

Clichés

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I've got a paperback book written by a female linguist, if I may so describe her without being accused of sexism. It's titled *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Underneath there's a picture of one of the stripcartoon heroes of modern folklore. I showed it to some of my younger associates who couldn't decide whether it was Superman or Batman or Spiderman or Captain America. You can imagine the kind of impossibly muscular and macho creature of futuristic pulp-magazine fantasy. Anyway, the point is that the bubble coming out of his head contains the words, in large 'Gothic' print: Gadzooks! Zounds! Fie on thee, foul villain!

Well, the message is clear before you've even opened the book. The question asked in the title: 'Language change — does it signify progress or decay?' is already answered. We no longer say Gadzooks! or Zounds! or Fie on thee, foul villain! By strong implication, the past is comic, we've left it behind in the inexorable march of Progress, and 'decay' is a word for stick-in-the-muds and stuffed-shorts, and change is something to be *welcomed for its own sake*, whichever direction it may take; for is it not a symptom of Life, Vitality, Vigour, and what you will? So that if you find fault with English in its modern form because of its sloppiness, looseness, contempt for established meanings and pronunciations, its love of jargon for its own sake, all its childish love of novelty

and catch-phrases, then you are 'a member of the anti-slovenliness brigade', as Ms Aitchison, the author of the book that I've mentioned, explicitly calls you. It's a symptom, not of simple dislike of barbarisms, but of mere senility. She makes a highly suspect analogy: 'Every generation inevitably believes that the clothes, manners and speech of the following one have deteriorated.' Well, if I may speak for my own generation, that's just not true. It's rather the reverse: it's the younger generation that reject the older generation. Very often they've got good cause to. My generation lumped everything that it despised and wanted to get rid of under the catch-all label of Victorian. We were right to condemn what seemed their outstanding faults of stuffiness and complacency and hypocrisy, we were right to laugh at their stovepipe hats and billycocks and crinolines, and all the Pooteresque absurdities of petit-bourgeois respectability. The curious thing is that in the course of the lifetime of that Victorian-baiting generation we've come to see a lot more in the 19th century than met the eye in the 1920's. You remember what Mark Twain said about his father: 'When I was fourteen the old man was so stupid and ignorant that I could hardly bear to have him around. Then I went away for a few years. When I came back home after seeing something of the world I was astonished to find how much the old man had learnt in seven years.' Well, that's a discovery that we should always be prepared to make. And I have long ceased to be astonished to find that in many ways the Victorians were considerably more respectable — I mean worthy of real respect — than we had supposed.

For one thing, their language was still essentially the language that they'd inherited from the 17th and 18th centuries. There was a press, but it wasn't yet a *popular* press in the modern sense; and it hadn't become inflated into the Media — which alone would make a sensible man envy his forefathers. Since their eyes and ears and minds weren't assaulted and insulted from all sides by illiterate commercial plugs and pop-journalese and disc-jockey jabber, they were far better able than we are to use their language as a means of conducting discussion and, no less important, an internal train of thought. By contrast, a great deal of what passes for language nowadays isn't really language at all, any more than chewing-gum is a food. There has never been an age before this — because there were never before the conditions in existence to make it universally possible, and indeed inevitable — that was everywhere so stultified with sheer meaningless claptrap. It's never before been possible to think *entirely* in clichés, or so hard not to think in clichés. Suppose some public ass gets up on his hind-legs and delivers an oration like this: 'As far as I'm concerned, my philosophy is that the grass-roots level will confirm that at the end of the day the name of the game is credibility. That's

what it's all about. In this day and age, at this moment in time, we must be prepared to make an agonizing reappraisal, to re-programme and restructure our approach, and get down to the nitty-gritty; for when the crunch comes it will separate the men from the boys, and it'll mean an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with a traumatic on-going crisis situation ...'.

I could keep on in this strain ad infinitum and ad nauseam, but there's more than enough of it surging round us like a soapy, scummy tide without my deliberately adding to it. I declare emphatically that anybody who can think that this kind of thing is an improvement on the language of, say, Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene — I've chosen twentieth-century writers, you observe — then he (or she) is incapable of discerning merit of any kind in any language. It used to be believed that language was the essential distinguishing characteristic of human beings: it allowed us, amongst other things, to think, to form a coherent abstract model of the world inside our heads, as it were; that's why the old buffers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance used to go on about the Microcosm. What kind of mental world can you imagine inside the heads of generations that get their *ideas*, as well as their language, in the form of prefabricated plastic bits that can be stuck together just as you please: mental Lego, that saves them the trouble of thinking at all? To be able to find decent models of English now there's no point in seeking it amongst the incessant flood of meaningless junk that the forests of Canada and Scandinavia can hardly keep supplied; you're absolutely compelled to turn to older, real literature, written by people who had something to say, and were intelligent enough to say it clearly, and had in currency a language fit to say it in with both conciseness and dignity.

It wouldn't matter greatly if, amongst all the linguistic junk, there remained a *core* of English, a literary or 'mandarin' English, if you like, that was essentially unaffected by the trash; for everybody with a decent education who's properly saturated with at least some of the good writing of the past *does* in fact make judgments on the style as well as the content of what he reads and hears — can't help making judgments on it — how could he? And such people can easily agree upon what constitutes good, clear, simple, *correct*, beautiful English; and in practice they always have done; and in practice they always will, whatever the with-it linguists may say; though they themselves set themselves up judges and pontificators. They only turn the whole subject inside out. With a cocky perversity that seems more typical of the smarty-boots fifth-former who knows so much more than his elders, they pretend to champion the new barbarism. But you notice that they

don't consciously write like that. Their English may be barbarous, but it's unconscious barbarism. They still *try* to write in the traditional way, and would if they could; but they can't.

Talking about jeering at the Victorians, with their prudery about sex: what about all the *new* pruderies of the modern ad-mass world that would have puzzled *all* previous generations? A lot of Victorian absurdity sprang from the attempts of nobodies to try to grasp at a social level a few notches above them; and the same in language, reaching up to a linguistic level a few notches above their heads. But where the moderns are no less absurd is in their reaching after *moral* standards far beyond their grasp. One of the most insufferably boring things about people nowadays, and particularly the excitable young, is their assumption of moral righteousness in all spheres of human life. You might think that that is itself a very Victorian trait; that it doesn't consort very well with the parallel vogue of 'permissiveness'; and that it's no less hypocritical than the Victorian attitude to sex. After all, the Victorian attitude was itself a superficial affectation, always belied by the positively Dionysiac reality underneath the surface; for our great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers *were* men and women — if I may say so without being 'sexist'. By comparison the new 'humanitarian' hypocrisies, with all their neo-revolutionary claptrap about liberty, equality and fraternity, are thin stuff; and the people who parrot all the Marcusean and sociological and psychological jargons don't seem to know, or very much care, whether they're men or women. We live in an age when a man is expected *not* to be manly, and a woman is subject to great pressures to make her ashamed of being a woman. What other generation could have invented such a word, or such a notion, as 'Uni-sex'? There's more sex in the head, I suspect, in these permissive days, than ever before. We're allowed to display more flesh these days than our forefathers, and especially our foremothers; but we're no less prudish in other matters than they were. Our open-minded contemporaries haven't yet satisfactorily solved the problem — their problem, not mine — of what to call a latrine, privy or necessarium. The conservative upper classes call it a lavatory, with the implication that there's nothing in it but a wash-basin; schoolgirls and suburban women call it the loo; and the lower middle class and respectable tradesman class genteelly call it the toilet; which is a sad humiliation for a word that used to be applied to a lady's dressing-room. American genteelisms have of course always left the English equivalents far behind. It was the Americans who put trousers on the piano — 'limbs'; and it took the Americans to turn the bogs into the 'comfort station' or the 'powder-room' or the 'rest-room'; though I should have thought it a most unusual and indeed unsuitable place to have a rest. You'd probably be taken up by the police if you attempted to.

But the areas where modern cant really comes into its own are those where any kind of inequality is implicit. Antisexism has of course been with us long enough to be an intolerable bore. In an age where women are freer than ever before and men are more circumscribed and frustrated and hag-ridden than ever before, subject to more economic, legal and social-conformist pressures than ever before, the harpies are still yelping for more freedom than there is in the world to give them; and when they don't, and can't, get more than there is, they still blame the men; who, if they happen to be heterosexual and philoprogenitive, have as much freedom as a caged white mouse on a treadmill. The libertarian students who wrecked the Sorbonne and fought pitched battles in the Boulevard St Germain a few years ago sneered at the daily life of the average bourgeois breadwinner, in the untranslatable phrase: Métro, boulot, dodo — get to work with all the other millions, get through the day's work, then crawl into bed. Well, that's life for the average Western man these days, whether he likes it or not; as the youthful protesters find out for themselves. What have women to complain about that men haven't? Anyway: what are the modern pruderies bothered about? Disability, for one thing. Consider the euphemisms now not merely fashionable but almost statutory. There are no poor any more, only the 'underprivileged'. There are no cripples any more; only the 'physically handicapped'. There are no village idiots any more; only the 'mentally handicapped'. There are no mad-houses any more. They were long ago euphemized to lunatic asylums, then to mental hospitals, and no doubt by now they're acquiring some new label that I don't know about. There used to be uncivilized or savage or backward countries; now there are 'underdeveloped' countries. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. What shall we call this age of Progress and Enlightenment, in this day and age, at this moment in time? Let's call it Bedlam. That's a word that began as a euphemism too.