

When did we stop caring about meaning? *

Robert Fisk **

I've been clipping my way these past weeks through a great pile of newspapers filed away from my days as a reporter in Northern Ireland. Rather dull Fisk pieces, I must say, but – turning to old copies of the review sections of the pre-Guardian Observer and the pre-Murdoch Sunday Times – I have been quite taken aback by the quality of the critics. These were the days when you could find Graham Greene reviewing books and Malcolm Muggeridge and AJP Taylor. Do we have writers of this talent reviewing today? Is our writing getting worse? I've made no secret that I suspect the internet and text messaging have damaged literacy.

I am brought yet again to this horrid conclusion by the annual report of the Open University. Now don't get me wrong. I'm all in favour of the OU. I hold an honorary degree from the OU. I think it has transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of students who would otherwise have no formal education above school. All praise to the OU. But not to its annual report. I only had to open page six to realise that my old and loathsome "core mission" is back alive. I think it was the late Robin Cook who invented this vile phrase when he announced that the Foreign Office had a "core mission" not to sell military aircraft to horrid people. He later discovered we couldn't break our contract and sold them anyway.

But up it pops from the OU in the words of Lord Puttnam, the Chancellor. The OU has a "core mission" to widen education. It's all about distance – because, of course, you can be an OU student in Malawi or Bangladesh – but must this really be called by Lord Puttnam "a unique learning experience"? And I'm not keen on reading that on the "digital planet", OU research is

looking at those who have been “left behind, older people and the socially excluded”.

Note how those of us who prefer books to laptops are “left behind” or “socially excluded”. There’s another giveaway later when we are told the OU’s faculty of health “took a critical [sic] look at older people’s alleged fear of technology and inability to ‘get it’”. Then, Martin Bean, the Vice Chancellor of the OU, tells us that his institution has a “founding mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas”.

I get the point. But what does Mr Bean actually mean? Later, Mr Bean has a reference to another tired old athletics metaphor, the “level playing field”. Three pages later, we have an anonymous paragraph to say: “The Open University is mapping its online industry curriculum to the CIO Executive Pathways competency framework – providing future chief information officers with essential skills to reach board level.” Sure. But after reading that, will they be able to speak competent English?

Then we have the Head of Talent at Waitrose – although I’m a bit mystified by the lady’s title – who says how they had “to come up with a new tool to embed learning and development across a bigger and more complex business”. What? WHAT?

By page 34, the OU announces that “we are delivering [sic] our mission on a global scale”. And, turn a page, and we find: “We are working with our supporters to deliver our mission.” Later, the OU boasts of its help to Bangladesh students wanting to learn English and notes that “a much higher degree of interaction was taking place between them, teachers told the secretary (of the education ministry) – in English”. I dearly hope they don’t use words like “interaction”.

Annual reports are not book reviews. But can you see what I’m getting at when, for example, I quote Muggeridge on Kipling? “He really was a bit mad; the conflicts and sicknesses of the age had got into his bloodstream. He was himself our own sickness and pain; the Straw Dogs were after him, and the

inescapable answer was a Clockwork Orange. This, of course, was what gave his writings so fantastic and early an impact. Hence the sentimentality, the tingle and the slaughterhouse tang of him; hence, too, the poignancy, the tragic aptness of his words. As when he wrote of Policeman Day, and how the night got into his head.”

And here is Frederic Raphael reviewing The Honorary Consul: “Graham Greene is one of the greatest of modern war reporters. There is no ideological battlefield from which he does not send up-to-the-minute dispatches. He is deterred neither by distance nor by danger from getting into the firing line. He seems indeed a citizen of the world. He remains, however, a regional writer; he has more in common with Thomas Hardy than with Somerset Maugham. His Wessex is, no doubt, a metaphysical parish, but all his characters live in it and they are as narrowly related to each other as the most inbred, even incestuous, cast of a rural drama.”

Bang! Those words have a made-to-mean look about them. All sentences spot-on; there is an essential aptness (Muggeridge’s word) about them, like reading Eliot on poetry. Coleridge said “you become a man” while you read Defoe but I prefer this quotation from a contemporary of Defoe. “He is a Man of great Rashness and Imprudence, a mean, mercenary Prostitute, a State Mountebank, an Hackney Tool, a scandalous Pen, a foul-Mouthed Mongrel, an Author who writes for Bread, and lives for Defamation.” Quite a mission statement. And probably what Messrs Puttnam and Bean will be calling me this morning.

NOTES

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