— 14 —

SWEARING

Among the Chinese, to be called a turtle is the worst possible taunt. In Norwegian, *devil* is highly taboo – roughly equivalent to our *fuck*. Among the Xoxa tribe of South Africa the most provocative possible remark is *hlebeshako* – 'your mother's ears'. In French it is a grave insult to call someone a cow or a camel and the effect is considerably intensified if you precede it with *espèce de* ('kind of') so that it is worse in French to be called a kind of a cow than to be called just a cow. The worst insult among Australian aborigines is to suggest that the target have intercourse with his mother. Incest is in fact so serious in many cultures that often it need be implied in only the vaguest terms, as with *tu madre* in Spanish and *your mama* among blacks in America. Often national terms of abuse are nonsensical, as in the German *schweinehund*, which means 'pig-dog'.

Some cultures don't swear at all. The Japanese, Malayans, and most Polynesians and American Indians do not have native swear words. The Finns, lacking the sort of words you need to describe your feelings when you stub your toe getting up to answer a wrong number at 2.00 a.m., rather oddly adopted the word *ravintolassa*. It means 'in the restaurant'.

But most cultures swear and have been doing so for a very long time. Dr J. N. Adams of Manchester University studied swearing by Romans and found that they had 800 'dirty' words (for want of a better expression). We, by contrast, have only about twenty or so, depending on how you define the term. The Rating Code Office of Hollywood has a list of

seventeen seriously objectionable words that will earn a motion picture a mandatory R rating. If you add in all the words that are not explicitly taboo but are still socially doubtful – words like *crap* and *boobs* – the number rises to perhaps fifty or sixty words in common use. Once there were many more. More than 1,200 words just for *sexual intercourse* have been counted.

According to Dr Adams's findings, certain things have not changed in 1,500 years, most notably a preoccupation with the size of the male member, for which the Romans provided many names, among them *tool, dagger, sickle, tiller, stake, sword,* and (a little oddly perhaps) *worm.* Even more oddly, the two most common Roman slang words for the penis were both feminine, while the most common word for female genitalia was masculine.

Swearing seems to have some near-universal qualities. In almost all cultures, swearing involves one or more of the following: filth, the forbidden (particularly incest), and the sacred, and usually all three. Most cultures have two levels of swearing – relatively mild and highly profane. Ashley Montagu, in *The Anatomy of Swearing*, cites a study of swearing among the Wik Monkan natives of the Cape York Peninsula. They have many insults which are generally regarded as harmless teasing – *big head, long nose, skinny arms* – and a whole body of very much more serious ones, which are uttered only in circumstances of high emotion. Among the latter are *big penis, plenty urine,* and *vagina woman mad.*

English is unusual in including the impossible and the pleasurable in its litany of profanities. It is a strange and little-noted idiosyncrasy of our tongue that when we wish to express extreme fury we entreat the object of our rage to undertake an anatomical impossibility or, stranger still, to engage in the one activity that is bound to give him more pleasure than almost anything else. Can there be, when you think about it, a more improbable sentiment than 'Get fucked!'? We might as well snarl, 'Make a lot of money!' or 'Have a nice day!'

Most of our swear words have considerable antiquity.

Modern English contains few words that would be unhesitatingly understood by an Anglo-Saxon peasant of, say, the tenth century A.D., but *tits* is one of them. So is *fart*, believe it or not. The Anglo-Saxons used the word *scītan*, which became *shite* by the 1300s and *shit* by the 1500s. *Shite* is used as a variant of *shit* in England to this day.

Fuck, it has been suggested, may have sprung from the Latin *futuo*, the French *foutre*, or the German *ficken*, all of which have the same meaning. According to Montagu the word first appears in print in 1503 in a poem by the Scottish poet William Dunbar. Although *fuck* has been around for centuries, possibly millennia, for a long period it fell out of general use. Before 1503, the vulgar word for sex was to *swive*.

Pussy, for the vagina, goes back at least to the 1600s. *Arse* is Old English. Common names for the penis, such as *dick*, *peter*, and *percy* (used variously throughout the English-speaking world), go back at least 150 years, though they may be very much older. *Jock* was once also common in this respect, but it died out, though it survives in *jockstrap*.

It is often hard to trace such terms reliably because they weren't generally recorded and because they have, for obvious reasons, seldom attracted scholarly investigation. *Buttocks*, for instance, goes back to at least the thirteenth century, but *butt*, its slangy diminutive form, is not recorded until 1859 in America. As Stuart Berg Flexner observes, it seems highly unlikely that it took 600 years for anyone to think of converting the former into the latter. Similarly, although *shit* has been around in various forms since before the Norman Conquest, *horseshit* does not appear before the 1930s. Again, this seems improbable. The lack of authoritative guidance has sometimes encouraged people to come up with fanciful explanations for profanities. *Fuck*, it was suggested, was originally a police blotter acronym standing for 'For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge'. It is nothing of the sort.

After *O.K.*, *fuck* must be about the most versatile of all English words. It can be used to describe a multitude of conditions and phenomena, from making a mess of something

(*fuck up*) to being casual or provocative (*fuck around*), to inviting or announcing a departure (*fuck off*), to being estimable (*fucking-A*), to being baffled (*I'm fucked if I know*), to being disgusted (*fuck this*), and so on and on and on. *Fuck* probably reached its zenith during the Second World War. Most people are familiar with the army term *snafu* (short for 'situation normal – all fucked up'), but there were many others in common currency then, among them *fubar* ('fucked up beyond all recognition') and *fubb* ('fucked up beyond belief').

Piss goes back at least to the thirteenth century, but may be even older. It has been traced to the Vulgar Latin *pissiare* and thus could conceivably date from the Roman occupation of Britain. As *piss* became considered indecent, the euphemism *pee* evolved, based simply on the pronunciation of the first letter of the word. In America, *piss* has been documented since 1760 and *pee* since 1788.

The emotional charge attached to words can change dramatically over time. *Cunt* was once relatively harmless. Chaucer dropped it casually and severally into *The Canterbury Tales*, spelling it variously *queynte*, *queinte*, and even *Kent*. The City of London once had an alley favoured by prostitutes called Gropecuntlane. It was not until the early eighteenth century that the word became indecent. *Shit* was considered acceptable until as recently as the early nineteenth century. *Prick* was standard until the eighteenth century. *Piss* was an unexceptionable word from about 1250 to 1750, a fact still reflected in the common French name for urinals: *pissoirs*. On the other hand, words that seem entirely harmless now were once capable of exciting considerable passion. In sixteenth-century England, *zooterkins* was a pretty lively word. In nineteenth-century England *puppy* and *cad* were highly risqué.

Today the worst swear words in English are probably *fuck*, *shit*, and *cunt*. But until about the 1870s it was much more offensive to be profane. *God damn*, *Jesus*, and even *Hell* were worse than *fuck* and *shit* (insofar as these things are quantifiable). In early swearing religion played a much more

prominent role – so much so that in the fifteenth century a common tag for Englishmen in France was *goddams*. Swearing by saints was also common. A relic of this is our epithet *by George*, which is a contraction of 'by St George' and has been around for centuries. *Cock* was for a long time not only a slang term for penis but also a euphemism for God. Thus in *Hamlet* Ophelia could pun: 'Young men will do't, if they come to't; By cock, they are to blame.' Some of these were surprisingly explicit – 'by God's bones', 'by God's body' – but as time went on they were increasingly blurred into more harmless forms, such as *zounds* (for 'God's wounds'), *gadzooks* (for 'God's hooks', the significance of which is obscure), and *God's bodkins* or other variants like *odsbodikins* and *gadsbudlikins*, all formed from 'God's body'.

This tendency to transform profanities into harmless expressions is a particular characteristic of English swearing. Most languages employ *euphemism* (from the Greek, meaning 'to speak well of') in some measure. Germans say the meaningless *Potz blitz* rather than *Gottes Blitz* and the French say *par bleu* for *par Dieu* and *Ventre Saint Gris* instead of *Ventre Saint Christ*. But no other language approaches English for the number of delicate expletives of the sort that you could safely say in front of a maiden aunt: *darn*, *durn*, *drat*, *gosh*, *golly*, *goodness gracious*, *gee whiz*, *jeepers*, *shucks*, and so on. We have scores, if not hundreds, of these terms. However, sometimes even these words are regarded as exceptionable, particularly when they are new. *Blooming* and *blasted*, originally devised as mild epithets, were in nineteenth-century England considered nearly as offensive as the more venerable expletives they were meant to replace.

But then of course the gravity of swear words in any language has little to do with the words themselves and much more to do with the fact that they are forbidden. It is a circular effect. Forbidden words are emotive because they are forbidden and they are forbidden because they are emotive.

A remarkable example of this is *bloody* in England, which to most Britons is at least as objectionable a word as *shit* and

yet it is meaningless. A number of explanations have been suggested, generally involving either a contraction of an oath such as 'by Christ's blood' or 'by our Lady' or else something to do with menstruation. But there is no historical evidence to favour one view over the other. The fact is that sometime around the sixteenth century people began to say *bloody* and to mean a curse by it. It's now often hard to tell when they meant it as a curse and when they meant it to be taken literally, as when in *Richard III* Richmond says, 'The bloody dog is dead.'

Although Shakespeare had a weakness for double entendre puns, on the whole he was a fairly restrained and not terribly inventive swearer. *Damned* appears 105 times in his thirty-seven plays, but for the rest he was content to insert the odd 'For God's sake', 'a pox on't', 'God's bread', and one 'whoreson jackanapes'. *Julius Caesar*, unusually for the period, has not a single instance of swearing. By contrast, in the same year that *Julius Caesar* was first performed, Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* offered such colourful phrases as 'Whoreson base fellow', 'whoreson coney-catching rascal' (*coney* being a synonym for pudendum), 'by my fackins faith', and 'I am the rankest cow that ever pissed'. Other of his plays contain even richer expressions: 'I fart at thee', 'Shit o' your head', 'Turd i' your teeth'. Another play of approximately the same period, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, first performed about 1550, contained literally dozens of instances of swearing: 'by Jesus', 'dirty bastard', 'bawdy bitch', 'for God's sake', and many more in the same vein. It even had a parson describing someone as 'that shitten lout'. Other oaths of the period included such memorable expressions as 'kiss my blindcheeks' and 'stap my vitals'.

Soon after Shakespeare's death, Britain went through a period of prudery of the sort with which all countries are periodically seized. In 1623 an Act of Parliament was passed making it illegal to swear. People were fined for such mild oaths as 'upon my life' and 'by my troth' – mild utterances indeed compared with the 'God's poxes' and 'fackins faiths' of a generation before. In 1649 the laws were tightened even

further – to the extent that swearing at a parent became punishable by death.

But the greatest outburst of prudery came in the nineteenth century when it swept through the world like a fever. It was an age when sensibilities grew so delicate that one lady was reported to have dressed her goldfish in miniature suits for the sake of propriety and a certain Madame de la Bresse left her fortune to provide clothing for the snowmen of Paris. Prudery, so often associated with the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), actually considerably predated it. One of the great names in the field was that of Thomas Bowdler, an Edinburgh physician who purified the works of writers such as Shakespeare and Gibbon, boasting that it was his practice to add nothing new to the work, but simply to remove those words that 'cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family'. His ten-volume *Family Shakespeare* appeared in 1818, a year before Victoria was born, so it is clear the queen didn't establish the trend, but simply helped to prolong it. In fact, almost a century before she reigned Samuel Johnson was congratulated by a woman for leaving indecent words out of his dictionary. To which he devastatingly replied: 'So you've been looking for them, have you, Madam?'

It has sometimes been said that prudery reached such a height in the nineteenth century that people took to dressing their piano legs in little skirts lest they rouse anyone to untimely passion. Thomas Pyles in his outstanding *Words and Ways of American English* tracked the story to a book called *Diary in America*, written in 1837 by an English traveller, Captain Frederick Marryat, and concluded that the story was told for comic effect and almost certainly was untrue. Rather more plausible was the anecdote recorded in the same book in which Marryat made the serious gaffe of asking a young lady if she had hurt her leg in a fall. The woman blushingly averted her gaze and told him that people did not use *that* word in America. 'I apologized for my want of refinement, which was attributable to having been accustomed only to *English* society,' Marryat drolly remarked, and asked the lady

what was the acceptable term for 'such articles'. *Limbs*, he was told.

It was an age in which the most innocuous words became unacceptable at a rate that must have been dizzying. *Stomach* became a euphemism for *belly* and in its turn was considered too graphic and was replaced by *tummy*, *midriff*, and even *breadbasket*. The conventional terms for the parts of a chicken, such as *breast*, *leg*, and *thigh*, caused particular anxiety and had to be replaced with terms like *drumstick*, *first joint*, and *white meat*. The names for male animals, such as *buck* and *stallion*, were never used in mixed company. Bulls were called *sires*, *male animals*, and, in a truly inspired burst of ridiculousness, *gentleman cows*. But it didn't stop there. Euphemisms had to be devised for any word that had *cock* in it – *haycock* became *haystack*, *cockerel* became *rooster* – and for the better part of a century people with *cock* in their names, such as Hitchcock or Peacock, suffered unspeakable embarrassment when they were required to make introductions. Americans were rather more squeamish in these matters than the British, going so far as to change the old English *titbit* to *tidbit*.

Against such a background one can easily imagine the shock that must have gripped readers of *The Times* who turned to their paper one morning in January 1882 and found a lengthy report on a parliamentary speech by the attorney general concluding with the unexpectedly forthright statement: 'The speaker then said he felt inclined for a bit of fucking.' Not surprisingly, it caused a sensation. The executives of *The Times* were so dumbstruck by this outrage against common decency that four full days passed before they could bring themselves to acknowledge the offence. After what was doubtless the most exhaustive internal investigation ever undertaken at the newspaper, it issued an apology: 'No pains have been spared by the management of this journal to discover the author of a gross outrage committed by the interpolation of a line in the speech by Sir William Harcourt reported in our issue of Monday last. This malicious fabrication was surreptitiously introduced before

the paper went to press. The matter is now under legal investigation, and it is to be hoped that the perpetrator will be brought to punishment.' But if they hadn't caught him after four days I doubt if they ever did. In any case, he or someone of like sensibilities struck again six months later when an advertisement appeared promoting a book about 'Every-day Life in our Public Schools. Sketched by Head Scholars. With a Glossary of Some Words used by Henry Irving in his disquisition upon fucking.' Whatever soul or souls were responsible for this sequel, they kept their peace thereafter – though I have been told that when Queen Victoria opened the Clifton Suspension Bridge the sentence 'Her Majesty then passed over the bridge' came out in *The Times* as 'Her Majesty then pissed over the bridge.' Whether this embellishment of the facts was intentional or fortuitous (or even possibly apocryphal) I could not say.

The Victorian horror at the thought of swearing in print has lingered up to our own day. According to Ashley Montagu, as recently as 1947 *Technology Review*, a publication of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology read almost exclusively by scientists and technocrats, changed the expression 'doing his damnedest' to 'doing intensely his very best'. Ten years later the same author used the same phrase in a book and again had it cut. Montagu also cites the instance in 1941 of a federal judge threatening a lawyer with contempt for using a base and indecent word in his court. The word was *darn*. In 1948, Burges Johnson actually managed to write a book on swearing, *The Lost Art of Profanity*, without once mentioning any of the four-letter words. He would not have had it published otherwise. And as late as 1949, the Hollywood Production Code banned the word *dames*. In that year, as Mario Pei notes, a movie called *Dames Don't Talk* had its title changed to *Smart Girls Don't Talk*.

The editors of the *Random House Dictionary* of 1966 decided, after considerable agonizing, not to insert any four-letter words. They did not appear until the publication of *RHD-II* in 1987. The original *Oxford English Dictionary*, despite its determination to chart every word in the language, contained none of the four-letter words, though they did appear in the supplements to the *OED*, which began to appear in 1972. They also appeared in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* from about the same time.

In 1988, William Safire managed to write a column in *The New York Times Magazine* about the expression *the shit hit the fan* without actually mentioning *shit*. The closest he came was to talk about the use of 'a scatological noun just before the familiar *hit the fan*'. During the Watergate hearings, *The Times* did print the term *candyass*, used by Richard Nixon, but did so only reluctantly. The paper's stylebook continues to say that *goddamn* 'should not be used at all unless there is a compelling reason'. And the National Transportation Safety Board displayed extraordinary delicacy when it published a transcript of cockpit voice recordings during the crash of a United Airlines jet in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1989. An example: 'We're not going to make the runway, fellows. We're going to have to ditch this son of a [word deleted] and hope for the best.'[1]

The British are relatively broad-minded about language, even in their advertisements. In 1989 Epson, the printer company, ran a lighthearted ad in British newspapers about the history of printing, which contained the statement that 'a Chinese eunuch called Cai Lun, with no balls but one hell of an imagination, invented paper'. I doubt very much that any American newspaper would accept an ad referring explicitly to the testicular condition of the inventor of paper.

Most of the quality newspapers in Britain have freely admitted expletives to their pages when the circumstances were deemed to warrant it. Their first opportunity to do so was in 1960 when a court decided that *Lady Chatterley's Lover* could be printed in full without risk of doing irreversible damage to society's well-being. Three British publications, the *Observer*, the *Guardian*, and the *Spectator*, took the opportunity to print *fuck* themselves and were promptly censured by the Press Council for doing so. But the word

has appeared many times in the British press since then, generally without any murmur of complaint. (Ironically, the tabloid newspapers, though usually specializing in matters of sex and prurience, are far more skittish when it comes to printing swear words.)

In 1988 British papers were given an outstanding opportunity to update their position on obscenities when the captain of the England cricket tream, Mike Gatting, reportedly called the umpire of an important match 'a fucking, cheating cunt'. Only one newspaper, the *Independent*, printed all the words without asterisks. It was the first time that *cunt* had appeared in a British newspaper.

Some words are less innocent than they seem. *Bollix* is commonly used in America to describe a confused situation, as in this quotation from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*:[2] 'It was the winless Giants' third loss of the bollixed strike-torn season.' Or this one from American Airlines' inflight magazine, *American Way*: 'Our faux pas of the month for February was the crossword puzzle titled Heavy Stuff, which was all bollixed up.'[3] It is probably safe to assume that neither writer was aware that *bollix* is a direct adaptation of *bollocks* (or *ballocks*), meaning 'testicles'. It is still used in England to describe the testicles and also as a cry to express disbelief, similar to *bullshit* in American usage. As Pyles notes, Barnacle Bill the Sailor was originally Ballocky Bill and the original words of his ballad were considerably more graphic and sexual than the innocent phrases beloved by generations of children. The American slang word *nuts* also means 'testicles' – though oddly when used as an exclamation it becomes wholly innocent. Other words concealing unsavoury origins include *bumf*, which is short for *bumfodden* or 'toilet paper' in German, and *poppycock*, an adaptation of a Dutch word meaning 'soft dung'. (In answer to the obvious question, yes, they also have a word for firm dung – in fact two: *poep* and *stront*.)

A few swear words have evolved different connotations in Britain and America. In America, a person who is pissed is angry; in Britain he's drunk. *Bugger*, a wholly innocent word in

America, is not at all welcome in polite conversation in Britain. As Pyles notes, until 1934 you could be fined or imprisoned for writing or saying it. A bugger in Britain is a sodomite. Although *bugger* is unacceptable, *buggery* is quite all right: it is the term used by both the legal profession and newspapers when someone is accused of criminal sodomy.