

## Editorial: Abuses of Literacy

After many years I still open parcels of review copies, or look over the piles in the office, with a zest that is the triumph of hope over experience. The joy of the chase might be less if the opening were easier. In the long run the trade may agree on a simple uniform clothing, but at present the books come confined in a variety of jiffy bags, cardboard envelopes, gummed tape, cellophane, pervasive and penetrating flecks of fluff and powdered polystyrene. Publishers have other ways of asserting their individuality. Some send hardback editions, some paperbacks; a few send both. I once received a two volume *Collected Papers* consisting of a hardback Volume I and a paperback Volume II. When I returned a hardback Volume II of a similar work because the binding was upside down, the replacement copy was reduced from hardback to paper. Many review copies are graced with personal letters singing the praises of the merchandise. Some readers will remember that one of these was crowned by the *author's* suggestion of the name of a suitable reviewer.

Many books have minds as well as bodies. Souls are rare, and I do not remember ever unwrapping a review copy and finding that it was the precious life blood of a master spirit. We must be grateful for the small proportion that are efficient machines to think with. Others are what Lamb called *biblia abiblia*—books that are not books. A philosophical book may fail to be a book because it is a collection of reprinted papers by various hands. Ryle, when editor of *Mind*, refused to review collections on the ground that a reviewer could only say that the contents included a characteristic paper by Ayer, a characteristic paper by Austin and a characteristic paper by Ryle. Other non-books include dictionaries, encyclopedias and 'companions', bibliographical works, and introductory text books consisting of extracts from other writers, even if the other writers include Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant and Wittgenstein. Many non-books are valuable and some are invaluable. The same could be said of the railway time-tables and telephone directories that Lamb would count as *abiblia*.

From the level of the non-entities the ladder rises step by step. Dozens of respectable works are listed as Books Received but are not further noticed. Books judged to be of interest or value, or to be likely to deceive readers into thinking that they are of interest or value, are assigned to reviewers. Four or five books per quarterly issue are commented on in Booknotes. To qualify for such a placing a book has to engage the interest of a jaded editor on the train journey back to

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Cambridge. It would be too severe, experience has shown, to impose spelling tests on authors and editors of works to be discussed in reviews or in Booknotes. In spite of our Spelling Lesson in April 1983, and numerous lesser admonitions, few philosophers now writing are capable of spelling correctly the names or titles of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Theaetetus*, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Antony Flew or Renford Bambrough.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This editorial is a slightly revised version of a contribution to the 'Shelf Life' column of the *Times Higher Education Supplement* (30 August 1991). It is reprinted here by permission of the Literary Editor.