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The Miserable Git's Guide to Modern English Usage

A preliminary essay

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17th November 2009

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Work *n.* Job (*qv*). Unpleasant, inconvenient and stressful means of earning barely enough money to pay the bills. By definition if work is enjoyable, then it is not work but play, and since play is generally considered to be inappropriate in the workplace it is therefore to be considered an illegitimate activity and should be ceased at once.

Contents

Introduction	5
The Lexicon	14

shakers. *v.* To indulge in that form of naivete that gives responsibility to another for one's own welfare. Belief in the promises of others. Learned, hence taught, lack of confidence in one's own abilities and judgement. Belief that someone else really does understand how things work. (*Etym.*, from *trussed*, to be tied up).

Twitter

UGC *abbrev. (obsolete).* Union of Garages and Car parks.

University *n.* In former times a university was a foundation dedicated to the betterment of humanity in which young minds were trained in the sublime arts of independent thinking, scholarship and study with a view to producing rounded individuals capable of taking a full part in society. Because this was restricted to men, who alone were thought capable of benefiting from the experience, universities were in reality mere training academies in which the rich and powerful learned how to maintain their ascendancy over the rest of the population. In our more enlightened times, universities are largely third rate business enterprises motivated purely by profit, the prestige of their vice chancellors, and the comfort of senior academics, in which students are called customers and are sold, in return for large sums of money, a piece of paper largely devoid of any value. Because the price of a university education is increasing all the time, universities are likely to become places to which only the children of the rich are able to go, and thus will become mere training academies in which the rich and powerful learn how to maintain their ascendancy over the rest of the population.

VAT *abbrev.* Vague Additions to the Total. A form of tax added to the true value of goods and services by unproductive functionaries who, despite adding nothing themselves, desire a slice of the action.

VAT Inspector *n.* Paramilitary tax collector for whom the agreed laws of the land are merely suggestions for behaviour.

VFM *abbrev.* Value For Money, i.e. cheap.

get on with the proper business of medicine, which is to secure decent pensions for doctors and over prescribe antibiotics.

Strategic management *n.* Activity at the highest levels of organisational management aimed at discovering the most convenient methods for downsizing (*qv*) or rightsizing (*qv*) those parts of the workforce who actually do something useful, while preserving the privileges and disguising the incompetence of senior managers, and ensuring a steady flow of income for their personal coffers.

Strategy *n.*

Student *n.* A university (*qv*) customer.

Tax *n.* State organised theft. In criminal circles the same activity is called protection money.

Tax Inspector *n.* Bagman or bagwoman who collects protection money on behalf of the state. Like their counterparts in MI5 (SS) and MI6 (SIS), etc., the tax inspector is ashy retiring creature who would rather avoid the spotlight of publicity. Unlike the former, however, who in the main make no bones about their activities, tax inspectors prefer to ruin lives under the cloak of public service.

Team *n.*

Team Leader *n.* Boss

Team Player *n.* One who does what he or she is told to do by the boss, (team leader *qv*).

Telephone Answering Machine *n.* Useful device enabling one to avoid talking to other people.

Terrorist *n.*

Thatcher, Margaret *n.* Establishment revenge on all the uppity hippies, feminists, socialists and poor people.

Thought *n.* An outmoded preoccupation of the hopelessly romantic.

Trust *n.* A commodity for sale on the open market. A form of naivete that allows the unscrupulous to get their way without the inconvenience of having to keep promises. State of being appropriate only for those who are neither movers nor

Introduction

We live in interesting times, and those who are au fait with ancient Chinese thought will appreciate that this is not an altogether good thing. For the ancient Chinese ‘May you live in interesting times’ is a curse, one of three and curiously the mildest of them. The other two, in order of ascending awfulness are, ‘May you come to the attention of the Emperor’ and ‘May you achieve the Imperial appointment you have been chasing’. Taken together these three curses seem peculiarly apt for the world in its current state, and what an awful state it is.

Language is a reliable weather cock for the social and political mores of a historical period, so the condition of a society can always be judged by how its language is faring, and ours doesn’t seem to be doing too well. Language has also always been the favourite target for those whose trade is power brokerage. From despotic monarchs to the local school bully, those who want to have or maintain power over others always seek to control how they use words believing, possibly correctly (although it is moot), that control of language is also control of thought. This fact, if such it is, has been recognised by many writers and scholars over the centuries, most notably George Orwell whose Newspeak in the book *1984* was the primary tool of social control used by Big Brother. Even Terry Pratchett, one of our most accomplished social philosophers, noted that without the words to frame a thought, it might not be possible to think the thought itself. Furthermore, since knowledge in our society is overwhelmingly recorded in written and spoken language, control of the language also becomes control of knowledge itself, something that the Mediaeval Church knew very well in its persecution of heresy.

Looking at the English language as it is at the moment, it is quite clear that since the 1980s, if not before, it has been under sustained assault from at least two directions. The first is a product of the so-called ‘managerial’ revolution, in which

perfectly good words have become mangled so as to reflect a free market view of the world. The word 'excellence', for example, has acquired a sinister authoritarian cast that historically it never had before. As part of the same trend, every social phenomenon that can be has been relabelled as 'management', even when manifestly inappropriate, and every undertaking, including voluntary association, redefined as 'business'. This creates and maintains an illusion of consensus around the notion that the only worthwhile goal of endeavour is profit, or more precisely money. Some way along the journey the Ferengi seem to have taken over.

The second assault on the language derives from what has become known as 'political correctness', although it is apparently no longer politically correct to use the term political correctness. I am not surprised. The term has distinctly Stalinist overtones which the self regarding (and overwhelmingly lower middle class)guardians of political correctness are desperate to repudiate. The term has roots in a similar, earlier phrase 'ideological soundness', with which those self same guardians tried to beat the sixties generation into what they considered was a respectable conformity. Same process, same kind of person, just different outfits. From floaty dresses, kaftans, beads and bells, to boring grey business outfits; whatever the dominant reality requires of its adherents. In some ways this is not surprising, but it is disappointing. The origins of political correctness as we now know and loathe it lie in the New Left of the 1960s. During this period the so-called 'baby boomers' (of whom I am one, as if it wasn't obvious) cut their political eye teeth in a massive rejection of the status quo. These were people who were born around or just after the end of the Second World War. It seemed obvious at the time that the two world wars had been caused not only by a rampant and amoral capitalism, but by old fashioned notions of empire, status, skin colour and worth measured by possessions, especially if those possessions had been acquired through historical acts of theft

with the aid of cunning camouflage, but often simply staying so quiet and out of the public gaze that no-one notices them. There have been tragic instances in which individual scholars have been ejected out of their natural habitat altogether. However it turns out that such individuals have often been able to adapt to their new, quite alien environment surprisingly well, and many go on to achieve great things independently. Indeed it is quite noteworthy that many of the great advances inhuman culture have been accomplished by individual scholars who have escaped from the university system altogether.

Senior Lecturer *n.* One able to extend a single second-hand, often vacuous, idea into a course of lectures (*cf* academic, lecturer, professor).

Senior Manager *n.* Psychopath, skilled manager (*qv*), one who has managed to climb the greasy monkey puzzle tree of promotion by eradicating or sabotaging any rivals and standing on the faces of those who are subordinate to them. Senior managers usually have an extensive history of active involvement with meetings (*qv*).

Social Constructionist *n & adj.* One who has made a conscious decision to have him or herself socially constructed into the in-crowd.

Sock drawer *n.* Seed bed or nursery for a sockery (*qv*).

Sockery *n.* Curious accretion of odd socks that seem to accumulate in inaccessible corners of a bedroom.

Soldier *n.* One whose duty requires that he or she clears up the mess created by politicians (*qv*).

Smoker *n.* An especially evil individual who is personally responsible for everything that is bad about the world, including the weather. Were it not for smokers there would be no disease, no hospital waiting lists, no crime, no global warming, no credit crunch, and no pot noodles. Without smokers the Chancellor of the Exchequer could at last abolish all taxation whilst ensuring peace and plenty in a world of global harmony, equality and justice. The medical profession, meanwhile, could

selves with massive end of year bonuses whatever the outcome of any joint project.

Realism *n.* Anything that promotes the wealth of the rich at the expense of the poor and weak. Its contrary, *unrealism*, most often encountered in the adjective *unrealistic*, is easily spotted by an excess of words such as justice, fairness, morality, social and communal, words that have more or less been expressly banned by the World Bank and the IMF.

Reality TV *n.* Form of entertainment in which the brainless derive pleasure from gawping at the shameless.

Regulations *n.* Formalised rules that apply to other people.

Rightsize *v.* Management term meaning to sack people. A necessary corollary to rightsizing is the so-called 'efficiency gain' in which those members of the workforce remaining are expected to do twice as much work as previously with reduced resources.

Scholar *n.* Shy nocturnal creature (*homo distracticus*) committed to the disinterested pursuit of truth either for its own sake or for the benefit of humanity or just because it's interesting. At one time the natural habitat of the scholar was the university (*qv*), but as the university sector has become increasingly enchanted with the siren sounds of economics (*qv*) and transformed itself into a passable imitation of a supermarket chain, the scholar has become an endangered species faced with a rapidly diminishing habitat. In the currently fashionable pseudo-Darwinian quasi-logic of today, scholars are no longer considered to be adequately adapted to their environment because their pursuits are not inherently 'practical' (*qv*). In severe cases they have become regarded as faintly embarrassing to their institutions, and frequently accused of 'not being with the programme'. They are thus increasingly forced to take refuge on the margins of university life, hiding in small dark niches that are seldom visited by ... anyone. Being shy by nature many scholars are thus able to live out their life in hiding until they can retire, protecting themselves sometimes

and brigandage now regarded quaintly as 'our history' or 'our cultural heritage'.

The New Left organised itself around broadly anti-authoritarian values, and sought to redefine the world in such a way that no-one would or could be disadvantaged by reason of accidents of birth. And the language was one of the primary targets, for good reason. As feminists of all persuasions (socialist feminists, anarcha-feminists, communists feminists, and so on) pointed out, the language we had all inherited reflected and reinforced a world in which women were second class citizens, any class lower than the upper middle class was to be despised, any skin colour other than white was regarded as inferior, and any kind of sexual orientation other than the sanctified heterosexual (missionary) position between a man and a woman was labelled perverse or perverted. So far so good. But ...

The sixties alarmed more than just the establishment. What was happening also alarmed some of those same baby boomers, especially those who were merely fashionably revolutionary, those who wore the Che Guevara T-shirts without knowing the slightest thing about Che Guevara himself. It was an exhilarating, dangerous time, when a large proportion of the young population really thought things were going to change for the better; really thought the revolution was coming. But even within the midst of the revolution there were those for whom libertarianism was merely a fashionable word, and they discovered to their horror that it entailed allowing other people to live their own lives, with their own values. For these the very idea that someone might actually disagree with them was anathema, and thus their commitment to the idea of freedom became tarnished with the zealotry of authoritarian self regard. Who wrote that the road to hell is paved with good intentions?

What began as a good idea, a laudable aim to ‘clean’ up the language so that it was no longer acceptable to demean people through the casual use of words, turned, slowly at first, into a monster. It transmogrified through the agency of the small-minded and unimaginative into a death grip on imagination itself, so much so that many people are now afraid to express what they really think for fear of being labelled as one or other form of social monstrosity, not fit to be a member of the modern human race. The process became much, much worse when government waded in with its size 15s, wielding the blunt weapon of legislation to force conformity in what were, or should have been, regarded purely as social issues not legislative matters. It was a daft intervention, even in conception, the idea that people could be *forced* to be ‘nice’ to each other by making it illegal not to be. In its transformation the very idea of changing the language to facilitate social cohesion by using the law has all the hallmarks of a ‘respectable’ bourgeois horror at bad manners, like some monstrously manic Mrs. Bucket (pronounced Bouquet) waving an etiquette manual at the great unwashed. What began as a noble aspiration became a small-minded suburban lower middle class curtain twitching morality that disdained anything ‘rude’ or ‘vulgar’, which in effect meant anything that its practitioners disapproved of. As so often Terry Pratchett catches the essence of the situation:

It was magnificent in its way, that plan. It was like a machine where every single bit was perfectly made, but had been put together by a one-handed nome in the dark. It was crammed full of good ideas which you couldn’t sensibly argue with, but they had been turned upside down. The trouble was, they were *still* ones you couldn’t argue with, because the basically good idea was still in there somewhere ... (*Diggers*, pp 68 – 9)

efficiently while leaving property unscathed, wide-screen TVs, exotic menus for the glitterati, lollorosa and goat’s cheese sandwiches on the trains, overpaid sportsmen and women, celebrities, quick meals, medicines that allow one to remain productive even though technically dead, cheaply made expensive clothing with designer labels, comfortable travel arrangements for first class travellers, pollution, waste and stress. In due course, when these undoubtedly important undertakings have been achieved efficiently, we may get around to ensuring that everyone is well-fed, well-clothed, well-educated and well-housed.

Professor *n.* One able to extend a single second-hand, often vacuous, idea into an entire career (cf academic, lecturer, senior lecturer).

Progress Chasing *v.* Shouting at people.

Project Management *n.* The art of drawing brightly coloured boxes and filling them with optimistic estimates of other people’s efforts.

Promise *n & v.* Method of deferring an inconvenient obligation indefinitely. In industrial, managerial or political usage the term is meaningless.

Psychopath *n.* Senior manager.

Psychotherapist *n.* One who allows you to solve your own emotional problems, and charges you a large fee for the privilege.

Public-Private Partnership *n.* Curious politico-economic arrangement between public sector and private sector organisations who team up to spread the financial risk of providing goods and services for the benefit of ‘the country’ by ensuring that when projects are successful and profitable the benefit goes to the private sector, whereas if the project runs into trouble, the tab is picked up by the public sector (i.e. from taxpayers). Even more curiously the private sector partners, especially their senior management, seem able to reward them-

chaos, subatomic physics, depth psychology, hydrodynamics and the final key to the Grand Unified Theory of Everything.

Peace *n.* Intermission between wars.

Plumber *n.* A magician who, with a simple sharp intake of breath, is able to increase the cost of a simple tap washer replacement to the level of a second mortgage with no further discernable effort. (*Cf* car mechanic, electrician).

Policy *n.* A form of wishful thinking

Politician *n.* An expert salesman or saleswoman who pursues his or her self interest by persuading the people of a country that it is in their collective interest that he or she does so. Most could pursue successful alternative careers in Dodgy Arthur's Quality Used Car Emporium.

Politics *n.* The continuation of war by other means.

Porter *n.* Satanic demon who claims that human motivation is rooted in fear, and therefore argues that those who want to motivate others should keep them afraid, uncertain and demoralised. This monster has single-handedly caused more human misery than almost any other proto-humanoid who has ever walked the face of the planet.

Postmodernist *n & adj.* One incapable of recognising or interpreting evidence.

Practical *adj.* Capable of making money, usually for those who have had no creative or administrative input into the process.

Productivity *n.* An essential quality of human endeavour without which we should all go hungry, unclothed, uneducated and homeless. Curiously it is a quality for which the unproductive are praised when it is present, and for which the productive are blamed when it is absent. Modern industry is highly productive, turning out unending supplies of such essential commodities as tranquillizers, reality TV, cars capable of doing 200 mph, computer games, tempting financial quick fixes, management consultants, weapons capable of destroying the universe, weapons capable of killing people

What makes all of this much worse, more desperately irksome, not to say tedious as well as tiresome, is the related growth of risk aversion that is evident everywhere. Part of the same small-mindedness as political correctness, this would be worrying even if it were the result of a genuine public desire for an entirely safe existence, but it is now actually being manufactured by institutions and organisations, mainly, it must be said, in the public sector, who are desperate to cover their own backs against litigation. In this the media are also culpable, especially because they are more than happy to play both sides of the game, creating false arguments, pretending to be the defenders of the people, whilst all the time using the situation just to sell themselves. At one moment they are decrying the spectacle of 'political correctness gone mad'; at the next they are whipping up hysteria about paedophiles, or terrorists under the bed, or whoever else has become the fashionable baddie of the moment. At one moment they are defending 'our' liberties; at the next they are baying for the death penalty, torture or permanent imprisonment for some easily attacked miscreant that the public has turned its baleful attention to (led there by the media in the first place). The word hypocrisy springs easily to mind, especially since these messages often appear side by side in the same publication or broadcast. What is especially galling is the twee way in which 'rude' words are bleeped out on TV programmes, even those aired after the watershed. *Who the fuck is this supposed to protect?* I can only conclude that the pruriently narrow minded have a terminal inability to turn off the TV set if they don't like what they see. Should any of these people have the misfortune to be reading this, then would they please mind fucking off and getting a life?

As if this were not enough, we have also been assaulted by a parade of public health and terrorist scares in recent years. These are manifestly part of the 'risk averse' society, and they often seem to have been perpetrated by the same small-mindedness as political correctness, but one also has the suspicion

that many of them have been deliberately created to keep the public in a constant state of panic and therefore more amenable to the steady erosion of civil liberties. But conspiracy theories are not good for mental health, so we will leave that thought by itself for awhile.

It is tempting, but it would be lazy, to characterise the twin assaults on the language as emanating from the political right and left respectively. In reality, however, they both originate from very similar authoritarian motives. In the end it is hard to distinguish a right wing authoritarian from a left wing authoritarian because they both fear people, especially people they don't control, and neither trusts people to live reasonable lives without the interference of (their) authority.

There is, of course, much more to be concerned about, as far as language and the social landscape is concerned; we haven't yet considered marketing for example. It is debatable whether this belongs to the 'managerialisation' of language, or whether it represents a third, amoral mangling of the language in its own right. Whichever is the case, the marketers have managed to denude quite a lot of the language of any meaning whatsoever, but we must leave their depredations for another time, merely noting *en passant* that we are all clearly entitled to ingest or slap all over various varieties of *Maydupium*® because 'we're worth it'. Perhaps I should add that I am not complaining about the natural development of the language, nor the playful turning of words back on themselves for aesthetic or other effect. What I am complaining about is the *deliberate* mangling, manipulation and debasing of the language for political or commercial advantage.

So how to conclude this section? George Orwell put it best; all things considered, the current state of affairs is 'double plus ungood'.

Who is this for? Well it began as a personal rant, a kind of cathartic splurge onto the page to make myself feel a bit better.

Meeting, *n.* A method for avoiding productive work while maintaining the illusion of a full diary. Regular attendance at meetings, providing it is obviously and ostentatiously broadcast to others, is one of the main routes to promotion, especially in a business or academic setting.

Money *n.* One of a class of abstractions including religion, excellence, the market, economics, Capitalism, efficiency, patriotism, the Party, and so on, that has the power to destroy all life on Earth.

Moral, morals, morality

MP *abbrev.* Member of Parliament. One who sits in the House of Commons in order to extol the virtues of frugality, public service, sacrifice and loyalty for other people. (*cf* politician)

Nation State *n.* A meaningless term consisting of a deliberate confusion of two entirely different and incompatible ideas; a deliberate concatenation of two distinct concepts in order to confuse the population. A nation is the sum of a given population related either through common geographical location or cultural ties. A state is an organised protection racket extorting money from the population in the form of taxes under threat of violent retribution. States take exception to rivals such as the Mafia and Cosa Nostra who try the same trick on the grounds that the state got there first and therefore has squatter's rights, although historically the state actually developed from organised crime in the first place.

News *n.* Form of entertainment that supplements the general media diet of sex, murder and destruction with stories of events from around the world involving sex, murder and destruction.

Organised Crime *n.* Logical extension of free-market economics (*qv*).

Parent *n.* One whose knowledge of child-rearing is matched only by his or her facility with formal logic, the mathematics of

Job *n.* An underpaid activity that takes place at an inconvenient time, at an inconvenient location, and which is preferably unengaging, exhausting, stressful and tedious. The best time of year for a job is winter, because that necessitates getting out of bed and travelling to work in the dark, and returning home also in the dark, the best hours of daylight having been replaced in the meantime by poor and unpleasant artificial lighting that increases the stress. The ‘ideal-type’ job, much beloved of modern managers (*qv*) for their employees (*qv*), leaves no time whatever for life, personal interests and family, and completely absorbs the individual’s existence in the service of his or her employer. Bureaucrats (*qv*) are in general highly committed to providing jobs for other people.

Lecturer *n.* One able to extend a single second-hand, often vacuous, idea into a lecture (*cf* academic, senior lecturer, professor).

Liberal *n.* One whose critical faculties have been blunted by an excess of sentimentality.

Love *n* & *v.* Inconvenient physiological state in which the blood pressure is elevated and the wallet denuded.

Make Good *v.* Builder’s term for the act of moving rubble, old screws and nails, stale cheese sandwiches, old newspapers and the other detritus of the building trade under your carpet or floorboards, or, where a carpet is not available, into the nearest flowerbed.

Manager *n.* One who has organised his or her own incompetence in such a way that it appears to be someone else’s. In former times it used to be the case that most managers were at least minimally aware of the kind of work they were allegedly managing. Nowadays one is most likely to encounter an ambitious foetus whose sole reply to any question is ‘I don’t know’, or words to that effect.

Market, the *n.*

MBA *abbrev.* Mediocre But Arrogant.

It made a change from shouting at the TV screen, or more precisely at the tossers *on* the TV screen. Being a generous soul I shared the original document with others, and it turned into a kind of samizdat document circulating amongst the dispossessed of my acquaintance and then making its way into the wider world. So I have decided to make it more available to my fellow travellers out there in the big, bad scary world. But there is a health warning. This is really only for those who are as angry as I am about the state the world is in, and about the people who claim to run it. Let me be clear about it. I am tired of liars in power; I am tired of cheats and thieves in power. I am angry that the aspirations of liberation can be co-opted by businesses to advertise cheap furniture, or high-powered cars that few can afford, or perfume, or shoes, or other trivial commodities that have nothing to do with the freedom of humanity or the human spirit. I am sick to the core of self-appointed middle class guardians of morality who preach endlessly about the evils of others while ignoring their own manifest faults.

I am particularly tired of busybodies who are trying to turn the world into a place of suffocating cotton wool. Take smoking as an example. It has become an easy ‘cause célèbre’ for the authoritarian talentless and risk averse to feel good about themselves. By attacking others. These are the same kinds of people who in other historical periods would have happily attacked the poor, the foreign, the exotic and the outsider. But thanks to ‘social progress’ they have been deprived of their casual racism, snobbery and prejudice and have had to search for other victims to vent their timid scorn upon. Smokers are the current target. Drinkers, fat people, and careless adventurers wait in the wings for their turn.

For whose benefit is the assault on smoking? Is it to keep smokers alive longer? Why? What is so bloody special about modern life that anyone would want to extend it? And what business is it of anybody else if someone chooses to commit suicide, slowly or other otherwise, in order to get out of this

pigsty. If the world was made a better place to *live* in, then they might have a point to make. As it is, they have no justification whatsoever. As it stands life in the early 21st century has little to offer the vast majority of people except drudgery, false distractions masquerading as entertainment, bullying at work 'for the sake of the organisation' (for which read *management*), the bureaucratisation of everyday life, exploitation by a greedy and non-productive 'service' sector, expensive bullying by the 'public' sector, and the increasing costs of merely staying alive without a corresponding increase in the means of meeting those costs (except for the big-wigs of the aforementioned exploitative sectors). And what about the assault on drinking? Is it an accident that the forms of drinking under assault tend to be those that the poorer people indulge in, such as beer, rather than the middle class indulgences of wines and spirits? The same might be said of diet, because the only foods attacked tend to be those of poor people rather than the pretentious diets of the middle class. And who the bloody hell was it that suggested that courgettes were an acceptable food? They are barely acceptable as compost. I will admit to liking humus and some of the other delightful trappings of a modern middle class existence. But courgettes? Don't they really belong in the back room of an Anne Summers shop?

For completeness, let me remark that I am also heartily sick of religious fundamentalists of *all* persuasions who would bully or bomb us back into the middle ages. I don't *want* to live in the Middle Ages thank you very much, and if it's all the same to you. It's a nice place to visit, but, no thanks.

Actually think I prefer to live in the modern world than go back to a time where the death penalty could be used for the theft of a loaf of bread. Not that it's much better now, in fact it's still a bloody mess, but I live in hope that we may yet change things for the better.

Impractical *adj.* Doesn't make money.

Independent Thinker *n.* Trouble maker.

Information *n.* Smokescreen for lack of knowledge.

Insurance *n.* A form of gambling in which the odds are permanently stacked in favour of the house, in this case the insurance company. The ostensible purpose of insurance is to protect its purchaser from unpredictable and unfortunate events in life. In fact its purpose is to generate excessive profits for the insurance company. One has only to contemplate the modest and shabby premises that insurance companies occupy to see how successfully the game has been played. If one is rash enough to make a claim on an insurance policy, one will find his or her premiums increased over a very short span of time until every penny has been paid back to the insurance company. Furthermore, because of the way such companies have rigged the game, it is not possible to move to another provider because any claim results in an entry in an insurance blacklist shared between providers. Curiously, whereas settling a claim involves a great deal of cross-checking, reconciling of files from incompatible storage systems, and waiting for information to be 'sent up from head office', news that one has been a claimant can be communicated instantly, efficiently, and in minimum time.

Invisible letter *n.* An invisible letter is rather like a silent letter, with this difference. A silent letter appears in the spelling of a word, but does not have an expressive value, whereas an invisible letter is one that does not appear within the orthography of the word but nevertheless has a definite presence for pronunciation. Current examples include the intrusive 'r' in the second syllable of homage (*qv*) and garbage. Authorities are divided on the question of whether the mispronunciation of the word 'golf' as 'gorf' is an example of an invisible letter or simply an idiotic affectation of those who mangle the English language simply in an effort to appear posh.

first century, that enabled metanational corporations to appear less evil than they really are.

HEFCE *abbrev.* Higher Education Funding Crisis Executive. Government body set up specifically to ensure that money entering the Higher Education sector is not wasted on ridiculous activities such as scholarship, freethinking, the disinterested pursuit of truth or even education of the student body, but is instead directed towards the proper ends of turning out graduates burdened with enormous debt yet properly beholden to the status quo, and the production of 'research' designed to bolster the oligarchy.

Homage *n.* Openly admitted theft of someone else's artistic or intellectual achievements, plagiarism with a smile on its face and the jaunty expectation of receiving praise and other plaudits from the cognoscenti. Although originally from Latin and French, in English the word is pronounced *homij*. Nevertheless within certain 'sophisticated' and self consciously chic circles the word seems to have lost its initial 'h' and to have acquired an invisible 'r' in the second syllable, much as the word 'garbage' has acquired a similar invisible 'r' amongst the sarcastic set (*cf* invisible letter).

HRM *abbrev.* Human Resource Management, a form of applied neo-fascism. The abbreviation would be more accurate if the missing letter A were replaced just after the H.

Human *n.* (also H. Being) Member of the most dangerous predatory species on planet Earth.

Guru *n.* Originally the word meant spiritual teacher or guide, but in modern English usage it has been systematically denuded of any real content.

IIP *abbrev.* Investors in Paper. One of a huge number of management fads from the end of the twentieth century that ensured that productivity was eliminated in favour of administration.

Illuminati *n.* Secret worldwide conspiracy that is in charge of absolutely everything.

As is common in literary endeavours, I should acknowledge my influences, before some smart arse literary critic tries to enhance a thin and tawdry reputation by 'discovering' what is obvious about this document. Let me therefore state at once that it owes a great deal to that estimable piece of social philosophy *The Devil's Dictionary* by Ambrose Bierce. Mr. Bierce, in his fearless attacks on pomp, graft, prejudice and flummery, reminds us all that we don't have to accept the flimflam, folderol and male bovine droppings that we are fed on a daily basis by those who would keep us quiescent and malleable to their agendas. On the other hand he also poses an object lesson for those who would buck the dominant reality by disappearing without trace on his way to observe the Mexican Revolution. Perhaps, like the legendary Lao Tzu who was last seen leaving 'the city' on a water buffalo, he got heartily sick of the ways of the powerful and just decided to drop out altogether. We will never know.

As to other influences, those with nothing better to do, and perhaps with a publication rate to keep up, might like to consider the following list of luminaries, all of whom have contributed something to the tone of what follows: Michael Bakunin; Leo Baxendale; The Blues Brothers; Richard Brautigan; Samuel Butler; Abiezer Coppe; Futurama; The Harvard Lampoon; Tama Janowitz; Norton Juster; Emmanuel Kant; Col. Henry Marten; H. L. Mencken; The Navy Lark; Frederick Nietzsche; Flann O'Brien; George Orwell; Dorothy Parker; Mervyn Peake; Edgar Allan Poe; Terry Pratchett; Round the Horne; Col. Richard Rumbold; Jean-Paul Sartre; George Bernard Shaw; The Simpsons; Screaming Lord Sutch; Dean Swift; Hunter S. Thompson; Voltaire; Yertle the Turtle; Babylon 5; Red Dwarf; my mate Martin; both of my offspring in their own inimitable ways; Kurt Vonnegut; Viz; Oscar Wilde; Irvin Yalom; and many others who share a similar clarity of vision.

On the negative side there has been considerable influence from the varied assortment of misanthropes, grafters, zealots,

ne're do wells, cutpurses, tosspots, false prophets, gerryman-derers, jugglers, clowns, comedians, liars, cheats and thieves who purport to run things for our benefit. Apart from an implied inclusion in this last category, observant readers will note the near total absence of career academics who, for the most part, have little of interest or value to share with the generality of humanity except their egos.

The Lexicon

Academic *n.* Member of the academy, specifically (i) one who maintains a career by trading in half-understood second-hand ideas. In recent times the term has shown as light shift in emphasis, and current usage tends to encompass the following additional meanings: (ii) one skilled in the art of generating large amounts of money for minimal intellectual effort; (iii) one skilled in manipulating Research Assessment Exercise returns; (iv) one skilled in the art of taking a half-complete academic paper and generating at least twelve publications from it; (v) one skilled in the use of vacuity in order to create an impression of profundity. Those employed as academics who are unable to accomplish these modest requirements generally find themselves promoted to Pro Vice Chancellor, Principle, Provost, or Vice Chancellor. It should be noted that there is a sharp distinction between the terms 'academic' and 'scholar' (*qv*) despite the confusion evident in the popular imagination, and which is also deliberately fostered by the universities (*qv*) as a form of market branding (*Cf* lecturer, senior lecturer, professor).

Bank *n.* A pillar of the capitalist experiment, an institution that specialises in making money make money without the trouble of producing anything tangible. Banks on the whole react badly to public scrutiny of their activities, which they regard as unwarranted intrusion into private matters, a breach

signed to deflect attention from the accuser who would rather not have his or her own closet examined too closely. Known as the 'efficiency gambit', senior managers who survive until retirement, civil servants of all times and all places, and politicians are extremely adept in its deployment.

Electrician *n.* A magician who, with a simple sharp intake of breath, is able to increase the cost of a simple electrical problem with no further discernable effort. (*Cf* car mechanic, plumber).

E-mail *n.* Social interaction for the inept or the lazy.

Employee *n.* One whose life, body and soul is wholly owned by an employer. Once an employee signs the Faustian pact that is the employment contract, they are expected to give over their entire energy, creativity and intelligence to their employer in return for an inadequate monetary remuneration. Employees who demonstrate an ability to think for themselves, or who steal their creative abilities for their own purposes, are considered to be bad employees, troublemakers, and not 'team players'.

Four-by-four (more usually 4x4) *n.* Decorative means of conveying young children to school. Technically a 4x4 is an 'off road' vehicle, but most 4x4s on the road today are as familiar with muddy fields, or even grass verges, as they are with the floor of the Atlantic Ocean.

Ethics, ethical

Fear *n.* Marketing tool, used extensively by governments, insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies.

Free Market, the *n.* (*cf* Market).

Gift *n.* Something that is given, as in 'I have just given you gonorrhoea. In German and Dutch the word means poison.

Government *n.* Control of the population by a largely self selected and self-appointed motley of egotists, narcissists, psychopaths, sociopaths and gangsters.

Green *adj.* Marketing term that gained in popularity towards the end of the twentieth century and early in the twenty

Economics *sing. n.* Infernal theology of the god Mammon. Like politics, medicine, psychoanalysis, astrology, Reiki, crystal healing and Feng Shui, economics often claims to be a science, indeed its practitioners often claim that it is the Queen of the Social Sciences, or, in more modest moments, that it is the 'only true social science'. In fact it is a rag bag of half worked out ideological presuppositions and fantasies with poor predictive validity, that assumes that everything of any importance in human life can be expressed in terms of money. This would be risibly sad were it not for the fact that economists sing the siren song most beloved of politicians, civil servants, managers and other misanthropes whose knowledge of human nature extends only so far as knowing that it consists of two words, one appearing between *huma* and *humble* in the dictionary, the other between *natty* and *naught*.

Educated *adj.* Having sufficient knowledge to be exploitable by an employer.

Education *n.* Preparation for a life of drudgery, boredom and exploitation as an adult. In primary education the term is a synonym for crowd control; in secondary education it means riot control; in tertiary education it means telling students (*qv*) to 'get on with it', in accordance with the precepts of pedagogically sound (fashionable) student-centred independent learning methods.

Efficiency *n.* Method of working demanded of people in the middle and lower levels of an organisation by those who are themselves hopelessly inefficient and incompetent. The term efficiency is frequently found in combination with other terms, as in 'efficiency gain' but always means roughly the same thing, *viz.*, that people are expected to work twice as much, twice as hard, in half the time, with reduced resources. But it has limited applicability, and is *never* applied to senior managers, senior civil servants or politicians who reserve its use solely for referring to other people. When used in the negative, as in the term 'inefficiency', this is an accusatory political ploy de-

of business confidentiality and as an anti-competitive conspiracy by unwashed radicals and communists. On the other hand, when things go badly wrong and a bank's profit margins begin to shrink, often as a result of their own greed and ineptitude, the public sector, especially in the form of the government (which has a monopoly claim on everyone's money) suddenly becomes the bank's best friend, at least until senior management's bonuses and pensions are secured, when everything reverts to the ante-crisis status quo.

Banker *n.* One who pleasures him or herself while contemplating other people's assets.

Benefit thief *n.* One who mistakenly imitates the behaviour of his or her betters and foolishly attempts to fiddle a couple of extra quid from the state. Had they read the unwritten rule book a little more closely they would have realised that while the penalty for, say, an MP caught fiddling thousands of quid on expenses is a simple public apology and admission that one had been a 'silly billy' with all that complicated paperwork, the penalty for anyone too poor to retain an expensive lawyer is automatic threat of being sent to the pokey.

Bureaucracy *n.* 1. Futile attempt to control the universe by means of a rule book. 2. Monastic order for the talentless, inept, fearful and spiteful.

Bureaucrat *n.* Control freak, one of the undead, one who is unusually inept at living a life and who, therefore, spends an inordinate amount of effort attempting to stultify the lives of others, especially those who seem to be having a good time. Bureaucrats can be identified by their lack of moral courage and inability to challenge others in a healthy direct manner. Many began their careers at school, as the puny little oiks who sneaked to the teachers and told tales on their fellows, always in private, naturally. Properly speaking a bureaucrat is morally neutral, which is to say amoral, and therefore capable of carrying out any orders from 'higher authority'

without ethical discomfort. Adolf Eichmann, for example, was a brilliant bureaucrat, as evidenced by the efficiency with which he was able to move 'units' to processing plants with little or no awareness or concern that the 'units' were actually people and the processing plants death camps. His portrait really ought to be on proud display within the offices of any self-respecting bureaucracy as an example for all who work there to aspire to.

As a general rule never, ever, suggest a 'good' idea to a bureaucrat because if you do, and the bureaucrat in question finds the idea to have 'merit', you will find that sooner or later your good idea becomes an iron rule with which to hold back the uncontrollable tide of chaos, and a good way both to keep you in line and beat you down. For example, if you happen to suggest to a bureaucrat that 'it might be a good idea to sort all your paperclips by size', within short order you will discover that it has become compulsory to sort paperclips by size, and you will be given a 200 page manual specifying types, shapes, colours and gauges of paperclips, each with their own unique identification code and a procedures both for storage and use, and woe betide anyone who uses the wrong size-colour combination of paperclip for joining the pages of a report.

In considering who is and who is not a bureaucrat, however, caution should be exercised so as not to confuse 'bureaucrat' *proper* with 'person who simply works within a bureaucracy'. The two are conceptually quite distinct. Whereas the former is likely to delight in the trivialities and obscurities of bureaucratic process, and the concomitant moral vacuity that goes with them, the latter, usually some hapless unfortunate who rather stupidly answered the wrong job advert, is more likely to be driven slowly insane as their essence is sucked out through their nostrils and their entrails are tied into impossibly complex knots. Although this process is more protracted and more painful than *bona fide zombification*, the final result is pretty much identical.

people, tax inspectors, and others claiming to hold the reins of power in the current world. It also describes most of the public sector generally. Its meaning has, however, changed in recent times to refer to those who have the temerity to show any disbelief in or lack of respect for the hollow promises, lies and inflated boasts of those same economists, politicians, economists, etc. This shift in meaning shows a want of respect for the integrity of the language, as would be expected from cynics (see earlier definition) attempting to marginalise those who are more properly called sceptics.

DBA *abbrev.* Dilettante's Bogus Accreditation.

Degree *n.* A piece of paper issued by a university (*qv*) showing that its holder has attained a modest level of scholarship and study. More important it indicates that its holder has enough stamina to withstand debt and boredom over an extended period, and sufficient foresight to identify which of several superficial and unrelated modules requires least effort to write the single essay required as assessment, thus demonstrating all the necessary qualities for survival in the workplace.

Delegate *v.* The art of passing on responsibility for one's own work to another, while retaining any credit for a positive outcome for oneself.

Downsize *v.* Management term meaning to sack people. A necessary corollary to downsizing is the so-called 'efficiency gain' in which those members of the workforce remaining are expected to do twice as much work as previously with reduced resources.

Drug *n.*

Drug dealer *n.* A social entrepreneur who, realising that his fellow citizens are suffering from terminal anomie and alienation, charitably furnishes the wherewithal for their temporary escape. Reality TV (*qv*) fulfils the same function for the less adventurous.

of everything. First, any competent conspiracy has to be secret, otherwise it does not have the appropriate cachet for a decent paranoia. However the details of such a secret, were it to exist, would almost certainly have been left on a train or in a taxi by now, on a misplaced memory stick or laptop. Notwithstanding, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, so we must consider the second objection, which is based on universal incompetence. It is utterly inconceivable that any group of people, least of all those obsessed with power and control, could assemble and maintain an extensive yet clandestine conspiracy without some of it leaking out or being exposed in a tabloid newspaper. Of course conspiracy theorists would probably argue that this has already happened, and part of the conspiracy is the inevitable cover up by shifty functionaries in dark suits. So we must consider the third objection, rational indifference. If there really were a secret worldwide conspiracy controlling everything that is as extensive as conspiracy theorists would have us believe, it is difficult to know what, if anything, any of us could do about it; trying to eradicate something so huge would be as futile as trying to instruct an amoeba in the finer aspects of heavy rock music. And what difference would it make anyway? Besides, considering the spectacular mess the world is in, and this harks back to objection two, if there really is a worldwide conspiracy controlling everything it clearly isn't very competent. So, chill brothers and sisters, chill.

Consultant *n.* (*esp. Management c.*) Overpaid windbag.

Credit Crunch *n.*

Customs and Excise *n.* Paramilitary tax collectors.

CVCPabbre *v.* (*obsolete*). Council for Vehicles and Car parks.

Cynic *n.* One of the great seers of the twentieth century defined a cynic as one who knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. That is a pretty good description of all the economists, politicians, civil servants, managers, business-

Builder *n.* One skilled in the art of creating maximum damage, maximum mess, and maximum noise while apparently engaged in the gentle arts of drinking tea and reading a tabloid newspaper. Builders are notoriously bad at time keeping; as the saying goes: Rome wasn't built in a day, although that was the builder's original estimate.

Burglar *n.* One who, while convinced of the theory of redistributive economics, is rather too squeamish about taking risks and therefore finds it more convenient to break into the houses of the poor and defenceless than take on anyone with a modicum of protection. As things stand the profession of burglar is a relatively risk free occupation because police attention has become focused on chasing down hoodies, skate boarders and smokers who even think of sparking up within half a mile of a public building. The occupation also has its own form of health insurance since any burglar who falls over on a carelessly placed skateboard in the hall and breaks a limb can sue the occupant of the house for occupational injury.

Call centre *n.* Battery farm for half wits in which the majesty of the human soul is reduced to the level of a cheap MP3 player with restricted toilet access.

Can-Do Culture *n & adj.* Specious pretender to the status of a genuine human culture, in which form takes precedence over substance, bluster replaces thought, noise replaces planning, promises (*qv*) substitute for commitment, busyness replaces action, delegation supplants engagement, boasting replaces achievement and glitz and glamour are given precedence over genuine value.

Capitalism *n.* Failed experiment in institutionalised greed. A sharp distinction should be made between capitalism, which is a non-productive parasitical ideology attaching itself to the body politic, and trade which is a natural human activity growing out of the necessity of co-operation for group and species survival.

Car Mechanic *n.* A magician who, with a simple sharp intake of breath, is able to increase the cost of repairing one's car with no further discernable effort. Car mechanics often seem to be very concerned with other people's big ends. (*Cf* electrician, plumber).

Citizen *n.* An adult member of the wider community whose sole purpose is to provide income for the public sector, especially government. This function is extremely important since it allows the public sector to experiment with new methods of social control and reward systems for its own members without unpleasant restrictions on creativity, such as the necessity of being frugal or efficient or the possibility that it may run out of funds. Where the latter begin to run low the public sector simply increases taxation and is thus able to continue functioning without interruption.

City *n.* Battery farm for people.

City, the *n.* Gambling capital of the UK, possibly of the world.

Civil Servant *n.* One who is neither civil nor a servant. This term generally denotes a person in public life who seems to think that he or she is in charge, which is a curious twist on the more common meaning of the word 'servant'. It would indeed be a strange turn of events if the servants in a household treated the owners as an inconvenient impediment to the servants' own comfort and ease, which, alas, seems to be precisely the relation between civil servants and the general population. Anyone who has ever tried to make contact with a branch of the civil service, or indeed any other branch of the 'public service', will be familiar with the many different ways in which it is possible for an anonymous voice on the other end of a phone line to be rude to another person, will be aware of how easy it is to avoid responsibility for practically anything, and will undoubtedly be able to write an eloquent essay on the effects of prolonged and unremitting ring tones on the human ear. If one is lucky enough to find a department that has a 'customer

care' (*qv*) policy (*qv*) then he or she will also be intimately familiar with a tinny electronic version of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Verdi's *Requiem* would be more appropriate.

Cogito Ergo Sum *phrase.* Consignment of the human race to existential oblivion. This definition is actually based on false logic, unless it is accepted that existence is entirely contingent on mentation in which case the definition is exact. Unfortunately experience suggests that cognitive functioning and existential actuality may in fact be separable. Few, for example, have ever encountered a table that gives clear evidence of the ability to think. Experience also suggests that there are people whose intellectual accomplishments are somewhat overshadowed by the average table's, those whom philosophers might call walking tabulae rasae if they were so inclined. Such people are frequently encountered in the front few pages of tabloid newspapers and the kind of cheap magazines that promise to reveal all about some non-entity or other. They are also often encountered in positions of authority where their lack of thinking skills is actually regarded as an asset.

Conspiracy theory *n.* Unusually stubborn belief that the random messiness of life and the utter shambles that passes for normality is somehow to be explained by positing a human agency behind everything. Although most conspiracies are presented as bad, damaging and corrosive to all that is fine and decent, ironically the tendency to see conspiracy everywhere is actually evidence of a deep wish to have an all-powerful parent figure in charge of our fates, someone who is following a rational plan albeit in this case an undesirable one; a kind of dark pater familias in the fairly obvious absence of a good example. It betrays a persistent belief that life really has some meaning to it, and is a disguised rejection of the alternative world view, which is that everything really is as messy, random, chaotic and incompetent as it seems. There are, however, three reasons for not taking conspiracy theories too seriously, especially those that claim a worldwide conspiracy in charge