

## No place for 'me'

What is the most terrifying word? Murder? Mayhem? No, plain, simple, common or garden 'me'.

The teacher has drummed out 'Me and my friend' as subject. So 'My friend and I' is used as subject and often as object as well. Sometimes the writer becomes uneasy about 'between my friend and I'. Use 'me'? Never. Hence 'between my wife and myself' (ET13).

Poor little me.

Margaret Toth,  
Toronto, Canada

## A sheepish tongue

In his excellent article on the English language's linguistic debt to the docile sheep, the late W. Vernon Noble omitted the wonderful comparison of being attacked by Douglas-Hume to being savaged by a dead sheep.

Sean Devine,  
Blackrock, Co. Dublin, Ireland

## Half-six and making dodo

Two points in particular interested me in the Post & Mail section of ET14.

The first was Dr Beatty's letter regarding the locution 'half-six', meaning 6.30. This is far from being an innovation as it was in use in the Manchester area when I was growing up there in the 30s and 40s: and I heard it used up there only a few days ago too. It is certainly a demotic usage but equally certainly not new.

Secondly, Mr Phillips writes from New York regarding the New Orleans expression 'Make a little Dodo'. The capital letter for Dodo makes one think of the extinct bird and is consequently misleading for an anglophone

hearer, because the French influence in New Orleans is very evident here: 'faire dodo' is a child's expression indicating 'go to bye-byes' and is derived from the verb *dormir*: it is used to very great effect at the end of Zola's *L'Assommoir* – read it and see!

W. S. Coates,  
Leamington Spa, Warwickshire,  
England

## More about parsing

The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* defines 'parse' starkly as 'to state the parts of speech of the words of a sentence.' It is the 'soulless old rigidity' of this concept that Godfrey Talbot shies away from (ET11). He would simply analyze a sentence showing in an interesting way the functions of the words and their relation to each other.

In springing to the defense of 'parsing' (ET13), June Bassett disregards the *O.D.E.E.* definition, not seeing how any definition that fails to add an explanation of how words are connected with each other can be of any use. She also expresses difficulty in finding a definition of Talbot's 'sentence analysis' so she is 'not clear on what it comprehends whereas 'parsing' admits of no doubt'. Not everyone would agree because both its origin and definitions call attention to the syntactical relations of the words, while 'analysis' suggests more concern with their meaning.

As if designed for our particular benefit here, Webster's Third dictionary includes the following three among its definitions of 'parse':

- (1) to describe grammatically and explain inflectional and syntactical relationships
- (2) to examine in a minute way
- (3) to analyze critically.

It appears that when we analyze

we necessarily parse, but when we parse we don't also analyze. That is why the word 'parse' is not even mentioned (much to my surprise on checking) in at least some grammars, and why Talbot had to explain its meaning to his teachers.

Maybe Bassett's comments will force us to recognize that there are two distinct concepts – the one defined in *O.D.E.E.*, the second defined in the other dictionaries and defended by Bassett. Perhaps Editor Burchfield will list the additional function in the next edition. It might 'legitimize' a useful synonym for 'sentence analysis'.

John W. Peters  
Springfield, Ohio, USA

## The unscholarly and the disgruntled

What an unscholarly epistle from John Peters ('Subjunctive doublespeak', ET14, Apr 88)! For one who has taught English for a score of years he would have benefited from knowing some Greek and German. I am not quite able to infer his having done any Latin or no. Fact is, that what Greek grammars call the optative coincides in function with the imperfect subjunctive in historic sequence, and in reported speech of German narrative. Greek's use of this mood to express wish is its least usual use.

ET13 had an article almost as offensive, by one (Liverpool Irish?) Boyd denigrating the scholarly treatment of our English language ('Pop grammarians and the death of English'). I suspect that Boyd, who holds a name originating in Scotland (is his family from Ulster?) never got near a Grammar School in his younger days. That deprivation could account for the chip on his shoulder.

'Tis pity your journal should

give so much room to the opinionating of the petulant and disgruntled. I have renewed my subscription.

David Wiard  
Grantchester Meadows,  
Cambridge, England

## Of quotation marks and potato crisps

Readers will be familiar with the usual and principal uses of quotation marks. We tend to use them when quoting direct speech (with the final punctuation mark inside the quotation marks); when giving the title of, for example, a poem or short story contained in a larger collection, or the title of a journal or newspaper article; when a word

is being used in a special, unusual or ironic sense.

The enclosed packet of Seabrook crisps contains a feast of quotation marks. While it is not out of the question that one or two of the functions mentioned above are in action here, there are other examples that defy traditional analysis. The front of the packet contains these interesting items:

"MORE"-THAN A "SNACK" (the hyphen only adds to the impenetrability of the writer's intentions)

"VALUE" 30 GRAMS "e" (surely the first time anyone has seen the EEC symbol in inverted commas before)

"CRINKLE CUT" (see also back of packet)

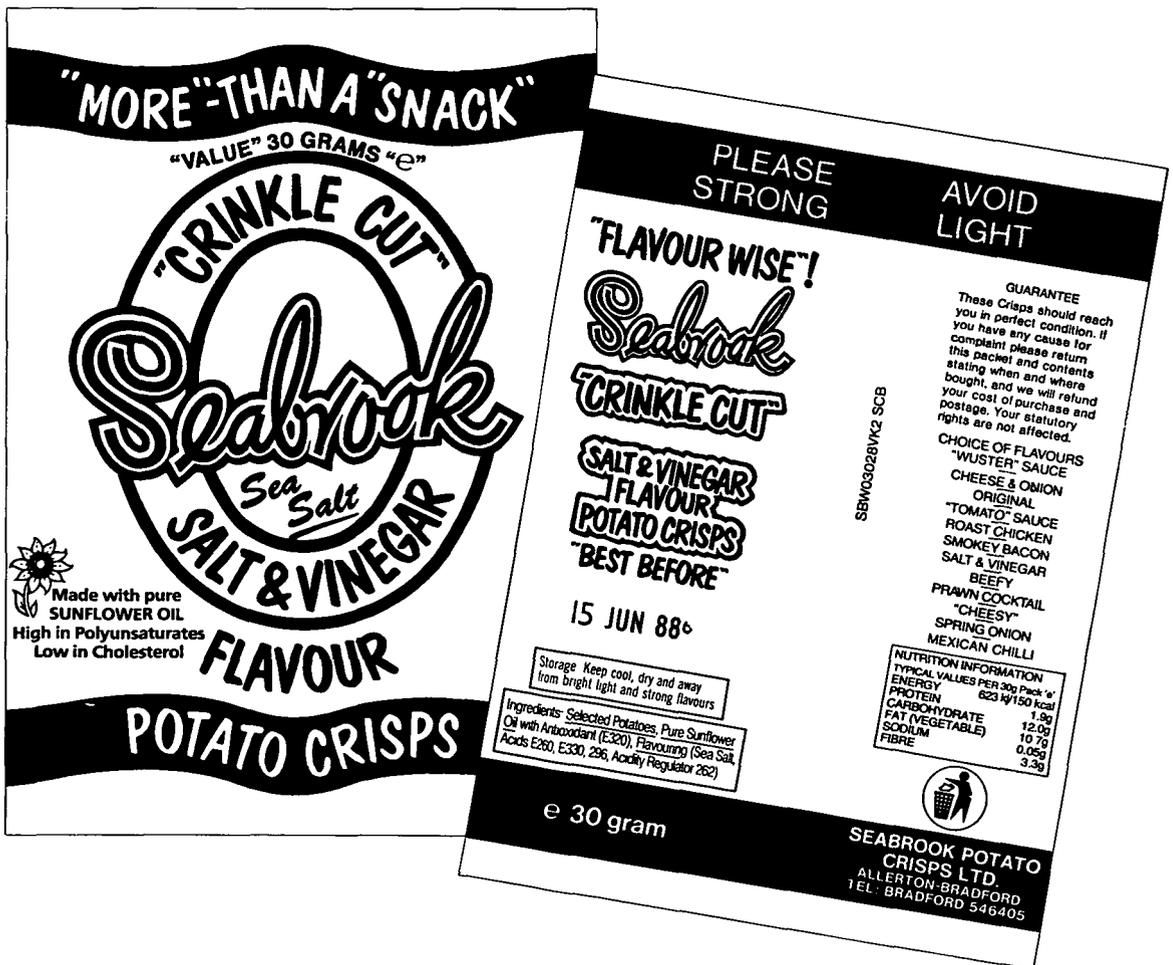
On the back, even more remarkable examples are offered:

"FLAVOUR WISE"! (nice placing of the exclamation mark)

"BEST BEFORE"

and among the list of other available flavours we find "WUSTER" SAUCE, which seems to be an appropriate use of quotation marks, but then "CHEESY" and "TOMATO", each of which should be able to stand on its own. The conclusion drawn is that the flavours bear little resemblance to cheese or tomato. Experienced crisp eaters confirm that this is precisely the case and that the quotation marks here are entirely justified.

Graham Brown,  
King's Lynn, Norfolk, England



## No joke, like

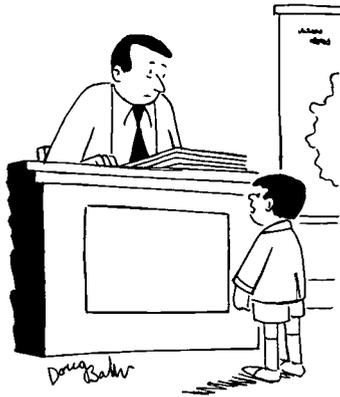
'Ow are yer, Chorver: This letter is lang ower due, cos it was a fair bit back in 1986 sin' ah fust meant ti put me fams ti mi kushty new computer an' ah meant to say 'ta chor' for gettin' stuck in back then an' diggin' up yah ET number yan fo' me, when some daft ha'porth i' New York started me off wi' two 2s, remember? Gormless oit. Must be as radged as a tayfit.

Me main interest is words an' where they kem from, accent an' dialect an' all them what they call varieties now, like history an' development thoo knaws. But ah's also fed up ti me chowies as how t'language is guine ti t'dogs through misuse by them that ah call fungshernal illitrus. In Cannidda we get 'consorshum' for cryin' out loud, just cos iggerant news readers think all 'ti's' should allus come out as 'sh's'! An' 'nawshus' meks me nauseous. Politicians on t'telly are allus anxious to do this an' that. Reporters ought ti ask 'em if they are really full of anxiety, or just eager or keen?

Ah'm a disciple of a gadgery called John Simon 'oo wrote summat called *Paradigms Lost*. If thoo's read it as well then thoo'll know what ah mean. But all these irritants are just symptoms of a greater malaise. Now there's a fancy word from a tyke! One o' mi papers has a weekly column about people nay longer i' t'news. It's been guine on for lang eneeagh and it's called 'Didn't you use to be?' They 'aven't noticed owt wrong wi' it yet and that sort of iggerance about tenses grates on mi wires an' now that I 'ave some time on mi 'ands their editor will be gettin' a scut ower 'is scawp, or a good bunch up 'is jenk.

Misen like, ah put it all down ti poor instruction i' t'schools. Then when fowks grow up they dain't know nowt an' tek nay pride in t'language.

Any'ow ah've been guine on lang eneeagh an' I 'ope thoo jans t'cant and disn't 'ave ower mich



*'If the past participle of "spring" is "sprung", our house was sprung-cleaned yesterday.'*

trouble wi' mi mangin' but, thoo sees, ah'm from Stocheslage, sometimes called Stowslamucky-beck, in t'shade of t'Cleveland 'ills, an' there's a lot o' mergussin' gans on in a very peculiar and almost private local language variety, among them as is in t'know, thoo knaws. Strangers in a group can't mek nixey-bogey out on it. I on'y used a few words to mek it easy for yer. Onnyroad, ah'm off now an' ah wish thee the best of luck wi' thi magazine.

Arthur Grainge,  
Kanata, Ontario, Canada

## Impressionable minds

*Strife* by John Galsworthy, was one in a collection of his plays that I borrowed from my school library for one summer holiday. I have forgotten what the others were, but have retained the indelible impression that this play made on me from the printed page, when I could have been no more than 15. Later on I was to see it on stage, performed by a repertory company, and the recent production on BBC2 tonight brought it all back to me.

With the subject of the content of literature studied in schools, being rather hotly debated at the

moment, I think it not untimely to remind 'educators' of how impressionable is the young mind, and what a responsibility we have in the moulding thereof. I am now nearly 70. John Galsworthy made a strong impression on me at 15, together with Shaw, Tennyson, Wordsworth and Shakespeare, to name but a few lasting loves, and their splendid use of the English language did me no harm. At school I was never exposed to 'bad language' (lots of girlish giggles at parts of Shakespeare and the Bible, of course, but in innocence) and was amused tonight by a character's apology for using 'Damn' in a lady's presence! (If *that* were all, nowadays!)

Surely we should 'feed' our young with only the best, and not merely the 'latest' in literature and all else? We are just as likely to be lastingly influenced by the shoddy as by the elegant. What will have been implanted in today's 15-year-olds, 100 years from *my* adolescence? What will be their yardsticks of 'good English'? Teachers have a duty to bear this in mind.

Sybil, Sarel,  
Stromness, Orkney

## Whose side is he on?

I'm sure the readers of *Melody Maker* or *Smash Hits* would be flattered to hear the magazines they read described as 'periodicals', but despite some interesting points on literacy it is not only Raymond Chapman's use of register which confuses the issues raised (*ET*, Apr 88).

While agreeing with him that some non-standard orthographic forms are used for non-standard messages and that advertising language and graffiti writers may deliberately use misspelling to create an impression, some of his observations seem to be confusing mediums with messages. And I'd be interested to know for

example who exactly 'the writers on modern speech' are who regard 'gonna' as 'intelligible but substandard'. Unless they happen to belong to the Queen's English Society, that is.

The texts of popular songs may bring 'a rich harvest of deviant spelling' but they don't come under the same linguistic category as dialect-imitation or newspaper editorials. Singing is a whole different area with a whole different set of linguistic and musical conventions, some of which – unlike speech – allow lyrics to be totally incomprehensible. The spelling of some of the lyrics may be 'deviant' in that they contain non-standard forms but it's as far removed from the implied sound-symbol revolt as the Beastie Boys are from Beethoven.

I started off by thinking that one of the things Raymond Chapman is saying is that you have to master the system before you can abuse it but ended up wondering whose side he is really on.

Paul Harvey,  
South Molton, Devon, England

## Discrimination?

I was interested to note several points in Paul Harvey's own use of language in his article 'Language Awareness' (ET13, Jan. 88).

He asks us to imagine a radio panel comprising five experts of various types and a member of the public. Carefully, and twice at the expense of using the plural, 'themselves' and 'their', in agreement with the singular 'expert', he avoids having to reveal the sex of any of the experts. This, the linguistically aware among us realise, is sterling non-sexist stuff.

But, when Mr Harvey turns to the member of the public, he refers to her as 'her' and implies that she lacks confidence about her accent and use of language. Why has he carefully avoided

ascribing a sex to any of the experts only to reveal this unconfident and uneducated member of the public as female?

Marion Mackay,  
London, England

## Common-gender plurals

The proposal by A. M. Stratford for a common-gender set of pronouns (ET14) is attractive but is likely to fail through the nature of language change. While words for the naming of new referents and experiences readily develop to fill a need, there is no way of deliberately changing the structural words – though an Orwellian regime might manage it in a couple of generations. History shows pronouns altering in their scope and sometimes disappearing, as the possessive *its* replaced *his* for neuter nouns and the nominative *ye* was lost, as well as the notable withdrawal of *thee* and *thou*. The pronoun *it* to which your correspondent refers was not a new word but simply an aphetic form of the Old English neuter pronoun *hit*, part of a declinable three-gender set. What is happening in practice is that the plural pronouns are being used for common-gender purposes, after words like *student*, *worker*, *person*, and pronouns like *anyone*, *nobody*: immediately before writing this, I read in a very literate paper, 'Everyone will form their own opinion of the achievement of Michael Ramsey.' A usage which has long been stigmatised as 'bad

grammar' is solving the problem and before long *they*, *them*, *their* will take their place in the pronominal system of English for singular common-gender use as well as for plurals, just as *you* is now both singular and plural. A little thought meanwhile often avoids giving offence. The example your correspondent offers, 'Find any employee and give this to –' can be turned into 'Give this to any employee you find'.

Raymond Chapman,  
Department of Language  
Studies, The London School of  
Economics, London, England

## No future for HAN

A. M. Stratford (letter, ET14) is on a losing game if he, or she, proposes to back the imposition of *han* and *hans* to replace *he/she* plus *him/her* and *his/her(s)*. In the three main Scandinavian languages these stand for 'he' and 'his' (non-reflexive) and not for 'him', and certainly not for the feminine forms; so Scandinavians would be confused. More important: such words are artificial. They are maximally unlikely to get acceptance from those whose first language is English; the great mass of people will never stand for it. But if I am wrong in this respect, and the people can be dragooned into using such forms, so much the worse: doctrinaire enforcement of arbitrary linguistic forms is wrong in itself, and doctrinaire inducement to adopt them is nearly as bad. 'They', 'them', 'their(s)' will do well enough where the noun referred to is not a personal name, except that there is a 'grey zone' where the noun indicates a person on whom the listener's or reader's concern is acutely fixed, or where there is an element of absurdity in the plural pronoun, e.g. in 'My hidden assailant', 'his torturer', or the like. In such cases 'this person' could replace the pronoun. For a personal, but non-gendered, name, to repeat the

### Lisper's delight

I have a pash  
For a family bash.

It's great to be with  
Kin your kin *kith!*

Alma Denny,  
New York

name may solve the difficulty. Where the sex is evident from the name or other noun, good old 'he', 'she' and the rest will do fine.

David I. Masson,  
Leeds, England

## On excluding the ladies

The rich English language has often been contrasted with poorer languages that lack significant cultural concepts such as 'home' or 'love', yet it is not sufficiently alive to fill two great gaps of its own. It has no word for the human male to distinguish him from the generic word 'man' and to be in parallel with the derivative word 'woman', and there is also a need for gender-free singular pronouns for human beings. Some of the linguistic acrobatics now being imposed as a result of these gaps are shown in a sample list from the Oxford University Press booklet entitled *The Balancing Act: Guidelines for Inclusive Language*, reported in *Kaleidoscope* (ET Jan 88). This list does not include How to Wreck your Writing Style with Circumlocutions and Hobbled Pronouns, but it replaces words that could be harmlessly generic with longer words that rank in degree of officialese and stuffiness from the innocuous 'photographer' and 'firefighter' to 'flight attendant', 'camera operator', and, to replace 'spokesman', 'official representative' or the incipient Spoonerism 'spokesperson' – which sounds like the person on the committee who puts the spokes in. 'Staffing' replaces 'manning' ('Staff the pumps!') and philosophers and scientists and theologians will discuss the nature of the human race and the ascent of people.

Meanwhile, out in the street, new words like 'homs and fems' and experiments with pronouns are simmering, and waiting for the attention of the arbiters.

However, at the bottom of the Balancing Act, so to speak, and last on the list comes another exclusion in the name of inclusive language which is rather curious, and is perhaps a sign of a slip in the culture: 'Woman' is to be substituted for 'ladies'.

Opposition to the word 'ladies' because it can be a weapon of male chauvinism and class snobbery goes back at least forty years. Certainly it is a term that can be laid on too thick, as many words can be, and its use can be invidious. One of our family stories is that when my mother was discussing the intended careers of her three daughters, and told how the youngest, aged seven, wanted to be a lady, 'Fancy,' said our schoolteacher. 'So they are all going to be something different.' But if the word 'ladies' is dropped altogether, something of grace is lost from our culture, and it will become a little harsher – too full of shovels instead of spades, and short of trowels, which have uses as well as misuses. This can be seen by substituting the biological descriptor 'woman' wherever the cultural description 'lady' had previously appeared in song, ballad and poetry, and by comparing contexts for the two words:

● Farewell to you, ladies of Spain, the Lady of the Lake, the Dark Lady, the ladies of chivalry and romance, the Lady with the Lamp (or Hammer, as some now say), the lady of my delight, the lady sweet and kind, Our Lady, Ladies and Gentlemen, Lady Luck . . .

● It can be used as evidence of persisting class distinctions and snobbery: Lady Muck, Lady

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Readers' letters are welcomed. *ET* policy is to publish as representative and informative a selection as possible in each issue. Such correspondence, however, may be subject to editorial adaptation in order to make the most effective use of both the letters and the space available.

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Bountiful, Lady Ladidah, Shady Lady, too much of a lady if you ask me, a real lady, no lady, little old lady, little old ladies (a shade different again) . . .

● There is a difference between charlady, tealady, cleaner lady, and charwoman, teawoman and cleaner woman – and it is interesting to find that most people in these occupations prefer to be treated as ladies, and their objections are when their treatment does not correspond with the title, making it a sham. To be 'treated like a charwoman' is resented by cleaners as much as by anybody else.

● There are many contexts for 'woman' that 'lady' escapes: foolish woman, silly old women, pack of old women, he's an old woman, wild woman, lost woman, fallen woman, Scarlet Woman, the other woman, token woman, the little woman, that damn woman, Wimmen!, that woman, womanly woman, women who want to be women, trust a woman!, weeping women, women must weep, can't stand the woman, bagwoman, wicked woman, mere woman, wise woman, Superwoman, Wonderwoman, modern woman . . .

But either 'Ladies' or 'Women' is better than 'Female Toilet'.

It is sometimes said of a wonderful person, regardless of social class, 'She's a real lady', 'She is always a lady', but 'the real woman' is a line of patter for a sex object used by cosmetics advertisers or a man on the make.

The revolt against the word 'ladies' is part of a revolt against 'manners', when 'manners' have come to signify social dividers and rigid cruelty rather than courtesy and ways of making life smoother and more pleasant for everybody. Unlike etiquette, courtesy does not make social distinctions; anyone can be a lady and anyone can be a gentleman, with the terms denoting thoughtfulness for others, gentleness rather than gentility, and grace

and graciousness rather than condescension. No Ladies, no Gentlemen either, and the loss of significant contributions to concepts of civilised behaviour. In my work as a child psychologist, I have found the value of giving children concepts that can help to shape their developing ideas of what they can do and be – ideas such as ‘courage’, ‘fair play’, ‘give ’im a go’ and yes, ‘ladies’ and ‘gentlemen’ – because when ideas are lost from the language, they may more easily be lost from life as well.

Valerie Yule,  
Faculty of Education, Victoria,  
Australia



*‘If I insult you again, you’ll turn ugly? Shouldn’t you have used the comparative degree?’*

## Removing the blinkers?

While I was trying to broaden the discussion on literature, for it is in diversity of approach that a debate takes off so that all might learn something, Mr. Palit (ET13) makes a desperate bid to put the blinkers on us all again. My contention that Irish has a better chance of survival than English is not ‘utter rubbish’ but informed opinion, and should be challenged by delving into the comparative strengths and weaknesses of these two languages, not by citing a couple of long-lived cultures which eventually died, and saying: There you are, then!

Mr. Palit’s final flourish is the incredible statement that ‘a language’s age is not reckoned as being older than writing in that language’. I am now beginning to understand the mentality which can celebrate Australia’s bicentenary 50,000 years after man discovered that land. If all Mr.

Palit wants is a few words etched on paper, bark or stone, then the Ogham stones pre-date English scratchings by a considerable margin. And if the Chinese character for ‘man’ can be based on a representation of a man, and be accepted as writing, then the Abo’s picture writing pre-dates every other surviving culture by countless thousands of years!

If literature leads to enlightenment, let us make an enlightened examination of this question. When the ancient Greeks performed their plays, was it literature? They spoke their lines from memory; the written word was a mere prompt, to be used at rehearsals so that the original composition would not be lost. The cultural event was not in the writing, but on the stage. And does a song not exist until it is written down? Now it is my turn to exclaim: ‘utter rubbish!’

The earliest Irish writings were not written as they were composed, they were taken from the oral tradition and exhibited elements of antiquity even then.

Brehon Law, the old Celtic law tracts, in use in Ireland outside the English Pale until the mid 17th century, and of course very similar to the law of Hywel Dda, contains passages which compare so closely to passages in Hindu Brahmin Law, that there can be no coincidence; they must have had a common source. This means that the Celts – ancestors of the Irish, Welsh, etc. – had a complex legal system and all the trappings of civilisation which go with that, right through the Bronze Age and Iron Age, intact into modern times. In other words, we have a cultural pedigree which includes stability and survival. It also means that we retained, during the Indo-European Diaspora, much that other Indo-European peoples had, but lost on the way. This is why I claimed in my last letter that when the English ignore the oldest literary tradition in Europe they smother the key to understanding their own origins and mentality.

I am not necessarily saying that we have something better than the English have, although it is certainly better than the cancerous mid Atlantic Coca Cola Culture. I am simply saying that we have something which was once theirs, and that should attract their interest, not their contempt.

For a start, I will redefine ‘literature’: it is not the written word, it is the composed word. Literature is: the composed word which merits being written down, recorded, or remembered. Does anyone disagree?

Blinkers can be comfortable, but they’re not obligatory. is mise, le meas,

Séamas Ó Coileáin,  
London, England