

social vision in this passage from *The Mill on the Floss*:

In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society, where principles and beliefs are not only of an extremely moderate kind, but are always presupposed, no subjects being eligible but such as can be touched with a light and graceful irony. But then, good society has its claret and its velvet carpets, its dinner-engagements six weeks deep, its opera and its faery ball-rooms; rides off its ennuï on thorough-bred horses, lounges at the club, has to keep clear of crinoline vortices, gets its science done by Faraday, and its religion by the superior clergy who are to be met in the best houses: how should it have time or need for belief and emphasis? But good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production; requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant,

deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, grinding, hammering, weaving under more or less oppression of carbonic acid—or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky corn-lands, where the rainy days look dreary. This wide national life is based entirely on emphasis—the emphasis of want, which urges it into all the activities necessary for the maintenance of good society and light irony . . .

At a time when different and exhausted traditions of literary criticism are declaring their indifference to this kind of social and intellectual awareness, it's necessary to remind ourselves of the relationship between imaginative issues and practical reality. It is a connection which neither Liddell's smug notion of inherited value nor Emery's fascination with the "hungry, shivering self" is capable of making.

The Game of the Name

Partridge's Catch Phrases—By D. J. ENRIGHT

WHILE CONFESSING that he doesn't really know what a catch phrase is, Eric Partridge defines it as "a saying that has caught on, and pleases the public."¹ Catch phrases may be not phrases but sentences or even single words. They are to be distinguished (if not very certainly) from clichés and proverbial sayings: "all depends on the context, the nuance, the tone."

Since the world is full of catch phrases and a lexicographer is only human (a c.p. missing from Partridge, though "he's one of us" is listed as a homosexual c.p.), it will be petty to complain of c.pp. missing from Partridge. And if one does complain, one may well be told that they are clichés or proverbial sayings. "A standing prick has no conscience" began as "a low c.p." but by 1920 had achieved the status of (unofficial) proverb, while "you'll have your work cut out" is a c.p. only when addressed to a (commonly Australian) mother about to have her third or fourth baby—otherwise it is merely a cliché. An instance of (not otherwise found in this dictionary) Catch-22? But we mustn't take the mick(e)y (another absentee) out of Mr Partridge. Oedipus schmoedipus (also missing), what's it matter so long as he loves his mother tongue?

Better to enjoy what is present, and in particular the catch phrases one hadn't come across before, thus proving that one is not a mere member of the public. But first, a juster matter for complaint, let us remark on a few oddnesses in this book. It is incorrect to say that "great minds think alike" (ascribed to "c. 1890, perhaps a decade earlier") does not appear in dictionaries of quotations or of proverbs, since it is given in *Everyman's Dictionary of Quotations and Proverbs* as a 20th-century proverb, with a reference to an unspecified older form in the 17th century. "Alone I did it" is described as latish C19-20, and Partridge states that his only early record of it occurs in a play by Alfred Sutro of 1906. If Sutro, why not Shakespeare (1607-8)?—

*like an eagle in a dovecote, I
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli.
Alone I did it.*

Of "are you keeping it for the worms?" ("a Canadian c.p., dating from c. 1940") Partridge remarks that it is "accidentally reminiscent of Shakespeare's famous attack on the value of virginity as such." Shakespeare's famous attack? Much more reminiscent of Marvell's playful ploy, "Worms shall try/That long preserv'd Virginity." On "look you!", a Cymricism "well known since C16 at latest", he comments: "so much so that it occurs frequently in the plays by James Shirley (1596-1666)." More to the point, it

¹ *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases: British and American, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day.* By ERIC PARTRIDGE. Routledge & Kegan Paul, £7.95.

occurs very frequently indeed in Shakespeare's *Henry V* (1599): eleven times in the scene in which Fluellen makes his first appearance.

In his historical notes Partridge tends to adduce popular sources and instances—Noël Coward, Wodehouse, Terence Rattigan, Edward Albee, ITMA—which is obviously apt, given the subject. But I think he underestimates the influence on the popular tongue of writers more elevated: *Hamlet*, as we know, is made up of catch phrases (among them “for this relief—much thanks!”, as Partridge notes). It is pleasant to come across Stevie Smith's “not waving but drowning” admitted as a highbrow c.p. “of c. 1958–70.” Shortly before her death Partridge wrote to Stevie Smith to ask whether she had coined or adopted the phrase “a good time was had by all.” She replied that she had taken it from reports in parish magazines on church outings, and asked in turn, “Are you the Eric Partridge of the Slang dictionary. But no! he must by now be dead.” No, better read than dead.

Partridge suspects that “better Red than dead” was suggested by Hilaire Belloc's epigram,

*When I am dead, I hope it may be said:
His sins were scarlet, but his books were read.*

An unlikely derivation, I would think. Solzhenitsyn (and John R. Silber, ENCOUNTER, February 1977) credit or discredit Bertrand Russell with the saying. Basil Brush ought to have got a mention in the entry on “don't get your knickers in a twist”, if only as the populariser of the c.p. for a younger generation. (No connection, between this c.p. and the probably older one, “you come home with your knickers torn and say you found the money!”: “indicative of extreme scepticism.”) And the entry on “some like it hot”—“became a c.p. somewhere about 1965”—certainly should have mentioned the immensely successful film of that name, starring Monroe, Lemmon and Curtis, made in 1959.

No flowers—by request! (Well, Partridge tells us that “this jocular c.p. means ‘no complaints, please!’.”) For “to —er is human” (a pun involving “the slurred sound of dubiety”). So let us look at some entertaining and unusual commonplaces, such as the very first item in the book “à d'autres!", an early and brisk version of “tell it to the Marines!” fashionable among English coxcombs and coquettes c. 1660–80. Or, in the 20th century, “hell hath no fury like a woman's corns.” “Les be friends” (Lesbian) is new to me, perhaps understandably, but so is “as easy as shaking the drops off your John” (“essentially masculine”). So are the (mostly Australian) phrases, “the more firma, the less terra” (used by those nervous of air travel, “since c. 1950”) and “give her twopence!”. By

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the latter hangs quite a tale: it is used "on sighting a beautiful female child" and suggests that the addressee should provide her with the necessary coins to ring him when she reaches the age of consent.

Nor can I say I have often caught the phrase "she is so innocent that she thinks Fucking is a town in China", reported to be "a mostly Londoners' c.p. dating since c. 1940." Or "that'll put your back up", meaning (*via* cats fighting) "that'll make you amorous." Or even the tongue-twisting "twinges round hinges through binges": since c. 1950 and referring to rheumatism and its possible cause. Since "trot the udyju Pope o' Rome" went out the year I was born, I can be forgiven for not knowing that it meant, by way of back- and rhyming-slang, "send the wife/female home." A notably grim, resonant c.p. is "the hills are closing in on him", c. 1953-5 (or earlier?) among UN troops in Korea, referring to the forbidding landscape, and signifying the onset of madness. But it is nice to see that the gibe against marriage, "why buy a cow just because you like milk?", has a highbrow equivalent: "why buy a book when you can join a library?" (Cf. the genteel "the day the omelette hit the fan.") One does rather wonder whether Partridge's esotericisms really qualify by his definition of a catch phrase. How big is the public they please? But after all the reader will want to learn—and a dictionary confining itself to what he already knew wouldn't be much fun.

THOUGH Partridge occasionally makes heavy weather of historical backgrounds, as in the entry on "have at thee (*or ye or you*)" and the mini-lecture on Coué, his commentary often takes an agreeably personal turn. He tells us *en passant* that Colley Cibber's play *Love's Last Shift* was translated into French as *La Dernière chemise de l'amour*. The c.p. "my wife (*less commonly* my husband) doesn't understand me" provokes him to expostulate: "What are *they* complaining about? It would be damned awkward for the speakers if they *were* understood!" On "a fart's the cry of an imprisoned turd" he comments that the c.p. is "as essentially poetical as it is superficially coarse . . . clearly an allusion to the cry of a bird imprisoned in a cage." So one is a little surprised when he jibs at "it's a poor arse that never rejoices"—equally poetic I would have thought, but, according to Partridge, the property of "those 'gangs' or cliques or fraternities of would-be wits in which public-houses abound." He is disapproving of casbahs too ("come with me to the Casbah!", to be spoken leeringly): "supposed to be a scene of romance, but usually disappointing and dangerous."

The use of "at this moment in time" he rightly

considers nauseating, and one of his correspondents damns “the name of the game” as smug and knowing—adjectives I could wish he had applied to “didn’t they do well!” and that sports commentator’s cant, “what a turn-up for the book!” He glosses the phrase “his nose is always brown” as “he’s a sycophant of the lowest order”, adding “and so is the c.p.” (Cf. “I didn’t think that was sun-tan on your nose”: “a C20—and esp. Suffolk—c.p.”) Of “looking for maiden-heads” (*i.e.*, for something exceedingly scarce) he remarks, “since WW2 becoming increasingly difficult to find, hence . . . now somewhat nostalgic and obsolescent.” He pursues the

theme in the entry on “think of England”: advice to a young bride ignorant about the facts of life, “very little needed since 1945.” And apropos of “as the actress said to the bishop” (and vice versa) he ventures the opinion that “only very slightly obsolescent by 1975, it is likely to outlive most of us.” Quite true: like “famous last words” (“one of the most memorable and trenchant of all c.pp.”), it fits practically anything. As the bishop said to the actress. . . .

Perdrix, toujours perdrix? But no, you can’t have too much of a good thing. . . . Incidentally, the publishers very nearly contrived to bring the book out on St Partridge’s Day.

The Cosmo Guide to Culture

Forget the content. Should a girl be seen
With Sons and Lovers? What of Graham Greene?
Updike’s Couples is obligatory;
The History Man and The Great Gatsby,
The Good Soldier, The Sun Also Rises,
All these may be read. There’s Mailer’s Armies
Of the Night too. You must know what to say
Of Beryl Bainbridge. Jean Rhys is O.K.

For poetry some good first lines will do
From almost any classic. But the new
Poets are tricky. Auden is still in,
Larkin may be safely praised. McKuen
Is not quite the thing. Must rave about
Seamus Heaney. His North, Wintering Out,
And Death of a Naturalist should be known.
Outside of these few leave the stuff alone.

Opera is optional. If you’re bored
You may say so. We doubt you can afford
A stall for The Ring. Midsummer Marriage
Though is a mind fuck. Pluck up your courage
And see it. Cinema is not special:
You can say what you like. Praise Bunuel.
You’re left with Ballet, Theatre and Art;
You must know David Hockney for a start.

Ballet is sublimated sex. You are
To like Contemporary Dance. Conjure
Up Brecht at a party. The Ancient Greeks
May safely be ignored but Chekhov reeks
Of culture. Osborne’s out. Stoppard and Gray
Are the boys. Among those not quite au fait
Is David Storey though he may just pass,
But Alan Ayckbourn’s far too middle-class.

George Szirtes