving your agreement to my proposal.'

In plain English that means—On second thoughts, aposiopesis is the answer. I will leave you to work it out, while I go and put my head in a bucket of cold water.

It is not surprising that the jargon of a comparatively new social pseudoscience should be obscure. *Inflation* is a very abbreviated shorthand symbol for a very complicated process that we do not yet fully understand. All the words related to *inflation* are slippery

and difficult. They refer primarily to the rate of increase or decrease in the supply of money, and by extension to the effect of changes in the supply of money on prices. Here follows a provisional bestiary of some of these alarming but important new concepts:

Inflation: the original dinosaur in the jargon jungle; a process in which the general price level, as measured by some broad price index, rises significantly and persistently for a considerable time, while the supply of money is being increased; looked at from the other end of the dinosaur, it means a persistent decline in the purchasing power of money. 'One of the principal troubles about inflation is that the public likes it', Lord Woolton.

Hyper-Inflation: Gigantosaurus; means that the money supply is being increased very rapidly, at an annual rate of 20 per cent or higher; it arises out of a radical breakdown in the monetary system, and runs its course in weeks and months rather than years; prices treble in a day; send for wheelbarrows to carry your wages home; the currency ends by being destroyed, as happened in Germany in 1923. 'The way to crush the bourgeoisie is to grind them between the millstones of taxation and inflation,' Lenin.

Stagflation: Imperial Mammoth; the term was coined by Iain Macleod, briefly Chancellor of the Exchequer before his death in 1970, to describe the British achievement in combining inflation and industrial stagnation. Previously orthodox economic theory supposed this to be impossible, on the grounds that there was an inverse relationship between inflation and industrial stagnation. Britain pioneered the discovery that stagnation, unemployment, and inflation could rise simultaneously in a positive relationship. Other nations including the United States have since followed in Britain's Mammoth footsteps.

Disinflation: Pterodactyl; policies of fiscal and monetary restraint, designed to lessen the pressure of demand; the supply of money is still being increased, as in inflation, but at a lower rate.

Deflation: Triceratops; disinflation, but more so; the supply of money is being reduced, or prices are falling, or both; wages and credit are also falling; unemployment is rising. The word is curiously formed by syncope, the shortening of a word by the omission of a syllable in the middle. It should be de-inflation; you cannot flate a bicycle tyre.

Reflation: Brontosaurus; means expansionary policies designed to bring the economic system up to full employment again; the supply

of money is being restored to a higher level after deflation has occurred.

A new fashion in economics will eventually slightly alter and refine these concepts. In any case you cannot hope to explain such monstrous and important obscurities in brief definitions. As Queen Victoria advised her granddaughter, Victoria Battenberg: 'I *wld earnestly* warn you agst trying to *find* out the *reason* for & explanation of *everything*.'

12/ JUMBO

Elephants never forget, but jumbos do

Question: 'In what countries are elephants found?'
Schoolgirl: 'Elephants are very large and intelligent animals, and are seldom lost.'

In a world increasingly dominated by *jumbos*, we have forgotten the origin of *jumbo*. *Jumbo* jets groan over London into Heathrow like bull elephants coming home to musth. We eat *jumbo* burgers or *jumbo*-sized steaks, while sipping *jumbo* malted milks, followed by *Jumbo* California peaches and *jumbo* peanuts. Then we are probably *jumbo* sick. The shelves of the local supermarket sag beneath king-sized, giant-economy, and finally, king of the consumer jungle, *jumbo* packages. According to the *Sun*, a newspaper not distinguished for meiosis, the Prime Minister (at that time Ted Heath) 'handled his *jumbo* Press conference amid the splendour of Lancaster House with poise and style.' He then probably felt the need of a *jumbo* Martini, though, being Mr Heath, he settled for three fingers of malt whisky.

We all know that this ubiquitous new prefix to indicate mammoth size is derived from a colloquial and childish synonym for an elephant. And we are all wrong. *Jumbo* was an interesting word before it became the name of a famous elephant.

The change in meaning happened in 1865, when the London Zoo acquired the first African elephant to depress the soil of England, and one of the first seen in Europe since Hannibal's travelling circus. The zoo got it from the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in exchange for a rhinoceros. The elephant arrived in a wretched condition: half-starved, filthy, puny, covered in sores, and no *jumbo* in the modern sense. But it was called *Jumbo*, a suitably

African name, probably derived from the second element of mumbo-*jumbo*, the name used in England since the eighteenth century for a West African god or bogey. It probably came from the Mandingo (a group of African languages, a branch of the Niger-Congo family, spoken chiefly in Mali, Guinea, and Sierra Leone) *mama dyumbo*, the name of a tribal god. Mumbo-*jumbo* has since come to mean silly superstition, or gibberish. Until *Jumbo* the elephant arrived in Regent's Park, *jumbo* the word had indicated shambling clumsiness in a foreign manner rather than mere size. A dictionary of 1823 defined *jumbo* as: 'a clumsy or unwieldy fellow.'

Jumbo the elephant recovered from his journey, grew bigger, and 'became very frolicsome.' Three months after his arrival a female of the same species called Alice was bought from an East End dealer for £500. Although the two elephants rarely met, the mawkish Victorian press from the beginning coupled them as 'man and wife'.

At the height of his growth and fame *Jumbo* stood 11 feet 4 inches at the shoulder and weighed 6½ tons. Over the years he carried many thousands of children on his back. But gradually the sexual rhythm known as musth made him dangerous, and an elephant rifle was kept at hand. Phineas Taylor Barnum, the American impresario, got wind of this, and offered the London Zoological Society £2,000 for *Jumbo*, if he could be safely boxed.

Any story to do with animals or royalty can be guaranteed to rouse the British public to frenzy. One leader writer in the serious press compared the proposed sale to the sale of Uncle Tom by Selby: 'When a Southern slave owner put in force his legal right of separating a family at the auction block, the world rang with anathemas against the inhumanity of the deed. Surely to tear this aged brute from a home to which he is attached and from associates who have so markedly displayed their affection for him, is scarcely less cruel.'

Punch published a cartoon of *Jumbo* covered with children being hauled away by a villainous Barnum. In the foreground Head Keeper Punch was holding Charles Bradlaugh, the radical reformer, disguised as a warthog, by the tail, and telling off Barnum:

'Hail Columbia! An elephant's house is his castle! Leave *Jumbo* alone, and Three Thousand Million British children, not to mention billions of British babes unborn, will bless the name of

Barnum. Take t'other instead and you will earn the gratitude of all parties, even that of the trusty and much tried other one representing Northampton. Why cert'nly, love to yourself and America generally. Vive Barnum! Facile Princeps in the show line, bar none. Hail Columbia! Yours truly, Punch.'

Jumbo songs were top of the pops. For example:

Jumbo said to Alice, 'I love you.'
Alice said to *Jumbo*, 'I don't believe you do.
If you really loved me, as you say you do,
You wouldn't go to Yankeeland and leave me in the Zoo.'

The music-hall star known as the Great MacDermott had a hit with a *Jumbo* ballad of six verses. One of them went:

Immigration is rife now all over the world,
Good, bad, and indifferent depart
From the land of their birth to the one across the sea,
Where they all hope to get a fresh start.
Now many of these can be very well spared,
But oh, Englishmen, can it be true?
For a paltry two thousand they're going to part
With old *Jumbo*, the pet of the Zoo.

The crowds sang the chorus as fervently as they sang the National Anthem. Barnum (who wrote to Matthew Arnold: 'You and I, Mr Arnold, ought to be acquainted. You are a celebrity, I am a notoriety.') fanned the publicity. He once said of himself: 'Talk about me, good or ill, but for God's sake talk about me!' He published a six-page pamphlet about himself entitled *A Prince of Humbugs*. Queen Victoria, the Prince of Wales, and Ruskin petitioned against *Jumbo's* departure.

In spite of the popular uproar, *Jumbo* crossed the Atlantic, where Barnum advertised him with characteristic mendacity and mendicity as 'the only surviving example of the mastodon.' After touring for three years with Barnum, fathering two calves, and attracting enormous crowds, *Jumbo* had a head-on collision with a goods train and was lost. But his name lives on in hamburgers and air lines.

But before Barnum and the Victorian public ran elephant-crazy, *jumbo* had no connotations of size, merely of clumsiness. After Barnum had finished with him, *Jumbo* had come to *mean*

elephant. It became the trade-name for a shade of elephant grey. It is a very odd eponym. Many people and creatures have given their names to things, from wellies to bloomers, and from tureen to Mae West. But none that I can think of, except *Jumbo*, have skyjacked a word and stolen its meaning.

It is pretty odd what *jumbo* burgers have done to hamburgers, when you consider that a hamburger originally meant steak chopped as they do it in Hamburg. Burger, as in *jumbo* or cheese or mouse burger, is a truncated word, as hybrid as Winston Churchill's triphibious warfare (irregularly opposed to the amphibious variety), and the dreaded breathalyzer, which ought to be a breathanalyzer.

After we have finished our *jumbo* burgers, we might mourn the Americanization of the English *doughnut*. In British English or Bringlish *doughnut* or *doughnut*-shaped is now universally used to describe a torus, which is shaped like a quoit, or, well, a *doughnut*. But that is the American *doughnut*, used for dunking in coffee and other distasteful practices. The true, the jamful English doughnut is a sphere. But you would not guess it, reading British journalists referring to the torus-*doughnut*, which is universal in maths and physics.

13/ LEGALESE

Lawyers: A society of men bred up from their youth in the art of proving by words multiplied for the purpose that white is black and black is white according as they are paid

Those who think that civilization as we know it is coming to an end, and that the Dark Ages are about to descend again, sometimes cite the 'decay' of English as a symptom of the supposed general decline of civilization. Myself, I doubt whether decay is an apt metaphor for the way that a language constantly evolves to meet the new needs of those who use it.

If you believed in vegetable metaphors, you could, I suppose, say that Latin decayed after the fall of the Roman Empire. That was because different and barbarian chaps were speaking the stuff. Political and social changes produced the change in language. But the language served its society perfectly. And as Helen Waddell showed unforgettably, the 'decayed' language of the Dark Ages was a vigorous, poetic, and eloquent language for the ecclesiastical and other purposes for which it was needed.

In his book called *Decadence*, published in 1979, Richard Gilman, the American critic, argued persuasively that *decadent* has become a freelance epithet that means pretty well nothing, except that the user smugly disapproves of what he is describing. We use *decadent* to explain and put down such disparate phenomena as the fall of the Roman Empire; Baudelaire and his disciples in mid nineteenth-century France; Swinburne, Wilde, Beardsley, and other '*decadents*' of the Victorian *fin de siècle*; the Weimar Republic; Hitler's Germany; punk rock . . . Paul Verlaine wrote: 'I like the word *decadent*, all shimmering with purple and gold. It throws out the brilliance of flames and the gleam of precious stones. It is made up of carnal spirit and unhappy flesh and of all the violent splendours.'

Yes, but what does it *mean*? According to Gilman, not much.

He argues that *decadence* explains nothing and reveals nothing but our apparently unappeasable hunger for neat, fateful explanations of the essentially mysterious processes of creation. The woods decay, the woods decay and fall. The words do not. They become obs., as the terse lexicographers put it, or change their meanings to suit new needs.

In a lecture to a society of sages at the Athenaeum recently, the learned and witty George Steiner argued that English was in a poor way in the United Kingdom. All the best poetry and fiction, he said, were being written in the United States. Well, yes, up to a point, Lord Copper. There are some Brits from Graham Greene and Iris Murdoch to Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes who still manage to turn out good English. And in certain branches of the language, from biography and academic writing (some of it) to television (some of it), British writers and talkers are in the first division; indeed, near the top of it. But, in general, it is not surprising that a country as big, rich, diverse, and gabby as the United States should produce more good writers than a comparatively small, run-down, and at present introspective island.

The only two British politicians who speak with the clarity and eloquence of previous generations of politicians (leaving on one side the wisdom or folly of what they say) are Lord Hailsham and Enoch Powell. Most of our politicians use language designed to conceal the poverty of their thought, and to mislead the public or appeal to their baser instincts. But then most politicians of all countries since the time of Cleon have done that. Many academics use pretentious jargon that is not clear even to those inside the discipline.

The churches were once the repository of good English. Pick up any book of seventeenth-century sermons, not by an acknowledged master of language such as John Donne but an otherwise obscure parson, and you will find the English language used to the service of God in a living and beautiful way. How long is it since we heard a bishop say something interesting? But leaving that aside, how long is it since you heard a bishop say something in language that is lively and clear?

One place, at any rate, where even pessimists about the language acknowledge that good English survives is on the Bench. Judges still talk conspicuously good English, and do it extemporarily. Of course, it is part of their training. Since all judges were once barristers themselves, they are used to speaking and making

themselves understood. A barrister who pleads before a judge has to make his meaning clear. He has to cite the proper references. He has to explain what he means by a particular example, even more so when he has a jury to persuade. It is harder to persuade a jury than to gull a television audience. A politician can get away with weasel words and slippery or invalid argument because he has nobody except the hecklers to contend with. A lawyer who is obfuscating language has to contend with the judge, who will often pull him up, if he starts twisting the language.

One of our learned and purist Circuit Judges sends me new words that he notices emerging in his courts from time to time. The latest is *adamance*, as in (from a report by a social worker in Southwark): 'He has expressed his *adamance* that he will become a responsible member of the community.'

The Oxford lexicographers cannot determine when the substantive *adamant*, meaning 'a fabulous hard metal or rock', became an adjective meaning 'inflexible', particularly in *to be adamant*, meaning 'stubbornly to refuse compliance with requests'. As an adjective, *adamant* usually means 'a negative determination not to do something' rather than a positive determination, for instance to turn over a new leaf and become a responsible member of the community. In spite of its barbarously bastard birth, *adamance* is an attractive new word in Legalese, as fits a substance that was for centuries confused with lodestone and credited with magnetic powers.

The Judge's second new word, *abscondition*, as in 'bail was refused because of the likelihood of *abscondition*' is less attractive, and seems otiose. We already have *absconding* and *abscondment* in the vocabulary as nouns. In the Judge's exemplary sentence 'because he was likely to abscond' would be less abstract and more vigorous. Like the rest of us, social workers sometimes want to soften the sharp truth with abstractitis.

The Judge's third new word that has recently emerged in his court is *orality*, as in, 'the English criminal trial is moving away from its character of extreme *orality*'; that is, it is 'not now so insistent upon solely oral evidence.' This appeared in a recent article in the lawyers' trade magazine *Justice of the Peace*.

In fact *orality*, meaning the quality of being oral or orally communicated, is already in the British vocabulary as a rare and supposed to be obsolescent word. Evidently our need for it is reviving. In any event, it has a respectable pedigree going back to

the seventeenth century, as well as its new legal function.

The Judge's final contribution was not a new word but an example of the old linguistic vice of jargon, circumlocution, and beating around the bush. It comes from a recent report from a Remand Centre. The subject of the report was said to be 'unlikely to make attitudinal changes until the maturation process has been completed.' I suppose that it was felt to be unduly blunt to say that the subject of the report was unlikely to change his attitude until he had grown up. British English is protected from the decay supposed to be nibbling away at it by the vigilance of, among others, those precise, often stylish, and never *decadent* purists, the Judges.

14/ LEMMINGS

'One can't believe impossible things.'
'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen.
'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day.
Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

There is no limit to human credulity; and the most credulous humans are the most positive. *Credulitas grammatica* is a virulent strain that infects newspaper readers. A considerable number of readers of *The Times* are convinced beyond reason that the pronoun *none* is singular only, and must at all costs be followed by singular verbs. It does no good to tell them that the OED and Fowler explicitly state that the plural construction is commoner, or that it is pure superstition that *different* can be followed only by *from* and not by *to*. They do not want to have their imaginary rules broken. The prudent or idle journalist, who wants to avoid having a lot of quibbling letters to answer, tries not to unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly insult such popular fetishes—as well as the one against splitting infinitives.

Another prevalent strain of linguistic credulity is belief in popular etymologies. It is a pity that *hocus pocus* is not derived from *Hoc est corpus meum* in the Mass. In fact, disappointingly, it is based ultimately on *hax pax max Deus adimax*, a pseudo-Latin magical formula coined by vagrant students in the sixteenth century. We are all susceptible to such pretty popular derivations. Dictionary Johnson declared with more poetry than accuracy that *curmudgeon* 'is a vicious manner of pronouncing *coeur méchant*.' He suggested that *helter-skelter* came from an old English expression meaning the darkness of hell. An intrepid young Irishman once suggested in his presence that that was a very far-fetched etymology, and offered as a better derivation the Latin *hilariter celeriter*, merrily and swiftly. Both Johnson and the Irishman were wrong, alas. *Helter-skelter* in the dull real world is a rhyming jingle like harum-scarum, perhaps based ultimately on the fourteenth

century *skelte*, hasten.

Astrological credulity rages in respectable publications and among otherwise sensible people. This balderdash is the excellent foppery of the world, that, 'when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars.'

Odder even than the feeble-mindedness that believes that the conjunction of the stars and the signs of the zodiac influence our lives is the historical credulity that prefers legend to truth. A leader of the National Graphical Association, the principal British printing union, announced the other day that his members were not King Canutes about the new technology that is turning their ancient inky craft upside down. He presumably meant that the lads were not going to try to stop the tides of innovation that are making many of them redundant. (Luddites would have been a more appropriate historical metaphor.) But he demonstrated again the need for a Society to Rehabilitate the Reputations of Those Whose Names Have Become Metaphorical Clichés. Many such monstrous towers of careless metaphor are based upon foundations of painted smoke.

For example, in the great Boat Club in the sky Canute must be indignant that he is daily slandered down here as a megalomaniac who seriously believed that he could stop the flowing tide. What happened was the exact opposite. Canute (c. 995–1035) was the great sea-king of Denmark and England. His fleets ruled the waves, and, under his command, defeated the Swedish fleet at Stangebjerg and the combined Norwegian-Swedish fleet at the mouth of the Helgeaa, both in 1028. He was the last man to waive the rules of seamanship. If any contemporary knew about the tides and other ways of the sea it was Canute.

The story of Canute and the tide is recorded only by Henry the Archdeacon of Huntingdon, who wrote his *Historia Anglorum* a century after Canute's death. Henry says that Canute sat on the muddy bank of the Thames at Westminster and commanded the rising tide to go back as a dramatic rebuke to his sycophantic court. He got his feet wet on purpose as a parable to demonstrate to his magnates that there were forces in the world greater than kings and war, and to prepare them for his submission to the Holy See of Rome. Henry of Huntingdon adds that as a gesture of humility Canute would never afterwards wear his crown: he hung it, instead, on the head of an effigy of the crucified Christ. The

story is found nowhere else. It reads like a pious ecclesiastical legend with homiletic intent.

It is an engaging paradox of the whirligig of that time that in careless rhetoric Canute has now been widely adopted as the example of an infatuated and arrogant reactionary who seriously believes that he can turn back the tides, usually those unpersuasively historicist currents, the tides of history. Politicians and other noisy persuaders evidently feel the need for some such dummy figure as an insult. And poor old Canute has drawn the short straw.

Our Society for Onomastic Rehabilitation will have plenty of other work to do. It is probably too late to persuade the cartoonists and politicians that no ostrich yet hatched ever buried its head in the sand to escape from danger. But we ought to try to do something for the unfortunate lemmings. The popular notion that the little rodents commit mass suicide by plunging off the Arctic shore and swimming out to chilly sea is deeply ingrained folklore. It is repeated in such respectable reference books as my (admittedly 1958 edition) *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: 'None returns, and the onward march of the survivors never ceases until they reach the sea, into which they plunge and are drowned.'

Like most popular folklore this is pure nonsense. No credible observer has ever recorded the mass suicide of the lemmings. The most that can be said is that on their periodic emigrations to escape from overcrowding, lemmings cross rivers and lakes tumultuously, like migrating ants, and many are drowned.

Yet the false idea that lemmings have a death wish conforms to some evident need in rhetoric. It has given rise to a concatenation of other equally fallacious myths, from the belief of Norwegian peasants that lemmings rain from the clouds like cats and dogs, to the notion of some imaginative biologists that lemmings are following instinctively in ancestral footsteps from the Miocene period, when the Baltic and North Seas were dry land.

It is all bunkum. Lemmings just do not do what they are supposed to do. The only animal that regularly commits mass suicide is Homo sapiens. But evidently we have a need for some vivid metaphor from Nature to illustrate the human propensity to self-destruction. The poor, bleeding lemming has been adopted as a rhetorical cliché to fit the description.

Our Society for Onomastic Rehabilitation will try to explain that there was more to the great civilization of Byzantium than

Byzantine deviousness. It is probably too late to persuade anyone that Cloud-Cuckoo-Land is a highly desirable residence next door to paradise. And in fact all such attempts to correct inveterate errors are, most likely, a priggish waste of time. We evidently need to believe rubbish about hocus pocus, Canute, and lemmings for our rhetorical and other purposes. And so the names have come to represent things that never happened.

15/ LIT CRIT

O you chorus of indolent reviewers

The honest giant careth not to be patted on the back by pigmies:
Flatter greatness, he brooketh it good-humouredly: blame him,
thou tiltest at a pyramid

Portrait of a Victorian Author *by Martin Farquhar Tupper*

Pity the poor literary critic! He receives his parcel of books on Monday with a deadline to deliver copy by the end of the week. He squeezes like a Victorian lady being laced into her stays to fit reviews of five novels into a thousand words. The sub-editors remove his intro, peroration, and all attempts at jokes, and give him a headline that makes punning nonsense of his theme. And then he finds himself abused as a butcher, a failed author, a member of a stupid and malignant race, a louse in the locks of literature, a man who has failed in literature and art.

Coleridge summed up the general opinion: 'Reviewers are usually people who would have been poets, historians, biographers, &c., if they could; they have tried their talents at one or at the other, and have failed; therefore they turn critics.'

In return for his hard work, expert knowledge, wit, and exposure to abuse, the reviewer is paid a pittance and allowed to keep the books, which he can flog furtively, if he can bring himself to.

Pity, also, the commissioner of reviewers! The Literary Editor is forced by the hard constraints of producing a daily paper to prefer professionalism (the reviewer who delivers copy of the length asked for on the appointed day) to wayward brilliance (it is depressing how many hardened and shameless reviewers still write twice as much as they are asked for, deliver it late, and then go

into tantrums about being cut). He would like to fill his precious space with constructive reviews of good books that his readers might want to borrow, or even buy. But, human nature being what it is, destructive rudeness is generally considered more fun to read: newspaper articles that are not fun to read generally remain unread. Coleridge, who tended to strip his sleeve and show his scars from reviewers, again: 'As long as there are readers to be delighted with calumny, there will be found reviewers to calumniate.'

Reviewers these days are in fact far less brutal than they were a century ago, except on occasions when Auberon Waugh or Bernard Levin go magnificently bananas. Here is Henry James in a fulminously memorable misjudgement of *Our Mutual Friend*: 'It is poor with the poverty not of momentary embarrassment, but of permanent exhaustion.'

The occupational vices of modern reviewers are not brutality and malignancy but pretentiousness and pseudery. Here follows a glossary of some new vogue words of Lit Crit lingo that are a warning, if one finds oneself typing them, that one may be showing off. It is bad manners for the critic to pretend to be cleverer than the author (who has spent years rather than hours on his book) and the reader of the review:

Ambience: Does this mean any more than atmosphere, surroundings or environment? In the jargon of criticism it evidently does: 'The ambience of the painting is involved with people who are all going towards a similar thing.' I think it means: 'I am a man of culture rare who uses the right passwords and shibboleths.'

Catch 22: Now widely used to describe any awkward situation, not just one based on a paradox. In Joseph Heller's book of this title, published in 1961, men were allowed to fly aircraft in the war only if they were not considered mad. If a man appeared to be mad, he could stop fighting and be sent home; but if he asked to go home, this only proved that he was not mad (because he did not want to be killed), and he was forced to go on fighting. Hence a Catch 22 is a Lit Crit dificulty, especially a rule considered unfair and unreasonable, that prevents one from escaping from an unpleasant or dangerous situation. One of the most cruel forms of Soviet Catch 22 used against dissidents, or those who wish to emigrate, is to dismiss them from their jobs, make it impossible for them to get work of any kind, and then prosecute them for not working. Catch 22 permits the enforcement of a rule nullifying a

right the exercise of which gives rise to the rule. While it is unfortunate that such a marvellous concept can seldom be applied accurately, it is disappointing to see its incorrect application so often.

Committed: A vogue word meaning prejudiced, biased, or intending one's writing to serve a political ideal, as in: 'The author's own style has been sparked into rhetoric by a committed involvement with his subject.' A wounded author has described the vague vogue word as 'that pretentious current favourite term of the self-appointed proprietors of politics, philosophy, and culture.'

Creative: A favourite hooray-word of Lit Crit because of its elegant imprecision and aesthetic ambience (see *Ambience*). All writers create, but a creative writer creates such works of imagination as poetry and fiction, the raw material from which reviewers earn a living. It has been creatively described as 'a luscious, round, meaningless word, so much in honour that it is the clinching term of approval from the schoolroom to the advertiser's studio.'

Emotive: A term pinched by Lit Crit from Freddy Ayer's emotive or boo-hooray theory of moral and all evaluative judgements (such utterances, or the evaluative elements in them, do not state anything, but, like ejaculations, simply express the reactions of the speaker). In Lit Crit it often is no more than a pretentious synonym for emotional or moving.

Epic: The connexion with Homer, Virgil, and Milton has long been broken, and epic means no more than exciting, or simply long.

Erziehungsroman: German Lit Crit for a novel about the education and upbringing of a young person (*Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*). German, being exceptionally rich in critical jargon, has a synonym to describe this small class of books: *Bildungsroman, Bildung* formation, *Roman* novel. I should avoid them, Philip, unless you are reviewing for the *TLS*.

Evocative: A laudatory epithet for creative writing, though its context does not always make clear what images, memories, feelings, associations, allusions, or symbols the passage so praised tends to evoke. Evocative names suggest some characteristic of the person named, for example, Thomas Gradgrind, in *Hard Times*, who blighted his children's youth by his emphasis on the superiority of fact to imagination, and Mr Horner, the witty young libertine in William Wycherley's *The Country Wife*, who cuckolds husbands, or, proverbially, gives them horns.

Inevitable: A fashionable but vague word of critical approbation, meaning that one could not change a word without ruining the book: 'Illustrations of French wit; . . . of the "inevitable" phrase, that gift to the world past all the praise.' The inevitability of the work is often more apparent to the critic than his reader, who could contemplate extensive changes without fainting.

Oeuvre: Often used in arty periphrasis, as in 'Most of Barbara Hepworth's drawings are representational, most of her sculptural *oeuvre* is organic.' What is wrong with her plain sculpture?

Of course: A classic phrase of one-upmanship in all journalism, not just the lingo of Lit Crit. It is used to impress upon the reader the erudition of the reviewer, who has sometimes merely picked the brains of the author he is reviewing, as in '1688, of course, was not just the year of the Second Declaration of Indulgence by James II; it was also the year in which Jean de La Bruyère published *Les Caractères*.' Sometimes *of course* is an excuse for not proving an assertion; sometimes it is used to patronize the reader; occasionally it seems to have no meaning. What was one supposed to make of the following sentence in *The Times* in November 1979: 'But *of course* Marx was a West German'?

Overview: Much favoured recently by the more modish sort of academic reviewer as an apparently exact synonym for survey.

Perceptive: A favourite reviewer's hooray-word, as in: 'A perceptive, intelligent novel about personal relationships'. Publishers like to have a *perceptive* to quote on dust jackets. The word probably means that the author has a quick eye and a sharp ear for human behaviour. It certainly means that the reviewer quite liked the book. Compare *Sensitive*.

Precondition: A modish but tautologous Lit Crit synonym for condition.

Saga: An old Norse word meaning story, applied to the narrative compositions in prose that were written in Iceland or Norway during the Middle Ages. Used in English to describe any tale of high adventure, and also, as in the *Forsyte Saga*, a series of novels of contemporary life in which the same characters reappear. I suppose you could just describe *The Archers* on the BBC as a SAGA. But the word retains ancient echoes of epic and the Vikings, and looks uncomfortable when used as a headline-word to grab the reader's attention by the scruff of the neck, as in *The Times*: PUZZLING SAGA OF AN INDISCRETION IN A SAUNA BATH.

Seminal: Highly influential, original, important, and likely to propagate like a seed or seminal fluid. Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, and pepper their discourse with seminal. The BBC's head of Religious Broadcasts: 'I would like to make some programmes whose images will remain in people's minds in a *seminal* way.' It is a trendy word, the figurative extension of which has recently grown in a *seminal* way.

Sensitive: Cf. *Perceptive*. From the Latin *sentire*, to feel: quick to detect, and to be moved by, stimuli communicated through the senses; ready and delicate in response to outside influences. Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*: 'A *sensitive* being, a *creative* soul', fires two Lit Crit barrels in a single line.

Significant: Used as a synonym for important, when its primary sense is to convey a meaning or suggest an inference. A novel can be important without being significant, and significant without being important.

Sympathetic: Another vogue hooray-word. The sense is borrowed from the French. The use of SYMPATHETIC to describe a character who excites sympathy rather than one who feels it is a comparatively recent extension of Lit Crit's empire.

In spite of the perils of pretentiousness, some of which are listed above, *Of course* book-reviewing is a *creative* art, which is practised sensitively, perceptively, sympathetically, and professionally by modern reviewers, particularly in *The Times*.

16/ LOVE

Shackup à son goût

Little Englishers, stick-in-the-muds, and snobs grumble about American linguistic imperialism. They are foolish to do so. The United States are the linguistic melting-pot of our age. Most new English flows eastwards across the Atlantic, partly because so many people are speaking and writing the stuff over there, and partly because so much of the innovatory work in science and technology, which needs new jargon to describe it, is being done over there. American English is the principal source of new life for the language. It is not surprising that a certain amount of linguistic scum comes to the top of the pot that refines the bright new metals of slang, jargon, and other accretions to English. But of all languages English is a functional organism. If there is a need for the new word or phrase, it establishes itself. Slang and jargon that are merely fashionable cottonwool words rapidly become boring and fade away. Not many unnecessary Americanisms have established themselves. The learned and fastidious chief revise sub-editor of *The Times* declares that the American word (and possibly also the virtue) of *know-how* is otiose as well as ugly. I am not persuaded that there is another way of saying precisely *know-how*, though I agree that it is an unpopular virtue in Britain.

Instead of grumbling about new Americanisms that time will prove to be either useful or ephemeral, let us call for a new word that neither American nor British English has yet invented. We desperately need a word for those who are cohabiting without benefit of clergy (the phrase being used metaphorically) or register office.

There is nothing new about unmarried people living together. It is just that more people are doing it, and that we no longer feel the

need to cloak the relationship with the fig-leaf of prudish discretion. According to the US Census Bureau, the number of POOSSLQS ('Person of the opposite sex sharing living quarters') has more than doubled since 1970. The Feds are doggedly hetero. A number of words have been tried to describe the relationship, none of them entirely satisfactory. Some, like POOSSLQ, are unduly bureaucratic; and others intolerably twee.

In the first category the Social Services Correspondent of *The Times* (which Americans will describe erroneously, as *The London Times*) has attempted to introduce *cohabitee*, which is ugly, as well as irregularly formed. The regular *cohabitant* is still a mouthful. It might just pass in written Bureaucratese, but not in conversation: 'Can I introduce you to my cohabitant?'

Cohabiter is possible, but still unduly bureaucratic. *Cohabitator* has a syllable too many. The 1980 Social Security Act introduced the term *unmarried couple*. A paragraph of Schedule 2 of the Act says that *unmarried couple* means a man and a woman who are not married to each other 'but who are living together as husband and wife otherwise than in prescribed circumstances.' This phrase now forms part of Section 34 of the Supplementary Benefits Act 1976. 'Hello, this is Isabel (or Reginald) my current Section 34' may eventually save us all trouble at dinner parties.

A naval friend has suggested *oppo*: in the Royal Navy a rating in another watch, with whom one 'paired', was an 'opposite number' or *oppo* for short. The word seems a bit hearty, and indeed camp, for use to describe a woman.

Here is a military suggestion. An Army wordsmith recalls that following the Militia Acts in 1939 recruits who were already married either legally or not came into the Army. An unmarried wives' allowance was at first paid to the latter. The then Archbishop of Canterbury was alleged to have objected to the term. When the War Office asked him to supply a better one, he is said to have suggested 'Special Dependant's Allowance'. The pay offices quickly shortened this to *Canterbury Belles*.

In certain regions of Britain, for example South Wales, *living tally* is an everyday expression for living together without being married. Although the nouns *tallyman* and *tallywoman* are not heard so frequently, the *Oxford English Dictionary* acknowledges these colloquial uses. The expressions originated from *tally* sticks, which fitted together exactly to provide both debtor and creditor with a record of a debt. A *tally* literally is each of two correspond-

ing halves or parts, a counterpart. In conversation it sounds friendly: 'Have you met my *tally*?' Perhaps airlines might not go for *tally* fares.

Travelling north in our Hunting of the Snark we find that Scots law recognizes the existence of the *Bidie-in* (or her legalistic equivalent, or his), as one who enjoys not only a fine homespun cognomen, but also most of the rights and privileges of the married person. It is derived from the archaic Scots word 'Bide': to wait, dwell, remain, face unshrinkingly, or endure. 'Biding' (*King Lear*: 'I'll lead you to some *biding*') means a residence or habitation. The definitions are handsome, and compare well with most marriage vows.

Bidie-in has the qualities of being pithy, applicable to persons of either sex, free from the pejorative connotations, and easily comprehensible by incomers to the area. The only limitation seems to be that the *bidie-in* normally has no security of tenure in the house—one of the couple is the *bidie-in* of the other, who is the owner or tenant of the property. However, this is not a serious drawback, as in practice this is usually the case.

In Scots law marriage by cohabitation with 'habit and repute' has been known since before the Reformation, and it has been suggested that the modern law is ultimately based on pre-Tridentine common law: 'When a man and a woman cohabit together at bed and board as husband and wife, and behave towards each other as such for a considerable length of time, so as to produce a general belief that they are married, it is presumed to be so in fact.'

Scots also have the even more informal and colloquial *kippie-up*, as well as the *bidie-in*, should they be so lucky. For such a puritanical and priggish race the Scots have a superfluity of words for what many of them would describe as living in sin. *Handfasting* is another. This was practised not only among the country people, but also in high society. When Margaret Tudor divorced her second husband, the Earl of Angus, in 1526, her grounds were that he had previously been *handfasted* to another; and a fifteenth-century Earl of Moray was *handfasted* to Isobel Innes. There are references to *handfasting* (a sort of trial marriage) from the Hebrides to County Durham. 'I'd like you to meet my *handfast*' is a romantic improvement on 'Meet my *cohabitant*.'

In isolated hamlets of the Yorkshire Dales, where the village was often cut off by snow for several months in the winter, people

could not get to the church on time. If two people wanted to get married, and there was no clergyman to hand, a temporary ceremony was performed. This tided them over until the snow melted. The ceremony consisted of the couple simply holding hands and jumping three times over a broom. They would then live 'over t' brush' until matters could be formalized. The practice, which persisted until the nineteenth century, was invaluable to the American pioneers when caught without clergy. A *Broomer* has been used to describe a partner in such an informal marriage.

A former District Commissioner in Fiji tells me that the Fijian term for a man and a woman living together unmarried was *Tiko vakatevoro*—to live like devils. Sitting with a Fijian magistrate in Provincial Court he was empowered to award the man up to two months imprisonment for living like a devil, and to sentence the woman to plait a rush mat one fathom long.

Wife by *habit and repute* is a designation in some bureaucratic jargons. It is, for instance, a legally recognized form of marriage according to 'Thesawalamai', the customary laws of the Tamils of Sri Lanka. Proof of this marriage requires that several ingredients should be satisfied, while a registered marriage is proved merely by the production of the certificate of marriage. Canadians have tried *chaquet*, derived from *chaque*, implying equal but separate parts of a whole: it seems too twee, too boring, too Canadian.

Australians have a delightful expression, the *de facto*, to describe a sleeping partner, that is the spouse *de facto* but not *de jure*. 'Have you met my *de facto*?' It is possible to spend some time in Australia before realizing that one has not been introduced to a procession of deaf actors. 'G' day, mate, 'ave yer met me *de facto*, Sharlene?' 'G' day, Sharl—wot yeravin'—sweet sherry, luv?'

Ligby (from *lig*, a variant of *lie*, and by) is a seventeenth-century word for a lover. It has some advantages: it is brief as woman's love, and unisex, describes the relationship exactly but not too explicitly, and does not have any moralizing connotations—yet. The Old English *gebedda* (singular, *gebeddan*) provides a similarly down-to-earth solution. The *ge* is pronounced *ye* as in yet.

I have heard suggested the revival of the archaic *cater cousin*, meaning an intimate friend with whom one shared board and bed. I think that the archaism outweighs the prettiness. *Neo-husband*, *quasi-wife*, and all such neologisms, abbreviated no doubt to *neo* or *quasi*, are vulgarities. *Jack* and *Jill* no doubt went up the hill to fetch more than a pail of water. But let them come down as coy

nursery names. *Lover-in-law* and *outlaw* have been tried, found to be too clever by half, and discarded. 'This is my *semi-detached* (*semi-attached*)' is unduly whimsical. German scores with *Lebensgefährte* (male) and *Lebensgefährtin* (female), meaning the one who accompanies you on your journey through life.

Conviveur (feminine, *conviveuse*) have been suggested from the French. They have agreeable echoes of 'Bon Viveur' and general conviviality. It follows, perhaps, that a bereaved *conviveuse* would become a *conviveuve*, or Merry Widow.

'And none but thou shalt be my *paramour*', Dr John Faustus. Shakespeare used *bedfellow* to designate the other member of either a hetero or a homo partnership outside marriage. Moreover, the introduction, 'And this is Jack—or this is Jill—my *bedfellow*' makes it clear to their hostess that her visitors expect to share a double room; doubly clear if Shakespeare's 'sweet' or 'lovely' qualified the Jack or Jill. *Conamore* is too contrived; *doxy* pretty, but too blunt. Heloise was happy to be known as Abelard's *whore*, though extreme feminists may not yet be sufficiently liberated to give the word a whole-hearted welcome. *Brevet-wife* has been in use since 1870. We could try a *paramarital*, *paramarit*, for short. *Companionate* wife is ponderoso. *Symbiont*, suggested by an eminent biologist, is too biological. Thumbs down to *Co* and *other half*, which are either facetious or Science Fiction.

The UK Department of Health and Social Security has started to recognize this linguistic deficiency. In its latest circular on the Cohabitation Rule it settles for *those who are living together as man and wife*, which is circumlocutory, has no singular, and gets the thumbs down for every-day use. In addition extreme feminists object to the phrase on the grounds that it should be either *husband and wife* or *man and woman* (and why does the man automatically come first?); and anyway, that it omits the possibility of homosexual partners, triolism, and other arrangements.

The French are starting to use *compagnon* for this meaning, and several airlines in the United States have recently introduced a *companion* fare that allows any couple to travel at reduced cost. A 'mate rate' proposed earlier by American Airlines was rejected by government regulators because it 'discriminated against unmarrieds'. In Cuba the woman who lives with a man, but is not necessarily married to him, is called his *compañera*. The trouble with *companion* is, first, that it is a genteel euphemism, and, second, that *companion* already has a useful meaning for which

there is no exact synonym.

Common law wife is banned by *The Times* style book as a mythical creature unknown to English law. Probation officers sometimes use the phrase in their reports to courts to refer to non-statutory partnerships between a man and a woman. A circuit judge recently complained about this use, and ruled that the term *common law wife* was applicable in only three circumstances: firstly, a couple who were married at sea by a ship's captain; secondly, a couple married by dissenting ministers before 1953; and thirdly, a couple married in a British consulate (not , however, in a British Embassy).

Common consent wife or *husband* is a mouthful; so is *unmarried dependant living as a wife* (or, where applicable, *husband*), which is used in some dialects of British officialese. *Wife-in-law* and *husband-in-law* sound too like *mothers-in-law*. *Sleeping partner* is facetious. *Handfast wife* is Anglo-Saxon. *Shackerette* is the latest Australian slang for a live-in sheila. *Concubine* and *paramour*, though handsome old words, have connotations of disapproval and secrecy. *Conjoint* is pompous.

The Ford Foundation favours *meaningful associate*. Its invitations to a weekend seminar recently offered to pay the expenses of the person invited, plus his or her 'spouse or *meaningful associate*'. Boo to that pompous phrase of Sociologese. 'Are you living with that woman, son?' 'No, Dad, she's just a meaningless associate.'

Equally coy are *special friend* (invitations from the US National Academy of Sciences these days are addressed to you and *special friend*), *spouse equivalent*, *domestic associate*, and *current companion*, which have all been tried by organizations anxious not to discriminate against the unmarried living together, but at a loss for words. American hospitals advise maternity patients that they may have present at delivery a husband or '*one designated significant other person*'. A patient in the George Washington University Hospital asked her neighbour in the next bed as a whimsy: 'Who's your *significant other*?' It was no joke. The neighbour had a husband who was not the new baby's father, and both men visited her. It is reported that some unmarried couples in the United States introduce each other at parties as *my significant other*.

In the autumn of 1979 the case of Marvin versus Marvin in California briefly popularized the word *marvining* or *marvinizing* as a topical euphemism for cohabitation. It was too tricksy and too topical to stick in the language, as is shown by the effort we now

have to make to remember that it was coined because of litigation by Michele Triola Marvin (who had changed her name but not married her *marvin*) to make the film actor Lee Marvin pay handsomely now for their earlier living together.

Still in California, where they are pioneers for the rest of us in language as well as sexual innovation, the State Welfare Department refers to a female *marvin* as an *URAW* (Unrelated Adult Woman), and the male, suggestively, as an *URAM*.

Friend, *boy-friend*, *girl-friend*, and *chum* all deserve thumbs down for being intolerable coy euphemisms and for muddying the established meanings of those words. They also sound arch when applied to mature unmarried livers together. *Consort* is stuffy, and in the United Kingdom has a ring of royalty, as in the Prince *Consort*. Mene, Mene, Tekel, I am afraid, to such coy coinages as *mate*, *partner*, *housemate*, *chambermate*, and *live-in friend*.

In London and other liberated parts of the United Kingdom, where it is possible to talk about cohabitation without turning purple, a man often refers to the woman he is living with without formal contract as *my lady*. This is charming, since *lady* in other contexts and with other connotations now sounds snobbish and old-fashioned. But it leaves the *lady* without any satisfactory name for her *partner*: *my man* sounds like Jane and Tarzan or Barbara Cartland; *my fellow* or *my feller* sounds twee and faintly American. The problem of finding appropriate nomenclature for the unmarried is so impenetrable that one begins to agree with Sir Thomas Browne: 'I would be content that we might procreate like trees, without conjunction, or that there were any way to perpetuate the world without this trivial and vulgar way of coition.'

Quite an engaging short story has been published in the States about a man and a woman who decide to get married after three years of living together, because they can find no suitable word to describe their relationship when introducing each other: 'And so they were wed, victims of a failure in language.'

A friend who worked on the US census reports that the word preferred by the unmarried when speaking to him was *my partner*. Next question: 'Who is head of the household?' Answer: 'There is no head—we're partners.' The man from the census: 'Sorry, but the census requires that one person be listed as the head of the household. So, whose name does the electricity bill come in? Yours? OK, you're head of the household.'

One American sect of neologists has tried *friender*; it fell

dead-born from the word-mint, and deserved to do so. Others have suggested *co-vivant* from the French: the nasal last syllable is going to cause grief to Anglo-Saxon noses. A better suggestion is to borrow the French adjective *intime*, which can also do duty as a noun meaning close friend or buddy. This has the advantage that anybody of either sex can be an *intime*, so that the word will do for homosexual as well as heterosexual partnerships. It has another advantage, in that it permits a nickname. An American friend says that he can now refer to the beloved partners of his children as 'our own dear Timmies'.

A woman with four daughters alleges jokily that they are all living with *ho-hummers*. Herb Caen, the ingenious and mischievous columnist of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, has put forward *ummer* as the solution. The word is derived from the embarrassed resolution of a verbal dilemma posed by a mother introducing her daughter's *cohabitant*: '. . . and this is Oliver, my daughter's *um, er* . . . ' Mr Caen also records the inevitable Oakland wit. 'You know what I call people who live together but aren't married?' she asks. 'Smart.'

Lover and *mistress*, though fine old words, do not convey the meaning that anybody is living with anybody else: on the contrary, they have connotations of romantic clandestinity. At present the most straightforward way of describing the relationship is to say: 'We live together.' We badly need a new noun for contexts where a clause will not fit. Is there an obsolete name for the partner of a clandestine marriage from the Middle Ages? If there were, could we revive it? It would be more sensible and more probable for the United States, our richest source of new English and new social customs, to bubble up a suitable new word for our tied tongues. It is remarkable that none that have been tried so far quite hits the bull—sorry, girls, the cow. The answer is a *leman*.

17/ LOW-KEY

Getting caught with a lost chord in the wrong key

Journalists, like Charles Lamb, are sentimentally disposed to harmony in their musical epithets. But organically we are incapable of a tune. Because of improved education, increased consciousness of culture, or mere one-upmanship we want to exhibit our knowledge of music, but we spoil things by getting the musical terms wrong. Let us raise an eyebrow at the odd images journalists and broadcasters create: 'The whole campaign was a *low-key* affair'; 'After a rapid crescendo a riot broke out'; 'They acted in total harmony'; 'Protest rose to a crescendo'; 'The high note of the visit'; 'The two men struck a discord'. *The Times* can strike a wrong note with the worst of them: 'Considering the sheer effort of orchestration required to get a single aircraft off the ground' (January 1980). Vaughan Williams had a Vision of Aeroplanes; but even Ralph, who when asked by a reporter what he thought about music went on the record, 'It's a Rum Go!', never succeeded in orchestrating them.

When Mabel Mercer, the deliciously stylish chanteuse of blues and jazz, was warbling in London for a season recently, the jazz critic of the *New Statesman* described her act as *low-key*. This was a discordant use of the epithet. It is true that sternly perfectionist jazz-fanatics used to remark that in her fruit salad days Miss Mercer's high notes could be wobbly, and the breadth of her register uneasy. She still sometimes talks passages of her songs rather than sings them. But to describe as *low-key* somebody who soars and plunges with such unrestrained art through the gamut is confusing, or even meaningless.

Luckily the NS jazzman went on to explain what he meant: 'No ingratiating chatter, no clutching of the microphone.' He was using

low-key in its fashionable new sense of muted, restrained, unspectacular, not flashy, and of modest ambition. In the same metaphor *The Listener* recently described a concert as 'pleasant, *low-key* entertainment', without intending to imply that the performers were a male voice choir composed entirely of bassi profundi. 'Difficult do you call it, Sir?' as Dr Johnson remarked of a virtuoso violinist's playing; 'I wish it were impossible.'

Penelope Gilliatt wrote in the *New Yorker*: 'One of the strange and impressive elements of the film is the *low-key* love for the patient by the woman psychiatrist.' There was no implication intended that the female shrink murmured her Freudian endearments in a deep, husky voice; merely that the love interest was restrained and understated, which makes a change these days.

'A *low-key* shopping and office centre' probably means a modest and unobtrusive one. It could also mean a cheap and skimped development. It could mean both.

Key is not a fundamental or essential element of music. It gradually crept into European music during the sixteenth century, and began gradually to creep out of it from the beginning of the twentieth. So far from being fundamental, it appears (alarmingly to some) to be a mere passing phenomenon. But Time and Taste have not yet fully declared their intentions. The principle of key is that of the construction of melody and harmony, at any given moment, out of a scale of which all the notes bear a strong and easily recognized allegiance to a chief note (key-note or tonic).

So what can it mean when *The Times* describes some remarks of Sir Harold Wilson as 'an unusually *low-key* speech'? Pitch can be low. Metaphorically, I suppose, the tone of a speech can be described as low. Key can be major or minor, but not low. Is the vogue musical metaphor sheer Schoenberg?

The key to the mystery is that the metaphor is not musical at all. Key is a little word with a large diversity of meanings, from Ciudad Rodrigo known as the key to Spain in the Peninsular War to the key to a *roman à clef* or *Schlüsselroman*, which lists whom the fictional characters represent in real life. Key has acquired several new meanings in the jargons of modern technology. It has been widely adopted into the proliferating language of photography, and particularly cinematography, over the past twenty years.

In animated cartoon production *key drawings* indicate situations at special instants, such as at beats in the bar of music, after which the in-between drawings are made to fit with the timing. And in

the lexis of cinematography *low-key* is the term applied when a majority of the tones in the subject or image lie at the dark end of the grey scale. A manual about the technique of film editing speaks of 'the elegant *low-key* lighting (which is utterly unrealistic)'.

Cinema and television are more popular modern art forms than serious music. It seems likely that our enthusiastic figurative and attributive adoption of *low-key* as a metaphor comes from the silver screen (as it used to be called) or the flickering blue parent (the latest American slang for a television set) than from music. Musicians have no monopoly on the use of the word key, having made use of the concept for less than four centuries. Shakespeare was one of the first to introduce the word to English, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, written in 1595 or 1596, and printed in 1600: 'Both warbling of one song; both in one key.' The name, though not the concept, was derived from the *clavis* of the Benedictine named Guido who taught the choir-school of the cathedral at Arezzo between 1025 and 1033, and whose method was the basis of all medieval music teaching. Musical critics have been unscrupulous Jargonauts of other men's language in their time.

Our modern *low-key* metaphor comes from photography, not good old Guido d'Arezzo. This is the origin of our *low-keyed* inquiries and '*low key* phases' (of terrorist activity). 'Nothing could be farther from my intention, and I know that many readers are happiest with a *low-keyed* and antitheatrical approach to their pleasure.' And here is the synopsis of a book that sounds quietish: 'A girl spending the winter recovering from a long illness, and her pet hamster are the elements in this *low-keyed* fantasy.'

But those who use *low-key* as a metaphor would be prudent to avoid it in musical contexts. Otherwise they suggest to their auditors or readers that the metaphor has run the whole gamut in a circle back to its supposed musical origin. In musical discussion a photographic *low-key* sounds not harmonious but out of key, as linguistically discordant as the tautology 'to rise to a crescendo'.

In the language of American politics a *keynoter* is also unmusical, but should never be *low-key*. The *keynoter* is the person who delivers the *keynote*, or theme-setting, address to a political convention. Walter Lippmann defined the duties of an old-fashioned *keynoter*: 'A *keynoter* must never say that two and two make four. It is also the rule that the orator must never use one

adjective if he can think of three adjectives, or make one statement except in superlative terms.'

When handling keys one must remember the medieval proverb: 'All the keys hang not at one man's girdle.' This is spoken to those who refuse us their help or their metaphor, intimating that others may afford what they deny us.

18/ MERMAID

According to the constitution of mermaids, so much as is not a woman must be a fish

'What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, though puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture.' This is a rare understatement from the peacock's quill of Sir Thomas Browne, the most magnificent overstater in English rhetoric. The nooks and crannies of the cupboard of scholarship are crowded with conjectures of answers to his puzzling questions.

Homer was the first we know to give a version of what song the Sirens sang. It begins: 'Come over here on your travels, famous Odysseus, great glory of the Greeks; stop your ship to listen to our voices . . . '

Tennyson made the Sirens sing: 'Whither away, whither away, whither away? Fly no more. Whither away from the high green field, and the happy blossoming shore?' and so on.

Between Homer and Tennyson there were many other equally banal conjectures, most of them promising knowledge. The tunes were presumably better than the lyrics, which seem resistible without plugging one's ears with wax, or having oneself tied to the mast.

Nor is there a shortage of conjectures about the identity of Achilles when he hid himself among women, if anyone is still having sleepless nights puzzling about the question. The most persuasive is Pyrrha or Sandy. But other absurd ancient guesses were Cercysera on account of the distaff (*kerkis*) that Achilles wielded; and Aissa because of his speed as a sprinter (*aisso* means I dash). More recently Robert Graves conjectured Dacryoessa (the tearful girl) or Drosoessa (the dew-drop girl), *drosos* being a poetic synonym for tears. His grounds were that, according to

Apollonius, the lad's original name, Liguron (wailing), was changed to Achilles by his tutor, Cheiron. Today we are less interested in Achilles' feminine pseudonym than in the hint in the myth that he was originally a sun-hero, like Hercules and Dionysus, who also lived disguised as girls under female tutelage in the women's quarters of a palace, and plied the distaff.

The puzzling questions were set originally not by Browne, but by the Emperor Tiberius, a pedantic mythophile, who used them to torment the *grammatici*, or literary critics and professors of literature of his time. Suetonius gives a third of his favourite, jaw-sagging conundrums: 'Who was the mother of Hecuba?' According to which obscure scholiast you prefer to believe, the answer is the nymph Eunoë; Telecleia; Metope, the wife of the Phrygian river Sangarius; or Glaucippe, the daughter of Xanthus. Today what's Hecuba's mother to us or we to Hebuca's mother?

A more interesting mythological puzzle today is: 'Were there mermaids in antiquity?' The answer is not as straightforwardly affirmative as one might suppose at first furrow of the brow. By mermaid we mean our familiar legendary fishwoman of the northern folkseas, female above the waist and fish below, with whom the careful man should try not to fall in love. Indeed and of course shoals of sea nymphs and other demigoddesses splash through ancient Greek and Latin literature. The puzzle is to find a familiar mermaid with a fish's tail.

Although *une sirène* is French for a mermaid, Sirens are of no use to us, for in antiquity they were feathered rather than finned and tailed. Ancient authors and artists describe them as monsters, being women above the waist and birds below, or else birds covered with feathers except for their heads, which were those of beautiful but man-eating women. Their appearance and predatoriness are like those of the Harpies, who had the faces of women and the bodies of vultures. Some say that the Sirens were so disappointed at not luring Odysseus to dinner that they threw themselves into the sea and drowned in an unmermaidly fashion; others that the Muses, having defeated the Sirens in a Euromythic Song Contest, plucked them to make themselves crowns of feathers. Whatever their bald end, the Sirens were originally no mermaids as well as no ladies. Over the centuries they gradually lost their feathered forms and acquired fishtails, while retaining their fatal voices and powers of seduction.

Scylla was a sea goddess with extravagant limbs. She had the

bad luck both to excite and reject the lust of Glaucus, a sea god, possibly even a Triton. Glaucus, whose name means grey-green, went to Circe the enchantress for some prescription to help him seduce reluctant Scylla. But Circe, who was notoriously greedy in such affairs, fell in love with Glaucus herself. Jealous of her rival, she poured the juice of poisonous herbs into a pool where Scylla bathed. This changed Scylla below the waist into a cluster of monsters like dogs, which never stopped barking. She became a sea monster, but no mermaid. According to Homer Scylla had no tail, but 'twelve feet, all dangling in the air, and six long necks, each ending in a grisly head with a triple row of teeth set thick and close, and darkly menacing death.'

The fifty Nereids were nymphs of the Inland Sea or Mediterranean, but there is no evidence that they had fishes' tails. According to Catullus, they were so amazed by the Argo, the first ship, that they stuck their heads out of the water to have a good look at this intruder in their kingdom. Unfortunately they protruded only *nutricum tenus* (as far as their breasts), so that although their top halves were seen to be satisfactorily female, we are given no information about their bottoms. In ancient art Nereids are portrayed as well-developed young women sitting on dolphins and holding tridents, in case the spectator had not got the fishy message. They have feet, not tails. Pliny the Elder, that charming old snob, said that we must believe in them, because several distinguished persons of equestrian rank had assured him that they had seen a Nereid with their own eyes off the coast of Cadiz. Disappointingly, after such a build up, he merely says that her body was of human form.

Naiads were the fresh-water nymphs who presided over rivers, springs, wells, and fountains. They are represented as young women leaning on urns, from which streams of water gush. They have feet, not tails.

Oceanids were deep-sea nymphs of the Atlantic, daughters of Oceanus. Apollodorus says that there were three thousand of them, and Plutarch that they lived for more than 720 years. It was unlucky to see them naked, and they were usually pictured veiled up to the middle or semi-submerged, pouring water out of jugs or shells. There is no evidence that they had tails.

Thetis, whose attendants were the Nereids, was a sea goddess, but no mermaid. The conventional epithet for her in Homer is 'silver-footed'. But whether or not the silver had scaly connota-

tions (probably not), she had feet, not a tail, and used to ride naked on a harnessed dolphin, which would have been unnecessary and difficult if she had been half fish herself. When the mortal Peleus ambushed her with a view to marriage, or something less permanent, Thetis showed a talent for metamorphosis, but not into a fish. She changed successively into fire, water, a lion, and a serpent, without discouraging her ambitious lover. Peleus hung on for grim love, even when Thetis translated herself into a huge cuttlefish, and squirted ink over him. A cuttlefish has no fishtail, but is a cephalopod mollusc of the genus Sepia. This is said by romantics to account for the name of Cape Sepias near the scene of the violent seduction. Although burnt, drowned, mauled, stung, and gummed down with sepia ink, Peleus continued to press his suit and his goddess. Finally Thetis gave in, murmuring: 'Some god has been helping you'; and conceived Achilles.

There is evidence that our image of mermaids seemed grotesque to the Romans. Horace opens his *Ars Poetica*: 'If a painter chose to join a human head to the neck of a horse, and to spread feathers of many colours over an incongruity of assorted limbs, so that the top of a beautiful woman tailed off hideously below into an ugly fish, could you, my friends, if treated to a private view, refrain from sniggering?' There may be no more genuine mermaids in the Edgware Road today. But our Nordic and Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon culture is conditioned to find mermaids romantic, beautiful, and dangerous; not absurdities to snigger at.

To turn from the literature to the iconography, pictures of semi-fishy persons are rare in antiquity. Vase paintings of Heracles having his fight with the Old Man of the Sea represent the latter as having a fish's tail. The main texts are E. Buschor's *Meermänner*, and a book by the appropriately named F. Fischer, *Nereiden und Okeaniden in Hesiods Theogonie*.

There is a candidate for a fishperson in the Roman mosaics unearthed in 1933 at Rudston in Yorkshire. The Rudston Venus shows the goddess as a typical Yorkshire lass with a big bottom and small breasts. She is supported by a creature that is human to the waist (male on account of his short hair), but from there on down distinctly fishy. He carries a torch for Venus, so evidently he is a sea cupid. Eureka, you would have shouted, except that sceptics argue that the enchanting merman is not Roman but British, merpersons, especially those with a single fishtail, being northern rather than Mediterranean fantasies.

The earliest known fishgod was Ea or Oannes, the Chaldean sea god, one of the great triad of Babylonian deities. The Lord of the Waters is at least seven millennia old, and was represented either as man to waist and fish below, or as a man with the head and skin of a fish hanging down his back like a cloak. The Greeks and Romans, who plagiarized Greek mythology, preferred their sea deities to look all human rather than part piscine.

The exception and the only true merman in the classical world is Triton, the son of Poseidon and the Nereid Amphitrite. He is sometimes portrayed as half man, half fish, with flowing hair and a handsome tail. He was bellicose, a violent lover, and, like many Greek sea deities, a water-chameleon at metamorphosis. Descriptions of him survive. In the third century BC Apollonius Rhodius in *Argonautica* arranged for Triton to direct and eventually tow the Argonauts, on their way home with the golden fleece, towards the Mediterranean. According to Apollonius: 'From the top of his head and about his back and waist as far as the belly he was remarkably like the holy gods to look at; but from Triton's waist down stretched the tail of a sea monster, forked this way and that, and with its spines he cut the water, for his tail divided into two curved fins like the horns of the new moon.' After this ancestral and eponymous Triton, most minor merdeities came to be called Tritons.

Pausanias of Lydia, the Greek traveller, geographer, and antiquarian of the second century AD, gave a more scientific description: 'I saw another Triton among the wonders of Rome, smaller than the Triton at Tanagra. Tritons are certainly a sight: the hair on their heads is like the frogs in stagnant water, not only in its froggy colour, but so sleek you could never separate one hair from the next; and the rest of their bodies bristles with very fine scales, like a rough-skinned shark. They have gills behind the ears and a human nose, but a very big mouth and the teeth of a wild beast. I thought the eyes were greenish-grey, and they have their hands and fingers and fingernails crusted like sea-shells. From the breast and belly down they have a dolphin's tail instead of feet.'

As society grows more sophisticated, the taste for such rare shows declines. The only place left in England where you can shudder at such monsters as the fat woman, the two-headed dog, and the Triton is at the fair in the centre of the course at Epsom during Derby week.

In art Tritons were depicted blowing on conches; Pausanias

again: 'Tritons speak with human voices, and some say that they blow through a pierced conch.' They all have dolphin's tails, and some are shown with horse's forelegs instead of arms.

Tritons are male. Tritonesses are exceedingly rare, but not quite unknown. Trust Pausanias, that careful connoisseur of artistic monuments and collector of the exotic, to find us one. At Phigalia in Arcady he missed the festival of Eurynome, the daughter of Ocean, much to his disappointment. However, 'the Phigalians told me it is a wooden idol tied up with gold chains, like a woman down to the buttocks, and below that like a fish.'

The answer to the puzzling question then is that yes, there were mermaids with tails in antiquity, but very few. Most gods and demi-gods of the sea kept their feet. The merperson with a tail is characteristically a Nordic or Teutonic creature, the latter probably a vestige of the great cult of the Vanir.

Your average British mermaid tends to have a single fishtail. The mermaid caught in the fantasy and inshore waters of mainland Europe tends to have a female shape down to well below the pelvis, where she splits into two scaly fishtails instead of legs, in a more suitable solution to the problems of life and pleasure.

If you are lucky enough to meet a mermaid, do not borrow her cap or belt, her comb or her mirror. Try not to fall in love with her. Whatever you do, do not marry her, though at the same time try not to offend her. And do not address her in Greek or Latin, for she is unlikely to understand you. If you hear mermaids singing, each to each, before you block your ears in holy dread, the dulcet and harmonious breath you hear will probably be singing in Old High German, Old Low German, or Old Norse.

19/ MILLENNIUM

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
But wait for it.

To say so is as pointless as delivering a lecture on traffic flows in Oxford Circus Underground Station in the rush hour. But the eighth decade of this century does not begin until 1 January 1981. According to our temperaments we have already been celebrating or deploring the 'Eighties for months. Islam's new century did not begin in November 1979, as stated in a resounding first leader in *The Times*, but on 9 November 1980. The twenty-first century and the third millennium will start on 1 January 2001, and not a year earlier when those portentous and rather alarming three zeros are clocked up on the chronometer of the Western world.

Tell that to the Astronomer Royal, but the ordinary star-gazers won't believe it. A World Association for Celebrating the Year 2000, WACY for acronym, has already been formed. Its secretary, John Goodman, a Londoner who makes his living by organizing entertainments for children's parties, has ideas for celebrating the year in question. He has invited some 500 cities and towns around the world to climb aboard his chiliastic dream-boat by planting trees, which should have grown to a celebratory height by 2000. Mr Goodman says: 'There should be a world museum of progress, big trade shows, and an armistice on all tariffs. The celebration should begin in 1995 and go on till 2005, each country taking it in turn to have a festival; and there should be a competition at the end to decide which country celebrated it best.'

One of the good man's more adventurous wheezes is to build an island seven miles square near the Canaries exactly half way between America and Africa. 'I'd call it World Millennial Island. It will float just above the sea. By then we'll have invented some way to reverse the magnetic field. Of course, it'll all be very

expensive indeed. But then disasters are expensive, and H-bombs are expensive, so why not spend money on celebrating?'

Why not, indeed? I dare say that not all these WACY ideas will come to pass: Mr Goodman gets carried away when talking to the Press, and the Press gets carried away when being talked to by him. But there is bound to be considerable superstitious and mathematically erroneous excitement on 31 December 1999, and 1 January 2000. Sauchiehall Street will be even deeper than usual with vomit, and broken bottles, and over-tired Glaswegians.

There always has been excitement at similarly neat mathematical conjunctions of the calendar. There was horrid millennarian and apocalyptic enthusiasm in the years around 1000. On 1 January 1900, there was eagerness to be rid of the boring old *fin de siècle* and to bring on the brave new century. Mathematicians led by William Christie, the Astronomer Royal, pointed out the simple mathematical fallacy in letters to *The Times*. But their scrupulous voices were drowned by the irresistible popular instinct that those double noughts must register a significant click in the passage of time. The popular school was appropriately led by Kaiser Wilhelm II, not a man to let accuracy hinder instinct; he decided by decree that for Germany the nineteenth century would end (prematurely, Wilhelm) in 1899. A century earlier Charles James Fox, invited to adjudicate to settle a bet, ruled in favour of the mathematicians that the eighteenth century ended at the end of the year 1800. Would anybody listen to that vigorous exuberancy of gambling and genius if he were to make such a ruling in December 1999?

Let us set it down again to clear our minds and for those who like to get things right. The Year Dot never existed except as a popular catch-phrase meaning as long ago as anybody can remember. (It is true that astronomers invent a zero year for some calculations; but they identify it as the year of the consulship of Lentulus and Piso, which historians call 1 BC).

Our system of chronology known as the Christian Era was constructed, according to the tradition in 532, by an otherwise obscure Scythian monk known as Dionysius Exiguus. Little Dionysius flourished, as far as anybody so dim can be said to have flourished, in Rome between AD 500 and 550. He accepted (wrongly, as it turned out) 753 years *Ab Urbe Condita*, from the foundation of Rome, as the Year of Incarnation, which he labelled AD 1. He could have called it the year 0, except that a symbol for nothing, 'that wonderful Indian invention which made possible the

Arabic notation and the denary scale, and released arithmetic from the strait-jacket of the Roman numerals and the crutches of the abacus', had not yet percolated into Europe.

Having no 0, Dionysius chose to start the first year of the first century of the new era with 1. If 1999 is taken as the last year of this century, as it is going to be, as it already is, and 1899 as the last year of the nineteenth century, as Kaiser Wilhelm decreed, then proceeding backwards down the ages, we find that 99 has to be the last year of the first century. But, as Dermot Morrah, that pretty precisian for calendary and other exact matters, pointed out: 'If all the dates from 1 to 99 are set out in a row and carefully counted it will be found (by good calculators) that this first century had only ninety-nine years in all.'

This *reductio ad absurdum* is irrefutable. The first century AD ended on the last day of AD 100. Therefore our present century will end at midnight on 31 December 2000, and not a second before. But those of us choosing to reserve our millennary champagne and retrospective newspaper articles until then will seem as behind the times as Rip Van Winkle.

The Astronomer Royal, Dionysius Exiguus, and Dermot Morrah are right, of course. Just as the first century started at the beginning of 1 and lasted a hundred years until the end of 100, so the twentieth ought to be allowed its full span—to the end of 2000. At cricket a batsman is not generally reckoned to have made his century until he has completed his hundredth run. To celebrate at 99 would be premature, hubristic, and incitement to the slips. The impeccable Morrah: 'When we set about counting in the oldest and most satisfying manner, it is true that as we tick off the tenth finger we find ourselves already needing two digits to write down the result; but it is only with the number eleven that we must need recognize the beginning of a second decade and start upon our toes.'

The Romans, with no BC dates to bother about, did not get into this sort of muddle. They celebrated the millennium of the founding of Rome (753 BC) not in AD 247 but, quite correctly, in 248.

Having dealt with the Christian Era, let us now put the record straight about the Islamic calendar. The beginning of the year 1400 of the Islamic Hijri calendar was widely reported in November 1979 as the beginning of the fifteenth century. According to Kalim Siddiqui, Director of The Muslim Institute for Research and

Planning: 'The fact of history is that the Prophet Muhammad (peace of Allah be upon him!) migrated (performed hijri) from Mecca to Medina in the third month (Rabi al-Awwal) of the Lunar year that was subsequently designated by the Caliph Umar as the first year of the Hijri. Thus, all historians are agreed that the battle of Badr occurred in the second year of the Hijra, the battle of Ohad in the third, the battle of Khandaq in the fifth, the truce of Hudaibiyya in the sixth, the conquest of Mecca in the eighth, and so on . . . We must, therefore, conclude that this is the fourteenth *centenary* year of the Islamic era, and the fifteenth *century* will begin on 1 Muharram 1401 (9 November 1980).' Dr Siddiqui's arithmetic is faultless. But Muslims, who introduced the nought to Christians, like Christians are mesmerized by it.

Human kind, especially the English human kind, cannot bear very much mathematics. Plato said that he had hardly ever known a mathematician who was capable of reasoning. The passion for anniversaries, decades, centuries, and all dates with noughts in them is deeply engrained in the human attitude to time. And yet it is an irrationally tidy way to measure life, which does not conform to the decimal system. The seventeenth century ought to begin in 1603. The death of Oscar Wilde in Paris in 1900 and the Dreyfus case mark the end of an intellectual and moral epoch. Perhaps the foundation of the British Labour Party in 1900 marks the beginning of one. But the nineteenth century properly ends in 1914. You cannot wrap men and ideas up in parcels of centuries in order to make literary and historical generalizations about them with the appearance of mathematical exactitude. You should not, but we all do. Since AD 1 there have been not nineteen but 1979 complete centuries. The real world is regardless of our systems of reckoning; events and men slip over years with noughts in their dates, even years with three noughts in their dates, with as little shudder as is felt on a liner passing over a tropic or in a car crossing a county boundary.

Quite soon we are going to have to decide how to refer to the years of the approaching millennium. Already people are referring to such dates as the year two thousand and twenty. This seems an unduly ponderous form, and one for which our descendants, particularly in the twenty-second century, will not thank us if it becomes established. We have the Eighteen-Twelve Overture and the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; so why can we not have the film *Twenty-Oh-One*?

20/ NEAR EAST GOES WEST

Asia is not going to be civilized after the methods of the West.
There is too much Asia and she is too old.
Rudyard Kipling

What ever happened to the Near East? It is tolerably well known that the continents move around the world at a rate that is imperceptible except to the eye of millennia and very sensitive instruments. But for a large and important part of the world to vanish off the face of the earth in a generation seems more like downright carelessness than continental drift. Any reduction in the number of regions in the world could be said by the playful, such as Sellar and Yeatman, authors of the classic English history lampoon *1066 and All That*, to be a Good Thing, because it is a cause of reduced geography.

The human animal is a self-centred creature, and naturally tends to see his particular patch of earth as the centre of the world. Thus the Ancient Greeks called Delphi, the home of the famous oracle of Apollo, the *omphalos* or navel of the world. It was natural (but erroneous) for the British, in the high and palmy days of their Empire, to suppose that the globe revolved around Big Ben, and was coloured pink as the British Empire was in British atlases.

The Times Atlas of World History dramatizes the distortion of such egocentric views of the world by printing many of its maps from unusual angles and perspectives. For example, during the explosive spread of Islam in the seventh century, an Arab quite naturally saw Mecca as the centre of his universe; as, indeed, he still does. The Arab defeat at Poitiers by the swords of Charles Martel's Franks in 732, so vital, as it later turned out, to the future of Europe, was to our Arab in Mecca not much more than a border incident. Accordingly the map is plotted, quite accurately and illuminatingly, from the viewpoint of Mecca. Poitiers is shown away on the world's rim, in the far north, where there was a

quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom most Arabs knew nothing.

In the nineteenth century the British, taking their islands to be not the far north but the centre of the world, started to use the phrase the Near East and its adjective Near Eastern. The earliest use of these phrases found by the diligent Oxford lexicographers was in 1869. Originally the Near East signified the Balkan (another obsolescent geographical term) states of south-eastern Europe. Later the term was extended to include the countries of what was then the Ottoman Empire, and some of the countries of North Africa. At its greatest extent the Near East was sometimes taken to include the entire area from Libya, or Morocco, Ethiopia and Somalia to Greece, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and even sometimes India.

It was never clear where the Near East ended and the Middle East began. Not only was the boundary vague, but it shifted. Originally, when the Near East meant merely the Balkans, the Middle East meant the Ottoman Empire. But, as the Near East expanded, it pushed the Middle East farther east to include part or all of south-western Asia.

The Far East was never so hazily defined as a region as the Near or Middle East. It always signified Japan, China, Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia, and eastern Siberia. The Philippines and Indonesia have always clearly been in the Far East; and the Indian subcontinent, Tibet, Burma, and the Malay peninsula and archipelago have usually been there. There is some doubt these days whether Pakistan and Afghanistan are in the Middle or Far East, or somewhere altogether more unpleasant.

The Near East disappeared off the map during the Second World War, which, like all wars, was no respecter of lines on maps, especially such imprecise lines as the one separating the Near from the Middle East. The generals found that the distinction between Near and Middle, never clear even in times of peace, was causing imprecision and confusion in their terminology. And imprecision and confusion are fatal flaws in military jargon. Soldiers need language that is incapable of being misunderstood. So, to take a simple example, the Platoon Commander does not say 'hedge' when indicating a target: he says 'hedgerow'. In the heat of battle 'hedge' could be confused with 'edge'. 'Did you say fire at the edge of that field or the hedge over there, Sir?' So, for the sake of clarity, the commanders of armies in the Middle East

decided to abolish the Near East and make do for military purposes with only two sorts of East: the Middle and the Far.

Their decision was adopted by civilians after the war, and the Near East has become an obsolescent expression. Ask the average westerner where he or she thinks that the Near East is, and you are likely to get a vague reply.

Although the generals and journalists have chased the Near East off the map, the academic world has not followed suit. The expression Near East is still regularly used by archaeologists and historians specializing in the ancient civilizations of the region. J. B. Pritchard, for example, who compiled that invaluable collection of translations of Sumerian, Assyrian, Hittite, Urartaean, Egyptian, and Ugaritic writings, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, did not see fit to substitute *Middle* for *Near*. Maybe the Middle East grows less distant with close study.

In English today the Middle East has come to mean that vast and important tract of the world that extends from Morocco to Pakistan. This is incongruous, since much of Morocco is west, not east, of the United Kingdom.

The Balkans (the Balkan Peninsula of south-eastern Europe, bounded by the Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas), originally counted as part of the Near East. They are fading away from the geopolitical vocabulary into Ruritanian romance, through which the Orient Express used to run, when there was an Orient Express packed with spies and mysterious slant-eyed beauties.

However, the verb 'to balkanize', meaning to break up a region into smaller, ineffectual, and frequently conflicting units, and its noun, *balkanization*, are both still current and useful in English, as: 'I oppose the partition of the United Kingdom, and hold that the economic consequences of *balkanizing* the country would be serious.'

With the Middle East now stretching extravagantly from the Atlantic to the borders of India, we are left with an onomastic deficiency for naming this part of the world. We should revive the ancient word, Araby, to describe the central Arab world between Egypt in the west and Persia in the east. What other brief description covers the area? Arabia is no good, because it suggests one state in particular.

While we are playing Adam, and renaming the Middle East, there is an obvious case for reviving the Levant, in the old sense of the eastern seabord of the Mediterranean, with its hinterland,

islands, and the countries adjoining. Nowadays this means the Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Cyprus, and the rest of that part of the world, which occupies such a disproportionate amount of news space. At present we have to call this region the Middle East, which is too big, and too vague.

21/ OLYMPICS

L'important dans ces olympiades, c'est moins d'y gagner que d'y prendre part. L'important dans la vie, ce n'est point le triomphe mais le combat.

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, in his speeches, passim.

In 1980 even the good Baron would have found it hard to pretend that politics have nothing to do with the Olympic Games, and that what matters is taking part, not winning. He would have persuaded himself so; but not many others.

The Games will survive the fiasco of 1980. They satisfy some atavistic need in human nature. Twenty-five centuries ago the cities of Greece sent official spectators to them to do nothing except watch. Today the public needs the Olympic Games on television. With any luck the Games will be pruned, simplified, and a little demythicized. Whether they are or not, it is a safe bet that the lads and lasses will be running, jumping, punching each other, and cheating again in 1984.

Every time that the quadrennial festival of chauvinism, politics, professionalism, and sport, comes round, people invoke the conventional pieties about the Ancient Games: 'pure Olympic ceremonial . . . the austere and sober athletic spirit . . . the appealing concept of the game for the game's sake.' If only we could get back to the original spirit of Olympia, where man raced against man for the glory of taking part, the world would be a cleaner place, they say.

They talk piffle and poppycock. In his essay *The Sporting Spirit* George Orwell demolished this sentimental view of the Olympics. His argument was that serious sport has nothing to do with fair play, and much to do with 'hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules, and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence.' It was inspired by the British tour by the Moscow Dynamos in 1945, and begins: 'Now that the brief visit of the Dynamo football team has come to an end, it is possible to say publicly what many

thinking people were saying privately before the Dynamos ever arrived. That is, that sport is an unfailing cause of ill-will, and that if such a visit as this had any effect at all on Anglo-Soviet relations, it could only be to make them slightly worse than before.'

What god, what hero, what man shall I loudly praise? Zeus, the President of the International Olympic Committee; Heracles, who founded the Games; and Vladimir Backboard for dunking twenty-seven baskets in the basketball final. Of course the Ancient Olympics are the oldest, most sporting, and most romantic athletics meeting in the world. But Greeks were Greeks, and sport was sport. Some of the guff written about them every four years errs on the side of romance rather than realism. Human frailty was not absent from Olympia.

Pace Coubertin and his followers, politics intruded even in that golden age. For example, one year Elis and Athens combined to exclude the Spartan squad, supposedly on religious grounds, in much the same way that modern nations combine to exclude others or boycott the modern Games. At another early Olympiad (probably XXVIII in 668 BC) Pheidon king of Argos expelled the International Olympic Committee, who came from Argos, and took the management of the Games upon himself: Herodotus called this 'the most outrageous piece of arrogance ever shown by a Greek.'

In Book II of his epic *Politics in Sport* Herodotus reports that the men of Elis sought the opinion of the Egyptians, who were considered the ablest people in the ancient world, about whether it would be possible to run the Olympic Games better or more fairly. The Egyptians commented that all seemed fair in principle, except that it was obviously wrong to allow athletes from the home State to compete: 'for it was quite impossible, when men from one's own city took part, not to favour them at the expense of strangers.' National rivalry was just as strong in the ancient Olympics as in the modern.

It is true that the ancient Olympics, like the modern, were nominally strictly amateur. The winners received only the glory, and chaplets of wild olive. All competitors were required to weed the track and clear the stadium before the races. The facilities provided for the athletes were minimal and for the spectators non-existent; washing arrangements were the river, and lavatories were behind the nearest bush.

However, an Olympic winner was made for life, in much the

same way that a Russian or American super-star need trouble himself or herself about nothing except sport. An athlete who had won at Olympia could expect high rewards and a large pension from his native city, as well as an Ode from Pindar or Simonides if he was lucky.

There were other lucrative perquisites. During Roman imperial rule a city in Asia Minor is said to have offered an Olympic winner 30,000 drachmas to enter its local sports as the star attraction. At that time a Roman soldier was paid between 250 and 300 drachmas a year.

Even without television rights and a vast influx of tourists, the host nation did well financially out of the Games also. The oligarchy of gentlemen-farmers of Elis, who ran the show, had extensive powers to fine offenders. Anybody who broke the sacred truce was fined at the rate of two minae per hoplite.

In 480 the great Theogenes, having beaten Euthymus of Epizephyrian Locri in the final of the boxing, was so exhausted that he scratched from the final of the pankration (kicking and hitting were allowed; biting and gouging were illegal; umpires stood by with rods ready to flog any athlete who broke the rules). His opponent was awarded the victory by a walkover, *akoniti*, 'without getting dusty'. Theogenes was summoned before the stewards, and ordered to pay a fine of one talent to Olympian Zeus—a neat diplomatic euphemism for themselves.

He was also ordered to pay one talent to the runner-up in the boxing, Euthymus, 'because it seemed to them that it was only to spite him that Theogenes had entered for the boxing.' Theogenes paid his large fine to the authorities (he had to, if he wanted ever to compete at Olympia again). But he came to a private arrangement with Euthymus that his part of the fine should be remitted, on condition that Theogenes did not enter for the boxing at the next Olympics. This seems to us the most disreputable part of the whole affair.

There are several accounts of bribery in the ancient Games. At Olympiad XCVI in 396 BC two bribed judges made Eupolimus, the local boy from Elis, winner of the stade race of 200 yards. The third judge, either honest or insufficiently bribed, awarded the victory to Leon of Ambakia. Leon accused the two judges of taking bribes, appealed to the high council, and won his case and olive crown. At Olympiad XCVIII in 388 BC Dionysius of Thessaly bribed his opponents in the boxing to take dives and let

him win. The transaction was discovered, and the fines extracted from the peccant pugilists were big enough to pay for five bronze statues of Zeus in the Altis or walled sanctuary.

Because of the penury or greed of the Olympic committee, the ancient Olympic Games regularly had to invite commercial sponsorship. For example, King Herod of Judea, distinctly a non-Greek, was made president of the Games of 12 BC to help them through a particularly sticky financial patch. Philip of Macedon won three equestrian events at different Olympics, receiving the news of his first victory (with a ridden horse in 356) on the day on which his son Alexander was born. He was so gratified that he built impressive monuments for the Olympic village. The admirable Herodes Atticus, a wealthy Roman born in Athens, built an elaborate water supply and sanitation system, at last, in the second century BC.

Conditions for athletes and spectators at Olympia were not Elysian, but hellish. There is an ancient joke about a master threatening to send his slave to the Olympic Games as a punishment. Epictetus the philosopher drew an insufferably stoic moral from them: 'True, there are hardships and difficulties in life. Are they not to be found even at Olympia? Don't you get baked by the sun there? Don't you get crushed by the crowds? Don't you find it impossible to get a bath? Don't you get soaked whenever it rains? Don't you have an overdose of noise, of shouting, and of exasperation? Yet you steel your heart and put up with it all, because you think that the spectacle makes it worth while.'

It is regrettable to have to report it, but there was a good deal of cheating in the ancient Olympics. Lucian notes that pankratiasts were well called 'lions' because of the amount of wrestling they did with their teeth. Sostratus of Sicyon, three times victor at Olympia, was famous for his finger-breaking trick. The word for gouging (which was against the rules for pankratiasts) was the ordinary Greek word for 'to dig', made into a compound so that it means 'to gouge alongside the other chap'. No Greek pankratiast ever gouged: they all, continually, gouged in retaliation.

The biggest cheat in the history of the Games was Nero, who did it on an imperial scale that makes our modern efforts look puny. He had Olympiad CCXI postponed from 65 to 67 AD, so that he could take part in the Pythian and Isthmian festivals of that year as well. He compelled the organizers to include musical and dramatic contests in the Olympic programme for the first and only time in

the history of the Games, and, by a happy coincidence, won the crowns for harp playing and tragic acting. No ordinary mortal could proclaim the emperor's victories, so he acted as his own herald, and won the competition for heralds. He won the chariot races for horses and colts in the hippodrome. In the ten-horse chariot race he fell out of his chariot. He did not remount, but was replaced in it, *rursus repositus*. Even so he did not finish the course. But guess who won the crown, anyway.

In spite of romantic modern rhetoric, the ancient Olympics were not the apotheosis of sporting amateurism as practised by English gentlemen (and one could raise a question-mark against them too). Greeks were Greeks, just as English gentlemen will be English gentlemen.

Nevertheless, they did have some good ideas. Any woman caught at the Games, or in the vicinity, or even on the opposite side of the River Alpheus, was removed by being thrown down the cliffs of Mount Typaeum. The ancient Games consisted only of foot-races, the pentathlon (which included the discus and javelin throwing), the 200-metre sprint, the standing long jump with weights in one's hands to give one lift-off, and wrestling. During the seventh century BC boxing, chariot-races, horse-races, and the pankration were introduced. So there were no ridiculous team sports, or events that depended on the opinion of the judges. From 720 BC onwards athletes competed naked. There are two stories told to account for the change. The first says that Orsippos of Megara dropped his shorts and gained a little speed to win the sprint, so setting a new fashion in stream-lining. The second says that a runner leading the field tripped and fell when his loin-cloth came unstuck; so loin-cloths or shorts were banned to prevent such calamities.

By all means let woolly romantics sigh for a return to the pristine purity of the Olympic Games. Let them realise that this means:

1. All entries must be personal and individual.
2. There shall be no teams or team events.
3. No women may participate in any capacity, not even as spectators.
4. The only records to be kept are the names of the winners of individual events and the names of their native cities.
5. All competitors must certify that they are of pure Greek descent on both paternal and maternal sides.

6. The managing committee will undertake to provide a stadium, a hippodrome, a few bath-houses, and some handsome statues; but no other facilities, no accommodation, and no stands for spectators.

Let us not suppose with the starry-eyed and ill-informed Baron Pierre de Coubertin that the ancient Olympic Games exemplified nothing but 'the noble and chivalrous character of athletics.'

22/ OVER THE MOON AND OTHER HIGH-JUMPS

O Moon, when I gaze on thy beautiful face,
Careering along through the boundaries of space,
The thought has often come into my mind
If I ever shall see thy glorious behind.

A Housemaid Poet, quoted by Robert Ross in the Academy

If religion ever was the opium of the British people, football replaced it long ago. Footy managers have become our priests and prophets, and their sermons on 'Match of the Day' and 'The Big Match' are watched by bigger congregations than Donne or Newman ever preached to. It would be unfair to expect them, in the heat of the moment and the eye of the camera, to be as eloquent as Donne or as limpid as Newman. Nevertheless, their catch-phrases, clichés, and recycled proverbs influence the language as powerfully as the lexis of religion once used to.

Inarticulate footballers being interviewed are responsible for the development of 'magic' as an adjective of commendation when their team has won; as in 'Chelsea are Magic', which is flashed in lights on the scoreboard at Stamford Bridge, when the score justifies it. When the team loses, 'diabolical' has become the vogue epithet to denigrate the decisions of the referee, the luck of the bounce, or the brutality of the other side.

When you win, you naturally tell Jimmy Hill that you are 'over the moon': a new metaphor, vivid the first billion times it was used, the origins of which are, as the terse lexicographers say, obsc. and unkn. Until now our moon proverbs have indicated impossibility rather than ecstasy. To bark against the moon, a doggy metaphor that has been with us for six centuries, describes a futile activity. To throw one's cap at the moon, which has been around for almost as long, means either to defy ('He cast his Cap at sinne in generall'), or to despair of overtaking ('I perceive our masters may throw their caps at their money', *Timon of Athens*). To cast beyond the moon is to indulge in wild conjectures. None of our old moon-proverbs from crying for it to gazing at it and falling

in the gutter, and from once in a blue to having a care lest the churl fall out of the moon (a proverb that was old when Chaucer wrote), have any suggestion that 'over the moon' is a desirable place to be. Quite the reverse.

It is possible that 'over the moon' meaning chuffed/delighted (rather than the diametrically and oddly opposed chuffed/disgruntled) is derived ultimately from the most famous nonsense-verse in the language: 'Hey diddle diddle, The cat and the fiddle, The cow jumped over the moon . . . ' Copious nonsense has been written about the origin and meaning of this verse, for which the Opies have found references in the sixteenth century. Extravagant explanations for it have included:

1. It refers to the worship of Hathor;
2. It refers to such constellations as Taurus and Canis minor;
3. It describes the flight from the inundations of the Nile: a branch of the lunacy of the Great Pyramid;
4. It portrays Queen Elizabeth I, Lady Katherine Grey, and the Earls of Hertford and Leicester;
5. It contains a covert topical reference to Papist priests urging the workers to work harder;
6. The expression 'Cat and the fiddle' is a pun for Katherine of Aragon (Katherine la Fidèle), or other sundry Kates.

None of these derivations is persuasive. Perhaps the reference is to the game of cat (trap-ball) and the fiddle (i.e. music) provided by some old inns. Sir Henry Reid made the most sensible commentary on the nursery rhyme: 'I prefer to think that it commemorates the athletic lunacy to which the strange conspiracy of the cat and the fiddle incited the cow.' No lunatic glossator has yet suggested that the cow was chuffed to jump over the moon.

It has become generally desirable to be over the moon only in the past two decades, since man has started to explore space. When Neil Armstrong lumbered out of Apollo XI on to the surface of the moon in July 1969, and carefully declaimed, 'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind' (a phrase carefully prepared for him to declaim by Werner Von Braun), he should have said that he was over the moon. The vogue for the proverb dates from about then. I have a hunch that space exploration is responsible for the notion that one is delighted to be over the moon. There are earlier uses of the expression. Sydney Smith wrote that he could have jumped over the moon (in delight); Noel

Coward wrote in his *Middle East Diary* in 1944: 'The Captain is absolutely over the moon with pleasure at having this command.' But 'over the moon' became a Colemanballs cliché* when man started literally to go over the moon.

The glorious behind of the moon, longed for by the Housemaid Poet at the head of the chapter, is an apt metaphor, for 'moon' is ancient slang for the buttocks. For example, James Joyce in *Ulysses*: 'Or their skirt behind, placket unhooked. Glimpses of the moon.'

If his team loses, the correct cliché for the football manager or player invited to make a comment into a microphone is that he is 'as sick as a parrot'. It is possible to date this new sporting catch-phrase exactly. In the 1970s there were a number of heavily publicized cases of travellers from West Africa dying of psittacosis or parrot fever (a viral disease of parrots and other birds that can be transmitted to man, in whom it produces inflammation of the lungs, pneumonia, and often death). After the popular papers had been full of such alarming stories, footballers introduced 'as sick as a parrot' into their vocabulary.

Another common reaction to defeat is to say: 'We never played to anything like our potential.' This sounds more scientific than: 'The lads played badly'; or 'We had an off day.'

The conjunctive 'Having said that . . . ' is a phrase that has recently been popularized to a tormenting cliché by football managers and other sporting commentators on the box. It enables Brian Clough and other users of it to say something, and then, immediately, having said that, to contradict it. Confusing and vexing. The phrase has a respectable ancestry and patronage by the judiciary, who, however, prefer the more urbane format, 'Having so said'.

Track record is a new cliché from athletics, not football. It has been widely extended from the Tartan running-track to describe the record of the accomplishments and failures of a person or business. It exemplifies the recent tendency to use two words where one would do. For example:

Score-line equals score;
Question mark equals question;
Story-line equals story;
and Track record equals record, but sounds jollier.

* A gabby sports commentator with the BBC who cannot open his mouth without putting his foot in it.

Track record is constantly (and absurdly, if you stop to think what you are saying) misapplied to persons, bodies, and situations where no track can be said to exist, even metaphorically. The word 'record' would nearly always be enough; if it had not itself been loosely used so persistently that it is losing its original sharp meaning.

What is this line that we are always laying it on (starting, finishing, production, dotted, thin red . . .)? When Clough or some other commentator says that he is going to lay it on the line, we know that he means he is going to speak frankly and directly, without pulling his punches or other malarkey. But I sometimes wonder what line we have in mind, or whether we have one at all.

'A fair crack of the whip' is another new vogue sporting metaphor, the meaning of which is hazily clear, but the precise origin of which is hazily obscure. We know that it means, informally and approximately, to have a reasonable chance of doing something, as in: 'All we wanted was a fair crack of the whip, but bloody Chappell would not declare, and batted on until close of play.' Presumably the metaphor comes from the circus or the Sport of Kings. But it is odd because it is used as though a fair crack of the whip were something desirable, when in fact, at the Epsom or Kentucky Derby or in the big tent, it is painfully undesirable, at any rate for horses.

We all know that to be on a hiding to nothing means to have no chance at all of succeeding, as in: 'The Indian batsmen were on a hiding to nothing. They could not win.' Sunday Times 1975. But what sort of hiding are we talking about (flaying, concealing . . . .)? Well, OK, presumably the hiding in the phrase is a beating or flogging. But the lexicographers are stumped by the exact derivation of the phrase. O Partridge, in your carrel in the Recording Angel's library, we miss you and we need you.

Début came into the language in the eighteenth century, from the French *débuter*, to lead off at billiards. It was originally used for a debutante making her entry into society, or an actor or other performer making his first appearance in public. It has recently been adopted as a sporting metaphor applied to goals, wickets, and other achievements rather than people, as in (*Evening Standard*): EMBUREY TAKES DEBUT WICKET.

Meanwhile the Bridge terms 'grand slam' and 'rubber' have escaped from the card-table into the jargon of sporting scribes, notably those who write about tennis. They are following the

example of many similar sporting terms, from hat-trick to kick-off, which have erred and strayed from their specific sports into the adjacent playing-fields. But if the tennis hacks have grand slam, it is time for one of them to elaborate the metaphor by using little slam to describe the achievement of somebody who wins all but one of the major national championships.

The new jargon of industrial negotiation has recently been enriched by a sporting metaphor. What and whence is this board across which wage increases are now legitimately demanded, and often obtained? As John Stuart Mill observed priggishly about the wages of sinecure: 'The bad workmen, who form the majority of operatives in many branches of industry, are decidedly of opinion that bad workmen ought to receive the same wages as good.'

Macaulay's 'every schoolboy' knows that the idiom means that whatever cake is being divided, whether baked of salary increases or tax cuts, will be shared equally among all of us, so reducing, with any luck, base envy. But how come? Is the board in the metaphor blackboard, chessboard, notice board, skateboard, springboard, or surf board? Do we imagine the cake on an archaic table called a board, about to be cut up by a knife as sharp as Solomon's? Or is the money, in its pretty new slang metaphor of 'bread', pictured on a breadboard, waiting to be sliced?

At first meditation by a Briton, his mind wandering at a union meeting, the most probable board seems to be the boardroom table around which negotiations are conducted.

The answer is odder and prettier. 'Across the board' is quite recent punter's or mug's jargon from the United States. To bet across the board is to place a combination bet on a horse to win, place, or show, which last in the language of Harry the Horse means to finish third, or at least third, which I thought was the same as a place.

This complicated way of providing for the sleek old age of bookies was first noticed by the watchful Webster in an addendum of 1950. It was at once adopted into the language of wage-bargaining, first in the United States and then in the United Kingdom, to mean embracing all classes, categories, or employees without exception. It has now become so familiar and useful a modish phrase that it is difficult to imagine how anybody negotiated for a general wage increase before some company executive or union official took a day away from the smoke-filled boardroom, about twenty years ago, to play expensive permutations on

the pari-mutuel machine. But, of course, anybody did manage to negotiate before 'across the board' came in. He used such antique words as all, every, universal, entire or flat-rate.

Used judiciously, 'across the board' is a valuable addition to the vocabulary of TUCSpeak and CBInglish. It has a sporting origin. But it is just possible that we have become so fond of it that we are turning it into a dead cliché, which passes in one ear, through the mind, and out the other ear, without causing a ripple in the grey matter.

23/ PIDGIN

Tok Pisin or Creole in its own write

When two languages meet (one of them is generally European) they sometimes form a pidgin, incorporating features from each of them. If the pidgin develops to become the mother tongue of a community, as it has in parts of the West Indies and Latin America, South Africa, and New Guinea, it is called a creole; for example, Haitian French, and Papiamento in Curaçao.

'Business-English' was the name given by the Chinese in the middle of the nineteenth century to the Anglo-Chinese lingua franca. 'The Chinese not being able to pronounce the word "business", called it "bigeon", which has degenerated into "pigeon", so that this word is in constant use.' We have confused the meaningless *pidgin* with the significant pigeon. Hence comes the expression, 'that's not my pigeon', which has nothing to do with the cloth-capped pigeon-fanciers of northern industrial England or with Christianity:

Il y avait un jeune homme de Dijon,
Qui n'avait que peu de religion.
Il dit: 'Quant à moi
Je déteste tous les trois,
Le Père, et le Fils, et le Pigeon.'

Until recently purists took a patronizing and dismissive attitude to pidgins and creoles, considering them dialects of the master language, not suitable for separate lexicographical treatment. Pidgins tend to be spoken, not written. But they are not broken English or baby talk. You can make a mistake in a pidgin or a creole as easily as you can in English.

Recently scholars have started to write down these hybrid

languages, to analyse their grammar, and to compile their dictionaries. It becomes clear that variety and cross-fertilization can make a creole richer than the sum of its components.

One of the first creoles to be studied professionally is Krio, which is spoken in Sierra Leone. The Oxford University Press has compiled its first complete dictionary for a creole. Others will follow.

Krio is a kind of pidgin English, with infusions from Yoruba, Arabic, Spanish, and other local languages, which is used as a local lingua franca. This linguistic cauldron bubbles off enchanting new words and phrases and constructions. *Bak sit drayva* is easy: it is the genteel local pronunciation for a back-seat-driver. To *ab* means to engage in sexual intercourse, derived directly from the British-English slang, as in 'he had her on the sofa', and 'he had it off (away) with her'. Americans prefer to 'make it with somebody'.

Abalist is a nervous euphemism for a witch-doctor, descended directly from the English herbalist with his simples. *Bakwil*, from the back wheel of a vehicle, means a woman's hips. *Abiliti*, from the English ability (but do not ask why), means a particular kind of hair-style for men, or the hair-line.

Abana is a broad-brimmed sun-hat from Havana, which recent geopolitical tourism has brought uncomfortably close to Sierra Leone. *Adkes* means cantankerous, intransigent, or difficult to deal with. It comes, of course, from the popular BritEnglish hard case. *Bad briz* is a bad breeze or wind in the stomach. To *pul bad briz* is to fart. You could spend eternity puzzling how *bakanti* means an overhead scissors-kick at football. The connexion with wild women is indirect: the scissors-kick was first demonstrated in Freetown by sailors from HMS *Bacchante*.

The writing-down of Krio has opened up a lively and humorous culture that was previously locked except to long-distance travellers. When you want to say that a child has great strength in Krio, you say he has *babu bon*, or bones of a baboon. When you want to insult someone, you call him a *babu wes*, the parts of a baboon around but mainly below the waist. To a bald man you say, if you are that sort of joker: '*Yu ed shayn lek babu wes*'; 'Your head shines like a baboon's bum, old boy.'

The dictionary deals with the meanings, derivations, history, and pronunciations of more than 30,000 Krio words. Since it is the most comprehensive and in many ways the first scholarly record of

any pidgin, the editors have had to pioneer through virgin jungle of phonology. Their work is going to be valuable, not only in Sierra Leone, but also for all West African linguistics. It has relevance to West Indian and American (especially Black American) English, with which Krio has strong linguistic and historical affinities. It is useful for the study of English as a second language, and blazes a trail for the worldwide study of pidgins and creoles.

It also raises fundamental questions about our current universal linguistic practice. For instance, is it appropriate any more to describe pidgins and creoles as being English-based, or Spanish-based? Are we right to describe language families, even the well-known Indo-European family, only by the principle of language divergence, without taking into account the equally important principle of language convergence?

This new work has added to our knowledge and joy in our rich Tower of Babel. Or, as they say in Krio, the man who does not rejoice that we are starting to take pidgins and creoles seriously as languages must be *bad lek Fero*, a biblical reference to the Pharaohs who oppressed the Israelites in the Old Testament. Let us celebrate the new respectability of pidgins with *bandits* (children's toy explosives fired at Christmas) and the entire *Wesli chuch lediz wukin ban*.

Across the world the pidgin called Neo-Melanesian is becoming a creole and a language in its own right. According to George Steiner there are more than a thousand separate languages, a fifth of the world's total, in New Guinea. No satisfactory explanation has yet been advanced for why languages should proliferate so exuberantly in New Guinea. Some zoologists have suggested that the extreme ease with which local languages arise and create barriers to marriage and mutual understanding suggests that they are an adaptation helping to promote the sub-division of the species into partially isolated groups, comparable with those found elsewhere in the animal world.

Neo-Melanesian pidgin English sprang up because more than a century ago indentured labourers were taken from New Britain to work in the plantations of Queensland. They and the other hired workers could not speak among themselves or with their bosses. So they gradually evolved a hybrid lingua franca, in which the Australian managers supplied most of the vocabulary, and the workers fitted the words into a matrix of Melanesian grammar.

Enter, jungle left, Tokulubakiki from Kiriwina, wearing a

penis-cover, and admirably bilingual in both his Trobriand dialect and delightful Neo-Melanesian. For example, *katim mans gras* means to shave; *givim stronpela tok* means to give somebody a right bollocking; and *bagarapim* is to spoil something (bugger it up). It is odd but a pleasure to hear the last word being used in normal conversation by Australian matrons as prim as Mary Whitehouse.

Rop bilong blut is the rope that carries blood, a vein. *Kikbal* you can translate for yourselves as the game that the British invented, which is becoming as universal a unifying force (well, almost) as the English language. *Puspus*, I regret to tell you, is sexual intercourse. If you go into the bush to watch birds you will see a notice saying I TAMBU, YU NOKEN PAIRAPIM MASKET LONG HIA, in other words 'No Shooting Here'. The locals have difficulty pronouncing 'f', so the initial 'p' in PAIRAPIM is an attempt to reproduce the local pronunciation of 'f'. For more than a century - IM has been the ending for transitive verbs. MASKET for gun is an indication of the age of this lovely pidgin.

The indentured labourers have been coming home to their villages speaking Neo-Melanesian for many generations. The pidgin is spoken along the coast of New Guinea, all over New Britain, New Ireland, Bougainville, and Manus. It is seeping into Central Highlands and Papua. Government business is conducted in it; radio stations, newspapers, missions, and the House of Assembly use it. It is fundamental to all attempts to teach people to read and write. It is spoken as a first language by infants around the Manus group of islands. Politically and linguistically it is a potent force for unity. As they end talk in Port Moresby: *Em tasol.*

English itself may have started as a pidgin in the Dark Ages, with the natives making themselves understood among visitors from neighbouring tribes with a mongrel lingo of Latin, Norse, High German, and tribal dialects that have vanished. Afrikaans was originally a pidgin: it was considered a mongrel tongue fit only for communication between master and servant. Other notable pidgins are Kikongo in the Congolese Republic, Swahili in East Africa, Bahasa in Indonesia, and Chinese in Macao.

When the twenty-first anniversary of broadcasting in the Solomon Islands was celebrated in 1980, the BBC sent appropriate congratulations. Ron Evens, head of broadcast and computer systems planning at the Corporation, sent his greetings with a special request for: 'Walkabout 'long Chinatown', a pop song in

pidgin written by a resident of the leper colony just down the road from the studios of the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation. The famous song commemorates the night of 5 January 1959, when Mr Evens, then on secondment from the BBC to the Colonial Office, went through Chinatown in search of the only electrician on Guadalcanal who could replace a fuse that had blown and cut off the mains current to the opening ceremony. Evens spent the last minutes before the broadcast climbing up an electrical pole in his dinner jacket and cummerbund. His heroism is still sung in epic pidgin.

Enter, pursued by a bare knowledge of pidgin, Yang Li-kung from Hong Kong. The original pidgin is dying as Chinese and British become more skilful with each other's languages. It used to replace 'r' with 'l', because Chinese have difficulty pronouncing 'f's, so for 'three' in pidgin, read 'te-lee'. Chinese inserts a word called a classifier between a numeral and its noun. Pidgin replaces this with 'piece': thus, 'one piece knifee'; 'two piece hingkichi' (handkerchiefs).

Yang Li-kung recites *Excelsior* in rusty pidgin. We had better print Longfellow's uplifting stuffed owl underneath.

That nighty time begin chop-chop,
One young man walkee - no can stop.
Maskee snow, maskee ice
He cally flag with chop so nice,
    Topside morefar.

He too much solly, one piecee eye
Look-see sharp-so-all same my.
He talkey longey, talkey stlong
Too muchee culio all-same gong
    Topside morefar.

Inside that house he look-see light
And evely loom got fire all light.
He look-see plenty ice more high,
Inside he mouth he plenty cly,
    Topside morefar.

Olo man talkee: 'No can walk,
Bymby lain come . . . welly dark.
Hab got water welly wide.'
'Maskee! My wantchee go topside.'
    Topside morefar.

'Man-man' one girley talkey he,
'What for you go topside look see?'
And one time more he plenty cly,
But allo-time walkee plenty high,
Topside morefar.

'Take care that spoilum tlee, young man,
Take care that ice. He want man-man.'
That coolie chin-chon he good night.
He talkey, 'Me can go all light.'
Topside morefar.

Joss-pidgin-man he soon begin
Morning time that joss chin-chin.
He no man see - he plenty fear
Cos some man talkey he can hear.
Topside morefar.

That young man die, one large dog see;
Too muchee bobbely findee he;
He hand blong colo - all same ice
Hab got he flag with chop so nice,
Topside morefar.

MORAL

You too muchee laugh. What for sing?
I tink so you no savvy what ting.
Suppose you no blong clever inside,
More better you go walkee topside,
Topside morefar.

The shades of night were falling fast,
As through an Alpine village passed
A youth, who bore, 'mid snow and ice,
A banner with the strange device,
Excelsior!

His brow was sad; his eye beneath
Flashed like a falchion from its sheath,
And like a silver clarion rung
The accents of that unknown tongue,
Excelsior!

(Is this unknown tongue a reference to the mistake the bard has made in the comparative of the adverb *excelse*? Ed.)
(Em I man Bilong Bikmaus, P. H.)

In happy homes he saw the light
Of household fires gleam warm and bright;
Above, the spectral glaciers shone,
And from his lips escaped a groan
Excelsior!

'Try not the Pass!' the old man said:
'Dark lowers the tempest overhead,
The roaring torrent is deep and wide!'
And loud that clarion voice replied,
Excelsior!

'O stay,' the maiden said, 'and rest
Thy weary head upon this breast!'
A tear stood in his bright blue eye,
But still he answered, with a sigh,
Excelsior!

'Beware the pine-tree's withered branch!
Beware the awful avalanche!'
This was the peasant's last Good-night.
A voice replied, far up the height,
Excelsior!

At break of day, as heavenward
The pious monks of Saint Bernard
Uttered the oft-repeated prayer,
A voice cried through the startled air,
Excelsior!

A traveller, by the faithful hound,
Half-buried in the snow was found,
Still grasping in his hands of ice
That banner with the strange device,
Excelsior!

There in the twilight cold and grey,
Lifeless, but beautiful, he lay,
And from the sky, serene and far,
A voice fell, like a falling star,
Excelsior!

24/ PIPELINE

'How infinite is the debt owed to metaphors by politicians who want to speak strongly but are not sure what they are going to say.' Sir Winston Churchill

Most speech and most writing consist of recycling clichés that have been used a trillion times before, as continuously as the shingle is turned by the waves on the seashore. Happy the man or woman who discovers a new metaphor! It was all very well for Adam on the morning of creation, when he became the first nomenclator: 'And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field.' Lucky old Adam! In that primal silence there were no clichés, because nothing had been said before. This is a sexist remark: cliché did not arrive on earth until the creation of Eve.

As our noisy world rolls through space signalling its passage with a continuous Babel, not many of us can find anything to say that has not been said many times before. Our nomenclators are the poets and the scientists. When one of them comes up with a shiny new metaphor, the rest of us seize it as a jewel to decorate our drab vocabularies, wearing it on all sorts of incongruous occasions. Eventually, either it becomes a dead metaphor like 'examine', which we can use without knowing or caring that it originally meant to assay precious metals by weighing them scrupulously in the scales; or it becomes such a hackneyed phrase, like *the fair sex* or *abrasive* (used metaphorically) or *bombshell* or *bonanza*, that nobody of any linguistic sensitivity could use it except sarcastically. Such recent battered ornaments include *the white heat of the technological revolution* and *you've never had it so good*.

For our generation oil is a prolific gusher of new metaphors. We live in the Age of Oil, or, more exactly and more ominously, in the Age of Transition from Oil to shortage of Oil. The most popular

new cliché of the past ten years has been *in the pipeline*. It is impossible to imagine how one said that something was in the process of being completed, delivered, or produced, before somebody, probably a bright young Jargonaut at Shell or BP, ran the phrase up the flagpole to see what it sounded like. It has caught on, ridiculously.

Here are some recent examples of incongruities *in the pipeline*.

BBC radio news, reporting that certain Sunday train services were being withdrawn, had British Rail announcing that there were 'no more cuts *in the pipeline*'. If there had been any such cuts, the story would certainly have leaked. The BBC also declared, costively: 'There is a reason to believe there is something solid *in the pipeline*.' Alastair Hetherington, then controller of BBC Scotland, was reported as describing some new correspondents he planned to appoint as 'still *in the* personnel *pipeline*', a phrase that evokes the picture of hacks and hackettes with tape-recorders crawling through the sewers of Glasgow to surface in the BBC headquarters in Queen Margaret Drive.

The Engineer's Directorate of the London Borough Council of Greenwich issued a pronouncement that there were 'pinch-points *in the pipeline*' (a pinch-point is a restriction on vehicles above a certain width). In spite of this case of municipal belly-ache, the traffic jams in that western suburb are still as hellish as anything outside the Fourth Circle of Dante's *Inferno*, where the Prodigal and the Avaricious are locked in continual collision and snarl-up. The British Government's Green Paper on Housing Policies (Command 6851): 'Since 1974 over 11,000 mobility units have either been built or put *into the pipeline*.' A mobility unit is a house adapted for a handicapped person, but putting it in the *pipe* seems an extravagant kind of adaptation.

If those who can, do, and those who can't, teach, those who can neither do nor teach become educationalists. In the burgeoning jargon of educationalists or educationists *hiccough* is at present a vogue term, denoting a spasm or delay, usually in vital communications. There have been several recent cases in educationalist literature of the unsettling complaint of *hiccoughs in the pipeline*.

The Cambridge Evening News reported that a council foreman was punched by a tenant, 'who felt repairs to his home were not going through the *pipeline* fast enough'. A headline in *The Times* declared: 'Witness organized *pipeline* to smuggle food into jail.'

The Department of the Environment has published a report called 'The public sector housing *pipeline* in London'. The *Berkhamsted Gazette* in Hertfordshire reported that a councillor 'admitted under pressure at a meeting of the Town Hall trustees that a buyer was *in the pipeline*.'

During times of drought newspaper sub-editors plunge into the *pipeline* to splash the pun about. The *Mid-Devon Advertiser*: 'Street taps, tougher bans *in pipeline*.' The *Evening Post* of Hemel Hempstead: 'Water rationing *in the pipeline*.' *The Guardian*: 'Winter drought *in the pipeline*.' The magazine *Building*: 'London housing *pipeline* lagging badly.'

A news item offered the perplexing statistic that the housing *pipeline* 'varies from just over five years to more than nine years.' A report of the Housing Corporation gave the trenchant mixed metaphor: 'Where schemes still *in the pipeline* do not fit the priorities, the Corporation will consider axing them.' And it was amusing to envisage Princess Anne, for whom the horse is a sacred cow, with, according to a spokesman for the British Horse Society, 'a lot of good horses *in the pipeline*.'

The *Gloucestershire Echo*: 'The blockage in the sewer is believed to have been caused by young people removing heavy manhole covers on the waste ground and filling the sewer with rubble. The site is to be used by the county council for a new school, although no plans are yet *in the pipeline*.' The *New Statesman* gave a new twist to the *pipeline*, apparently something to do with an Ordnance Survey map: 'The Tameside victory was no small benchmark, and next *in the pipeline* is an appeal to the European Court in Strasbourg.'

Let us put a cork in it and pipe down, concluding that the literal meaning of *in the pipeline* is not yet dead, and that use of it as a metaphor in cloacal or similar contexts flushes a shower of cold bilge water through the sentence.

Target is another favourite metaphor in which the literal meaning is not yet dead, but can be jerked absurdly to life by an incongruous context. *Targets* are things to be aimed at and hit, rather than met, beaten, overtaken, attained, fought for, obtained, achieved, and so on. Our popular journalistic extension of *targets* is extravagant enough to make William Tell misfire in amazement and transfix his left foot. Sir Ernest Gowers told the story of a lecturer who recorded that when he read in a speech by one of our Ministers of a 'global *target*' which, to the Minister's

regret, could not be 'broken down', the picture that came into his mind was of a drunken reveller attacking a Belisha beacon.

A recent issue of *The Times* darkened the sky with arrows and peppered the landscape. The main headline on the Centre Page was: 'The frantic rush to meet our North Sea Oil *target*.' The main headline in the Business Section was: '£6m *ceiling* keeps rise in earnings well within Treasury *target*.' On the same page there was: 'The CIA suggests that to reach its *targets* Russia must decentralize . . . ' On the Sports Page John Woodcock opined that 'a trio of class spin bowlers would have made 216 seem a distant *target*.' But then, what would cricket correspondents or commentators do without *targets*? It is remarkable that none of them has noticed why we keep on losing Test Matches. They themselves keep on telling us that our players (when surely they should have been playing cricket) spend most of their time chasing *targets* set by the Australians and West Indians.

On-target is a popular variant of the metaphor in industrial jargon, as in (*The Times*): 'A generous bonus for an *on-target* performance.' On the rifle range or in the archery contest the prize goes not to the Calamity Jane or Robin Hood who gets a shot *on target*, which can be a magpie, an outer, or a complete scrubber, but to the marksman who hits bulls and inners. Still at Bisley, let us avoid writing that only so many more sales of motor cars are needed to top the year's bull's-eye, remembering that bull's-eyes, like *targets*, golf balls, and nails give more satisfaction when hit in the middle than when topped.

Ceiling, meaning limit or maximum, is another vogue metaphor in officialese, of which the literal meaning will not lie down and keep quiet, but continues to butt in as obtrusively as the *ceiling* painted by Rubens for the Banqueting House, Whitehall. Hugh Dalton in the Attlee Government attracted notorious and deserved ridicule when he announced that he was going to put 'a *ceiling* price on carpets.' 'In determining the floor-space, a *ceiling* of 15,000 square feet should normally be the limit'. Why drag down the *ceiling*, like one of those descending *ceilings* beneath which Pearl White was trapped at the end of an episode of a serial, to say that the floor-space should not normally exceed 15,000 square feet? Sometimes the word stands on its head: 'The effect of this announcement is that the total figure of £410 million can be regarded as a floor as well as a ceiling.'

Conversely, the rights directors of publishers, when auctioning

books, frequently establish floors, but never, for obvious reasons, ceilings. Don't be unkind to publishers. They may be miserable, difficult, mean buggers, but that is probably because their lives are so exposed to the weather.

Blueprint, used as a picturesque synonym for scheme or plan, has the odd distinction of being alive as a metaphor but dead in its literal meaning. This method of reproducing drawings has been obsolete in the engineering world for more than fifty years—and deservedly so, for its white lines on blue paper were never easy to read, and certainly become no clearer while being used in a workshop. For half a century drawing offices have produced photocopies with dark lines on white paper, and engineers have called them merely 'prints' or 'drawings'.

Blueprint is as dead as the steam engine in the jargon of engineering, but it is still a term of art in economics and politics, where it is a jaded synonym for 'proposal', 'scheme', 'plan', or even 'timetable'. It is apparently used in the hope of persuading its readers or hearers that the scheme it refers to is logical, accurate, complete in every detail, and beyond all possibility of amendment. Even when engineers used the things, real *blueprints* were never like that: moreover, they were always mechanical copies, never originals. No designer ever drew a *blueprint* directly. When a politician produces his *blueprint*, what he is literally saying is that it is somebody else's plan that has been rejected as useless for fifty years. Here we have yet another example of that great cultural divide that C. P. Snow described and Monty Finniston expounds in his *blueprint* for the development of true respect for engineers.

Bottleneck is all metaphor, and appears never to have been used in its literal sense. Even so, there is a shadowy literal meaning behind the metaphor, which makes one wonder, when listening to traffic reports on the radio, why the bigger the *bottleneck*, the harder it is to get through. The metaphor leads a rackety life that would break the neck of any normal bottle. There was the famous civil service memorandum that certain delays were 'due to a vicious circle of interdependent *bottlenecks*'; a universal shortage is described as a *world-wide bottleneck*; there are demands that *bottlenecks* should be ironed out.

Cold war is another expression in which the metaphorical meaning fits incongruously with the literal. It was introduced to describe the hostilities short of armed conflict between the Soviet Union and the western powers after the war. George Orwell was

an early user of it in *Tribune*: 'A State which was in a permanent state of *cold war* with its neighbours.' Its contrary is presumably hot war. But if so, why do we speak of an improvement in relations or detente as a thaw in the *cold war*? Surely, if things are getting better, we are moving farther away from hot war and relations are growing colder. Or are we to think of shooting, nuclear-bombing war, as Dante thought persuasively of the centre of Hell, as being the coldest place in the universe rather than the traditional eternal heat and red-hot coals:

> *Com' io divenni allor gelato e fioco,*
> *nol domandar, lettor, ch'io non lo scrivo,*
> *però ch'ogni parlar sarebbe poco.*

Now that we are going metric, we seem to have forgotten how to use a real *yardstick*. Here is the Government Green Paper on Housing Policies again conjuring up an alarming picture of caning at an English boarding school: 'In relation to improvement grants, local authorities ought to apply broad *yardsticks* flexibly.'

In all such new or newish metaphors the literal meaning is not dead, but dormant, or even lying there pretending to snooze with one eye open. We must take care in using them not to wake the sleeper into jumping out of bed and doing a dance of derision over our meaning.

25/ REFUTE

Refutation, refutation, refutation! O! I have lost my refutation

There is a Gresham's Law for language as well as economics. If a coinage is debased, citizens, not being as daft as governments suppose, will tend to withdraw the old coins from circulation in order to realize the excess of their value as metal over their value as money. As the point of a word is blunted by popular use, it tends to lose its original value for everybody. Bad usage is continually driving out good. To put it less provocatively, loose usage drives out precise. It is no longer possible to use ilk meaning 'same', or inchoate to mean 'just beginning', or disinterested to mean something between impartial and unbiased with any confidence of being understood in the sense intended. It has virtually become idiomatic to tautologize by writing 'of the same ilk', so offending the fastidious Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that Ilk.

The technical words of such argumentative disciplines as philosophy, which are attractive to politicians and other professional liars (a little prevarication, special pleading, and inaccuracy save a mountain of explanation), are particularly vulnerable to such weakening. To beg the question does not mean, as is commonly supposed, to evade a straight answer to a question. It means taking for granted in a statement or argument precisely what is in dispute. To say that parallel lines will never meet because they are parallel is simply to assume as a fact the very thing you profess to prove and to invite rebuttal and *refutation*. Logicians call this Boudiccan form of reasoning by driving a chariot with scything wheels through the argument *petitio principii*. Arguing in a circle is a common variety of it: capital punishment is necessary because without it murders would increase.

Consider what has happened to the strong verb *to refute*.

Television interviewer: 'Is it true that you have abused your powers as President?' President: 'I *refute* that totally and categorically.' End of interview. To *refute* such a question totally and categorically would have taken the President the rest of the century as well as the rest of the programme, because he would have had to produce proofs that all his thoughts, words, and deeds since he moved into the White House had been as clean as a hound's tooth.

The trouble is that nobody believes politicians any more; not that they ever did, if you take the word of political commentators from Aristophanes on Cleon to Crossman on Wilson and *passim*. It is no use the unfortunate politicians denying anything, because after centuries of such denials, we rate them lighter than the hot air that gives them utterance. A stronger word is needed.

'Lie' is not available to British politicians because of the laws of libel and the convention of unparliamentary expressions. When Lord Shaftesbury took his seat as Lord Chancellor in 1672, the Duke of York got away with calling him a rascal and a villain; but the imputation that a member or a minister is not telling the truth is never allowed in Parliament. It is a popular misapprehension that Winston Churchill eluded the convention with 'terminological inexactitude'. This famous example of polysyllabic humour has been generally misunderstood as a nice substitute for 'lie', but the context makes it clear that this was not what was intended. Churchill, Under Secretary for the Colonies in the Campbell-Bannerman Government, addressing the House of Commons in 1906:

'A labour contract into which men enter voluntarily for a limited and for a brief period, under which they are paid wages which they consider adequate, under which they are not bought or sold and from which they can obtain relief . . . on payment of £17 10*s*, the cost of their passage, may not be a desirable contract, may not be a healthy or proper contract, but it cannot in the opinion of His Majesty's Government be classified as slavery in the extreme acceptance of the word without some risk of terminological inexactitude.'

Lie is libellous. Deny is weak. Terminological inexactitude is stuffy. So public figures have recently taken up *refuting* somebody or some argument they dislike as though they are denying or repudiating it totally and categorically. That is not what scrupulous users of the word mean by it. *To refute* something is to disprove it,

to overthrow it by facts or argument, to succeed in showing that it is false. It is not only to deny it, but also to provide sufficient reason for believing that what is denied is in fact false. A man who *refutes* something must do more than just utter the word with a righteous glare of indignation at the interviewer. If that is all he does he is weakening the language, and must expect to be challenged by anybody who understands the meaning of *refute* to supply chapter and verse to make good the disputatious part of the word that asserts proof.

Talking of Bishop Berkeley's theory of the non-existence of matter, Boswell observed that though they were satisfied it was not true, they were unable to *refute* it. Johnson kicked a large stone so that his foot rebounded from it, saying: 'I *refute* it thus.' That was a playful Johnsonian *refutation*, but even it had solid proof rather than simple denial. A more serious use of *refute* by Johnson was his remark: 'Shakespeare never had six lines together without a fault. Perhaps you may find seven, but this does not *refute* my general assertion.' To *refute* Johnson, even when he was making so deliberately provocative a statement, would have to be an argumentative and laborious process.

'The local authority *refute* the suggestion that their proposal is extravagant, but their arguments are wholly unconvincing.' If their arguments are so wholly unconvincing, they have not *refuted* the suggestion. At least they offered arguments. 'He sharply *refuted* the suggestion, and said he could produce ample evidence that it was wholly without foundation.' So far he has only denied the suggestion. Let him first produce his evidence, and we shall then see whether he has *refuted* it, sharply or bluntly. 'Mrs Thatcher refutes Mr Callaghan' implies that she proves him wrong, and therefore goes far beyond 'Mrs Thatcher answers Mr Callaghan.'

The word comes from the Latin *refutare*, to repel or rebut, and is no relation of 'refuse', however much it may look like it. It has been used in English since the sixteenth century. You can *refute* a person, an argument, an accusation, or a statement, provided that you can adduce persuasive proofs that they are false. To confute is closely related to it, but a little stronger. You can confute an accuser or his accusation, again provided that you can put your evidence where your mouth is. It would be tidy to reserve *confute* for proving accusers, arguers, television interviewers, and other trying persons wrong, and *refute* for proving their accusations, arguments, statements, theories, and brazen assertions

wrong. But, unlike French, English is a gloriously untidy and prolix language.

In its rich prolixity to rebut is a near-synonym to *to refute*. Literally it means to re-butt somebody or his argument in a head-on collision like a goat: to repel a blow by giving a blow. I am afraid that once again you are going to need proofs to rebut, Mr President. Merely to say that you rebut something is cheating. A rebutter is nothing to do with reviving tired sandwiches: in legal jargon it means the defendant's answer to the plaintiff's surrejoinder.

To rebuff is to snub or reject bluntly and usually abruptly, as in 'she rebuffed his advances with her umbrella'. The origin of the word is also a blow back, but a different sort of blow from rebut's. It comes from the Italian *ribuffo* or 'reproof', which by imitation and onomatopoeia literally means to 'puff back'. You do not need proofs to rebuff, merely a gust of feeling.

Just as we choose inappropriately strong technical words like *refute* to emphasize our denials, so we choose inappropriately enthusiastic epithets and superlatives to emphasize our pleasure. It is a particularly North American habit to indulge in verbal ecstasy over the mundane and average; at any rate Britons think it is. Memo to myself: let me in the coming decade that starts in 1981 resolve to restrain the use of the over-generous adjective. It is not uncommon to hear 'It's the greatest thing I've ever seen' being used to describe a new television commercial, or some other apotheosis of the banal. Muhammad Ali has a right to feel aggrieved by the general misappropriation of his chosen superlative.

This extravagant use of superlatives is a fault of generosity, which is a good direction in which to err. It is like a judge awarding maximum points to a gymnast or skater. If a subsequent competitor produces a better performance, there is no margin left in the marking to reflect her or his superiority. This is one reason why such activities are not suitable for competition.

It is the same with language. We devalue it when we fail to use adjectives honestly and with moderation. A friend who says 'It's terrific to see you' every day, even when it obviously is not, cheapens the word 'terrific' and leads one to suspect his sincerity. It would be a more straightforward world if laudatory and superlative adjectives were reserved for the Sunday best occasions that really merit them. But it would be a less animated, more boring world. I find a charm in exuberance.

26/ REVERSIBLES

Most lies are quite successful, and human society would be impossible without a great deal of good natured lying.
George Bernard Shaw

Life would be unbearable if we were all absolutely honest all the time. Tactful, decent, civilized, diplomatic dishonesty makes the world go round. English, because of its huge vocabulary and infinite variety of idiom and emphasis, is an excellent language for lying in. It is rich with expressions that mean the opposite of what they seem to.

Not many are as strange as *chuffed*, the recent piece of British Army slang, that manages to mean both gruntled and disgruntled. Here is an example of the first meaning from Auberon Waugh's *The Foxglove Saga*, published in 1960: 'He was chuffed at this new monumental skive he had discovered.' Here is an example of the disgruntled meaning from a novel published four years later: 'Don't let on they're after you, see, or she'll be dead *chuffed*, see? She don' like the law.'

Partridge favours the gruntled meaning, deriving it partly from a military slang word for food, and partly from a low slang word for stimulation of the male member by lumbar thrust in coition.

It is tempting to say the gruntled meaning is the correct one, and the disgruntled meaning is misunderstanding by those who hear the word, like the sound of it, and start using it without taking the trouble first to make sure what it means. However, disgruntled *chuffed* is used by David Storey, and other good writers with an ear for modern idiom. It is a mystery that it has happened. It is confusing that it should continue to be a Janus word.

Nobody is going to get into much trouble by confusing one *chuffed* with the other. Foreigners could well get into trouble by taking literally some of the lying reversible phrases used by speakers of British English for hypocritical purposes. 'I hate to

interfere . . . ' really means, 'There is nothing I like better than interfering, and here I go again.' 'You won't mind my saying . . . ' really means in Bringlish, 'You are going to hate my saying this like hell, but never mind, here goes.' 'Every schoolboy knows . . . ' (Lord Macaulay's favourite) means, 'Here comes an impossibly obscure piece of erudition that I have just looked up in the encyclopaedia.' 'To be perfectly frank . . . ' means, 'Lies, lies, lies.' A notorious English murderer of the 1930s, against whom the evidence was flimsy, hanged himself by his continuous and unpersuasive use of 'To be perfectly frank . . . ' in the witness-box.

'I hate to gossip . . . ' means, 'Open your ears, for I am going to pour some delicious social sewage in them.' 'It will be obvious to the meanest intelligence . . . ' means, 'This is impenetrably obscure, and quite probably untrue.' In scientific publications, 'It clearly follows . . . ' is a signal that what follows is a weak or a lazy argument.

George Solt, a London technologist and wordsmith, has invented a word-game that consists of spotting phrases that convey the precise opposite of what they literally mean. He calls his game 'White Man speak with Forked Tongue', and finds that he gets his best scores at Board Meetings. To avoid halting his colleagues in mid-flow, he uses a symbol to register a score: he places the clenched fist with the back of the hand touching the lips, while waggling his extended index and middle fingers like the fangs of a rattlesnake. He says that this used to make his colleagues rather cross, but that they have got used to it over the years. I am amazed that they have not defenestrated him.

Formal subscriptions to correspondence are often reversible lies. 'Yours sincerely' is written after millions of letters every day by correspondents who are neither sincere nor attached to the people they are writing to. At least nobody pretends to be our Humble and Obedient Servant any more. We should be thankful for that.

'By all means . . . ' is a phrase in which there is an interesting distinction between American and British usage. Americans use it straightforwardly to emphasize their point. 'By all means do it' is an invitation to do it at all costs and whatever the consequences. Britons use it as a reversible lie. If an Englishman says, 'By all means . . . ', he is speaking with forked tongue. He means: 'If you really must.' The phrase signifies grudging acceptance of the unavoidable.

When someone says, 'By all means come to my party', the warmth of your welcome will depend on which side of the Atlantic your host comes from. In the face of linguistic pitfalls such as this, it is not surprising that many Americans regard Britain as hardly less foreign than France or Spain.

'In fact' literally ought to mean 'in reality', used either to emphasize, or to contradict: 'What in fact happened (contrary to what you are suggesting) was . . . ' In fact today it is continuously used by broadcasters to fill up time, and to mean, if it has to mean anything, something like 'in short'.

The English are so polite (or so hypocritical) that their language shrinks from the blunt truth, and works by indirections, emphasis, allusion, velleity, reversibles, and lies. That is why we are offended by the barbarous decision of Brussels bureaucrats to rename our mutton 'sheepmeat'. We do not like to call a sheep a sheep.

The traditional etymology observes that English preserves an intriguing distinction between meat on the plate and meat on the hoof. Mutton, beef, pork, and venison are of Norman French derivation, presumably because our ancestral invaders were the ones to enjoy the meat. The English shepherds and cowherds preserved the Old English terms for the animals that they merely tended. It is as true as most popular etymologies.

In the last few years lamb (first recorded by the OED as a term for meat in 1620: 'Lambe of two or three months old is the best') has been elevated to displace mutton from our butchers' shops. The famous restaurant Simpson's in the Strand, where the food is the apotheosis of English boarding-school cooking, stopped serving mutton in 1979, and started carving the same joint, now called lamb. Lamb is frequently, as most people must be aware, a misnomer.

Perhaps after a millennium sheepmeat (or rather sheep's meat, on the analogy of sheep's eyes and sheep's head) might suitably restore an English name to a traditional English food, which we both produce and eat. Who knows, the French might even import it.

Vegetarians approve of the precision of sheepmeat as a step towards accuracy. 'As people are gently reminded of the grisly reality that produces their lamb chops, many more will come to eschew the barbaric and anachronistic habit of eating dead animals.' They offer 'decomposing sheep corpse' as a more appropriate

description, which is enough to put one off one's food. As the man said, most vegetarians look enough like their food to be classed as cannibals.

Meat-eaters will mourn the passing of the rich English vocabulary of the table before the cold precision of Brussels. Barons, rounds, and sirloins of beef, venison, gammons, hams, and flitches have for centuries illuminated the language and invited to dinner. Now we are to be nauseated by the disgusting bureaucratese of crowns and saddles of sheepmeat. Whatever comes next? Cowmeat?

Actually, yes. Desperate Dan has been eating cow pie for years. A colleague reporting in Brussels at a recent meeting distinctly heard an interpreter speak of 'beefmeat'.

To lamb, according to the 1811 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, also means to beat. The OED records an obscure Australian meaning of lamb to signify to induce a person to get rid of his money, to clean out: 'One used to serve drinks in the bar, the other kept the billiard-table. Between them they lambed down more shearers and drovers than all the rest on the river.' Who ever heard of anybody inducing a Frenchman to part with his money?

Let us invoke William Shenstone, whom Horace Walpole unkindly called 'the water-gruel poet', to complain about the fate of our sheepmeat in Europe. It comes from *The Song of Colin, a Discerning Shepherd, lamenting the State of the Woollen Manufactory:*

> Ah! heedless Albion! too benignly prone
> Thy blood to lavish, and thy wealth resign!
> Shall every other virtue grace thy throne,
> But quick-eyed Prudence never yet be thine?
>
> From the fair natives of this peerless hill
> Thou gav'st the sheep that browse Iberian plains;
> Their plaintive cries the faithless region fill,
> Their fleece adorns a haughty foe's domains.
>
> Ill-fated flocks! from cliff to cliff they stray;
> Far from their dams, their native guardians far!
> Where the soft shepherd, all the livelong day,
> Chaunts his proud mistress to the hoarse guitar.

But Albion's youth her native fleece despise;
  Unmoved they hear the pining shepherd's moan;
In silky folds each nervous limb disguise,
  Allured by every treasure but their own.

Poor, home-sick woollies.

27/ SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH

Swilling in a shebeen with blankes, bliksem, and the babbalas

Scene: a London pub. Enter van der Merwe from Bloemfontein, wearing a blazer emblazoned with badges, short back and sides, and the intellectual expression of a lock forward jumping stud-first into the ruck. He discovers Patel a Londoner, lounging on a seat and reading.

van der Merwe: Ag, sis, domkop. Do you take this for a library, hey?
Patel: I beg your pardon.
van der Merwe: Ah Big Yaws. Shebeens are for swilling in till your eyeballs roll, not reading, hey?
Patel: You sound like a South African.
van der Merwe: You sound like a trassie to me, and maybe an opstoker too.
Patel: How interesting. I happen to be dipping into this new dictionary of South African English. I see that you think I sound like what we call a pooftah over here, and possibly a trouble-maker as well. Yours is a rich and strange tributary of the mighty river of our glorious English language.
van der Merwe: That is an example of your Cockney humour, not so? I know that you verdomde Engelsmen are eaten up with hypocrisy and Boerhaat, you Kafferboetie. Take care, man, or I will donder you.
Patel: Calm down, old chap, I was not being sarcastic. I do find South African English interesting, now that I can understand it. I had forgotten how many of our common stock of English words come from your linguistic melting-pot. And not merely the obvious ones, like trek. But how many Britons today who go

pony-trekking or 'commandeer' a company car realize that they are echoing the jargon of the early Cape frontiersmen?
van der Merwe: Oh, if it is our language and not our politics you're interested in, perhaps we need not after all be bad friends.
Patel: You cannot separate language from politics, old man. What you call the Anglo-Boer War brought the African veld into the parlours of Brixton and the pubs of Highgate, with words like kop, especially at Anfield. Your modern politics is introducing us to such gloomy words apartheid, verkramp, amandla, hippo, troopie, terr, and the Immo Act. Indeed, it is an example of the power of words that rulers of many countries think they can make their policies more attractive by giving them new names.
van der Merwe: Go garshly, bliksem. You English preach at us from your dirty preekstoel without understanding anything about our country.
Patel: Well, in a modest lexicographical way, this dictionary will help us to understand. Its comprehensive system of crossreferencing gives a thorough trek through your white and black words of grand and petty apartheid, Bantustans, resettlement, nie-blankes, domboeks, and the rest of the nightmare apparatus.
van der Merwe: But does it say anything about our beautiful country, man? That is what matters about South Africa to those of us not obsessed with politics like what you are.
Patel: I doubt whether it is possible to close one's eyes to politics permanently. You know that the etymology of 'idiot' is somebody who does that? But, of course, the dictionary deals faithfully with your splendid fauna and flora; though with only about 3000 headwords it cannot pretend to be a detailed biological glossary. I was amazed to discover that the unfortunate ostrich is classed as farming stock, that its meat is used for pet food and biltong for humans, and its eggs for omelettes and cakes with such delicious names as poffertjie.
van der Merwe, suspiciously: Who made this book?
Patel: The Oxford University Press, of course. Are there any other dictionaries?
van der Merwe: I am not paying any heed to a book made by verdomde uitlanders, finish and klaar, is it?
Patel: For God's sake, old fellow. The dictionary has been edited by an authentic mevrou and a kenner, Jean Branford. She grew up in Cape Town, lives near George, and teaches at Rhodes University. She shows the rich medley of your language, which cannot be

confined in compartments by separate development like people. South African English has evolved not just from the vocabularies of the Dutch and British colonial administrations, but also from Coloured, Indian, Malayan, and the rich varieties of African speech. One day perhaps your people will mix as freely as your lingo.

van der Merwe: But does she give the language we okes use today?

Patel: Oh, yes. Her illustrative citations are taken from everyday speech as well as literature. For example, to illustrate the South African use of to sleep to mean to lie down, not necessarily to be asleep, she quotes a 17-year-old schoolboy: 'I was sleeping on the ground in the middle of the scrum and someone stood on me.'

van der Merwe: Do you need a passbook to get a drink in this bloody pub, lekker ou? I am los hotnot, my throat is as dry as a donga, and I smaak a Modder River of beer.

Patel: I'll stand you a beer, and you can tell me how misunderstood you are. So long as we stay on the ground floor. Nothing personal, you understand. But my vertigo has been accentuated by reading what happens to people of my sort of colour who help BOSS with its inquiries on the thirteenth floor. You cannot solve political problems with dictionaries. But at least it is a small step that we speak the same language—nearly—some of the time.

28/ STYLES OF ADDRESS

What shall I call thee?
I happy am,
Ms is my name.
A Ms is as good as a male.

Appellations, forms of address, and handles to names are a minefield in our egalitarian modern society. For example, whom should we dignify with the title of 'esquire' in Britain these days? The English gentleman and the English lady are obsolescent creatures. Public orators still use the old-fashioned vocative 'ladies and gentlemen' to give a gale warning for the imminent torrent of hot air. But in most contexts the descriptions are quaint or ironical. Our public lavatories prefer the signposts of gender 'men' and 'women', or Lowry matchstick figures with legs for men and skirts for women. One could say, 'She's a lovely lady'; but that lady would be consciously jokey.

If the female person in front of us in the bus queue dropped her parcel, we might say to a child who was with us: 'Give the lady back her parcel.' But that would be British hypersensitivity about class, in case the woman were offended by being described as a mere woman. It is a nuance of British unease about class that in those circumstances 'Give the woman back her parcel' sounds brusque.

Nobody except a very old-fashioned gentleman or a very old-fashioned cad would describe himself as a gentleman these days. None of us admit to being gentlemen any more. However, in our paradoxical progress towards a classless society, we have all been promoted esquires.

The question arises in the minor art of addressing envelopes to Englishmen. According to Debrett's, that arbiter of correct form, it is now up to the writer to decide whether to address his correspondent as John Smith Esq. (or, old-fashioned, Esqre), or as

Mr John Smith. In practice most of us play safe and stick an esquire on the end, unless we are writing to tradesmen, the Inland Revenue, or journalists.

Esquire was originally a specific description of one of a small class of people. The esquire was the trainee knight, a young gentleman who attended upon a knight, carried his shield and other gear, and acted as his apprentice. The appellation 'esquire' is derived from the French and Latin words meaning a shield-bearer. When shields went out of fashion, esquire became a title of rank, intermediate between a knight and a gentleman, in the elaborate hierarchy of English class.

The rank was nicely and oddly defined. Authorities in such punctilious snobbery laid down five classes of people who were legally entitled to the appellation of esquire. For instance, younger sons of peers and their eldest sons were esquires. So were the eldest sons of knights, and their eldest sons, and so on in perpetuity. Barristers are formally esquires, at any rate after they have taken silk; but solicitors are never more than mere gentlemen. There was much enjoyable dispute among the experts about exactly who was an esquire and who was not. Today we find such distinctions invidious as well as ridiculous. In any case, it would take a genealogist some days clambering around a man's family tree to determine whether he was entitled to the suffix of esquire or not.

Accordingly, we have given up the monkey-puzzle and call everybody who is anybody 'esquire'. One of the paradoxical products of our age of the common man is that we have promoted the entire male population to this formerly elite class.

The abbreviation 'squire' is a non-U and often sarcastic appellation, used to mock those suspected of having crypto-genteel tendencies, as in, 'Can I get you anything, squire?' Larry Adler, wag, mouth-organist, esquire, and author of *Jokes and How to Tell Them*, says a TV cameraman once told him a joke, and not well. Larry said: 'You should read my book, *Jokes and How to Tell Them*.' The cameraman replied: 'You should read mine, squire, *Harmonicas and where to Put Them*.'

According to Debrett's, in the United States the handle 'esquire', usually contracted to esq., as in Britain, is customarily used in social correspondence, especially in the eastern states, but not in business circles. In the Department of State the term is reserved for Foreign Service Officers serving abroad, and is not abbrevi-

ated. I suspect that Debrett's may be a little behind the times in this adjudication. Behind the times is the position in which that stately publication feels most at home.

This brings us, reluctantly, to the vexed question of women's appellations, in particular Ms or M/s, used by women who prefer not to disclose their marital status. In 1976 the Speaker of the House of Commons agreed to lady Members of Parliament styling themselves Ms if they so wished. Debrett's recommends 'that this terminology should not be used unless a lady has indicated this preference, because it offends many more than it pleases.' The style book of *The Times* prohibits Ms, unless the woman in question insists on it. The volume of letters to the editor whenever a Ms is published in *The Times* suggests that more women readers of that newspaper dislike Ms than like it.

In favour of Ms is the general principle that as far as possible people should be allowed to call themselves what they want, provided that they do not go around trying to deceive or defraud others by using false titles. The other side of this principle is that we, and particularly national institutions like *The Times*, which is not and should not be in the van of linguistic revolution, have no right to attach the label to those reluctant to wear it, until it is firmly established.

Also in favour of Ms is fairness. It is unfair as well as anomalous that a woman's title should declare whether she is married or not, while the man's does not. As a reporter I feel impertinent in having to ask any woman I interview whether she is married or not, so that the sub-editors can label her Mrs or Miss. It is not a question that I would ask a man.

Against Ms is the fact that it did not evolve naturally, but is an artificial, political construction. It is not clear what the abbreviation is short for; if anything, presumably Miss-or-Mrs. There is no agreement about its pronunciation. In Britain attempts to pronounce it range from Mizz to Merz. Most women in Britain, as far as one can tell, do not want to be labelled Ms. And, because it is a political shibboleth in the jargon of feminism, the word has strong political undertones. Angela Carter, that oracle of the lingo of sisterhood, has admitted sadly that Miss has come to mean respectably unmarried; Mrs to mean respectably married; and Ms to mean nudge, nudge, wink, wink; in the same way that a 'liberated' woman is often taken to mean a promiscuous one.

We should have been spared this confusion and ill-will if the

male and female handles had evolved similarly. A boy is labelled Master until he becomes an adult and Mister. A girl used to be labelled Miss until she became an adult. After a certain age she became Mrs, whether she was married or not. Until late in the eighteenth century the title Mrs was applied to elderly maiden ladies as well as married ones, usually, but not always, followed by the Christian name: Mrs Elizabeth Carter; Mrs Hannah More. The nineteenth century divided the women's titles by marital status instead of age.

In other languages and societies the division is made by age rather than marriage. In Germany an unmarried woman of a certain age becomes Frau; in France Madame. There are no elderly Frauleins or Mesdemoiselles. Life would be a lot easier if we had retained this distinction in English.

But we did not. In the long run we shall probably abandon all designations, appellations, and titles, and address each other by our plain names, with, if you take an Orwellian view of the future, our personal numbers attached. In the short run we must do the best we can to call people what they want to be called, without being bullied into calling other people what they do not want to be called. In the meantime appellations are a rich source of confusion, snobbery, and amusement.

English-speakers get into such a muddle with appellations for themselves, that it is no surprise that we have difficulty with those of foreigners. We find it difficult to distinguish between the given and family names of Arabs, and baffling that there is no accepted Arabic equivalent to Mr, Monsieur, Herr, Esquire, and so on. Such foreign appellations are best avoided in describing Arabs, both because they are artificial, and because of the risk of attaching them to the wrong part of the name. The only foolproof way for an Englishman to write an Arab name is to give it in full. But this can quickly become too long, and there is a danger that a name without any handle may be considered derogatory.

One escape is to use military and other titles whenever possible, as in Colonel Quadhafy or Gaddafi, transliterate him how you can. By a lucky chance, for us if not for their subjects, an increasing number of prominent Arabs have military titles. The custom of preceding names in Iraq with the title Sayyid (abbreviated Sd), which correctly means a descendant of the prophet, has become vulgarized in the same way that esquire has in England. Women's names present even harder problems. It is a comfort to know that

it is not just in English that we have trouble with what to call each other.

The Thais solve the difficulty about forms of address to the different sexes in a singular but muddling manner. The gender of the title is determined by the sex of the speaker, not that of the person he or she is addressing. A woman in Thailand gives the title Ka for Mr or Mrs or Miss or Ms, irrespective of the sex of the person she is giving the title to. The Thai man's title for anybody is Krap. No joke.

29/ TAUTOLOGY

A plethora of words becomes the apoplexy of reason

'If the Treasury were to fill old bottles with banknotes, bury them at suitable depths in disused coalmines which are then filled up to the surface with town rubbish, and leave it to private enterprise on well-tried principles of *laissez-faire* to dig the notes up again . . . there need be no more unemployment and, with the help of the repercussions, the real income of the community . . . would probably become a good deal larger than it actually is.' John Maynard is out of fashion at present, and Milton Friedman rules. The Treasury is not yet burying banknotes in disused coalmines. Because of the recession and the weakness of the economy redundancy is always with us at work. It is always with us in the language too. One of the most fashionable tautologies, used automatically for emphasis now on radio and television, is: 'What I am saying is . . . ' Of course it is, gasbag. We did not suppose that you were semaphoring or tapdancing it.

'At this moment in time . . . ' still rules the sound-waves as a pompous piece of pudder that fills a little time while the speaker works out what sonorous banality he or she is going to emit next. What other sort of moment than one in time does he suppose we might mistake it for?

A tautology, from the Greek words for saying the same thing, is the needless repetition of the same statement in different words (as in 'the literary critics spoke all at once together'), or the repetition (especially in the immediate context) of the same word or phrase, or the same idea or statement in other words: usually according to the *OED*, as a fault in style. From funeral obsequies to mutual co-operation we live in a language of tautology, pleonasm, and verbosity.

The National Times, a weekly magazine in Australia, runs an annual tautological championship for those who use language as a blunderbuss instead of a rifle. It has recently been won for the fourth consecutive year in succession (tautology is infectious) by Rex Mossop, a sports commentator for one of the commercial television channels in Sydney. Those who speak extemporarily in haste about exciting events like sport are naturally prone to tautology, solecism, and other inelegance. It is a difficult craft, and anybody who has ever tried to practise it will feel sympathetic rather than censorious.

Mossop won his crown of double-tooth or bur marigold with such gems as:

'If I keep getting Boyd and O'Grady mixed up, it's because they look alike, particularly around the head.'

And

'Commentators are going to have a nightmare with these two—well, not twins, but look-alikes, Dane and Kurt Sorenson—because their shapes and silhouettes are the same, too.'

And

'Originally I went for Cronulia, but with all the changes I've had to change my mental thinking.'

And

'Both the referee and the touch-judge were close by on the spot, but, Blimey, you'd have to be Mephistopheles to work that one out.'

And (the one that crowned him king for the fourth regal and tautologous year)

'To their credit, Manly, as the game evolved, deeper into the second half, increasingly made inroads into the South's defence.'

Norman May of the ABC finished as runner-up in second place behind the winner with:

'Here comes the Australian contingent led by two twins.'

And

'Everybody unanimously has disagreed with what has happened on the field today.'

And

'He hit it nicely through the vacant gap.'

And finally at last on cricket: 'The point about this interruption to play is that it means there is now less time remaining in the match.'

Norman May was the commentator who once spelled it out

verbatim and word by word of a Test Match between Australia and England:

'The game is in an interesting position: it means a win for Australia, or a loss, or even a draw—those are the three possibilities.'

Australia's former and now benighted Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, was responsible for:

'I knew on the 6th November that I would have a weekend of very serious private deliberations, which I intended to undertake alone.'

Malcolm Fraser, Australia's peripatetic Prime Minister, produced: 'Because they (the Opposition) have no policies of any kind, they always sink back to that natural habitat where they are most at home.'

We are all liable to do it, especially when talking off the cuff, not just Australians. Here is Alan Weeks of the BBC's *Pot Black* cannoning around the table:

'One frame each then, as we go into the third, final, and decisive frame.'

And

'During that game, Doug Mountjoy made a break of 32 which looked like breaking his own top high of 87.'

Tautologies seem to merge together as two twins that are necessary requisites and important essentials for making a point with emphasis in rhetorical speech.

Pleonasm is another form of linguistic redundancy, very like tautology, but more respectable. It is possible to use more words than are required to give the sense intended for rhetorical effect, as in, 'Lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears.' What else would they see and hear with, for Isaiah's sake? But the verse works magically as a memorable incantation. Tautology is almost always a pejorative word to describe redundancy that upsets the speaker. Pleonasm can be good or bad. It depends on whether it produces the effect intended, and whether the occasion is worthy of it.

'Such are the vicissitudes of our sublunary existence' is a prolix way of saying 'Such is life'. You might carry it off as a piece of pedantic humour, but I should not try. 'Are we quite sure that newly emancipated woman has yet acquired a sound biological status, or secured for herself a harmonious psycho-physiological equilibrium?' Ho hum—if that is a question, then this is an answer.

Verbosity is a near-synonym for pleonasm. The former comes from Latin, the latter from Greek, and both mean a superfluity, redundancy, and otiosity of language (to be redundant, superfluous, and otiose). Both flourish exuberantly in serious language as well as pedantic jokes. The Chairman of the American Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Mr Joseph Hendrie, declared (verbosely) after the Three Mile Island crisis: 'It would be prudent to consider expeditiously the provision of instrumentation that would provide an unambiguous indication of the level of fluid in the reactor vessel.'

The sentence is worth adding to those wonderful examples of inflated diction that are cited in George Orwell's essay *Politics and the English Language*. If it really takes so much verbal and syntactical pleonasm for the NRC to recommend a foolproof instrument for measuring the fluid in a reactor vessel, no wonder the commission moved as slowly as it did in the crisis.

The Deputy Postmaster General of the United States, James Conway, recently reported: 'We're now in what we call a validation phase. Up to this year, we were conceptualizing.' Translated from postal jargon and pleonasm, that means that the Postal Service is testing to see if its concepts of electronic mail will work.

Academic pleonasm is as lush as the political species. The catalogue for Jersey City State College's 'Saturday Semester' courses opens English eyes to the diversity of American higher education as well as the verbosity of American academics. A recent catalogue offered courses in 'Strategy and Tactics for Getting a Job', 'Introduction to Casino Gambling', and 'Political Assassinations'. The prospectus for the 'Workshop in Psychic Potential' explained: 'The aim of this workshop is to study paranormal psychology in its relation to everyday living. Our aim will be to study and apply the concepts and techniques of paranormal psychology to the problems of ordinary and nonordinary experience. "Workshop" here means working on one's own self. Each workshop will try to create an optimal personal environment for exploring the art of unfolding full human potential.' That description is rich not just with pleonasm, tautology, and verbosity, but also with the more dangerous growths of Freudian psychobabble and sociological gobbledygook.

According to Kingsley Amis, if there is one word that sums up everything that has gone wrong since the war, it is Workshop; after Youth, that is.

Speaking of the campaign to expand credit card business in Europe, Mr Lovitt-Danks of American Express recently declared: 'Once plastic awareness comes in we can surfboard on it. It's a hearts and minds battle—once they've got plastic awareness in their minds, we can do battle for their hearts.' That was a fine Irish stew of pleonasm, mixed metaphor, and marketing trendiness.

British businessmen are just as prolix. Here is Mr H. B. Salter, managing director of Argos Metals, on the hazards of foreign travel in search of overseas markets: 'Local media, in no matter how large a metropolis, is invariably self-orientated and therefore useless to the export-orientated businessman.' *Sic* to that 'is'.

Occasionally tautology and pleonasm are rhetorically effective, but very seldom. Let us preserve our equanimity of mind and not prejudge the verdict in advance. But let us resolve together unanimously by a consensus of opinion of all of us to cut out the redundant flab, and write and talk as succinctly as possible, praising but not imitating Polonius, the patron saint of verbosity:

> and now remains,
> That we find out the cause of this effect,—
> Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
> For this effect defective comes by cause:
> Thus it remains, and the remainder thus.
> Perpend.

30/ WATERGATE

Shut the gate, before any more get out

Watergate has been an English word expressing several meanings for more than five centuries. Its oldest recorded use is to mean a channel for water. Then it came to be used for a gate (of a town or castle: for instance the *Watergate* commonly known as Traitors' Gate in the Tower of London) giving access to the Thames or some other body of water. In the Middle Ages it was also used to mean a sluice or floodgate both literally and figuratively, as in:

> If, with ten-fold chain,
> Thy hand hath lockt the *Watergates* of Rain.

It can be used to mean a gate through which supplies of water are brought, and a place through which water traffic passes. It was once used as a medical metaphor to describe urination, in the same way that we still say, if we are feeling prim, passing water.

Now that castles are ruined, moats are stagnant and full of paper, and towns no longer walled, *Watergate* was a modest and obsolescent word until June 1972. But since the plumbers and buggers section of the Nixon White House decided to pay an uninvited call on the campaign headquarters of the Democratic Party's national committee, the word has acquired a useful new shorthand meaning as the popular name for the political scandal and cover-up that took place during the American presidential election campaign, and led two summers later to the unmaking of the President. The high drama and billions of words that flooded upon an unbelieving world from that bungled burglary in the Democratic national campaign headquarters have made the new meaning of *Watergate* the one that comes to mind for most of us.

The *Watergate* is a vast complex of offices, apartments, and a

hotel down in Foggy Bottom by the Potomac in Washington DC. It is built of white concrete with balconies ranged like dragon's teeth castellation. An Italian development company put it up with Vatican money. Most of it consists of typical American apartments for the well-heeled, guarded like a medieval fortress by ubiquitous television cameras as well as human custodians. Many of the court and Praetorian Guard of Richard Nixon lived in these apartments. There is an expensive and predictably bad restaurant.

Opposite is the motel from which the 'plumbers' employed by CREEP (Committee for Re-election of the President) kept watch. The British National Coal Board staff and miners' pension funds have recently bought a half-interest in the famous building in Foggy Bottom. They have got themselves a share not just in recent American history, but also in the most fashionable new cliché in the English language.

The *Watergate*, as building, has done well from the sensational publicity that has made its name an unsavoury household word. The name has not done badly as eponym either. What went on at *Watergate* was such a scandalous piece of skulduggery, and the press played so important a part in exposing it, that we journalists have been unable to resist continually recycling the metaphor. *Gate*, as a suffix to indicate the latest political party games, has become so popular that it is in a semantic *Gategate* ongoing situation. It has proved so useful a piece of journalese that it has pupped a litter of derivatives, not all of them apt.

Oilgate was widely used as shorthand for the flagrant sanction-busting with impunity by the oil companies in Zimbabwe/ Rhodesia. *Muldergate* was used to refer to the South African information scandal that unmade a President, John Vorster, as well as a probable Prime Minister, C. P. Mulder. When the shippers of Bordeaux were caught with their hairy great feet on the scales, their traditional method of trading was happily labelled *Winegate*. There was a less happy example of a *Samoagate* to describe doubtful political shenanigans (and some about which there could be no manner of doubt, no probable, possible shadow of doubt, no possible doubt whatever), in the Central Pacific.

William Safire, the witty American political journalist and wordsmith, helped to popularize *Koreagate* and coined *Lancegate* as descriptions of two recent Washington scandals. He judges that *Peanutgate*, as a description of the investigation of the finances of the Carter family peanut warehouses, is going too far in trivializing

the metaphor and being beastly to Jimmy Carter.

But he commends *Goldingate* as journalistic shorthand for the uproar over the activities of Harrison Goldin, the Comptroller of New York City. He wonders why the 'Dome' of 'Teapot Dome' never came to be used as a suffix to denote financial chicanery in subsequent juicy political scandals.

In general the temptation to build new *gates* should now be resisted, unless, as in *Goldingate*, there is an irresistible pun, or rhyme, or similarity with grandfather *Watergate*.

Otherwise, where is it going to end? Will the company called Cow & Gate, which manufactures baby-food and other dairy products, have to change its name because to most of us 'Cow & *Gate*' will have come to suggest hushed-up dirty work connected with some person, body, or organization called 'Cowand', and other such nastiness that no baby would like to find even in its artificial milk?

There is nothing in English for which one cannot find a precedent, if one looks hard enough. There is nothing new in taking a syllable (like *gate*) out of a word, and endowing it with an entirely new meaning. We did it with *bus*, which is the final syllable of the Latin word *omnibus*, meaning 'for everybody'. The French *voiture omnibus* or carriage for all was introduced at the beginning of the nineteenth century. From that original *omnibus*, many *buses* have rolled.

Churchill manufactured such an illogical chimera word during the war, when he coined *triphibious* (out of amphibious, by the back door) to mean military operations by land, and sea, and air.

There is danger in such indiscriminate use of syllables. Soon after the discovery of new and industrially promising superconducting alloys, an enterprising American set up a firm to manufacture these materials, and called it 'Supercon'. An eminent French professor of engineering science saw this arresting letterhead, grabbed it, asked for any further copies lying around, and carried them off to France to amuse his colleagues. The firm has folded up; but its letterhead has become a collector's item.

The French Professor, who is a *Membre de l'Institut (Académie des Sciences)*, writes: *'Connaissant votre préoccupation* with the French three-letter word, *je voudrais vous soumettre un petit problème de logique et de linguistique qui a vu le jour dans notre Académie depuis que nous avons élu Madame Choquet-Bruhat. Jusqu'à sa venue nous nous appelions entre nous "cher Confrère".*

Cette appellation ne lui convient pas, manifestement. L'appellerons-nous "chère Consoeur"? Et non, here's the rub. *Si j'appelle une dame chère consoeur, cela veut dire que je me considère comme sa soeur, et le problème n'est pas résolu. Nous l'appellerons platement "Madame". Avez-vous une suggestion constructive?'*

In view of the importance of this quandary, in which not only the *Académie des Sciences* but, because of the recent election of the first '*Immortelle*' (Mme Marguerite Yourcenar), the *Académie Française* finds itself as well, a small committee considered the matter carefully, and recommended as follows: Mesdames Choquart-Bruhat and Yourcenar should be addressed as *'Consiblingue'*, and the same term may be used by them when addressing their male fellow-members. The introduction of *sibling* into the French vocabulary could lead to the popularization of this word in English.

Two Frenchmen were quarrelling. One of them, losing his temper, shouted at the other: *'Monsieur, vous êtes un con, mais sans en avoir la profondeur ou l'agrément.'*

A few years ago there was, in the London Underground, an outbreak of posters advertising a new kind of chocolate biscuit called Discon, no doubt from the shape. The picture showed an open package, spilling out the chocolate discs, above the word DISCON. Below, in small print, was the quite needless injunction 'pronounced Dis Con'. One is not proud: one does not mind being *tutoyé*, even by the advertisers.

After this jolly had added to the gaiety of the nation for a week or two, one morning we saw that (perhaps owing to a hint from the French Embassy) the billposters, overnight, had discreetly applied a little overlay, reading 'pronounced 'Disc On', at one stroke making the advice both English and (what is perhaps the same thing) Respectable.

When the well-known British firm, Imperial Metal Industries, developed two new types of superconducting wires, one having a single filament, the other having several filaments, they decided to call these two types Unicon and Multicon. At a discussion meeting Nicholas Kurti, Professor of Physics at Oxford, publicly asked them to refrain, because their French-speaking customers might get the wrong idea about the business carried on by IMI. He suggested two other equally good and more expressive trade names. Since their material differed from other similar materials in that it contained titanium, he proposed that they should call their

types Unitit and Multitit. Being a learned as well as a mischievous man he may even have advised them to use a picture of an Amazon as advertising emblem for the former, and for the latter, obviously, Diana of Ephesus. Alas, although for reasons different from Kurti's, they could not use Unicon and Multicon (these words were registered many decades ago as trade marks), they did not accept his helpful suggestion, and used some very boring terms.

The new word *petrochemicals* is another odd example of chimerical word synthesis. It was coined from the two words 'petroleum' and 'chemicals' to describe chemicals derived from petroleum. Unfortunately the wordsmiths doing the coining—possibly long on science, but short on Classics—chose the wrong half of the word 'petroleum'. We are therefore now stuck with a word that means 'chemicals from rock'. 'Oleochemicals' would have sounded just as plausible, and has the merit of accuracy. The same absurd accident has happened to petrodollars, which must mean rock dollars, a singularly inappropriate term at the moment.

Perhaps the most engaging of these new chimera-words is *monokini*, meaning a brief pair of bathing-pants worn without a top by women. This topless bathing suit was introduced in France in 1964, and immediately known as the *monokini* in a marvellously nutty derivation from bikini.

The bikini was invented in 1946. In the warmth and euphoria of the first summer after the war French women started rolling up the edges of their modest, old-fashioned two-piece bathing costumes, in order to expose more flesh to the sun. An enterprising French designer cottoned on to this craze by producing a tiny costume with the appropriate name of Atom. Models were photographed in Atoms holding containers the size of large matchboxes into which they would fit.

In July of 1946 the United States carried out an atomic bomb test on the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The Atom swim-suit had a quick name-swap. *Le Monde* observed, with characteristic priggishness: '*Bikini, ce mot cinglant comme l'explosion même, correspondait au niveau du vêtement de plage à un anéantissement de la surface vêtue; à une minimisation extrême de la pudeur.*' The bikini, like Bikini Atoll, was only a tiny area, but it hid some highly secret information. Monokini is an even smaller and odder mongrel-word.

31/ WHEREBY

Watch out, whereby is making a come-back, or whatever

Beside the Serpentine and the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens, the nearest thing we have to the Garden of Eden this side of the Thames, the ornithophilist Department of the Environment places little cages as casualty clearing stations for birds that have succumbed to the changes and chances of life in a royal park. On these bird-cages is written: 'When a bird is placed *herein* please telephone—or inform any park constable.' That *herein* is a living example of what the great Fowler (of words not birds) described as a formal word. Anybody speaking or writing plain English would have used 'in here'.

Herein was presumably preferred because it was thought, mistakenly, to be more impressive for public exhibition in so stately a setting. We put on formal words for the same inadequate reason that we climb (in my case grumbling, swearing horridly, and with studs and paper-clips popping at intervals to expose pink, sweaty chest) into white tie and tails for a formal occasion. We should look absurdly overdressed in them in the rush hour on the way to work.

Whereby is a formal word that is showing interesting signs of making a come-back. Old English bred a herd of these compounds beginning with *where-*. A few of them (whereas, wherever, wherefore) are still alive and vigorous.

Whereby and many other strange beasts from the herd (whereat, wherefrom, wherein, whereof, whereon, wheresoever, wherethrough, whereto, wherewith) today have a whiff of formality, or look as long in the tooth as mastodons, or both. Fowler judged that resort to *whereby* generally suggested that the writer had a tendency to formal words or pedantic humour.

We have broken up most of these archaic compounds with the suffix *where-* into their component parts of a preposition and 'what' or 'which' or 'that', or found some other synonym. In one of the most succinct and least entertaining definitions in his *Dictionary* Samuel Johnson defined *whereby* simply as 'by which', and offered examples of its use from Sidney, Hook, Taylor, Milton, Locke, and Shakespeare: 'You take my life,

When you do take the means *whereby* I live.'

'Be ye a knyght of Cornewalle?' '*Whereby* aske ye hit?' said Sir Tristram. Today he would say, 'why' or 'for what reason' do you ask? Except, I suppose, the ancient hero from Lyonesse might stick to *whereby* from romantic archaism, loyalty to Iseult, and distaste for our modern Series 3 rhetoric.

'Thereby hangs a tale.' '*Whereby* hangs a tale, sir?' The musician in *Othello* translated into a modern pop singer would ask: 'By what (or on what) hangs a tale?' He would not say 'sir'.

'Goodwife Keech telling us she had a good dish of Prawnes; *whereby* you didst desire to eat some: *whereby* I told thee they were ill for a greene wound.' That pretty pair of dialect *wherebys* in the second *Henry IV* have become 'upon whiches' or 'and thens'.

Now suddenly *whereby* seems to be coming into fashion again as an impressive word for journalists and politicians to suggest that their thoughts are deeper than those of other men. The trouble is that because we are no longer used to the old word, we keep on getting it slightly wrong. To use a formal word and get it slightly wrong is as embarrassing as to be seen wearing a white tie with a dinner jacket, or to have one's paper clips pop out and one's stiff white shirt unseamed from the nave to the chaps while one is rising to drink the Queen's health.

'Every year there is a predictable charade in Australia called the Premiers' Conference, *whereby* the six state premiers meet the Prime Minister, put their individual cases for how much money they need . . . ' 'At which' or, if you insist on being formal, 'whereat' would have been precisely what was meant.

'A currency grid *whereby* the various European currencies . . . ' The language of currency grids is fraught with mumbo-jumbory impenetrable by the outsider; but I think he meant: '. . . in which the various European currencies' could do whatever they were supposed to do.

The mischief with such archaic formal words is that they blur the

meaning and make it an anti-climax, if we can be bothered to work it out. Scientists and other academics frequently indulge in formal words in such formal and awesome contexts as examination-papers, when they feel that they must put on the linguistic equivalent of sub-fusc: sub-fustian, perhaps. 'Synoptically discuss the means *whereby* . . . ' they start. What they mean is: 'Discuss briefly how . . . '

Whereby me no *wherebys*. Better than them in an exam even the puzzling simplicity of 'Is this a question?' once set in Greats at Oxford. The story goes that a candidate on his way to a First replied: 'If it is, then this is an answer', and moved briskly on to the next question.

Whatever is not a formal word, but a pronoun with complicated interrogative, antecedent-relative, and concessive uses. It has recently made a leap into informality in British English, exchanging its grammatical grey flannel for polo-neck, beads, and ear-ring. It has become a catch-phrase to end a list or some other kind of sentence '. . . , or *whatever*' full stop. 'Take a bus, Underground, taxi, or *whatever*.' People use *whatever* to trail off the end of a sentence that they cannot or do not want to elaborate. In its new use *whatever* means an unknown or unspecified thing or things, a whatnot, or a thingumabob, or thingumajig.

Old-fashioned prescriptive grammarians grumble that *whatever* is behaving improperly, wearing no tie with its dinner jacket, goddammit. But the new use evidently fills a need, and can, on occasions, be charming as well as useful. A stronger criticism of the new construction with *whatever* is that it has become so fashionable that it is boring, and excuses one the need to say precisely what one means. A person who said precisely what he meant all the time would be a monster.

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Words fail me / Philip Howard. -- N
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conjecture. *Words Fail Me* addresses them in Philip Howard's characteristically entertaining and instructive way.

Howard's philosophy can be summed up by his attitude toward *whatever:*

> Whatever has recently made a leap into informality . . . exchanging its grey flannel for polo-neck, beads and earring. It has become a catch-phrase to end a list or some other kind of sentence . . .
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Philip Howard is Literary Editor of *The Times* of London. His books include *The Royal Palaces, London's River, The British Monarchy, New Words for Old* and *Weasel Words.* He was a King's Scholar at Eton, and a scholar of Trinity College, Oxford, where he read classics and philosophy.

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