

JEAN AITCHISON

## Newspaper Language

Jean Aitchison is Emeritus Professor of Language and Communication at Worcester College, University of Oxford. She is the author of several important books on human language, e.g. *The Articulate Mammal* (1976, fourth ed. 1998), *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* (1981, third ed. 2001), *Words in the Mind* (1987, third ed. 2003), *The Seeds of Speech: Language Origin and Evolution* (1996, Canto ed. 2000), and *The Word Weavers: Newshounds and Wordsmiths* (to be published 2007).

### 1. Pattern weavers

Humans perpetually juggle words, stringing them together in new and inventive ways: 'open-endedness', 'creativity' and 'productivity' are all common ways of describing this talent. The free range of human language contrasts with the output of most, maybe all, other animals which can communicate about a limited range of topics only. The poet John Keats (1795–1821), in his 'Ode to a nightingale', addresses the bird as one who sings 'of summer in full-throated ease'. Yet most birdsong is about mating or territorial rights. The nightingale was unlikely to be celebrating the season. It was probably trying to entice a mate, or warning others off its territory.

But humans do not just chatter inventively, they can weave language into planned novel patterns. In our society, poets, on the one hand, and journalists on the other, are two kinds of creative humans who specialise in doing this.

Yet these two types of pattern weavers receive very different treatment. Poets, on the one hand, are widely praised and admired. Poetry, according to the eighteenth century writer, Oliver Goldsmith, 'is a species of painting with words, in which the figures are happily conceived, ingeniously arranged, affectingly expressed, and recommended with all the warmth and harmony of colouring'. Journalists, on the other hand, tend to be heavily criticised:

For all those persons, that to tell,  
And write much Newes do love,  
May Caron ferry them to hell,  
And may they ne're remove,

ran a verse published in 1648. Such criticism continued. Journalism is 'the vilest and most degrading of all trades', according to the respected philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill, writing in the 19th century. 'An editor is one who separates the wheat from the chaff, and prints the chaff' claimed the American politician Adlai Stevenson in the 20th century (Parris 1994:133–134). And complaints about the press have persisted into the 21st

century: 'Awkward, cantankerous, cynical, bloody minded, at times intrusive, at times inaccurate, and at times, deeply unfair and harmful to individuals and to institutions, are comments reportedly made by Prince Charles, the future king of England (*The Observer* 29th December 2002).

Yet in an age when many more people scan newspapers than read poetry, why should journalism receive such blame, and literary works, especially poetry, such praise? Unexamined tradition may be one cause, as indicated by the fictional character Sir Fretful Plagiary in Richard Sheridan's play *The Critic* (1779): 'The newspapers: Sir, they are the most villainous – licentious – abominable – infernal – Not that I ever read them, – No –, I make it a rule never to look into a newspaper'.

Yet this raises the question of why a tradition suggesting 'newspapers are villainous' ever arose in the first place. On closer inspection, two creative traditions have existed side by side for centuries. Journalism has been progressively devalued, and literary writing has become unfairly elevated. Let us consider the matter further.

### 2. Oral versus written

Language developed around seventy thousand years ago. Yet true writing systems emerged only in the last ten thousand years. In the intervening centuries, humans undoubtedly captivated one another with songs and stories. Such oral performances were not primarily for entertainment. More importantly, they preserved the stored knowledge of generations. Legal formulae, genealogies, prayers, magic spells, eulogies were all incorporated. Remnants of such handed down wisdom are found in our own 'sage saws': 'The North wind shall blow, and we shall have snow'. 'Red sky at night, shepherd's delight, red sky in the morning, shepherd's warning'. But longer creative compositions existed in many cultures, such as traditional oral epic of the type best known in Greece, where the epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, supposedly composed by a blind bard called Homer, were edited and first written down probably in the 6th century B.C., though they preserved some memories which went back to before 1,000 B.C.

In the 18th century, traditional bards could still be found in Scotland, according to rumour. The lexicographer Samuel Johnson and his friend James Boswell travelled north to the Western Isles and the Hebrides, but were disappointed not to find any traces of these revered performers. Johnson comforted himself with the thought that even if found, their output would have been worthless, as they could neither read nor write. Such a bard, he asserted 'was a barbarian among barbarians who, knowing nothing himself, lived with others who knew no more'. He claimed, wrongly and ignorantly: 'There may possibly be books without a polished language, but there can be no polished language without books'. 'Diction, merely vocal, is always in its childhood', he pompously asserted (Johnson 1775/1996:101–102).

Johnson was typical of English writers of his time, who assumed that an ability to write was an essential component of literary skill. Yet had he and others known where to look, they would have found plentiful traces of ancient oral traditions. But these were routinely dismissed as worthless by literary highbrows. George Puttenham, a key sixteenth century literary figure, referred scornfully in his work *The art of poesie* (1589) to 'blind harpers or such like tavern minstrels that give a fit of mirth for a groat, and their matters being for the most part stories of old time... [and song] made purposely for recreation of the common people at Christmase diners and brideales, and in taverns and alehouses, and other places of base resort'.

### 3. Broadsides and chapbooks

Yet in England, we have an often unrecognised store of old oral compositions. The songs of the traditional minstrels had been converted by the invention of printing (1476) into a trade in broadsides or broadsheets, single sheets of paper which were printed on one side only. As Leslie Shepherd, one of the first people to work seriously on this topic, noted: 'The broadside ballad was an adaptation of the older traditional minstrelsy to the newer demands of topicality, a kind of music journalism, and the forerunner of the popular press' (Shepherd 1969:14). The authors of broadsheets were typically scorned as tellers of 'tall stories'. In Shakespeare's play *The winter's tale* (1610), Autolycus is depicted as a roguish pedlar of ballads who tries to entice gullible purchasers. Mopsa, a naive shepherdess, states 'I love a ballad in print, a-life, for then we are sure that they are true'. Autolycus assures her that his tales are indeed 'very true', telling her of a woman who was changed into a cold fish because she would not 'exchange flesh with one that loved her'.

The broadsheets were printed in clumsy Gothic type, known as 'blackletter', with woodcut illustrations. They took their material from a variety of sources, some news (execution broadsheets were in high demand), old scandals, traditional ballads, strange monsters, anything that would appeal to the popular imagination. Although targeted mainly at the lower classes, some gentry were enthusiastic purchasers: the lexicographer Samuel Pepys was known to have a collection.

The long tradition of complaint about the popular press probably began around this time. Tudor rulers were concerned about the effect of these cheap publications on their subjects. Henry VIII banned offensive ballads in 1533 and 1542, and similar proclamations were made in the reigns of later monarchs.

As literacy increased, demand arose for something lengthier than a single sheet of paper. This led to a plethora of so-called 'chapbooks'. These were small popular pamphlets, sold by itinerant dealers known as chapmen, and their chapbooks outsold real books: 'Chapmen, able to spread more pamphlets... than all the booksellers in London', we hear in 1592 (*Oxford English Dictionary* s.v. *chapbook*).

Chapbooks first grew up alongside broadsheets, and then gradually supplanted them. They were smaller than a modern-day paperback, around five and a half by three and a half inches (about 15 x 10 cm), and contained between four and 24 pages. The monsters, miracles and sensational murders of the broadsheets continued, though chapbooks covered a wider range of topics. Different publishers had their own specialities. A chapbook on popular medicine (1634) provided a practical guide to first aid for those who could not afford to pay an expensive surgeon: a man who had fallen off a horse who had no bed to lie in, was advised to be 'set... to sweat in horse dung up to the chin' (Watt 1991:294). A courtship handbook explained how to pay compliments to young ladies. Sermons and general moral diatribes preached against bad behaviour. One condemned drunkenness: 'For as wet and foggy ground in the summer time doe ingender multitudes of frogs and toads, and other venomous vermin: so doth drunkenness produce and ingender multitudes of diseases in the body of man' (Watt 1991:312).

### 4. Newsbooks

But just as chapbooks overlapped with the broadsheets in time, so newsbooks, dating from the mid-17th century overlapped with chapbooks. Newsbooks are regarded as the forerunners of newspapers, though they were mistrusted by many. Ben Jonson, in his play *The staple of news* (1631) poured scorn on these unreliable publications: 'The age... hunger and thirst after published pamphlets of news, set out every Saturday but made all at home, and no syllable of truth in them.'

The rise of newsbooks is particularly connected with the civil war, which broke out in England in 1642. Several newsbooks were on sale, though two were the most famous: *Mercurius Aulicus*, produced by the royalists, who supported the king, and *Mercurius Britannicus*, the parliamentary newsbook, produced by the king's opponents. Print runs were low by modern standards, about 500, though people passed them from one to another, and many more than 500 read each issue. Newsbooks were published irregularly, usually every few days. They contained primarily the events of the war, but also some horrendous shock-horror stories, such as the execution of a child murderer, who was strangled, then her hands and legs were chopped off with the same chopping knife with which had cut off those of the dead child. The murderer's body was finally thrown into the same river as she had dumped the child's corpse (Raymond 1993). Freaks of nature were also reported, such as an account of a child with two tongues, 'the one in some measure covering the other, but the lower Tongue appearing to be the more firm and longer than the other' (id., p. 439). Those who deplore the scandals and bloodthirstiness of recent tabloids might discover they are less shocking than some of the grisly horrors found in old newsbooks.

Newsbooks were the subject of numerous complaints: they were cheap and looked cheap, being 'weekly Fragments' and 'mere pennyworths of impiety'. They were 'so many impostumated Fancies, so many Bladders of their own blowing', and were full of 'parboyl'd Non-sense'. Their writers were 'a Generation of Vipers' who 'gull'd' readers out of their money. The readers were the uneducated, 'poore deluded People', the 'credulous vulgar' (Raymond 1993:13–14). As Raymond points out: 'The tirades against newsbooks formed a tradition from which subsequent writers continued to draw' (id., p. 14). The hostility to newspapers sometimes found today is as much due to this inherited tradition of complaint, as it is to intelligent reading of the papers themselves.

### 5. Daily newspapers

The first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant*, began publication in 1702. Throughout most of the 18th century, the press was viewed with suspicion, particularly by politicians. Taxes were levied on newspapers, and the publication of parliamentary debates was prohibited. Consequently, any so-called news contained a high percentage of gossip. Oliver Goldsmith in *The citizen of the world* (1762) suggested that such 'news' came 'from the oracle of some coffee-house, which oracle has himself gathered them the night before from a beau at a gaming-table, who has pillaged his knowledge from a great man's porter, who had his information from the great man's gentleman, who has invented the whole story for his own amusement.'

Towards the end of the 18th century, these restrictions began to be lifted, and parliament opened up its proceedings to the press. Newspapers proliferated, both morning and evening ones. As George Crabbe wrote (1785):

For soon as morning dawns with roseate hue,  
The 'Herald' of the morn arises too,  
'Post' after 'Post' succeeds, and all day long  
'Gazetters' and 'Ledgers' swarm, a motley throng.  
When evening comes she comes with all her train,  
Of 'Ledgers', 'Chronicles' and 'Posts' again.

The 'Big Daddy' of them all, *The Times*, began at this time (1785). It was originally named the *Daily Universal Register*, and brought the number of London morning papers to nine.

*The Times* was notable in two main ways. First, it invested in technology, which enabled its print-run to outnumber that of other newspapers. In 1814, it installed a steam press, and circulation figures leapt. By 1844, more than 20,000 copies a day were sold. By 1854, the figure had doubled to 40,000, and by 1864, to over 50,000. The early record may have been the death of Prince Albert in December 1861, when the sales rose to 91,000.

Second, *The Times* spent money on getting news fast. In 1834, a prominent

politician, Lord Durham, had been invited to give a speech in Glasgow, and there was great interest in what he would say. *The Times* sent two of its best parliamentary reporters to Glasgow, and set up relays of postmen and horses at intervals between Glasgow and London. The 400-mile journey was performed at the rate of 15 miles an hour, and the speech appeared in *The Times* a day before it was expected, a widely acclaimed achievement – though galloping horses were soon obsolete, because the 'electric telegraph' was invented in the 1840s, and *The Times* made full use of this new technology.

*The Times* was also praised for its size, though this varied. The record was reportedly held by the issue of 22 June 1861, which contained 'no fewer than 24 pages or 144 columns!' 'If no waters nor mountains intervened, a column of *The Times* might be laid down almost half the distance to India', it was claimed (Grant 1871:23), assuming that all the text from 70,000 impressions was cut up into single columns, and laid end to end.

*The Times* was referred to as 'The Monarch of the Press'. But its monarchy was soon challenged by the *Daily Telegraph*, which had been established in 1855. It overtook *The Times* by means of two hard-sell tactics: price cuts on the one hand, and appeal to the middle classes on the other. At first, it cost two pence, and even though it was the cheapest paper, it almost went bankrupt. Then the price was reduced to one penny, and sales rocketed. By 1870, it claimed to have the largest circulation in the world, an average daily sale of almost 200,000.

Then in 1882, the *Daily Telegraph* 'stumbled across a journalistic crock of gold. It was grey and enormous.... This was Jumbo, already the best-known animal in London Zoo' (Engel 1996:37). The Zoo had sold Jumbo to Barnum, the American circus owner, and Jumbo was led away to the Millwall Docks. Jumbo was supposedly devastated at this turn of events. According to the *Daily Telegraph* reporter: 'The poor brute moaned softly... embracing the man [his keeper] with his trunk, and actually kneeling before him. Jumbo's cries were soon heard in the elephant house, where poor Alice [his presumed wife] was again seized with alarm and grief' (id., p. 38). Eventually, Jumbo was led back reportedly to the delight of everyone, including Alice. But Jumbo and Alice never did share a cage, and their romance was a journalistic invention. Jumbo did kneel down, but this was due to a serious and long-standing knee problem. Jumbo was eventually taken off to America, where he was killed by a freight train as he was being led across a railway line. 'Both train and Jumbo were wrecked', as the journalist Matthew Engel expressed it (id., p. 40).

Towards the end of the 19 century, entertainment increasingly pushed aside more serious news, and the *Daily Telegraph* was overtaken by newspapers whose aim was to 'Tickle the public' (Engel 1996:17):

Tickle the public, make 'em grin,  
The more you tickle, the more you'll win;  
Teach the public, you'll never get rich,  
You'll live like a beggar, and die in a ditch.

This anonymous verse went round Fleet Street in the 19th century. And it was echoed in 1932 by a verse which was published in the *New Clarion*, supposedly sung to the tune of a well-known song, 'What shall we do with the drunken sailor?' (Engel 1996:128):

What shall we put in the daily paper?  
Suicide of linen draper,  
Duchess poisoned by noisome vapour  
Early in the morning!

### 6. An obsession with gossip

Yet gradually, readers' appetite for bloodthirsty drama was overtaken by an obsession with gossip and celebrities. A desire for chit-chat and scandal is by no means new. Ben Jonson's play *The staple of news* (1626) was set in an imaginary news agency where the employees were instructed to gather gossip:

Sirs,  
You must get o' this news...  
Who dines and sups i' the town, where and with whom...

Richard Sheridan's play *The school for scandal* (1777) began with Lady Sneerwell checking that the gossipmonger Snake had inserted false gossip into a publication. Later, in Evelyn Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies* (1930) two young aristocratic gossip journalists bemoan the fact that they find it difficult to say anything new about the same people who they repeatedly see at parties.

But in recent years, the appetite for gossip has markedly increased: 'Gossip has become a sulphurous brew that has long since burst the confines of traditional gossip columns and cascades over the daily newspaper diet of millions' points out Roger Wilkes (2002:275) in a book titled *Scandal*. If a genuine celebrity marries or dies, the coverage can be overwhelming. When George Harrison, one of the pop group the Beatles died of cancer in November 2001, the entire British press cleared their front pages, and many more inside, for an appreciation 'on a scale that, only a few years ago, would have been reserved for the Second Coming [of Christ]' (id., p.9).

This trend has continued, with increasing quantities of tittle-tattle about celebrities, their appearance, and their love-life. Not long ago, a tabloid devoted its main story on the front page to opinions about a pop star's

breast structure: 'The verdict is in – Posh's boobs are FAKE. Brits reckon by a landslide majority that Victoria Beckham's cleavage is man-made. A bouncing 72% of voters thought that Posh's breasts were not real' (*Daily Star* 26 February 2004).

Some have deplored this flood of celebrity trivia, others have been more forgiving. Such gossip can serve a serious, though not always recognised purpose. It gives readers a comforting sense of rapport with the celebrities, and with society, making them feel that everyone, with a little money and a little luck, could be famous. The media imply that 'dressing the part' might make it all happen. These days, that means going shopping. 'The biggest area of mass reporting is simply shopping, news as thinly disguised advertising. Editors believe that the British today are most interested in their number-one leisure activity: buying stuff. So shopping mad have we become as a society that the adverts are now becoming the news', suggests the journalist Andrew Marr (2004:106).

Yet maybe this is not such a surprise. Newspapers and other media always have been, and maybe always will be, a mixture of news and entertainment. These days, they are part horror-comics (when disasters happen), part gossip-mongers (when celebrities marry and split up), part shopping aids (a solidarity ploy in a prosperous society). The news-entertainment mix varies from day to day, but it is still essentially the same bubbling broth of news and entertainment.

### 7. Reporting styles

Yet some things are new. Over the decades, styles of reporting have altered. Up until the turn of the century, newspapers, like their predecessors, the newsbooks, recounted events in the order in which they occurred. In 1888, for example, the London *Times* published a report of one of the murders of the notorious killer known as Jack the Ripper'. The account was matter of fact: 'Another murder of the foulest kind was committed in the neighbourhood of Whitechapel in the early hours of yesterday morning. At a quarter to 4 o'clock Police constable Neill 97J, when in Buck's Row, Whitechapel, came upon the body of a woman lying on part of the footway, and on scooping her up in the belief that she was drunk discovered that her throat was cut almost from ear to ear'. (*The Times* 1 September 1888). The report continued with an inspection by a doctor, who pronounced the woman dead. The body was removed to a mortuary, and attempts were made to find the identity of the victim, who was finally named as Polly Nicholls.

This pedestrian 'order of events' account contrasts strongly with reports typically found in recent newspapers, which condense essential information into the first sentence: 'A pensioner died yesterday after being dragged from his car, robbed and beaten when he stopped to ask for directions yesterday morning' (*The People* 7 November 2004). Here we are told succinctly, WHO was involved, WHAT happened, WHERE it happened,

HOW it happened, WHY it happened, and WHEN it happened, the so-called 6 WHs, which trainee journalists are taught to specify in the first sentence.

Beneath this informative initial summary, the rest of the report is carefully organised. The commonest type of structure in modern newspapers may be the 'inverted pyramid', basically an upside down triangle. After the summary, surrounding events are then fitted in, in a way which progressively explains the situation. For example, in the case of the robbed pensioner, readers might be told how the pensioner had managed to get lost. Each subsequent piece of information is assumed to be less important, and is given less space. Finally, an evaluation (sometimes optional) is added, which says something such as 'The investigation continues', perhaps tempting the reader to buy the next day's newspaper.

The advantage of the 'inverted pyramid' is that all new or important information is conveniently located at the beginning of the article, so anyone perusing a paper in a hurry could get the maximum of information with a minimum of effort – though other variants are also found. For example, an 'hour-glass structure' begins with an inverted pyramid, and then moves to a chronological survey. This is particularly common if the story is complex, and the journalist wants to be sure the reader can follow the story clearly.

But it is not only the structure of an article that has been carefully arranged. The words too have been skilfully polished. Any piece of good journalism is honed down to a set of precise, readable and compact paragraphs. Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908), best known as the author of the 'Uncle Remus' stories, was a journalist for most of his life, and he expressed the need for polished concision well:

When you've got a thing to say,  
Say it! Don't take half a day...  
Life is short – a fleeting vapour –  
Don't you fill the whole blamed paper  
With a tale, which at a pinch,  
Could be covered in an inch!  
Boil her down until she simmers,  
Polish her until she glimmers.

George Orwell, the author of the novel *1984*, was deeply concerned with 'language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought' (1946/1952:257). Even today, his 'rules' for clear writing are often handed over to trainee journalists (id., p.156):

- (1) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- (2) Never use a long word when a short one will do.

- (3) If it is possible to cut out a word, always cut it out.
- (4) Never use the passive when you can use the active.
- (5) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an English everyday equivalent.
- (6) Break any of these rules rather sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Various books of advice to journalists add to these in various ways, such as 'use adjectives sparingly'.

Most of these 'rules' are simple common sense. But other aspects of news stories may have their own stylistic conventions, especially headlines. British English readers have no problems understanding a headline such as ALISON MURDER CHARGE, though foreigners are sometimes puzzled: 'Is "Alison" the murderer or the murderee?' they sometimes ask. British readers know that Alison has been murdered.

A study of headlines containing the word MURDER showed that both broadsheets and tabloids contained noun sequences which followed a similar formula – even though readers, when asked, were unaware of this (Aitchison, Lewis and Naylor 1990). The noun sequences sometimes formed the whole headline, sometimes only part of it. In three-noun sequences, the victim usually came first (e.g. ALISON), though sometimes the location (e.g. STREET), or the murder weapon (e.g. SHOTGUN). Then came the word MURDER. The third word was mostly a legal term, such as TRIAL, though was occasionally a descriptive term such as HORROR.

Both the serious newspapers (broadsheets) and the more popular (tabloids) followed the same pattern, but their vocabulary differed. The broadsheets tended to use the surname of the victim (e.g. SHAUGHNESSY), the tabloids the first name (e.g. ALISON). The broadsheets used fairly formal vocabulary to describe human relatives, MOTHER, FATHER, HUSBAND, CHILD, while the tabloids used informal words: MUM, DAD, HUBBY, TOT. The broadsheets used relatively formal legal terms, such as CHARGE, INQUIRY, while the tabloids often preferred a short informal word such as RAP 'criminal charge'.

## 8. Role of journalists

But in spite of these stylistic differences, the role of journalists is often thought to be straightforward: they provide information about recent events, especially juicy shock-horror stories which will capture readers' attention. According to this simple view, they are newshounds, skilled hunters and gatherers who are permanently on the lookout for juicy pieces of news, like pigs snuffling for truffles. When they have found some, they dig them out, and transmit the essence to their readers. This ties in with their own self-perception: 'Central among journalistic beliefs is the idea of news as random and unpredictable events tracked down by the skills of

journalistic anticipation and circumspection' (Golding and Elliott 1979/1999:112). As C.P. Scott, a long-standing editor of *The Guardian* newspaper (1872–1929), famously said in 1921: 'The primary office of a newspaper is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted. Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of presentation, must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong... Comment is free, but facts are sacred' (*Manchester Guardian* 5 May 1921).

But this may be an oversimplification, and the role of journalists may be more complex than appears at first sight. No journalist or group of journalists could ever cover everything that happens: they have to choose what to report. And what they report is what people expect them to report. This is remarkably similar from paper to paper.

As the journalist Andrew Marr observes, 'It is not uncommon to leaf through four tabloids and four broadsheets and find almost exactly the same stories in every one' (Marr 2004:116). And these tend to be handled in similar ways, both from day to day, and across newspapers, even though (as mentioned earlier) some variation in vocabulary is found. 'News cannot stray too far from what news has been, because news stories must be resonant with the stories that Society believes about itself, the media researcher Dan Berkowitz points out (Berkowitz 1997:497). Newspapers provide a comforting sense of normalcy and also of continuation. The stories follow a predictable pattern, often that of a titillating serial. A murder with a grisly corpse, is followed by an account of the police hunt for the killer, who is eventually captured. Then comes a trial, and a conviction. So there is both an ongoing story, as well as the maintenance of important society values, that crime will be punished, that murder, especially of children, is wrong, and so on.

News is therefore a multilayered confection. Something happens, maybe a murder, a mugging, a robbery, or a road accident. Newspapers decide whether this is newsworthy. Then relevant facts are selected from the complexity of the overlapping events. Hidden messages are tucked in alongside, such as 'crime must be punished'. This filtering down is sometimes referred to as 'gatekeeping' and 'representation': 'Gatekeeping is the process by which the billions of messages that are available in the world are cut down and transformed into the hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day' (Shoemaker 1991/1997:57), while 'representation' is the way in which journalists either consciously, or subconsciously, represent the world to their readers.

Some writers have argued that newspapers are intentionally trying to hoodwink their readers. Yet mainly, they are trying to provide readers with a sense that the world, and especially their own culture, is behaving in a predictable and normal way. Unlike poets, who are often trying to mould vocabulary into new, untried word combinations, journalists are trying to do the opposite, convince their readers that all is familiar and coherent.

This is well expressed in a short piece/poem by Adrian Mitchell, with the title: 'Early shift on the *Evening Standard* news desk' (Summerfield 1974:225):

'Fog Chaos Grips South'  
'A thick blanket of fog lay across southern England this morning like a thick blanket –  
'Don' t let's call it a thick blanket today, Joe, let's call it a sodden yellow eiderdown.'  
'Are you insane?'

And earlier in the 20th century, the novelist Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) admired newspaper writing, and recognised that its precision and temporary nature made it different from other types of writing (Woolf 1925:214):

The newspaper crocus fills precisely the space allotted to it... It radiates a golden glow. It is genial, affable, warm-hearted... It is no despicable feat to start a million brains running at nine o'clock in the morning, to give two million eyes something bright and brisk and amusing to look at. But the night comes and those flowers fade... the most brilliant of articles when removed from its element is dust and sand and the husks of straw.

#### References

The topics dealt with in this article are explored more fully in Aitchison (2007), and this article is a summary of sections of that book. If two dates are given in the references, the first is that of the original work, the second of a more readily accessible reprint.

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MARSHALL BERMAN

## Tradition... Transgression! Singer In the *Shtetl* and On the Street

*"They were godly without God, and worldly without a world."*  
- Singer on his generation

Early in the 1960s, a little over forty years ago, I discovered the work of Sylvia Plath. Alas, I discovered it (as most people did) at exactly the moment it stopped. The London *Observer*, along with its story on her suicide, printed a whole page of her poems. In the midst of "Daddy", one of the most riveting of those poems, Plath pulls herself up short and says,

I began to talk like a Jew.  
I think I might well be a Jew.

A year or so later, I attended a reading by the great confessional poet Robert Lowell. He staggered onstage, and made a startling declaration: "You know, I'm a Jew". He asked if anybody doubted him; nobody did. Some of us rolled our eyes, and wondered what he would be confessing next. But he spent most of the evening reading a gentle memoir of his Sephardic maternal grandmother. When I told a friend this story, he said he had seen William Carlos Williams do the same: present his Jewish genealogy to a poetry audience in a gesture of *There, In your face*. I was mystified, yet flattered, to see these great WASP poets wanting to be part of us. My mother wasn't so thrilled. Could somebody tell the poets that as symbols of horrible but noble death, the Jews were worn out? Wasn't it time to choose some other people and give us a chance to live? I partly agreed with her, but I said, Mom, don't blame the poets, blame God.

It was only this summer, as I immersed myself in this centennial edition of Singer stories - I counted 198 in all; I may be wrong, but not by much - that the yearnings of the poets of half a century ago came back to me. *COLLECTED STORIES*, latest entry in the Library of America, places Singer in the canon of American literature, alongside Hawthorne and Melville and Henry James and Mark Twain. It is a major event in the history of Jewish American culture. This triple volume is beautifully edited and annotated by Ilan Stavans. It includes a paperback Album full of evocative photos and ephemera, a brilliant symposium by Stavans, Morris Dickstein, David Roskies, Jonathan Rosen and Isaiah Sheffer, commentary by Francine Prose, Cynthia Ozick, Joyce Carol Oates, and many more. Stavans was right to focus the collection on Singer's stories; his talent and originality come across far more vividly in his short fiction, which