

TEMPORA MUTANTUR

PHILIP HOWARD



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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2002

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Cover illustration by Neil Barrett, from a black-figure cup by Exekias showing the god Dionysus sailing triumphant in his ship.

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TEMPORA MUTANTUR

Mr Chairman. Mr Chairperson. Mr Chairbody. Mr Chair.

I am not sure which is the fashionable vocative with which to address you.

Do you remember Winston Churchill starting to learn Latin? He came to mind in Ronald Knox's delightful memoir of Douglas Young yesterday. Douglas Young was the Scottish classicist, poet, translator, patriot, anarchist and all-round good man. Young disliked Churchill so much that he could not bring himself even to say his name in English English. He always referred to him in Lallans as "Yon KirkBrae".

For his first Latin lesson, little KirkBrae was being taught the first declension: Mensa, Mensa, Mensam. When he got to the vocative, he decided that Latin was a silly language. If he was expected to address a table, "O Table", it was not worth learning it.

Churchill should have waited. It has now become idiomatic to Table a Motion to Madam Chair.

Mr Chairman.

You do realise that this is quite improper.

I am breaking not just Rule 94 of journalism. I am breaking the First Rule: "Thou shalt never take part in what thou art reporting." Hacks must not mix with their victims. For one thing, you might punch us on the nose. For another thing, participation destroys the impartiality for which we are famous. If not notorious. It ruins our credibility. We must not just be impartial. We must appear impartial to the average reader.

You cannot hope
To bribe or twist,
Thank God! the
British journalist.

But, seeing what
The man will do
Unbribed, there's
No occasion to.

(Humbert Wolfe, "The Uncelestial City", 1930.)

If the journalist gets too close to his subject, he “makes his excuses and leaves”. No journalist should carry on doing the same job for more than five years. After that, we are assumed to have gone over to the enemy. We have stopped writing for the Woman on the Leith bus or the Docklands Light Railway Line, and have started writing for an elite clique of insiders. We shall have to go; to some other speciality: the Miss Manners Etiquette, Agony Uncle Column.

My first job as cub reporter at *The Times* was to report the Classical Association Conference. It was being held in Manchester that year. At the beginning of April the News Editor called me over. He was Frank Roberts, a Pickwickian but stately figure. He said: “Mr Howard” in those days. “Mr Howard. You offer Latin don’t you? Would you like to cover the Classical Association Conference for us? It is an annual Editor’s Must. We have fences to mend with them. Last year Hugh Noyes caused grave offence.”

Hugh Noyes was our Parliamentary Correspondent. Son of the poet, Alfred Noyes. You know, “The Highwayman” chappie:

“The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding –
Riding – Riding –
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.”

The trade of Parliamentary Correspondent was just turning into that of Sketch Writer. Treating Parliament as theatre. Making jokes and personal comments about the appearance, and speech, and peculiarities, and hypocrisies of the actors in Parliament. Matthew Parris has just stopped and Ben Macintyre has just started doing it for us. Simon Hoggart does it for the *Grauniad*. Frank Johnson for the *Torygraph*. And I had been doing it for the (*Glasgow*) *Herald*. It wasn’t so well developed a genre. And we had to stay until 2230 hours in order to report the voting figures. They mattered in those days.

Anyway, the previous year Hugh Noyes had taken a sketch-writer’s view of the Classical Association. He had drawn a beady eye at our meeting. There had been a paper about Odysseus’ trial of shooting the arrow through the axe-heads. The speaker had claimed to have solved the crux. (NB. Interpolation. Never use the jargon “crux” in dictated or even computered reports of learned meetings. It is learned

jargon. Showing off to the general reader. And it ALWAYS appears in the paper the next morning as either CRUTCH or CLUTCH or CRUNCH.)

Anyway Hugh had taken the Micky ever so gently, as we would have described it in those more gentle days. As sketch-writers we were pioneering the new road of satire, in parallel to *Beyond the Fringe* and Bernard Levin. I looked up Hugh's intro: "In a thunderclap from Olympus yesterday Professor E. R. Dodds solved a question that has vexed sages and scholars for 30 centuries..."

In that still deferential and dignified age, his sarcasm had gone down like a lead arrow.

Frank said: "We need to mend fences with these people. They are our target readership. Remember our advertising slogan: 'TOP PEOPLE TAKE THE TIMES.'" (Interpolation. That was one of the most famous, most disastrous slogans in the Puffing Trade. I hated it. Just at the cusp when elitism was becoming a dirty word. It put off potential readers who feared that they were not Top People. It discouraged the liberal retired teacher of modest means living on a pension in Bexhill or Morningside.) Frank *loquitur*: "So mend fences. But don't stay with the conference at the University. Keep the conference at arm's length. Stay aloof. Otherwise you will go native and be of no use to me. Stay in the Station Hotel..."

So I did as I was told. I was an obedient child. I remember the embarrassment of eating a solitary dinner reading a book in the grand dining-room of the Station Hotel. At vast expense to Lord Astor, the proprietor. And the discomfort of a huge bed in an overheated room, with windows that didn't open. But I did my best. We carried two columns a day on the CA. The President that year was Sir Basil Blackwell. We gave the conference quadruple decker headlines of a plonking solemnity:

GRAMMATICAL RETREAT SIGNALS
A CLASSICAL ADVANCE
PANORAMA SUCCEEDS THE MICROSCOPE
IN STUDY OF THE HUMANITIES

And there was a typo in the first WORD. "THEIR was a long posterity for learning..." THEIR, third person plural possessive

pronoun instead of THERE, adverb. I wept tears of humiliation. I was very young. I have since become typo-hardened. Though I still shudder in shock/mock horror to read how my copy has been mutilated.

And after Manchester, I stopped following my News Editor's advice. I started staying in the university with the conference. I fear that I have gone over to the Indians. Alas for my professional honour. But Bravo and Carolling Calliopes for my personal life.

The life of a daily journalist is by definition unpredictable. You never know what you will be called on to do from one day to another. Frank, that same stout News Editor, advised me always to wear a dark suit to the office: "You never know when you may be called instantly to Downing Street in order to interview the Prime Minister." I am still waiting for the call. But I am still hopefully (in its routine adverbial sense) wearing Uncle Geoffrey's dark double-breasted almost-fitting suit to the office. I have no idea what I shall be called on to do tomorrow.

The only fixed point in my random year comes around at Easter. Then I know that I shall be staying in some university lodgings in England or Scotland. I shall be sleeping in a student's bedsitter, with my feet protruding far enough from the bottom of the bed to hang my towel on. If I have remembered to bring a towel. I shall be eating cooked breakfasts for the only time of the year. I shall be struggling to keep up with learned lectures. I shall be enduring the Scotch mist (i.e. blizzards, thunderstorm and Force 10 gales) that are the traditional weather for the Classical Association excursions. I shall visit the best universities and stately homes in England and Scotland.

And I will be among my friends. The best, cleverest, wittiest, funniest, wisest – dearest friends I have made in life have been met at and through the Classical Association. You may find this surprising. My colleagues at work certainly think I am unprofessional and odd in my devotion to the CA. Here was an elitist institution, with a select and dwindling membership. It was deliberately obscurantist. It took the view that it would be better at running the world than the Masters of the Universe who actually run it. It was pleased with itself. It was just a little bit reactionary –

I am speaking about *The Times* here, of course. Not the Class Ass. EUPHEMEITE, PHILIPPE. *Absit Omen*. Wash your mouth out.

Both *The Times* and the Classical Association have changed since my first conference at Manchester. Some Laudatores Temporum Actorum say that *The Times* has been going to the dogs ever since I joined it. I hope that it is not entirely my fault. But it is not entirely true, anyway. The cure for admiring the Ur *Times* of times past is to read it. I did, for the *Times* history, and for this address. And it is excellent, in parts. But dashed heavy going in other parts. Pomposo Vacuoso Ofuscationissimo Establishment, Notice Board for the Ruling Class.

And the Classical Association too has changed. 150 members sat down to my first annual dinner – about average for those days. Our membership was older and less academic. Oxbridge had other fish to fry in the holidays. There were only three lectures a day, all delivered by elder statesmen and women of the classical world.

This made reporting much easier. You went to three lectures. Summarised each as neatly as possible. Made a joke or two. Bluff and name-drop. And it all appeared in *The Times* the next day, with the usual homophonic misprints to make me shriek and gibber over breakfast.

Well, we have changed all that. Now more than a hundred papers are delivered at our conference. Sometimes ten are being delivered simultaneously. You cannot always tell from the titles and summaries what they are about. (I sometimes cannot tell what they are about even after hearing the paper.) Some of you have become FleetStreetWise at giving your papers titles that journalists describe as “sexy”. I.E. worth the whistle. I.E. newsy. I.E. of the kind to make the Chief Night Sub shout: “Hold the Front Page.” But the title, alas, does not always have the slightest connection with the contents.

Back in those days, elitist *Times* could take papers from the CA on any subject under Helios and Selene. We took it for granted that Top People would have studied classics at Cheltenham Ladies College or Eton, at St Leonard’s or Edinburgh Academy. And would understand what we were on about. I fear that this may have been romantic wishful thinking even then.

Today every reference to the classics has to be explained in words of one syllable for the barbarians, Philistines, colonists from Soloi in Cilicia, and competitors in “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” whom we are hoping to attract to read us. This interpolated explanation,

inserted late at night under the lash by a young sub-editor who knows no classics, still make me scream over the bacon, eggs, sausage, beans, tinned tomatoes and mushrooms. From Bristol in millennium year we described Orpheus as “the well-known ancient Greek poet”, and characterised Aristotle as “a Macedonian schoolmaster”.

I no longer even try to report papers on tragedy or philosophy. The job of explaining who Medea, Antigone and Plato are takes too much space to leave any room for the lecture. There is no longer an Editor’s Must parking space reserved daily for the proceedings of the Classical Association. Every “story” has to compete for its place in the news park. So art, mythology, archaeology and speculative history are the best candidates for the journalist fighting for his place in tomorrow’s paper against today’s young tigers and tigresses of journalism with more “relevant” pieces. Especially if they provide the possibility of PIX (pictures), preferably, in colour, of young women in diaphanous chitones. And of course, the Classical Association today is a far more professional and livelier society than when I started to report our meetings. In those days, Oxbridge was too grand or too busy to attend. The CA was run by two devoted Professors from Cardiff, Bryn Rees and Leon Moritz. And a tall young historian from Cardiff, John Percival, wizard of the Roman Villa.

But we still had our gaudy moments. There was more room for the true amateur, like me. Do you remember? I remember Mr Postgate, younger son of one of our foundation Patres Conscripti. He always sported blancoed plimsolls (rather than trainers in those days) which left white footprints wherever he went. Except when the ground was white with snow. And he wore his pyjamas under his suit, so that they protruded an inch at cuffs and trouser bottoms.

And I envy Mr Postgate’s contempt for conventional fashion. The annual meeting of the Classical Association is as famous as Skegness for its bracing weather. I am a veteran of Snowbound in Cardiff, when the last day had to be cancelled because the buses could not get through the drifts. I survived the Antonine Wall, when our enthusiastic guide was left addressing the horizontal Scotch Mist on his own. For the rest of us had softly and silently stolen away. We had been huddling with Hypothermia, the CA Muse, turning blue in the vallum, for the previous 40 minutes.

So that is why General Gibb always accompanies me to our meetings. General Gibb is no longer a soldier. He has become an Eponym. He is an overcoat – well, more like a marquee, to be honest – in Harris tweed of a check suitable for a Silver Ring bookie at one of the flashier provincial race-courses. Kelso, say. Or Perth. Its original owner was the Colonel of Edinburgh’s local regiment, the Royal Scots. First of Foot. Right of the Line. “Pontius Pilate’s Bodyguard.”

Do you know the legend that Pontius Pilate was born in Scotland? The son of a legionary officer? When the Royal Scots were in French service as *Le Régiment de Douglas*, a dispute arose with the *Régiment de Picardie* as to which was the senior. A French officer boasted that his regiment had been on duty on the night of the crucifixion. To which the Colonel Gibb of the day replied: “Aye. And if we’d been on duty that night, we’d no have slept at our post.”

When General Gibb died, his coat was too big for his son Francis, another CO of the Royal Scots. So I inherited it, and expose it for its annual airing to the meeting of the Classical Association. After some years General Gibb began to show its age. It frayed at the edges and its vast hem hung down for many yards, like the wool of the ram of Polyphemus beneath which Odysseus clung.

My friends thought that I was letting the side down, as well as the hem and them. One of my dearest memories is from Birmingham: Betty Radice, Ann McGinley, and Isabel Raphael. Sitting in a row like the Three Norns, each stitching up a fathom of Colonel Gibb’s hem. Oops. OF COURSE. Not Norns. Three Graces. Dear Aglaia, Thalia and Euphrosyne.

Betty: E.V. Rieu’s assistant and successor as editor of the Penguin Classics. That rarest of creatures, both a creator and an unselfish inspirer of creativity in others. Brilliant translator of Terence, Pliny, Abelard and Heloise, Erasmus. Betty was a no-nonsense Humberside lass with a booming voice, and a Yorkshire instinct to call a spade a spade. As she grew older, Betty became a little deaf. A very distinguished professor was giving the lecture before lunch. And he went on far too long, an hour into the lunch interval. At one point he dropped a chunk of his notes and got them back in the wrong order. He was a bit like Wodehouse’s Rev. Francis Heppenstall, the Vicar of Twing, in the Great Sermon Handicap. You remember: his sermon on

“Brotherly Love” lasted 45 minutes if it lasted a second. Even when he had deleted the rather exhaustive excursus into the family life of the early Assyrians.

Even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea. Even the most prolix lecturer at the Class Ass eventually winds up. The rest of us sank back in relief or woke up. But Betty’s voice boomed round the Hall as deafening as the Sibyl of Cumae on a double dose of Mulliner’s Buck-U-Uppo stimulating leaves: “Without exception, that was the worst lecture I have ever listened to.”

Of course, there are some stories from the Classical Association for which the world is not yet prepared. Who was locked out of his room in his pyjamas when we were last in Edinburgh, because he had gone for a dawn climb up Arthur’s Seat? David West, actually. Who gave a paper entitled “After Knauer, Schlunk”? David West, of course. Who gave a brilliant inaugural lecture “On the Absence of the Railway Engine”, while wearing a purple suit, beads and a beard, and carrying a handbag? And he was just a fellow. Donald Earl. Do you remember the deplorable case of the ladies’ knickers at Durham? Who was the Gurkha Colonel who survived the War with the Chindits by keeping Horace in his pocket, and was distinctly unsafe with the younger woman on castle battlements during the excursion? Do you remember Canon Armstrong’s “Communications” (theoretically brief talks by volunteer amateurs) on Origen and other Fathers of the Early Church? And Norma Miller dancing reels as lightly as the girl who won the gold at the Highland Games? Shan Hackett on tactics and strategy in Homer? Like Cyril, he was that rare combination of soldier and scholar. He used to write to the Editor of *The Times* complaining about misprints, solecism and barbarisms. And I had to reply for the Ed, telling him that we were jolly sorry and would do better in future. But since he was evidently a clever man, not just a bigoted Mr Grumpy, I started advising him (in the gentlest possible way) to grow up and realise that grammar and semantics DO CHANGE. They always have. And so we became firm friends.

My mistake as journalist was to mix with the Indians, then.

But some mistake on your part, too, Mr Chair. Not just mine.

Am I the right person to address your conference? Have you not made a category mistake?

I am a daily journalist, working for Mr Murdoch. I deal with NEWS. With NEW THINGS.

Greek and Latin, by definition, deal with OLD things. The past. They are described (untruly, I think) as DEAD LANGUAGES.

I am paid to be up-to-the-date, Streetwise, in touch with the future. You may well suspect that I am an improbable person for such a job. But that is how I earn my daily bread.

Greek and Latin are to do with languages and cultures of twenty, thirty centuries ago. Quite different to ours.

My inky trade is to be relevant. Journos write in English. Pretty basic English.

The Angles sailed West as illegal immigrants, bringing Anglo-Saxon with them. The Obtuse Angles turned left and became English. The Acute Angles sailed on to Edinburgh and became Lowland Scots.

I peer frantically into the future, or tell you what happened yesterday, if possible after last night's television news.

Classicists stare Argus-eyed back at the past, studying the ways and words of men and women who lived in other countries, and an unimaginably long time ago.

I am a servant of TOMORROW.

Classicists are students and lovers of the past.

So what possible connection can there be between a daily journalist and a classical scholar? What common overlap between them can we see in a Venn diagram? I tried to think of one.

Try RHETORIC. The Sophists and Orators invented rhetoric. I suppose we journalists still use rhetoric in our leaders and other pieces. But ours is not a classical kind of rhetoric. Cicero might describe the whole of this intro so far as RECUSATIO. Demosthenes called it APORIA. It means something like rhetorical false modesty. Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking! O I am quite unworthy of the great honour of addressing you! An irritating old trick. And contrary to every journalistic rule. Modesty is a thoroughly unjournalistic activity. It is a vice. The journalist cannot admit that he does not know. The journalist writes: "I can EXCLUSIVELY REVEAL", when the truth is: "I have just copied this out of a tired old press release." WORLD EXCLUSIVE really means "cribbed from the website of the *Los Angeles Times* on the Internet before its publication in LA in eight hours time". All picture bylines are at least

20 years old, and preferably of gorgeous pouting dolly birds. Most journalism consists of recycling other men's phrases. (But then so does most second-division oratory.) Having no ideas and being able to express them is what makes a journalist.

Journalists and Classics have our rhetorical exits and our entrances. Ours are not complex or sublime. We call them intros and pay-off lines. Homer started with an invocation to the Muse. ANDRA MOI ENNEPE, MOUSA, POLUTROPON, HOS MALA POLLA/ PLANCHTHEE . . .

Horace recommended plunging straight IN MEDIAS RES.

There are basically only three types of newspaper intro. The one that starts to TELL a news story. The one that starts to SELL a news story. And the one that starts to TELL A STORY.

1. TELL a News Story. "Detectives were last night hunting the Regius Professor of Greek who is the mastermind behind the kidnapping of Jenny Nimmo Smith, Secretary to the Organising Committee of the joint CAS/CA conference 2002."
2. SELL a news story. "Stop gnashing your teeth at men, girls – and start feeling some sympathy for the poor mixed-up things. Dr Malcolm Schofield yesterday claimed that men are an oppressed minority in terms of professorial chairs, sex, pensions, health, divorce and jobs."
3. TELL A STORY. "It was 6.15 on a windy afternoon on Saturday in the Playfair Library Hall, Old College, when a slightly-built, quietly-spoken Professor of Ancient History finished his coffee and..."

The latter technique is closely identified with the *Sunday Times*, which uses it mainly in long background briefings on the Page One news.

One could categorise the same formulaic endings to stories in journalism.

But I do not think that I can compare them to elegant Ciceronian clausulae and cadences to end a bit of oratory. Do you remember the pleasure of bringing a Latin prose to a ringing conclusion? Dum Di Dum/ Dum Dum. Esse laturos. Or Dum Di Dum/ Dum Di/ Dum. Unde conscenderam. Delendam censui. Or even, almost OTT, Dum Di Dum/ Dum Di/ Dum Dum. Formulas usitatas. Condemnari

noluerunt. O the pleasure, Cicero. O the Alpha query Plus mark.

Well, nothing as beautiful as that in journalistic clausulae. And our entrances and exits are always cut anyway. Remember the old sub-editor's advice in Michael Frayn's *Towards the End of the Morning*. The only realistic book ever written about journalism. Except, it wasn't really about journalism, it was about the old *Manchester Guardian*. The old sub describes his trade: "There's nothing to subbing old boy. Just check all facts and spellings. Cut the first and last sentences. And REMOVE ALL ATTEMPTS AT JOKES."

The style book of the Daily Anotherpaper actually states: "All irony is banned in the *Daily Torygraph*."

So I am afraid I can detect no overlap in rhetoric, intros or clausulae between the two opposed activities of Classics and Journalism.

There must be some connections between the Classics and journalism. Try harder, Philip. The Classics are by definition old. Newspapers are by definition new. "What are the news?" John Thaddeus, the great editor of *The Times* in its glory days, as a radical paper campaigning for Reform and Democracy, cabled William Howard Russell, the first war correspondent, in the Crimea.

Back across the wires the electric message came: "Not a damned new." This office legend helps to date an interesting change in construing the number of "news". But there is nothing new under the Sun, or for that matter in the *Sun*. Recycling old clichés is our daily job.

Our "Stories" come in cycles. One week the news is all about killer dogs savaging children. One hack breaks the news, under the logo "WORLD EXCLUSIVE". This headline usually means no more than we copied this story from *The Daily Wail* after the first editions came out. The whole hack pack takes up the cry. For a week the papers are full of killer Rottweilers and ferocious pit bull terriers. And then we move on to a new WORLD EXCLUSIVE cliché, about leaves on the line or the inevitability of Stephen Byers getting the sack. Savage dogs continue to bite. The Government may even have passed an injudicious Act condemning bad dogs to death, which in this country was even more unpopulist than condemning children to death.

Are the clichés of journalism a distant echo of the clichés of Homer? Are the stock stories that we tap out under the lash every

night distant cousins of the stock epithets in Homer? Odysseus is always “of many schemes” and Mrs Thatcher was always “the Iron Lady”. Achilles, having taken contemporary steroids from the Styx, never appears without being described as “swift-footed”. He must have become as irritated by the cliché as Linford Christie, who sues if you give him his stock epithet of “lunch-box”. “Agamemnon, lord of men”; “hollow ships”; “the unharvested or loud-roaring sea”. From childhood I have loved “*Arguropeza Thetis, Thugater halioio gerontos*”. On a moonlit night I watched a magical performance of *Andromache*, as Thetis appeared as Dea ex Machina in the Greek theatre at Bryanston at the Greek summer school. The memory of that magical night still brings tears of joy to my eyes.

Such passages were a great comfort when they turned up in construe or in an unseen. “They stretched out their hands on the food lying ready.” “Thus it seemed to him as he pondered to be the more rewarding course.” On a grander scale whole scenes, such as a warrior arming for battle, a crew launching and rowing a ship, or the sacrifice of an animal repeatedly appear unchanged. In much the same way we *epigoni* of Homer repeat our stock themes and clichés for a Cabinet reshuffle (why re? why not just “shuffle”). For the Booker Prize. For a Government sacking. Are the stock themes of modern journalism evidence of ring composition, of oral tradition, of extemporising with existing blocks of words?

Question: Mr Howard, you are an expert in the use of journalistic cliché, are you not?

Answer: Yes, Sir. I am a certified journalistic cliché expert.

Q: In that case, would you be good enough to answer a few questions on the use of the cliché in everyday journalism?

A: I should be only too glad to do so.

Q: Thank you. Now, Mr Howard, what is love?

A: Love is blind.

Q: Very good. Now, Mr Howard, What does love do?

A: Love makes the world go round.

Q: With whom does a young man fall in love?

A: With the Only Girl in the World.

Q: Describe her.

A: Her eyes are like stars. Her teeth are like pearls. Her lips are ruby. Her cheek is damask, and her form divine.

Q: Haven't you forgotten something?

A: Eyes, teeth, lips, cheek, form – No, Sir. I don't think so.

Q: Her hair?

A: Oh, certainly. How stupid of me. She has hair like spun gold.

Q: Mr Howard, your explanation of the correct application of the stock cliché in these matters has been most instructive. I know that all of us cliché-users here will know exactly how to respond hereafter when, during conversation, sex – when sex – when – aaagh . . .

A: I think what you want to say is: “When sex rears its ugly head”, isn't it. Our Homeric epithet for these activities is “sex romps”. And we always print four letter words F*** and C***, though even our dimmest readers cannot be unacquainted with the rude words. We write such sex romps stories in a kind of Penthouse Gothic, the particular style employed in the fantasy departments of the soft-core magazines on the top shelf at Mrs Punjani's.

And I fear that Homer's account of the sex romps of Hephaestus and Aphrodite caught in the golden net, or Zeus making love with Hera, are far more erotic than our modern clichés. And far better even as journalism.

Both ancient authors and modern journalists present texts for others to read. Both make mistakes. Both are read by eagle-eyed critics, anxious to detect a mistake. Both are vulnerable to careless copy-takers, dittography, haplography, inadequate research, careless cock-up, and all the other changes and chances of their inky trades. So perhaps that is a way in which classics and journalism share a level playing field.

Not really, alas. Textual criticism is a complex and rigorous literary science, with its stemmata, collations (cold?), and fashions. *Utrum in alterum abiturum erat?* Why would anyone in her/his right mind change this to that? At Manilius line 423 was a puzzled scribe (sub-editor) going to change *esurcione*, not Latin and unmetrical, to *dubitavit?* Or vice versa? Housman, the great textual critic, produced the great critical edition of Manilius. I confess that I have never got to the end of this didactic astrological poem. Or much beyond the beginning, until I was looking for a fruity textual crux for this address. I was put off by Housman's sarcastic compliment to his author of “skilfully versified sums”.

We played in the junior leagues of textual criticism at school and Mods. Discovering the truth shining beneath a mound of literary junk must be wonderful. Remember Housman on Catullus 61, 209-13, his marriage hymn for Manlius Torquatus? Here, near the end, Catullus prays for the birth of a little Torquatus, who will “stretch out his tender hands from his mothers bosom and smile sweetly at his father – but to me first, with his lips.” Eh? Steady on, Gaius Valerius.

*Torquatus volo parvulus
matris e gremio suae
porrigens teneras manus
dulce rideat ad patrem
sed mihi ante, labello.*

Sed mihi ante??? Housman *emendavit* – “*semihiante*”

Brilliant. As persuasive as the most famous of all Shakespearian emendations. You remember. The Hostess of the Boar’s Head, Eastcheap, Mistress Quickly, is describing Falstaff’s death. All the Folios have “And a Table of Greenfields”. Has dying Falstaff’s red nose become a Table (or Image) of Green Fields? Or is this an obscure stage direction for an *ekkuklema* from the theatrical agents Greenfields to be rolled out? Theobald’s anonymous “gentleman somewhat deceased” emended “Table” to Talkd. Which is an easy scribe’s error. Lewis Theobald himself in 1733 emended “Table” to “babeld”. One of the great lines of Shakespeare about one of his favourite characters, with its hint of Falstaff babbling of the green pastures of Psalm 23. I believe Theobald. *Difficilior lectio potior*. “Babeld” is the more unusual, the more precise, the more evocative, and thereby the more Shakespearian reading. Professor Kerr Borthwick emends the emendation. He has Falstaff babbling of *Greensleeves*, which was a folk song long before Henry VIII claimed to have composed it.

Remember Catullus XIV. The opening scene. The flower of the young men of the *Argo* hot for the capture of the Golden Fleece, churning the waves with their blades of pine, the first ship ever to plough the Ocean. *Emersere feri candenti e gurgite vultus/Aequoreae* – staring in amazement at the sight – *monstrum Nereides admirantes*. Housman and most of the textual critics emend *feri* to *freti*. “The Nereids push their heads up out of the white foaming

waters of the channel.” Making *emergere* transitive, with an accusative. Peter Glare gives the authority of his Oxford Latin Dictionary to this *Hapax Legomenon*. Bollox to the textual critics, I say. And, in the nicest possible way, Bollox to dear Peter Glare. Who needs *freti*. We know the *Argo* is in a watery thing. *Feri candenti e gurgite vultus* is very Catullan in this piece – Adjective A, Adjective B, Noun B, Noun A. And *feri* is unusual and better than cliché *freti*. Not wild, but the non-human faces of the Nereids.

Well, our textual disputes in daily journalism are not like that. Misprint and typo are the elements in which we live. Spellcheck has just made things worse. We call them “literals” in the trade. They are trivial. And mortifying. And funny. I had a letter from one of the great ladies of the English theatre pointing out five literals in a piece I had written. She remarked, more in sorrow than in rancour, that it would not have done when her husband worked in the sub-editors’ room at *The Times*. I wrote back defensively . . . new technology . . . teething troubles . . . more words in each edition of *The Times* than in four novels . . . don’t start writing them until after lunch, and you know what journalists’ lunches are reputed to be . . . daily miracle on your breakfast table . . . meaning matters more than misprints . . . will try to do better.

I am under strict orders from my patient friends not to tell AGAIN my favourite misprint from the Classical Association. The one about the bushy-tailed arboreal rodents of the *Genus Sciurus* and the Scrolls found at Qumran. So I pass them by hastily without referring to them. [The report from my first CA meeting printed “Dead Sea Squirrels” passim for “Dead Sea Scrolls” – a surrealist homophonic typo that inspired a mortifying correspondence in the bottom-right-hand corner that ran for months.] Here’s another furry animal typo from last month. Giving a guide to the proposed hunting bill, *The Times* announced that different licences would be required for hunting fox, deer, hare or MINX. We had no doubt in the office about who was the minx referred to. And did you spot the brilliant one in William Rees-Mogg’s column last Monday? He was reminiscing about his childhood as a poor farmer’s boy. Hem! Hem! “The pigs would go to market. The hens would be killed quickly, as nonchalantly as the Queen wrings the necks of wounded PEASANTS.”

Spellcheck has made newspaper textual corruption worse, not better. A sub ran letters to the Editor through Spellcheck. The names and addresses at the top of each letter were not Spellchecked. So they remained correct. But Spellcheck emended the names and addresses at the bottom of each letter to what it recognised as a better spelling. Adrian Cosker from Baldock is a regular Mr Grumpy correspondent. He emerged in print as Mr Drain Coaster from Padlock. He was even less amused than usual.

It is a myth that in the golden days before some war or other, *The Times* paid a shilling to any reader who cut out a misprint and sent it in. Like the Madame Tussaud's myth about spending all night in the Chamber of Horrors. It is true that, when the paper was much smaller and more heavily manned, a linotype-operator had a penny docked from his wages for every literal in the copy he set. But there always have been marvellous misprints in *The Times*.

I got the Class Ass on the front page from Bristol in Millennium year. With pictures. It was a lecture by Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones of the University of Wales about ideal female shapes in the ancient and modern worlds. He is a young man with a quick apprehension of topics and titles that journalists describe as "sexy", meaning popular, not necessarily to do with sex. Unfortunately he was transmitted as LORD Llewellyn Jones. A Peer takes precedence over a young Welsh gentleman scholar in the snobbish world of selecting tomorrow's news towards midnight.

I was not responsible (I swear it) for NEUTRALLY Assured Destruction (NAD), in a huge triple decker leader about the Cold War. The leader writer dictated over the phone Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). The copytaker misheard the near homophone. This suggestion of assuring the destruction of Switzerland forced the only correction in the leader column itself in 216 years' history.

But I claim "press gang" as my own. I wrote "press gang" several times in a political column. It was subbed by Sam Obu from Ghana. His English grammar is better than that of most subs, who are paid to know grammar. But his history and culture know more of slave-traders than press gangs. So he thought: "Silly Philip, being flip AGAIN," and altered "press gang" throughout to "a party of journalists". This gave a surreal subtext to the story that puzzled the readers.

But the Professor of the misprint was Philip Hope-Wallace, opera and theatre critic of the *Grauniad*. A plaque marks his customary seat in El Vino's One for a bottle of Veuve Cliquot before the opera. He was immensely kind and generous to me when I was a cub reporter. His review of *The Merchant of Venice* cast Laurence Olivier as "Skylark". He reviewed an opera called *Doris Godunov*. His notice of *La Traviata* asserted that "the music hall [for musical] direction was in the capable hands of . . ." Dictating after a concert, he finished his piece: "The programme had begun with an admirable performance of Elgar's overture 'In the South'." He then said END. As one does when dictating copy. So the next day the *Manchester Guardian* puzzled music lovers with a new piece: "Elgar's overture, 'In Southend'."

He started work for Lady Rhondda, a brave pioneer feminist, who owned *The Nation*. She tried to remove male bias and stereotyping from her magazine. Philip described Tosca as acting "like a tigress robbed of her whelps". The sub, knowing the admirable views of his proprietress, changed "tigress" to "tiger". And the compositor, puzzled under the deadline, changed "whelps" to "whelks" off his own bat. So Tosca appeared "like a tiger robbed of his whelks". As touchingly original as the Walrus and the Carpenter or something out of Edward Lear.

And, yes, of course we shall try to do better. See what you can make of that bit of copy, Mr Sub-Editor, Mr Compositor and Mr Printer. Japs who live in farmhouses shouldn't stow thrones. But typos in newspapers and disputed readings in Catullus are comparing fleas to unicorns.

Of course, even in red-hot up-to-the-wire journalism, we still use some Latin phrases. In the Venn diagram of Classics and Journalism, there is a little area that overlaps. A small stockade of common ground. These are the little Latin phrases that express something more economically than their English translation. Etcetera. Viz. Sc. I.E. E.G.

For example, *Mutatis mutandis* is shorter and more obfuscationary than: "Dear Sir, The Editor thanks you for your letter, but regrets that it is impossible to make the corrections that you demand must be corrected."

My friend Miles Kington used to write a column for *The Times* called “Moreover . . .” He lived in my old flat two doors away in Ladbroke Grove . He would ring at 8 and say: “When are you going to the office, Philip?” I would say: “Oh, about 8.30.” He would say: “Well don’t leave. Just give me time to write my piece.” And he would bang it out in half an hour. Brilliant. Witty. Surreal humour. I nearly went off with him to the *Independent*.

And long before Miles invented *Franglais*, we used to play *AngLatinum*. You know:

POST HOC PROPTER HOC – A little more white wine won’t do you any harm.

QUIZ CUSTODIET IPSUM CUSTODEM – The President of Trinity is on Round Britain Quiz AGAIN tonight.

ARS LONGA, VITA BREVIS – An unsuitable bathing costume.

I was reading Pliny the Younger the other day. Don’t we all?

At *The Times* we always start the day with half an hour’s construe of a Classical text. If the proprietor is not in town to take us through it, the Editor does. Letter I, IX. You remember the piece. One of the first examples in literature of the *topos* of the pleasures of town versus country living. Betty Radice translated the letters for Penguin Classics herself:

“It is rum how if a chap asks you what you did on a single day at Wapping, you can give a more or less accurate answer. But not if he asks you about several days put together. So you reply: ‘Yesterday I went to a Bar Mitzvah, an engagement party, a libel case at the High Court.’” Pliny seems to have had a more social life than I do. “Yesterday I wrote a Third Leader and a column on the Split Infinitive. I answered three dozen Letters and composed a week’s Word Watching.”

It all seems jolly important on the day. But quite pointless when you consider that you do the same things every day. And still more pointless when you consider your activities when you are out of town in the country.

I profoundly disagree with Pliny’s conclusion that you are better off in the country than the town. I was a country boy, brought up hoeing the Swedes. Neeps you call them up here. And stooking the sheaves. And that cured me of the daft old Roman obsession with vegetable living among the middens and the dawn milking.

But Pliny was right about one thing. If you describe what you do every day over a period of time, it comes to seem trivial. At the time, towards the end of the day, towards deadline, each day seems terribly important. With the Back Bench screaming for copy, and the News Desk shouting that they have a Scoop, and the Editor changing Leaders. But by tomorrow morning, its importance fades. After a week, its importance is dead. All those opinions. All those pert references. All that hurly-burly under the lash of the deadline. All those attempts to finesse one's ignorance. All that bluff to blind the readers with self-assurance. All ashes under Uricon now. Or, as we describe it these days, lining for the budgerigar's cage.

The life of a journalist is by definition ephemeral. It is just one damned thing after another. But I have only one fixed point in my harum scarum year. I know that whatever else happens around Easter I shall be in a fine university. I shall be hearing eternal verities instead of "stories" that fade. I shall be in the land of truths and values instead of the shadow land of stories and sensations. I shall be with my dearest friends, companions and comrades.

The address of the Amateur President is the hardest for the reporter to cover. They are always (by definition, with one exception) distinguished, often amusing and sometimes amazing. I remember Dilys Powell: "While I was at Oxford, I wondered whether I should study Classics. My brother said: 'Don't. The Classics are a terrible grind for a girl. And you will become terribly wrinkled.'" I remember Tony Harrison going on for an hour and a half. And everyone in the audience willed him to go on twice as long, even though we were already an hour late for dinner.

But the "Amateur" Presidents are the hardest to report, because they tend to say: "Classics are Good for You." What else can the poor sods say? This is not what journos call a Story. PRESIDENT OF CA ANNOUNCES CLASSICS ARE GOOD FOR YOU is not even in the class of "Dog Bites Man" story. It is in the even more crooked headline class of POLICE SQUAD HELPS DOG BITE MAN.

This, at least, is the only presidential address that I shan't have to report. It is a great honour to be your President. It is the proudest honour I have ever received. It is a great pleasure to be again among my dear friends, heroes and heroines. It is the high point of my year. I shall be back. Of course. Next year. When the Classical Association

attains its centenary in the steps of its senior partner. But for now this irregularity and impropriety must cease. And I shall resume my proper place in the reporters' box.

