Pilot Paper No. 1

The Ancient Mariner and The Old Sailor

delights and uses of the English language

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CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

Preface

This is the first of the pilot papers which the Centre for Policy Studies intends to publish. Their purpose is to prepare the path for comprehensive studies on various topics of the day; in this instance, on the teaching of English in schools.

Few subjects, if any, are of more fundamental importance. The language we use, whether for the writing of letters, the construction of memoranda, the transaction of business, the understanding of literature, the conduct of friendships, illuminates or obscures every corner of our lives.

Peter Vansittart has been a teacher but he lays down no laws on the teaching of English. This, he says, 'depends less on rules than on good sense, purposeful hesitation after spontaneous feelings, recognitions plucked from "the other side of the air".' It is an art, a matter of atmosphere. 'The wise teacher has tact, can be most effective when not actually teaching.'

Words are at the heart of the matter—their origins, manifold meanings, their mysteries and magic. The perceptive reader will not be slow to detect the immense seriousness which underlies Peter Vansittart's evident delight in the uses of English, his enjoyment of the vagaries and transformations of phrases and expressions.

Above all, the author does not conceal his passionate advocacy of books, and turns with evident pleasure to the authority of Dr Johnson, 'I am for getting a boy forward with his reading, for that is a sure good. I would let him at first read *any* English book which happens to engage his attention, because you have done a great deal when you have brought him to have entertainment from a book.'

But this is to trespass upon the author's own work. The object of this preface is rather to introduce the competition which it is hoped that teachers all over Britain will enter during the summer of 1985, and to serve as a starting point to their own reflections on the subject.

In early 1986 the Centre for Policy Studies plans to gather together all the thoughts on the teaching of English which will have emerged from the pens of our competitors and others during the remainder of the year, and to publish a full-length policy study on the theme.

Oliver Knox
Director of Publications

The Ancient Mariner and the Old Sailor

I take my title from a remark once heard from John Wain. It illustrates the echoes, nuances of words, their manifold possibilities and roots. Years ago, Virginia Woolf reflected on a novel by Hugh Walpole, 'True, it's competent enough, spare in the wording—but words without roots. Yes, that's it. All a trivial litter of bright objects to be swept up.'

Words are tools, and tools—spades, axes, chisels—have shape, decoration and history. Our ancestors endowed tools with magic, personality, myths. Like numbers, words, particularly proper names, incantations, ritual passwords, had thus to be treated with awe. A misplaced word, ill-remembered phrase, the tactless utterance of the name of a god, enemy, ruler, sacramental function, could spoil a rite, impair social morale, attract the evil eye of the universe.

Words mattered and it remains an arrogant society that overlooks nuance, let alone meaning, offered by literature (which was once defined by Ezra Pound as news that stays news). The ostensibly commonplace contains manifold shades of meaning. Delacroix, I believe, listed twenty different ways of saying 'Mon cher Monsieur'. I would add the same about 'Love your Enemies'.

H. G. Wells called education the building up of the imagination, the inner life with its symbols, myths, parables, metaphors by which we live. Many of these may be far older even than words, rooted very deep in the psyche, however unconsciously. In my own conscious life, I was excited when discovering origins in Sanskrit, Persian, Punjabi, Celtic, of words I had considered typically English. History, like gods, makes us feel at home in the world. It shows words, like Troy, frequently rebuilt over the original structure. They contain elements virtually forgotten, sometimes unexpectedly live, together with continuous possibilities, as, it is said, each stone contains a statue. Arthur Waley traced the movement of a Chinese word, *Ssu* ('temple'):

> 'Its root was, "to take in hand". Hence:
> 1. To hold over in order to take control.
> 2. To hold on, in order to support oneself.
> 3. A place, where things are taken in hand, where business is handled, a court room. Finally,
> 4. Official premises assigned to foreigners for worship and hence a Buddhist temple.'

The Elizabethan *mediocre*, so commended by Archbishop Matthew

Parker, meant 'moderate', as *naughty* meant 'criminal'. *Roly-poly* was successively 'a scoundrel', 'a game', 'a dance', 'a pudding', 'an overweight person'. *Silly* meant 'blessed, holy', as in 'Silly Suffolk'.

I, myself, find that awareness of origins and developments induces a wider and often more subtle view not only of language but of people and peoples. This emphasises the significance of exceptions which do prove the rule, in the sense of *testing* it, and reveals the unending flux of culture, social attitudes, belief. Nothing is ever finished, all is loose ends that tingle, and this can be a stimulus almost intoxicating. My own imagination was quickened by finding that, in medieval tennis, the player might briefly rest and let the ball be thrown into play by a servant, hence *service*.

Some words have vanished from popular life. *Soc*, *blodwit*, *outfangentheof*, seldom much missed. Others drifted in, from crusades, trade, empire. The Celtic, Latin and Teutonic stock was reinforced from the vocabularies of Persians, Arabs, Hindus, Turks, American Indians, French, Spanish. *Kiosk*, *loot*, *turban*, *admiral*, *zero*, *verandah*, *bastinado*, *tobacco*. *Pal* is gypsy. I was glad to find *boudoir* deriving from *bouder*, 'to sulk', thus a place for ladies to retire for this important mood. *Cockney* is Old English, 'cock's egg', an absurdity. For Chaucer, a foolish or spoilt child. For Shakespeare, a timid woman. 'Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels, when she put them into the pail alive.' Applied to towndwellers, mostly Londoners, it suggests country folk's feelings of superiority. Charles Chiltern holds *arse* the oldest known Cockney word, *booze* the second. The huge verbal mint of Shakespeare, Swift, Dickens, Joyce, was prepared early. J. R. R. Tolkien allegedly denounced Shakespeare for ruining traditional English.

Words can sometimes revert. *Gay*, used today rather glumly, compared to its presence in W. B. Yeats's verse, has, I think, returned to its popular associations in the age of Marlowe, as applied to the minions at the Valois court.

We are losing regional epithets and sayings, like 'calm as a clock', 'chanceways' and the Norfolk *timberhill* ('staircase'), and forgetting the origins of others. Bristol merchants *paid on the nail*, laying their money on a flat brass nail in the Merchants' Tozey alongside All Saints' Church.

A severely functionalist society will not lament such losses and may well strive to increase them. To dispense with the residue of long extinct peoples, it may strip the sky of such names as Saturn, Mercury,

Orion's Belt. In Orwell's fable, England became Airstrip One: we may find Orion's Belt becoming Beria's Noose, Kennedy's Side-kick, Thatcher's Handbag. Robbing words of ancient associations with disproved gods and clumsy heroes can be seen as an attempt to free the imagination of lumber, bracing it to start again, in stripped and challenging freedom, with the zest of the French endlessly renaming their streets in accordance to the recycling of political regimes. In the Revolution they replaced the hoary, Christian 7-day week with a logical 10-day week: 1792 became Year One, the months were renamed in honour of virtuous human activities. With superb lack of humour they presented children with such names, impeccably public-spirited, as *Cabbage*, *Brutus*, *Civilization Jemappes République*. The English revolutionaries adopted such names as *In the Gall of the Bitterness in which He Died*, and *Were it not for Jesus we would all be Damned*. They could never have tripped readily off the tongue. Later, a Russian child might be named—I almost said *christened*—*Tractor* or *Five Year Plan*. For all that, one can sympathise with the excitement behind Pablo Neruda's words. 'There are in our country rivers which have no names, trees which nobody knows, and birds which nobody has described. It is easier for us to be surrealistic because everything we know is new.'

The formal abolition of words has never been easy. When Christianity proscribed the old gods, Apollo tended to become St Apollon. The wits of the legislators outpace the popular mind and lose themselves. Who recalls *Fructidor*, *Messidor*, *Thermidor*? The last has now an agreeable connection with lobster, and sometimes doubles as a synonym for a counter-revolutionary coup.

Meanwhile, ancient names persist. They need not, indeed cannot, be kept alive artificially, but we can still gain imaginative vitality from them. Flowers, stars, places have names which vibrate with life and usage, oddity and encounter. V. S. Pritchett observes that London is a heavy city. 'The very name London has tonnage in it. The two syllables are two thumps of the steam hammer, the slow clump clump of a policeman's feet, the cannoning of shunting engines, or the sound of coals thundering down the holes in the pavements of Victorian terraces.'

At a glance into place-names, riddles become light. The Celtic god of light, Lug, himself survives in *Carlisle*, 'Caer-Lug', and the Christian festival of *Lammas*, as Woden does in *Wendover*, *Wednesbury*, *Wansdyke*—and *Wednesday*. *Shepshed*, *Swineshead*, *Ramshead*, recall that Celtic and Teutonic sacrifice usually concentrated upon

the head. *White Colne* depicts the movement of history. In 1163 it was Column de Milbanc, named from a tenant of eighty years previously. His nickname, 'Demi Blanc', a small coin—a hint of meanness?—contracted to *Milblanc*, then *Blanc*, finally *White*. Maps reveal names even for fields. *Labour in Vain*, *Break Back*, suggestive enough. *The Bloody Meadow* is commemorated on a plaque in Tewkesbury Abbey, to 'Edward, late Prince of Wales', of the fifteenth century. Streets, like pub signs, like nursery rhymes, have tales to tell, if sought. For years I passed *Thurlow Road*. Just a name. Now I have learnt that Thurlow was an eighteenth-century Lord Chancellor renowned for his wit, debauchery, blasphemy, arrogance and dignified appearance.

Even menu names can enrich the idle moment. Sole *Mornay*, Escalope *Holstein*, Pêche *Melba*, named from a Second Empire statesman, a Prussian Foreign Office official, an Australian prima donna. Two of these are hung with lively anecdotes, the third is mysterious, a man of silence, and of disputed influence.

In the song 'Loch Lomond', the High Road is the literal path to Scotland, the Low Road is the Celtic highway in the underworld: one Scots rebel is singing to another in an English prison: one condemned, the other reprieved.

You may dismiss all this as trivial. It is not all-important, but by adding to the variety and colours of existence, it adds to the art of existing with *others*, of existing with oneself. Little is more important.

Academic discussion, less perhaps in Britain than abroad, is refining the past into a vacuum of non-events: all facts are non-existent. As summed up by Professor John Bayley, 'a sentence like "Napoleon died on St Helena" merely tells us something about language'. Presumably it implies the impossibility of detaching fact from myth, legend, fable, hearsay, wishful thinking, error, plain fraud, coupled —more interesting, I think—with Talleyrand's remark that Man is given speech in order to conceal his thought. An educational system based upon the denial of facts might well be a lively one and by no means impossible to envisage.

*

Children are dumb to say how hot the day is,
How hot the scent is of the summer rose,
How dreadful the black wastes of evening sky,
How dreadful the tall soldiers drumming by.

But we have speech that blunts the angry heat,
And speech, that dulls the rose's cruel scent.
We spell away the overhanging night,
We spell away the soldiers and the fright.

There's a cool web of language winds us in,
Retreat from too much gladness, too much fear:
We grow sea-green at last and coldly die
In brininess and volubility.

But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,
Throwing off language and its watery clasp
Before our death, instead of when death comes,
Facing the wide glare of the children's day,
Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,
We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.

Robert Graves

For myself, as for all children, early life was a matter of secrets, misunderstandings, accidents, myths, occasional breakthroughs into utter, often inexplicable happiness, a joy of the soul, arbitrary, unearned, probably unrepeatable. It was also a network of questions. Could my head do things if I told it not to? Did George V really have so much mail as his brisk red cars implied? What was the difference between *cad*, *bounder*, *outsider* and *simply impossible*? Like the adult Virginia Woolf I wondered what went on behind faces. Such questions tended to remain unasked, imagination having to supply the answers. Sometimes, indeed, an answer preceded any clearly formulated question.

I was a stolid child, awkward, inarticulate, literal-minded. I had difficulty in understanding that a word could have more than one meaning. ' "Hurrah", cried Jack', seemed a contradiction. At 'Fifteen Men on the Dead Man's Chest', I felt that the dead man's girth must have been excessive. Piccadilly *Circus* proved disappointing. A line of verse lingered with me:

On the low hills to westward
The Consul fixed his eye.

This was surely a self-sacrifice unnecessarily painful.

Thus I had gradually to unfreeze, learn how to expand words,

recognise symbol and imagery, realise that logic was not always the last word in thought and expression. Nothing proved very easy, very simple. In the growth of vocabulary and comprehension, the accidental, mistaken, misheard, could intervene. Mishearing *cloud land* for *ploughed land*, I saw fields as petrified clouds, which at once established them as dramatic, and suggested a vital connection between earth and sky, hitherto wholly independent of each other, and slightly widened my sense of wonder, 'the mystery of things'. Freud's biographer, the psychologist Ernest Jones, seeing an adult point southwards from Swansea Bay, slightly misheard the exclamation 'That's Devon', and imagined that Heaven was very close, perhaps visible on clear days.

One of my early headmasters slurred his words, and, during prayers, I was never certain whether he intoned 'The Love of God' or 'The Lower God'. This induced the notion of two gods, one powerful, haughty, headmasterly, whose veins were apt to stand out like knotted cords: the other, maltreated, misunderstood, exceptionally sensitive and unusual, very much, I began to think, like myself. Yet from this I developed lasting interest in mythologies, the collapse of old beliefs of astrological societies, the triumph of new ones, though, as Hitler and Stalin demonstrated so drastically—using, in Orwell's words, science in the cause of superstition—the collapse is never final, the triumph never wholly triumphant, and what *seems* is only rarely what *is*.

Once, lying in an attic, I saw my stepfather inspecting me through a window. Insufficiently sensible to deduce that he was on a ladder, I had the unpleasant conviction that at certain times he could become a giant. This altered our relationship, on the whole for the worse. The future would be a prolonged process, first of struggling against such beliefs, then of adapting them for my own purposes. They often secreted a grain of reality: ironical, metaphorical, poetic. My exact contemporary, the poet Norman Nicholson, remembers of his childhood, 'I had been led to believe of Roman Catholics that if they missed Mass, the priest would turn them into a nanny goat.'

It was from this stew of imprecision that, with no conscious effort, I found myself writing, for myself, not on classroom orders, and at nine, wrote my first—and indeed last—poem, only one line:

Squelching through the Gulch—Mombassa.

In this I took a pride generally considered inordinate. At best it was nonsense, without perhaps being rubbish. It was response to the lure of

words, drawing me deeper not only into the mysterious but the everyday. Fostering this, I would pore over old maps, creating a private geography from *The Kingdom of Rum*, *The Exarchate of Ravenna*, *The Lands of the Visconti*, *The Khanate of the Golden Horde*, *The Dome of Mohammed Abdin*. They were as real as Brighton Pier, the Pennine Chain, Orkneys and Shetland, and distinctly more real than Hendon Central, Oxford Street, Camden Town.

The art of life, if not, perhaps, the purpose of life, is in transforming handicaps and setbacks into assets, as a failed love affair can free one for promising situations elsewhere. I was quickly a fluent reader, yet frequently unable to understand most of what I read. This, however much a disadvantage in the classroom, was in essence one of reading's most profound attractions. Both reader and writer are detectives, finding and adding to clues scattered throughout the day and, more ambiguously, the night. Tell our stories, everything demands. Stones have been known to speak, there is a cloud that's dragonish, fair is foul. 'Blue is the colour of thy yellow hair.'

Nursery rhymes, street cries, half-heard remarks, jingles, lifted the horizon, could unpin the sky:

Barkely, Popham, Horner, Thynne,
The monks went out, and they went in.

* * *

The wind, the wind, the wind blows high,
The snow is falling from the sky,
Maisie Drummond says she'll die
For want of the Golden City.

I never knew the origin of this last nor, at the time, bothered about interpretation. It was enticingly self-sufficient and, years later, reminded me of George Barker's remark that the unicorn does not exist because it has better things to do.

I did not then want pedagogic explanations, nor, today, do I relish editorial footnotes for such lines as:

Ripeness is all.

* * *

My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely.

This is not to prefer the slovenly, the bone-lazy, but to leave room for my imagination. W. H. Auden spoke for me when he wrote that a poem is a tall story but, if it's tall enough, it makes us go and find the truth for ourselves. Childhood is rich with tall stories. Young Charles

Dickens, walking an urban street, was halted by a wondrous and unknown word engraved on a window, *Coffee Room*, but, designed for the interior, spelt backwards. Here was what Pound called the sound of the nightingale too far off to be heard.

In class, wandering, sometimes illicitly, amongst random books, I would have resented direct questions about:

> Then the Asas all went to their lofty seats,
> The most holy Gods deliberated upon that;
> 'Who would form the chief of the Dvergues,
> From the blood of Brimir, from the thighs of the livid giant?'

The wise teacher has tact, can be most effective when not actually teaching. Later, of course, I became more receptive to instruction, and remember an exciting radio programme conducted by Terence Tiller which scrutinised a single line from *Hamlet*, 'They say the owl was a baker's daughter' (excavating social, historical, mythological patterns which involved prostitution, ritual and commercial: fear of stepmothers: the goddess Athene: sacrifice: the relation of myth to history: the nature of myth itself).

By chance, during an evening prep when I should have been studying French participles or Latin gerunds, I encountered these anonymous lines, probably familiar, even hackneyed, but which at once enchanted me:

> The maidens came
> When I was in my mother's bower.
> I had all that I would,
> *The bailey beneath the bell away,*
> *The lily, the rose, the rose I lay.*
> The silver is white, red is the gold,
> The robes they lay in fold.
> *The bailey beneath the bell away,*
> *The lily, the rose, the rose I lay.*
> And through the glass window shines the sun
> And should I love, and I so young?
> *The bailey beneath the bell away,*
> *The lily, the rose, the rose I lay.*

Here was beauty, but beauty mysterious, out of reach, slightly sinister, with hints of initiation into adult secrets which I was both anxious and reluctant to possess, leaving behind a sensation of white becoming red, perhaps rich life transformed into rich meat, a sensation finally losing itself in what I could not name and perhaps never would. When I

repeated it to myself, in bed, one line almost always had changed: 'And should I *die*, and I so young'. Unwittingly, I had perhaps stumbled upon another secret, one day to be made more explicit by Wagner's *Tristan*. My taste in words, in literature, was not, and never has been, impeccable, and I would have missed much of singularity, delight and queerness if it had been: much of what Dr Johnson called the juiciness of the English imagination. I doubt whether any modern curriculum would include an old favourite of mine, written by Isaac Watts, an ex-slaver:

> Have you not heard what dreadful pains
> Are threatened by the Lord,
> To him that breaks his father's law
> Or mocks his mother's word?
>
> What heavy guilt upon him lies!
> How cursed is his name!
> The ravens shall pick out his eyes
> And eagles eat the same.

Hymns provided the unforgettable, though not always the reassuring.

> There is a Fountain filled with Blood
> Drawn from Emmanuel's Veins.

I unfroze slowly, but sufficiently to realise that not only could a word possess multiple meanings but that words ostensibly identical could, by their relation to others, convey very different associations, nuances, significances, and that groups of words could be endlessly rearranged, creating what I was taught to call 'style', whether in hymn or ballad, story or music hall song.

The writer who first made me consciously aware of the personality of word and sentence, the flavour of a page, was P. G. Wodehouse, whom I found I was reading not for the story he had to tell—like the William books, Dumas, Sapper—but for an atmosphere, aura, pride of words. Similarly, the atmosphere of the Sherlock Holmes adventures far transcended the actual stories.

> 'Look at his window, Watson, see how the figures loom up, are dimly seen, and then blend once more into the cloud-bank. The thief and the murderer can roam London on such a day as the tiger does the jungle, unseen until he pounces, and then evident only to his victim.'

In certain moods I need read no further, deliciously astir, at one with myself, as if sucking a gob-stopper and fearing to finish it. Buchan too conjured up atmosphere, menacing, pungent and spectral, so that in old

age I still cherish my annual reading of *The Three Hostages*, whisky in hand, fire aglow, telephone off the hook.

> The memory of those queer places came back to me as we walked across Berkeley Square. The West End of London always affected me with a sense of the immense solidity of our civilisation. These great houses, lit and shuttered and secure, seemed the extreme opposite of the world of half-lights and perils in which I had sometimes journeyed. I thought of them, as I thought of Fosse Manor, as sanctuaries of peace. But tonight I felt differently towards them. I wondered what was going on at the back of those heavy doors. Might not terror and mystery lurk behind that barricade, as well as in tent and slum? I suddenly had a picture of a plump face all screwed up with fright, muffled beneath the bed-clothes.

Even more so, Wodehouse had begun my private obsession, the understanding and manipulation of words, the tough magic not of brute communication, but of style. Each Wodehouse sentence depended on very deliberate selection of a particular word, then its timing, spacing, its juxtaposition to other words, to the slant of the story. All this created its mood, and the mood, as in *Hamlet*, was the story. We scarcely read either *Hamlet* or *What Ho, Jeeves*, to know how they ended. Almost all of each is familiar, even commonplace, yet the effect is new.

Wodehouse meandered through my mind, periodically dropping anchor.

> 'I thought you had retired from business,' said Mrs Lora Smith Wortlebury, with a sniff that cracked a coffee pot.

There was the Wodehouse female who looked as if she had swallowed the east wind; another, who, when some novice proposed marriage, turned him down like a bedspread; the station-master whose whiskers had Victorian bushiness and gave the impression of having been grown under glass; the golfer distracted by the roar of butterflies in an adjoining pasture, and, a stately procession of one, a gentleman with 'splay feet, and three chins, and when he walked his curving waistcoat preceded him like the advance guard of a royal procession'.

When I left the teaching profession, headmasters were beginning to read *Lolita* and *Fanny Hill* to bored classes. A mild contrast to what, at ten, I read in a Wodehouse school story, describing a master:

> They heard Mr Glossop bellowing at an amused class.

Wodehouse, in my teens, led to Saki:

> She was a good cook as cooks go, and, as cooks go, she went.

To Evelyn Waugh:

> Mrs Ape had no beard, to speak of.

To Sybille Bedford:

> Nannies are a kind of grown-up.

These writers shared a style, seemingly effortless, casual, yet unmistakeable. They have some link with E. M. Forster:

> There are no bathing steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here.

And Graham Greene, writing from Africa: about a black girl holding a baby, who 'smiled and smiled like an open piano'.

Wodehouse led also to Dickens, to Mr Jingle, who 'knew that young men, to spinster aunts, are as lighted gas to gunpowder'. To millionaire Mr Merdle, before suicide, staring into his own hat 'as if it were a well twenty feet deep'.

To James Joyce:

> Still we know how Day the Dyer
> Works, in dims and deeps and dusks and darks.

In all these, no word can be lightly altered. Or take Webster's ending to *The Duchess of Malfi* suggested to me by my friend and editor, Oliver Knox:

> Cover her face, she died young.

This can very effectively be ruined by the simple addition of 'up': 'Cover up her face, she died young.' This is the language of the police court rather than that of the court of Malfi.

The importance of this concern with words cannot be exaggerated. Remember:

> It was an Abyssinian maid,
> And on a dulcimer she play'd,
> Singing of Mount Abora.

Try rewriting it:

> It was a Hottentot maid,
> And on her banjo she played,
> Singing of Laurel and Hardy.

Shakespeare's 'The bright day is done and we are for the dark' can certainly be construed as 'The fine day is over and we must switch off the light'. But there is a strict and readily apparent difference

between them, as between *The Ancient Mariner* and *The Old Sailor*. Rilke's *The Great Night* would alter in nuance if rendered *The Great Evening*, and, I suspect, his poem would be changed absolutely. In this verse by Hugo von Hofmansthal:

> Who can see much of importance where he roams,
> Yet whoever utters 'Evening' says a great deal.
> A word from which flows rare thought, rare sadness,
> Like honey dripping from hollow combs.

Substitute *Night* for *Evening* and I think you will find that the last two lines are at once affected, the last line, I maintain, rendered wholly inappropriate.

At school we had to learn poems, then recite them, a debatable exercise, about which I still remain undecided. I remember a boy having to deliver Walter de la Mare's poem, beginning:

> Far are the shades of Arabia
> Where the Princes ride at noon.

A trick of nerves forced him to replace *noon* with *twelve*, and it jarred all of us, even the least responsive. Attention to individual words underpins the safety of language. *Fat, gross, obese, over-fed, stout . . . riot, mutiny, revolt, rebellion, revolution*. Each can be thoughtlessly misused. *Copse, thicket, glade, chase, covert, spinney . . .* the slow decline, even extinction, of these words tells a story.

J. M. Synge remembered the great Irish linguist, Douglas Hyde, being rebuked by an impoverished West Coast peasant for, in a translation from Gaelic, using *gold* instead of *golden. Gold* was showy, vulgar (Gold Standard, gold-capped teeth, the gold watches of Johannesburg. I always find Rossetti's blessed damozel leaning out from the gold bar of Heaven too firmly reminiscent of a barmaid). *Golden*, slower, deeper, more profound, the peasant implied, contained the finer sense of value. Maisie Drummond yearned for the *Golden* City. Shakespeare's *golden lads* were not gold.

At school, a section from the Old Testament attracted me, by its language, not its sentiments.

> Then said Samuel, 'Bring ye hither to me Agag, the King of the Amalekites.' And Agag came to him delicately. And Agag said, 'Surely the bitterness of death is passed.' And Samuel said, 'As thy sword hath made women childless, so shall thy mother be childless among women.' And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

The terse vividness is built on words which act as cornerstones: *bitterness, hewed*, and for me, then as now, *delicately*, which gives an immediate apprehension of Agag in the tensest of situations. The New English Bible removes *delicately* in favour of *with faltering steps*. I am unconvinced that this is more effective.

WORDS

T. E. Lawrence, on board ship, would tease naval officers by referring to *the Bridge* as *the Verandah*. Amateur historians failed to notice the political distinction between *King of France* and *King of the French*. Difference abounds between *wanderer* and *traveller*, between wise Odysseus and Marco Polo, commercial traveller.

Years later I became concerned with the distinction between *minutes*, exact, methodical, functional, inhuman, a throw-off of the fourteenth-century public clocks: and *moments*, more generous, more rounded, evocative and lingering. Suggestively, *Zeus* means 'Moment of Light'. To me, *moments* echoes the conscious awareness of random, unpredictable beauties and horrors of the passing day, so that Ortega y Gasset could define culture itself not as life in its entirety but just the moment of security, strength and clarity. Within us, Rilke wrote, is a bigger, deeper day than ticking clocks define. Not literature alone, but letters, diaries, appeals glisten with singular moments of light, and of darkness, for, if memorable, moments are not always delightful. Think of that moment, in spring 1945, in which Magda and Josef Goebbels must have stared into each other before deciding to poison their six children.

T. S. Eliot celebrates the lifetime burning in every *moment*:

> The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew tree
> are of equal duration.

In a sudden *moment*, not *minute*, of illumination, we recover our lost selves.

> Fifty years later, Anne Marie, turning the pages of a family album, realised that she had been beautiful.

Jean-Paul Sartre packs a family sorrow, hideously stifled, within a few, very ordinary words.

Dylan Thomas considered *aerodrome* the most beautifully expressive word in the language, its rise and fall perfectly suggesting the plane's smooth ascent, and its calm, satisfying descent. Its supplanter, *airport*, has staccato bluntness which promises future discomfort.

The ugliest word I have yet encountered is *bigshottification*, used

in an American translation from the German. I remember too, as a child, reading *The Wind in the Willows*, which I judged perfect, save for two words, *private scaffold*. They had no place in such a work. I think so still. For months afterwards I would regard with misgivings a certain door in our house which was never opened.

At any time the familiar may, like Anne Marie's album, reveal a strange poignancy.

Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney sweepers come to dust.

The American critic, Hugh Kenner, remembers a Warwickshire countryman blowing grey heads off dandelions. 'We call these golden boys chimney sweeps when they go to seed.'

Boys, asserted Dr Thomas Arnold, do not like poetry. As pupil and teacher I have found this mistaken. I myself loved the anonymous ballads, and can still quiver at Pretty Poll awoken on the cold, moonlit earth by her lover digging her grave. They were of a stark world, not yet extinguished, of wild beauty, love threatened by blood feud, lust, mindless pride, a world of the dark seducer, nut-brown maid, enigmatic greenwood, the black wind and seas sharp as the murderer's knife.

Beside Branxton is a brook: breathless they lie
Gaping against the moon. Their ghosts went away.

These two lines, about Flodden Field, are not a ballad, but echo the ballad world. They also confirm Voltaire's remark that the secret of being boring is to omit nothing. A secret that has not been well kept.

Ballads are still written, notably by the schoolteacher and poet, Charles Causley. I would like to be taught by him though, on reflection, he has indeed taught me much.

Hurry to harbour, Sailor,
Fetch the parson by noon,
Or the fox will lie with your lover
Under the mask of the moon.

Down by the springy river,
Down by the shrieking locks,
Watching love die like a doctor
Is the patient Mr Fox.

Your coat, Mr Fox, is of satin,
Your wallet as gold as a harp,
The gloves on your delicate fingers
Hide your nails so sharp.

Anthologies yielded ambushes of feeling, trespasses into further lands.

Far beneath a blazing vault,
Sown in a wrinkle of the monstrous hill,
The city sparkles like a grain of salt.
Tennyson

My English teacher was enthusiastic about W. H. Auden, and certain lines seemed passwords of a conspiracy not yet possible to join, but perhaps not forever impossible:

The hum of the printing presses turning forests into lies.

* * *

The horrible nurses itching to boil their children.

* * *

The poets exploding like bombs.

In their turn, my own pupils noted:

The lamplight falls on all fours on the grass
Robert Bly

* * *

The light above the street is sick to death.
Louis Simpson

And from Shakespeare:

Hark! I hear horses.

* * *

The web of our life is of mingled yarn.

* * *

Cave-keeping evils that obscurely sleep.

* * *

Our own love waking cries to see what's done,
While shameful hate sleeps out the afternoon.

Once more, everyday words whose juxtapositions are spacemen, entering the new. Mysterious, even hypnotic, rather than obscure.

I was to learn, but painfully, the importance of implication. Housman's line, 'On the idle hill of summer', contains so much more than it states. An atmosphere of leisure and peace, without wind, an ironic contrast to what will soon occur: the imperviousness of nature to human affairs: and, as idleness must end, the hill is vulnerable to intrusion.

Virginia Woolf held me with a paragraph that was itself a short story:

> They were both beautiful and both inanimate. They sat opposite each other across the oval table but all she received from him was the plate of biscuits. They danced together, she inclined her head. He danced divinely but when they sat out together nothing was said. At night her pillow was wet with tears.

BOOKS

Without benefits of radio or television, though whole-heartedly committed to cinema, I hungered for books. Without knowing it, I was obeying the precepts of Dr Johnson:

> I am for getting a boy forward with his reading, for that is a sure good. I would let him at first read *any* English book which happens to engage his attention, because you have done a great deal when you have brought him to have entertainment from a book. He'll get better books afterwards.

Devoted as I was to the Billy Bunter stories in the *Magnet*, and the thrillers of the Sexton Blake fourpenny paperbacks, I profited from households where books lay about in large numbers as a matter of course, and where adults, however philistine, would scarcely have been outraged by Maxim Gorky's remark, 'When I hold in my hand a new book, I feel something alive and mysterious has entered my life.' In fine lack of discrimination I enjoyed equally tales of Agamemnon and Bulldog Drummond, Porthos and Oliver Twist. Because in my local Public Library all books had identical black covers, I stupidly assumed that they were all part of the same book. Choosing from eye-level, I glided through Franz Werfel, Edgar Wallace, Mrs Humphry Ward, Hugh Walpole, Jacob Wasserman, Charles Williams, T. H. White, Rebecca West, Woodrow Wilson, H. G. Wells, Stanley Weyman, P. G. Wodehouse, Henry Brereton Marriot Watson, Gilbert White, Kate Douglas Wiggin, William Aldis Wright *LLD etc.*, understanding little, puzzled by shifts of plot, character, style, but absorbed. Later I was ashamed of so crass a habit, but today I feel there were many worse ways of getting to know the world and its products.

Politicians, dictators and critics who tell me in bad prose how to write, cannot prohibit the random, the accidental. That the then Poet Laureate, John Masefield, trained robins to take sultanas from his mouth, that under early Stuarts wife-beating was forbidden—after 9 pm —could suggest large paragraphs, minor stories. Browsing amongst a higher shelf, I discovered a passage by Hilaire Belloc—surely, I felt the

most beautiful of all names—of which, writing fifty years later, I was abruptly reminded.

> No one has written verses to ropes. There is one verse about ropes, or mainly about ropes, in a chaunty, but I do not think there is any poem dedicated to ropes and dealing mainly with ropes. They are about the only thing upon which verse has not accumulated—bad verse—for centuries.
>
> Yet the rope has one very important place in literature which is not yet recognised. It is this: that ropes more than any other subject are, I think, a test of man's power of exposition in prose. If you can describe clearly without a diagram the proper way of making this or that knot, then you are a Master of the English tongue. You are not only a Master—you are a sign, a portent, a new discoverer, an exception among your fellow men, a unique fellow. For no one yet in this world has attained the lucidity in this most difficult branch of all expression. I find over and over again in the passages of those special books which talk of ropes, such language as:- 'a bight is taken in the standing apart and then is run over right handedly, that is with the sun, or, again, the hands of the watch (only backward), and then under the running part and so through both times and hauled tight to the free end.' But if any man should seek to save his life on a dark night in a sudden gust of wind by this description, he would fail: he would drown.

I have said that words are tools. The book, wrote Kafka, must be an ice-axe to break the sea frozen within us. But they can also be shrouds, wrappings, smoke-screens, to conceal reality, used very commonly by those in authority. I would not have cared to have been Mrs Florence Maybrick, on trial for her life, 1889, having to endure the judge addressing the jury:

> You are apt to assume a connection between the thing which is a proof in the result of which you are to arrive—because it is put before you—and in that way you may be led to do a greater or less degree of injustice according to the state of the case.

Political zealots, bureaucrats, false messiahs, gravitate to what T. S. Eliot called the natural sins of language, sins of which Mussolini was master, though master of nothing else. One is bemused by Robespierre bleating that the Revolutionary Government was the *Despotism of Liberty*: by Hitler comparing his regime of gas, bullet, gallows, to *The Eternal Life bestowed by the Grail for the truly pure and noble.* Reinhard Heydrich termed his secret police *The Press and Information Service*: an East European state disguises its torture unit as *Department for Intensified Investigation*. Himmler reflected that he was to be considered chiefly as a *scientist*. In 1985, a four-year-old girl was

returned from loving foster-parents to her delinquent father, who soon savaged her to death, a London council having been assured that the killer and his mate had been *remotivated*. The Indian Thugs, religious assassins, used *Merchandise* for their intended victims, as the SS used *Canned Goods* for theirs, together with *India Rubber* for truncheons, and *Task Forces* for murder squads. Years ago, Orwell noticed *transfer of population*, *rectification of frontiers*, blurring mass dispossessions and worse. 'Why not name the thing?', Cobbett demanded, incensed by *corporeal infliction* instead of *thrashing*. He would not have relished *industrial action*.

It is not the poor and unschooled who are responsbile for this verbiage. Often their turns of speech are racy, violent, coarse, pungent. The Nobel Prize novelist, Patrick White, comments morosely, 'Educated men bleach the meaning out of words, there is no colour left.'

Linguistic inflation, itself denoting contempt for the audience, has, of course, been commonplace for centuries. When Sir Walter Scott lamented 'an act of wickedness surely more diabolical than any hitherto upon record', few would have instantly appreciated that he referred to the publication of the complete works of Lord Bolingbroke. A publisher's blurb, quite recently, advertised 'Robin Lane Fox's career is little less glittering than his subject.' His subject was Alexander the Great. Winston Churchill cited Bishop Beaufort opening a parliamentary session, 1414, with a sermon, *Strive for the Truth unto Death*, and the exhortation, *While we have time, let us Do Good to all men*. This, Churchill adds, was understood to mean the speedy invasion of France. In 1945, Emperor Hirohito broadcast that Japan had been fighting 'for the common prosperity and happiness of all nations'.

Lloyd George once complained that the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, used words as if they were sounds, not weapons. 'Ah, my friends,' MacDonald mused, 'how easy it would be to listen to the milk of human kindness.' Later, he told us, 'You cannot clip the wings of the rising tide.' Lloyd George himself wielded words like sledgehammers; of him John Burns once complained to the effect that the Welshman's conscience was pure and unspotted because he had never used it. Also, Lloyd George provides an example which MacDonald might not have disdained: 'Compulsion is simply organised voluntary effort,' he said, defending the 1916 Conscription Act.

Flaubert, writing his novels, said that he wished to create, not

character, not plot, but colour. Purple *Salammbo*, grey *Madame Bovary*. Neville Chamberlain used a different grey:

> It is the opinion of my committee that a further investigation should be undertaken, taking into consideration all those matters of which, in the opinion of the new committee, consideration should be taken.

An educated man, Ezra Pound, once argued that Rome and the Renaissance went to rot when it was no longer the fashion to hit the nail on the head. 'A people that grows accustomed to sloppy writing is a people in process of losing grip on its Empire and on itself.' True, yet Pound lived to betray himself with such sloppy thinking as 'Hitler taught the Germans manners,' and 'Hitler and Mussolini follow through magnificent intuition the doctrines of Confucius' (1941). You might think that words could scarcely be further reduced in content. But consider this, from a specialist journal a few years back:

> The Wilson Government took over the country at a time when Dynamic Changes were afoot, in not only it being rescued out of a Decadent Regime, the last of the negative-born Equinox of Pisces, but when we, as the Hierarchical Powers, took over the Royal Glory of Aquarius and are overshadowing and directing Warriors of Truth to restore the Isles of Albion to their Former Glory as a Royal Seat of Learning.

All this verbiage is, of course, unnecessary. A vigorous tradition of plain English has existed from earlier than King Alfred, himself a fine craftsman of language. *Power be not good unless he be good who holds it.*

Shakespeare's prose rings like a hammer of greater power more thoughtfully directed than Lloyd George's:

> This peace is nothing but to rust iron, increase tailors, and breed ballad-mongers.
>
> * * *
>
> There is no more mercy in him than milk in a male tiger.

This sharp, uncomplicated prose-style reaches through Ralegh, Queen Elizabeth, Defoe, Swift, Cobbett, to Shaw, Russell, Orwell, all of whom vigorously demonstrate that simplicity of utterance does not emasculate personality. I myself was early introduced to Malory:

> And thus they fought till it was past noon, and never would stint, till at the last they lacked wind both, and then they stood wagging and scattering, panting, blowing, bleeding, that all that beheld them for the most part wept for pity. So when they had rested a while they yede to battle again, tracying, racying, foyning as two boars.

Notice that *for the most part*, a small but convincing detail.

Slightly earlier, a fifteenth-century politician was addressing:

> That sewer of treachery, sink of greed, charioteer of treason, coffer of vice, fabricator of hate, lie-maker, vilest of informers, most supreme slanderer, traitor to fatherland, Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk.

The art of public life, Evelyn Waugh considered, consists to a great extent of knowing exactly where to stop and going a little further. Here is an MP, Anthony Henry, addressing his constituents, 1714:

> Gentlemen, I have received your letter about the tax, and am surprised at your insolence in writing to me at all. You know and I know, that I am determined to sell it [the constituency]; and you know what you think you know, that you are now looking for another buyer; and I know what you certainly don't know, that I have found another constituency to buy. May God's Curse light upon you all, and may it make your homes as open and free to the Revenue Officer as your wives and daughters have always been to me while I have represented your rascally constituency.

Taxation extracts strong feeling. Sydney Smith, 1820, wrote a prose unlikely to be judged feeble: he observed that there were

> taxes upon every article which enters into the mouth or covers the back or is placed under the foot. Taxes upon everything which is pleasant to see, hear, feel, smell, or taste. Taxes upon warmth, light and locomotion. Taxes upon everything on earth or under the earth, on everything that comes from abroad or is grown at home . . . Taxes on the sauce which pampers the rich man's appetite, and the drug which restores him to health, on the ermine which decorates the judge, and the rope which hangs the criminal; on the poor man's salt and the rich man's spice; on the brass nails of the coffin and the ribands of the bride; at bed and board, couchant and levant we must pay. The schoolboy whips his taxed top; the beardless youth manages his taxed horse with a taxed bridle on a taxed road; and the dying Englishman, pouring his medicine which has paid 7 per cent into a spoon which has paid 15 per cent, flings himself back upon his chintz bed which has paid 22 per cent and expires in the arms of an apothecary who has paid £100 for the privilege of putting him to death . . . His virtues are handed down to posterity on taxed marble, and he will then be gathered to his fathers to be taxed no more.

Dr Johnson was not renowned for taciturnity but could express complex matters with forceful pith:

> Abundant charity is an atonement for imaginary sins.

He defined patron as one who supports with influence and is repaid with flattery.

Wellington, whose despatches are splendidly concise, humane and masterful, once ended a letter:

> I remain, Sir, your humble and obedient servant, which you know, and I know, is a damned lie.

George Seferis wrote:

> As pines
> keep the shape of the wind
> even when the wind has fled and is no longer there,
>
> So words
> guard the shape of men.

I myself enjoy unusual imagery, versatile use of language, but agree with Alain-Fournier:

> I like the fantastic only inside the real.

I am bored by it when it comes from those ignorant or contemptuous of plain speech, as I am by the surrealistic or expressionistic works of those artists who have never troubled to learn to draw. Wittgenstein, moreover, has said that philosophy is the battle against the bewitchment of our senses by language.

I was influenced, perhaps over-influenced, by Croce's saying, that all history is contemporary history. I believe that, while human behaviour can change—see the military history of Scandinavia and Switzerland—human nature, since the last Ice Age, has not. This helps me retain a certain optimism, a belief in *yin* and *yang*, balances; swings and roundabouts. Enemies are always on the frontier, sometimes advancing but also liable to retreat. Present discomforts are seldom novel, even more seldom unique. Consider this passage and—like Sydney Smith's diatribe on taxation, ponder when it was written:

> The world is passing through troubled times. Youth thinks of nothing but itself. It has no reverence for parents or the old, is impatient of all restraint. Young folk talk as if they alone know anything, and what to us seems wisdom is absurdity to them. As for girls, they are forward, immodest and unworthy in speech, behaviour and dress.
>
> *Peter the Monk* (1074)

In his book on Empire (1965), Sir John Glubb recalls that eleventh-century Baghdad, though in political and military decline, had free medical service, new universities, disorderly conduct amongst youth, a

5-day working week, with women flooding the learned professions and much youthful adoration of popular singers.

In my teaching days, *phoney* was a word popular amongst my pupils. Years later, it might have been *doing your own thing*. The distinction is not always very pronounced.

Jargon, superstition, standardization, advertising, all the junket of mass-media, threaten our language, its gifts of precision, allusion, continuity. Consider *massification of the individual* and *manifestations of optical and acoustical razzmatazz*. Books themselves can be deserted by the need, or fashion, for instant sensation, by the mistrust, perhaps fear, of considered thought. 'We must,' ordered the Hollywood tycoon, Darryl Zanuck, 'get out of this joint in twenty minutes.' He was speaking of the Louvre.

Cyril Connolly wrote this, back in 1944, and it is not grotesquely out of date:

> The English language is like a broad river on whose banks a few patient anglers are sitting while higher up, the stream is being polluted by a string of barges tipping out the muck of Fleet Street and the BBC . . . Words today are like the shells and ropes of seaweed, which a child brings home glistening from the beach and which in an hour have lost their lustre.

George Orwell held that no one who feels deeply about English literature, or even prefers good English to bad, can accept the discipline of a political party. He would have had firm views about the 1968 students' violence and its slogans.

When in Doubt, Burn.

* * *

Fire is Instant Theatre.

* * *

> We've combined Youth, Sex, Music, Drugs and Rebellion with Treason, and that's a combination to beat.

Any appeal to the past was feared, for precedent, analogy, plain fact, could swiftly puncture the most grandiose anarchic or sociological dogma. I myself have been attempting to restate the value and strength of the past—we may forget it, it does not forget us—and can only shrug at the ukase of Allan Ginsberg, author of the aptly named *Howl*, delivered to shrieking applause:

> There's nothing to be learnt from History any more, we're in Science Fiction now.

Ginsberg is now a small part of history; I think we can learn from him.

In that noisy decade, we saw a don puzzled to learn that by teaching Jane Austen he was assisting the American war-effort in Vietnam. His critics would have found support from one who had a swift, generalised answer to dissidents of any age, Heinrich Himmler; his plan for the entire Slav population, submitted to his employer, May 1940, included *Reading is not necessary.*

We still witness speakers at universities howled down in the name of free speech, as fifty years ago, we heard Sir Oswald Mosley shout that it was Fascism that brought free speech to England.

Language remains the most subtle and versatile means of communication. Nevertheless, that when language dies the imagination withers, can be denied even by those whose fortunes depend on it. 'Language,' asserted the late Roland Barthes, a professor of literary sociology, 'is, quite simply, fascistic . . . every form of classification is oppressive.' From a critic in the *Times Literary Supplement* we are told, 'Clarity is the death of language'. The other day an Anglican bishop proudly observed that a young man with a stone in his hand could achieve far more than could he in a dozen sermons. This revives a line from the Thirties:

> Lecturing on navigation while the ship is going down.

As a teacher, I disliked an ingratiating attitude amongst certain colleagues who wished to make learning too easy, to be learnt without effort, like Mussolini, Mussolini the iron-jawed, who once said, 'I am the most intelligent animal who ever existed on the face of the earth', but who, in his days as a schoolmaster, could maintain himself only by help of a large bag of sweets, offered timidly, accepted greedily. The colleagues I censured also objected to our cricketers wearing white, because of the totalitarian implications of a uniform appearance.

Almost twenty years after I retired, I was commissioned to write a book for teenagers. When I delivered it, the publishers, one of the greatest in education, reproached me for expecting my readers to co-ordinate themes apparently disparate, to accept metaphor . . . to use their brains. Ten years ago, the editor moaned, there would have been no problem. Secure by having been paid, I naturally told her that this was rubbish: dishing out expensive pap would destroy schools, publishers, Western Europe, as it has already destroyed Eastern. I refused to believe that my own pleasure in the half-realised, the potential, the slightly out of reach, the joy of eventual breakthrough, had lapsed like a crossbow or sedan chair.

Not long ago a teacher suggested, in the *Observer*, that teachers should no longer correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, misuse of words, jargon, cliché, as these corresponded more exactly to demotic speech. *All history is contemporary history*. Over 2,000 years ago, Plato wrote, without pleasure:

> The father is afraid of his sons, and the son feels no awe of his parents. The teacher fears and fawns upon his pupils, and the pupils disregard the teacher and their superiors, while the old imitate the young, fearing they might be thought disagreeable or bossy. The young chafe at the slightest hint that they are disobedient and will not endure such hints. Ultimately, they disregard even the laws, written and unwritten, so that, my God, they have no authority over them whatsoever. This is the root, firm and strong, from which grows tyranny. The probable result of too much freedom is too much slavery, for the individual, for society; from the summit of liberty they fall to the fiercest extreme of servitude.

I have read that between 5% and 10% of 62,000 Omaha children were taking *behaviour modification* drugs, to improve *classroom deportment and learning potential*. Only a week ago, I learnt that the Oxford University Press has produced a dictionary for Russia, which, an official explained, followed the policy of adjusting dictionaries to the demands of different markets. This, *Capitalism* is defined:

> An economic and social system based on private ownership of the means of production operated for private profit and on the exploitation of man by man.

I may sound as if I have disparaged teachers, in favour of some questing, precocious, rather priggish child sauntering at will through the imaginary and illusionary. Not so. I owe much to my own teachers, notably to Miss French, who taught English at my first school.

We all inspect phenomena differently: to a cricketer, a botanist, a gardener, a poet, a policeman, a strip of grass will indicate particular significance. Hilda French had the insight which distinguished which type each of us might be, and she treated us accordingly, with an instinct—she was only 25, without training or degree—for discovering what we separately needed: a hobby, a letter from home, a larger shoe, the selection of a present, a funny story. She detected some interest, skill, obsession, grudge, not readily discernible to others. She recognised my own need for words, encouraged me to ask questions, and to associate books with pleasure and freedom.

This last is not as commonplace as might be supposed. As late as the Forties, a regular punishment at a girls' public school was an hour's detention in the library. Hard labour, hard reading. (This did at least help to produce a Booker Prize runner-up, Penelope Lively.)

Hilda exemplified the tiresome fact that like marriage, comedy, wit, teaching is an art: it can be demonstrated, implied, it can seldom be profoundly taught. None of my teachers prated about the hundred best books, or Noble Thoughts in Noble Languages—the title of a book, large, expensively produced, and, after fifty years, still unread in the school library—nor were they like whoever was once addressed by Dr Johnson:

> Sir, while you are considering which of two things you should teach your child first, another boy has learnt them both.

I began to realise that English—reading, writing, discussing, exploring—depends less on rules than on good sense, purposeful hesitation after spontaneous feelings and recognitions plucked from what Rilke, referring to music, called 'the other side of the air'. Without putting it into words, I learnt that the imagination must keep its roots watered. Early perceptions need not be despicable. Teachers encouraged our infant vision. I did not care to submit to them my Collected Poems, though the time to be expended would have been small, but, under their influence, was careful to collect children's work. It had insight, sometimes singular insight.

> Winter is when the trees are made of wood.

* * *

> Jesus Christ was the man who was sent on a secret mission into the east under a yellow star. They caught him and hung him up but were not allowed to torture him. After three days he ran away and the old dog died of joy.

* * *

> A cow is an animal with legs. All the way down to the ground.

* * *

> Hodur the blind god roams about the halls,
> For that god he never knows when darkness falls.

Teaching can be unofficial. I would like to have been the schoolboy who received this letter from Robert Graves:

> Yes, it is at 14 that one knows for sure that one is a poet, and that one will always be one. Most letters that come to me with poems in them are from the 18-22 age group: they want to be told that they are poets, they want to

> be told how to publish their poems so as to make other people think they are poets. But in their hearts they know they are not really: they are people in love or sorry for themselves, or with a social conscience or something. So I was glad to get your poems, because I know how you feel. A wild, invincible feeling.

Thomas Mann maintained that education is a matter of atmosphere, nothing else. This may be disputed, though not by me. My teachers certainly provided atmosphere, that of eccentricity and guile, humour and bizarre exuberance. They provided intelligent preparation for the holidays. Their lessons have faded, their atmosphere has not. I still write with an ear cupped for their comments.

They never preached, knowing, with Gide, that beautiful feelings make bad art. John Masefield, a virtuous man, was an inferior artist to Rimbaud, who was not. They did not confuse a vigorous and convincing pamphlet on anti-fascism, the Peace Pledge Union, Arms for Spain, with literature. Whether we like it or not, Rebecca West reflected, we must admit that there is very little in the works of Shakespeare which can be used as propaganda for adult suffrage. Without spelling it out, they taught me that very plausible arguments can finally depend on the tone of voice and personality of the speaker. *Love your Enemies.* I ask you to listen to this:

> How can you find pleasure in shooting from behind cover at poor creatures browsing on the edge of a wood, innocent, defenceless and unsuspecting? It's really pure murder. Nature is so marvellously beautiful and every animal has a right to live . . . It was of extraordinary interest to me to hear recently that, even today, Buddhist monks, when they pass through a wood in the evening, carry a bell with them, to make any woodland animals they may encounter, keep away, so that no harm will come to them. But with us, every slug is trampled on, every worm destroyed.

My own reaction to this passage was modified when I realised that the author, complacent about his share in the slaughter of millions of humans, *Canned Goods*, was Heinrich Himmler.

Teachers answered my questions honestly. Fulfilling the Roman definition of education, they were concerned more with drawing out than with putting in, not regarding their charges as empty barrels. They encouraged me to read what I liked, though, in an off-hand way, indicating certain shelves I might possibly have overlooked, lending me books and articles which they suggested, courteously, tentatively, I might enjoy, and were not offended when I did not. So little was taught in literal confrontation, yet so much was given. 'I'd like your opinion

of this . . .' One requested me to review a book for the Magazine, another invited me to outline a Utopia. This I did with enthusiastic self-importance, unaware that I was being examined for my convictions, negligible, and opinions, conventional. Only much later was I fully aware of the tact behind the casual. Camus, you remember, defines *charm* as the ability to get the answer Yes, without having asked any definite questions.

These men and women could cut out dead tissue. 'Dead words smell badly', a Russian poet wrote, before arrest and execution. They were, I suppose, amateurs, compared to our contemporary layers of degrees, teachers' training colleges, diplomas of education, well-organised unions. Like Harold Macmillan, 1975, they would have approved of Professor A. J. Smith's verdict on an Oxford Curriculum —that, save for future teachers or dons, it would be totally useless, except that, following hard and intelligent work, the student should be able to detect when a man is talking rot, and that, for him, was the main, if not the whole purpose of education. W. H. Auden might have thought rather similarly when he wrote:

> Clear from our heads the masses of impressive rubbish.

Pupils may discover with bitterness or hatred that a teacher can foster talent, he cannot provide genius. No great work emerges from Creative Writing Classes. But, I again quote Hugh Kenner, teaching is an act of generosity, a function of sharing. Kenner himself long ago alerted me to the latent powers of imagery, citing a few words from *Hamlet*:

> . . . makes mouths of the invisible event.

He saw this as a triple metaphor:

1. Guns trained on a distant horizon.
2. The shouting face of an officer.
3. A nose thumbed at destiny.

The final truth of this did not matter. It was usefully suggestive: if it were no more than a Tall Story, it was tall enough to stimulate my own interest.

My optimism is tempered by scepticism, which trusts less in human goodness or evil than in human restlessness and curiosity, without being certain that either are biologically inherent. A Tunisian tribe of cave-dwellers have apparently remained static for 3,000 years, uninterested in tools, pottery, new knowledge, very little concerned with fire or clothes.

Though regularly presented with my pupils' IQs I was only mildly affected by them, remembering that, with one exception, those in the

dock at Nuremburg for crimes against humanity scored considerably above the average. I doubted whether many of my favourite writers were of outstanding brain power, and reckoned that Arnold Bennett, Leonard Woolf, Somerset Maugham, Aldous Huxley, would probably have outpointed Dostoevsky, Virginia Woolf, Walt Whitman, Turgenev.

In my day, books may have had to do too much in schools. Today, gadgetry can release the book for what it can do best, and only it can do, the revelation of interior vision. Cinema, TV, computer have a necessary function, but as colleagues, not supplanters of libraries and intelligent debate. A word-processor cannot transform a poor book into a masterpiece. I remember Chesterton exclaiming that it took an age that has nothing to say to invent the loud speaker.

Telescope, microscope, can yield extraordinary vision. But books, I think, keep pace with invention. I come across, professionally, very intelligent, vividly written, technically adroit books for youth, experimenting less with syntax, sense, logic, than with suggestive notions of time and space, past and future, memory and intuition, open about social and sexual relationships. Controversy necessarily abounds, not least as supplied, 1985, in a book by Jacqueline Rose, who maintains that, until 1974, all writing for children, particularly *Peter Pan*, has been employed for 'often perverse and mostly dishonest ends . . . the ongoing sexual and political mystification of the child.' Simultaneously, I also presume that university admission boards must be finding that in many homes books are no longer a matter of course. Not that this axiomatically entails illiteracy. A. L. Rowse's childhood home possessed but one book, *The Home Preacher*. It cannot be maintained that Dr Rowse has failed to fill the empty shelves. An age of semi-literacy produced the titanic nineteenth-century novel, humanity's supreme gift to itself. From pious mothers and godly upbringing may emerge a Stalin, Hitler, Goebbels, Himmler; a socialist father produced Mussolini.

Finally, I admit I have said nothing of lateral thinking, post-structuralism, post-modernism: about society's current disdain for classical languages, and indeed most languages, about the value of examination set books—I should have said texts—about our debt to translators, whom Monk Gibbon has called the diplomats of literature. I have refrained from using such words as *integrity*, *syndrome*, *nowhere situation*, *relevant*. But, I repeat, through language we roam time, space and beyond. We see marvellous arguments, and see through them.

Out of the sea of sound the life of music,
Out of the slimy mud of words, out of the sleet and hail of verbal imprecisions,
Approximate thoughts and feelings, words that have taken the place of thoughts and feelings,
There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation.

T. S. Eliot