James MacTaggart
Memorial Lecture

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Dennis Potter

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JAMES MacTAGGART MEMORIAL LECTURE 1993
DENNIS POTTER

Relax - or, rather, most of you can - and let us together further dissipate that already minimal level of expectation so appropriate to an occasion such as this.

I am going to propose a deal, thereby starting with the kind of language to which I am, alas, becoming accustomed. The deal is - nobody is allowed to walk out until I finish, except in search of an oxygen mask or a good lawyer. In return, I promise from my side of the autocue that this is not going to be what could properly be called A Lecture, even if it turns out to contain enough recycled material to qualify me for membership of the Liberal Democrat Party, that perennial second prize for those who like to tickle but are afraid to wound.

No: this piece is far more in the nature of a personal statement, or a cry as much from the bile duct as the heart. I recently and profitlessly visited Michael Green, a big man in our business, a personable fellow who must nevertheless be held partly responsible for the predictable disappointment known as Carlton Television. Before going, I checked with a friend of his in red braces how best I could put Mr. Green at immediate disadvantage. "Ask him what he believes in", the friend said. But I could not bring myself to be quite so cruel.

This evening, however, I insist upon answering that same lethal question for myself. Please accept, therefore, something as ephemeral or self-serving as the ripple of a few pages from what will always remain an unwritten autobiography.

But in order to damp down the smoulder of an individual voice - whose cadences are almost by definition troubling to the mass media - I shall do my level best to pitch these few thousand hastily assembled words at about mid-point between, say, a caterer and a passably humanoid robot, thereby spanning the entire range of what was always somewhat amusingly called independent television and what now in nostalgia only is still occasionally termed 'public service broadcasting'. Maybe I should divert myself by calling this piece "The Prisoner of Zenda" or better still "Jurassic Park", but I think they probably need that label to pin on the panelled door of the musty room in beleaguered Broadcasting House where, under the puzzled looking portraits of previous Director Generals, the ageing, unrepresentative and demonstrably ineffectve BBC governors chunter quietly amongst themselves.

Instead, I am giving the melodramatic and not at all tuneful title Occupying Powers to this year’s James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture. The title has not been chosen simply to indulge yet again in the inevitable paranoia which so afflicts writers who work in television, although I’ll give that a go, too. No, I call this “Occupying Powers” so that I can reflect behind the barricade of metaphor about what it really feels like for many others besides myself who sell their services and some of their passions to the strange new generations of broadcasting managements and their proprietors. More than that, wider than that, I want to use the title “Occupying Powers” to reach beyond our parochial concerns and grapple with a few thoughts about what it means to be a citizen (or do I mean a consumer) in the United Kingdom plc, where two-thirds of the population live on incomes below the national average of £250 a week, almost five and three quarter million exist on less than a hundred pounds a week, three million are unemployed, three million children live in poverty, one fifth of the young are innumerate, the chasm between the highest and lowest paid is wider than at any time since 1886, and Dave Lee Travis has resigned from Radio 1. What is at the heart of such a distorted society?
Quote: “Broadcasting is at the heart of British Society. The structure and composition of the broadcasting industry, the purpose and motivation of broadcasters and the programmes and services they offer are vital factors in reflecting and shaping that society” unquote. I too would like a mirror that reflects and shapes, but these are the words of the BBC at its most ponderously anodyne as it responded to the government’s Green Paper on the future of the Corporation. The ideal colour for this and a few other such BBC replies to the Green Paper should have been a touch more lily-livered or, if you like, lily-livered in their hues. But the particular quotation is certainly one which James MacTaggart would have taken for granted with as little sense of astonishment as if someone on an outside consultancy contract had told him on three identical bits of thermal paper that a walk along the corridors of the Television Centre will always bring you back shaken but not stirred to where you started.

Jimmy was my first drama producer at the BBC. He was in charge of “Vote, vote, vote for Nigel Barton”, the first play of mine to be hoicked off the screen without so much as a by-your-leave on the very day it was scheduled to be broadcast. Believe me, I have by now acquired enough experience of senior television executives to know the exact medical circumstances in which it would be pointless to carry out a spinal tap. But at least a few prominent people at the BBC had by that time moved a trifle closer to the denotico in the spoken if not the written word, and the then head of drama appeared to be so troubled by the play’s outrageous implication that some party politicians were from time to time on nodding terms with overt cynicism, that he asked me why I wanted “to shit on the Queen”. He must already have known that this is not a particularly easy thing to do from a kneeling position.

These things were happening way back in 1965 in the days of supposedly frequent and untroubled sexual intercourse, the not entirely dissimilar “white heat of technology” as promised by Harold Wilson (another long windsed way of saying “fuck you”) and the rather slower burn of the Wednesday Play.

Jimmy MacTaggart and his huffy tailed acolytes used to sit around somewhere in the Fifth Circle talking with a younger conviction about the evident iniquities of the BBC management, the tapeworm-length persistence of BBC cowardice, and the insufferable perversities of the BBC threat to the very existence of the single play. You can imagine how much greater our indignation would have been had we known at the time that we were sitting slap in the middle of what later observers were to call the Golden Age of television drama.

Back in those good old days there was a bureaucrat in every cupboard and smugness waiting with a practised simper on the far side of every other door. I recall these things in order to offer up at least one small strip of sticking plaster for the suppuring wounds of the poor wretch who is the present Director General, the twelfth and not actually the thirteenth to hold such an exalted (if fully taxable) position at the “heart of British society.”

I haven’t made this long journey in order to be kind and gentle, but I think it is only fair to tell him that the fear and loathing now swirling jugular-high around those same circular corridors do have some antecedents, and it always was possible to measure the distance between so called management and the so called creative by the time it took for a memo to go in one direction and a half brick to come back in the other.

There are a few of us old soldiers still around who know that the best way to polish our campaign medals is to spit on them. I am not blaming John Birt for that particular remark, by the way: it was, I believe, attributed to a BBC spokesperson, and since it was immediately comprehensible, I assume it was not made by Mr. Birt himself.

It is a wretched thing to have to say, and certain not disinterested newspapers have made it more difficult to say, but it is a fact, known by my own experience and without the faintest possibility of doubt, that there are legions of troubled and embittered employees at the BBC who can scarcely understand any of the concepts of the new ‘management culture’ which the present and so often so unfairly abused Director General tries to enunciate. I will willingly concede that this is partly because they do not want to listen, and there have long been people at the BBC ready to spout about their dedication to public service broadcasting who think it is an absolute impertinence if they are asked to get out of their beds of a morning.

I have just this week finished a co-production with the BBC, on which many BBC staff worked as the biggest part of the corporation’s contribution to the budget. The film we made is called, perhaps prophetically enough, “Midnight Movie”, something which in my totally unbiased opinion was brilliantly directed by Renny Rye, who will one day be seen to be one of the great names in British cinema. It is by now part of my job to find and then to support such people, but I would rather have fulfilled this proper obligation without using quite so much of my own money. Unfortunately, “Midnight Movie” was not about a one-legged dwarf with an enormous cock and certain understandable priapic problems and so, perhaps wisely, the properly cautious people who run that near-queango called British Screen could not help me with the budget. And so, naturally, I was very pleased when Mark Shivas at the BBC put his shoulder to the boulder that more accurately represents the British film industry than the comparatively minor task of poor Sisyphus.

But it was during the making of “Midnight Movie” that I came to see just how deeply and how seriously the demoralisation, the bitterness and, yes, even the hatred had bitten into the working lives of so many hitherto reasonably contented and undoubtedly talented BBC staff. My worst experience was seeing a middle-aged man man on the far edge of the set start to cry after a phone call from some manager at the Centre, a grief that I am only marginally glad to say was nothing to do with my script.

I tell you now, it was impossible not to wonder how on earth those currently and I hope temporarily in charge of the BBC could have brought such things to such a miserably demeaning condition. My impression was that there is now a one-way system of communication, and that the signals being sent down the narrowed track were so laden with custose, blurb and bubble driven didacticism that they were more than half perceived as emanating in a squeak of static from someone or, rather, something alien and hostile. And you cannot make a pair of croak-voiced Daleks appear benevolent even if you dress one of them in an Armani suit and call the other Marmaduke.

A smile can be twisted out of the least promising material, especially when it does not immediately affect oneself. Rather like one of those Marks & Spencer packs that says “serves two” - make sure that one of you has already eaten first. When making “Midnight Movie”, and watching and listening to what is going on at the BBC as it trims down its staff almost as fast as it loses its viewers, I was struck - and not the first time - by how much the shifts and turns which seem particular to any one large institution can in themselves be seen as a model for the wider society in which all of us live. Any virulently new Management Culture can be studied as scrupulously as one might examine the bacteria proliferating around a wound. Both are the response to previous damage made worse by infection picked up from the outside world. The ideas in the unclean air, so to speak. The glories of privatisation and the brutalities of the unshackled market - as unleashed by Mrs. Thatcher and her successor ideologists - were always
likely to rattle a few of the professions, and sometimes rightly so. This genuine radicalism, rare in British politics, can more or less honestly hold up the battle-banners of its occasionally healthy and often vicious indifference to the old, class-ridden, status-conscious cultures of Great Britain. This iconoclasm fractured many old attitudes, many old bonds, and even many whole communities. The cry of Yuppie to Yuppie sounded in the land, as chilling as any call from the carnivores in swamp or forest. And the deep hatred of any other claim, any other way of seeing, of anything other than the forces of law and order in the public domain, was always going to be arrowed with poison-dipped barb at the slow, decent, stumbling and puzzled giant run from Broadcasting House.

And thus it is in model form that the turmoil, the distress, the dogma-driven rhetoric, the obtuseness and the spluttering aggressions at and around the BBC can also be picked up in similar shapes, cries, contortions and an almost identical bluster - from both sides - in so many other areas of our national life. We have been at war with each other, and some of our fellow citizens have felt that bits of their very brain and fibres from their very soul are being crunched with the other, apparently all-important numbers in the computer. No wonder that, out there, there is talk of Moral Panic, and a sense that our feet are scrambling about on loose scre.

Moral panic? Loose scre? Any moment now I shall be talking like a newspaper editorial. May the shades of this Kirk protect me from such ignominy. But let me gently slide in the needle at this point to inject one of those psychotrophic reagents that can for a while stimulate into strange new activity a previously slumbering cluster of brain cells. I am looking to find the kind of juxtaposition that most economically tells a tale. And here's one worth thinking about.

At the time Rupert Murdoch was anxiously trying to gild if not renovate his image while lobbying to prevent his cable television company coming under the same rules and regulations that apply to other British television companies, he announced that his main company was going to fund a new Chair at Oxford University to the tune of three million pounds. It was to be called the - I do beg your pardon, but I cannot keep a straight face - it was to be called the Murdoch Chair in Language and Communications. But the announcement came with cack-handed timing on the very same day that the Press Council formally and of course ineffectively censured Murdoch's Sun for calling homosexuals "poopers". Same language. Some communication. Murdoch did not turn up for the ceremonial meal to mark the largesse at Oxford, always a place where the gap between the cup and the lip can be measured by more than an inch of the sardonic. But Rupert has a touch of pure cruelty in his make-up. He sent Kelvin MacKenzie, the sharp little weasel that edits that daily stink they call the Sun, and the maladroit fellow had to sit and chew and probably even dribble a bit between two Professors. Well, that was one set of cutlery not needed on the crisp linen I suppose. But I hope for the sake of all concerned that both the professors were from the Anthropology faculty.

The reason I am speaking in this way on this occasion is not simply because my fists are already clenched, and not just because I really do want to land a few blows on some of the nastiest people besmirching our once-fair land. No, this because I object to the manner in which too many of us too much of the time half hide behind the anonymous, the over-smoothed, over-soothed and anodyne. Even as we quietly rot or noisily spin, and even as the disaffected, the dispossessed, the poor and the more than half-mad surge almost necessarily unnoticed at the lidded edges of the gutters, even then, even then, the normal, polite metalinguage of Britspeak and its half-way decent conceptual evasions, modulated only by a whine, choke off enough of the pain or sufficient of the venom. But then we are left emptied of almost everything except a numbing bewilderment, a paralysis of the spirit, and that long, aching, nearly inexpressible sense of loss which is, I feel - what's the current phrase? - the Hidden Agenda lurking behind so much of our public discourse, with something of the same stretched rictus of proper embarrassment in which a former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer currently fronts a few TV commercials. Embarrassment. Well, it's a fluttery enough, fluttered enough word to take me now into a long loop all the way back to the blue remembered hills of my old childhood. You will have to excuse what might at first seem to be a self-indulgent digression but I need to make this journey to gather up a few of the things I want to say. Somewhere back there are the set of reasons or feelings for why I wanted to place my work onto that Palace of Varieties in the corner of the living room rather than first of all between the covers of a book or on the theatre stage. A critic on The Guardian has said, with a neat little edge of ambivalence, that for thirty years I have shown a fidelity to television which would astonish a Labrador Retriever. I'm not always sure that I can tell one dog from another, but I have to say that if I were starting out today as a writer who is able to persuade himself on at least two days of the week that drama or fiction is one of the last few remaining acres of possible truth-telling left to us in our over-manipulated and news-stuffed world, then I doubt very much that I would deliberately choose, as I did, to begin in television as it is now controlled, owned, and organised. But let me go back a bit. Beam me up, Scottie, or down, if not quite to the Land of Lost Content.

My first home was in the Forest of Dean, which rises steeply in ever tighter layers of green and grey in what is purely coincidentally a heart-shaped mound between the Severn and the Wye close to the border with Wales. I was four years old when the Second World War broke, and it took me until I was ten before I finally won it, with a little help from Rockfist Rogan, Tommy Handley and Mr. Harris at Salem Chapel. In those days, the main sources of work in the district were the five deep-shaft coal mines, long since closed, and the stone quarries, whose rumbling explosions made me wonder if the Germans were coming. My father worked with pick and shovel on the pre-mechanised coal face, and most of the men in the village worked in the same colliery. The school, long since abandoned, had windows too high for a child to look out of, gravestones of dead foresters right up to its back wall, and a big locked cupboard of books, real books () - and how to break into it after hours was for me an avid and wholly secretive preoccupation which, if only I had had the courage to put into reality, might well have begun the passage into just sufficient criminality and bad faith to allow me in later years to write a television franchise application.

The Forest had long been fairly isolated from everywhere else - even Wales - and between the boundaries of the two rivers it had become almost suffocatingly in - turned. The speech, for example, was so broad, so full of forgotten English and so buttered with Thee and Thou and the 'highshi' which was 'hist', or listen-with-urgency, or the 'surry', which was 'sirraul', that it could almost be said to be a dialect. Where bist thou a-going, o'butty? "it chunt as I cont, surry - it's just as I byunt" or "doon't thou start geving at me, mind, else I shall sort th' out!". An almost test-tube perfect case for assessing the impact of the mass media, the motives of those who own it, and the consequences for the people who experience it.

There it was, the pit, the chapel, the brass-hand, the rugby team, the speech. I don't know how to explain this to you. I don't know how to make you understand. It was tempered or maybe diminished for me by the fact that my mother was a Londoner, the daughter of a Forest of Dean woman who had gone into what was called domestic service - that is, being a skivvy - in the distant capital, and who had exchanged that near-slavery for the drudgery of marrying a Hammersmith plumber and bringing up ten other children besides my mother in a variety of rented and mostly
terrace houses. My mother came to the Forest of Dean on a weekend charabanc trip to visit her strangely spoken and faultless-tooled relatives, and was duly impressed by my father’s ever-shy little smile, gentle little delicacies, sparklingly well-polished shoes, and most importantly of all, perhaps, the way he sang: “I’m painting the clouds with sunshine”, with an emphatic if hardly necessary double stamp-stamp of those same well-polished feet to mark each otherwise wishful chorus. Jesus, my throat narrows. You are not supposed to talk like this in our country. When I hold back a tear - To let a smile appear - I’m only painting - The clouds - with sun-shine ....

Would someone with a hard face please protect me from those sickly and sugared old tunes? They tinkle-tinkle their simple sweetness and yet somehow complicated accusations out of the most personally demeaning residues of what had seemed to be lost and gone forever. I’m fairly sure as a soiled adult slowly disintegrating into advanced middle-age that it is salutary for each one of us to look back on our own past with more than a degree of tender contempt. But there are a few still-lingering and probably still-mocking syncopations which can remind us, however faintly, however ambiguously, that the usual deadening materiality of things out there, or the insistent present-tense of the implacably busy world is other than just what we see. There is, too, a Wonder in and of our shrunken mortality and our scrabbling appetites which maybe prayer and maybe drama and maybe just a song or a dance or a breeze in the air can sometimes fleetingly catch hold of. That is why, as I bent over the blank page, I allowed Arthur Parker, the helplessly dishonest and helplessly adulterous sheet-music salesman in “Pennies from Heaven” to lift his head in paired recognition as “Painting the Clouds With Sunshine” throbbed along to middle-eight and because he was better than he seemed - or wanted to be - and knew in some part of his tawdry soul that those wisps of song were chariots of grace, like the Psalms of David. And then I hanged him.

Or, rather, that was what was supposed to happen in the last few pages of a six-part script which I am sure in my own mind was only commissioned because a few people at the BBC felt just a little guilty about the banning of my “Brimstone and Treacle” in the previous twelve months. That’s the way things used to work, a snack, and then a kiss. The then and new Head of Drama looked at the scripts, listened to me talk, shuffled a bit in his sockless sandals and then asked with the faintest hint of alarm or incredulity “What? You mean they pretend to sing in every episode?”

But, as I say, I never did get to see Arthur Parker descend through the trap-door on the studio-designed scaffold. The clock had ticked on in the final studio session, and exactly, but exactly, on the hour, just as Bob Hoskins had swallowed in his no-doubt suddenly-dried throat, the BBC sparks pulled the plug. Sorry, guv, and all that sort of stuff, which was also part of the old BBC, no matter how many times you hear the word ‘dedication’ from the union side in the current brouhaha at the Corporation.

But “Painting The Clouds” has, of course, tempted me off track. It was sung in an England where everyone was supposed to know his place, and it felt like it, too, no matter what the song. I grew up and grew away in that English manner from Kith and Kin whose talents had been so long unused that they were now all but unusable. It began to seem to me, with the shy whispers of academic success in my ear, that their expectations had been made to shrink to little more than the width of the room. Our own land was in the hands of others, and these others were not interested in our growth, or emancipation. And that is what defines an Occupying Power.

But when I said just now in the exaggerations of rhetoric that aspirations were scarcely wider than the spaces between the parlour walls, I was leaving out the one big window, and it wasn’t the one made of glass. We called it, then, the Wireless. A whorled, fluted and bekneed oblong which could allow anyone to feel like Joan of Arc.

More than the coming of the bus and the train or even the daily newspaper, it was the voices out of the air which, as though by magic, pushed out those constriciting boundaries. You could hear a play that made the back of your neck tingle as well as a dance band that made your foot tap, a brow-furrowing talk about something I’d never heard of as well as an I-say-I-say-I-say Music Hall routine, or even (and how bizarre) a ventriloquist’s dummy as well as a not wholly dissimilar newspaper. And none of it was trying to sell you anything. Maybe.

I would not dispute for one wayward whistle or crackle that the BBC of my childhood was not paternalistic and often stuffily pompous. It saw itself in an almost priestly role. But at a crucial period of my life it threw open the ‘magic casement’ on great sources of mind-scape at a time when books were hard to come by, and when I had never stepped into a theatre or a concert hall, and would have been scared to do so even if given the chance.

Of course, the characteristic media ploy of separating the ‘Popular’ from the ‘Serious’ - which often means the distinction between the Solemn and the Lively, and not just the truncene-like measuring rod of class and educational status - of course, yes, that process had already begun with the split between the Home Service and the Light Programme. But such a parting of the ways was nothing like as rigidly mapped out as it is nowadays, where listeners are presumed to be walking about with one of the digits One to Five tattooed like cattle brands on their high, middling, low, lower and yet lower brows. On the old Light Programme you could suddenly, maybe reluctantly, collide with a play or a discussion or an embryonic drama-documentary. The now totally pervasive assumptions of the market place, which have stiffened into something close to Natural Law, had not by then removed the chance of being surprised by something you didn’t know or - better still - by something you didn’t know that you knew.

When there is a certain type of functionary on the other and more powerful side of the desk, or when faced with a particular kind of audience, I’ll admit that I’m quite ready to be a churl in sharpened hobnails, as I hope to show a little later this evening. But it would be graceless of me not to acknowledge with an open heart the significant part the BBC had played in my life and in the lives of the people I came from. Millions of our fellow citizens feel the same way, for there have been all too few British Institutions of any size of which one could say with hand on heart that they truly work, that they are ‘the best’ that is.

I place quotation marks around ‘best’ because the potential vices of any form of moderated paternalism are all too clear, and were too often demonstrated in the old BBC monopoly, first and for longest in radio and then for many years in television. Paternalism has been defined as power with a conscience, and it can also be arrogance without a banana skin. This is-what-we-think-is-good-for-you sounds much too much like that wretched hospital the other week which allowed a patient to die rather than modulate its little package of prejudice.

The dangers of the older view of how to run radio and television are, unless faced and redefined, sufficiently troubling to leave enough space for someone such as Rupert Murdoch to drive a golden coach and a team of wild-eyed horses straight through the gap. His James MacTaggart lecture here a few years ago was little short of a masterpiece of apparently libertarian rhetoric. Indeed, it was the kind of peroration I would like to hear him deliver from the scaffold.
The insecurities and contradictions of the BBC's only half-digested and half-shamefaced self-definitions lay like rubble spread in inviting heaps in front of the supercharged, savage-toothed ICB of his unslaked appetite. The Corporation has already been driven onto the back foot by the ideology-driven malice of the ruling politicians, and its response has been to take several more steps backwards, with hands thrown up, and to whimper an alleged defence of all it has stood for in the very language and concepts of its opponents. This palpable ambivalence and doubt, where you pretend to be the commercial business that you cannot be, has led to the present, near-fatal crisis where it seems to be thought that the wounds (often self-afflicted) can only be staunched by shuffling about word-processed words about a new 'Management Culture'.

Management of what? Management for what? Management. Management. Management. The word sticks in one's interface. Please excuse me if I dare to laugh, but I know that each age, even each decade, has its little cant word coiled up inside real discourse like a tiny grub in the middle of an apple. Each age, even each decade, is overly impressed for a little while by halfway bright youngish men on the make who adeptly manipulate the current terminology at precisely the right moment to make precisely the right impression on those who are a little older, a little less intelligent, and considerably less alert. Ah, me! Which one of us here this evening has not fallen into one or other of these categories, and perhaps into the wrong one at the very moment we thought we were in the other. Life in the media business can be a hoot.

As a writer who needs to clutch his pen as though it were a lifebelt, I have to admit that I have nevertheless improved many a shining hour with a probably untransmittable little playlet about one of the more intriguing encounters of our time. I was not there when Fortnum met Mason, Laurel met Hardy, or Murdoch met Mephistopheles but I would have given my old Thesaurus or my new sequence of Readers Digest Prize Draw Numbers to have been a hornet on the wall at that surely entrancing, fascinating, and maybe even comical occasion when dear old Marmaduke first met dear young John and each of them sort of half-discussed what was sort of half-wrong with the greatest broadcasting organisation the world has ever seen. Where, I wonder, did they meet? Who was the first to smile - lethally? Who said, um, 'structural walk-through' as he ordered the mineral water? and did the waiter say 'Fardon'?

Was the table well-laden and did it groan when the unadvertised post of the twelfth and not the thirteenth Director Generalship was finally settled? And were the Ageing Governors at the British Broadcasting Corporation waiting and twitching and nodding amongst themselves in some cramped little area decently set aside at the front of the room where you deposit your hats, coats, tightly furled umbrellas, and maybe, in the case of one of them, your spare Honk If You Love Jesus car stickers.

My invention has not run out, and it might be nice to go on this vein, so indelicately poised at mid-point between fast and final, but the temptation to dish back what has been so wantonly dished out must be resisted. After all, a laugh has such a close psychological resemblance to a stream of outrage, so what I ought to do in the concluding sections of this piece is to put the pomegranic on the back burner, where it can ooze and bubble away into a very nice soup that we can all taste later. And with long spoons, if need be.

It is too easy to accuse others of betrayal when you are not ready to acknowledge your own. I remember the way in which I made the journey up the tick-tick-tick examination ladder, all the way to Oxford. Teachers love to get their hands on a bright and pliant child, and they do not consciously give wing to the invisible worm that flies in the night, 'bringing the blight of an especially English type of betrayal deep into the oh-look-at-me! folds of the most precious bloom. You are first made to feel a little different, and then you want to be different: and although you know what you gain with your little Latin and less Greek, you do not for a long time realise what you have lost.

The glittering prizes are there all right, as they always have been for a few - and not all of those few can be described as 'stout of heart'. Glitter, glitter little star, how seldom we wonder what you are! But when a little of the sheen sticks to your own eager fingers or glints in your own deliberately wide eyes, you soon come to use the refractive light to see into the cozy and otherwise secretive little corners where those with real power smile so affably at each other. I soon enough came to know in the Oxford of the nineteen-fifties that those beautiful spires are not so much dreaming as calculating. It took an indescribedly short time for me to decide to become a politician - and that was only partly because I wanted to open for others the doors which had been opened for me.

I had developed a superficially astonishing ability to be, as tonight, eloquent, aggressive and sanctimonious all at one and the same time, as well as the useful knack of smiling with my mouth only in what must have been an instinctive rehearsal for a future hypothetical question. Hell, and I mean hell, I could fairly easily have mutated into a marginally more charming version of - of - No. No. No names. This is a Kirk. The devil will surely claim me. Tick one of many boxes, and pick a name for yourself. But, yes, I sensed, once, that a laurel-edged path was opening invitingly at my feet and I knew that it would lead to upholstered Media-Power, or to a padded bench not too far from the maze in Parliament, or a padded cell somewhere not at all dissimilar but even more interesting, wearing a jacket that buttons up at the back.

Instead, and in what I now see as a mysterious act of grace, I had what must be a version of a middle course chosen for me, and very soon after coming down from New College I finished up in hospital scarcely able to move. An entropy of the spirit, I suppose, manifest in the swollen rigidities of each limb and the fiercely scalding mockery of their outer casing.

And so it was that thirty or more years ago, apparently stripped of much more than my skin, I had the opportunity of re-assembling myself from what I hesitate to call from scratch. I had the chance of making myself up all over again.

This interesting and intrinsically dramatic process not only restored to me a sufficient measure of dignity but also had the immemorable advantage, in due time, of giving me what I have to call a sense of Vocation, if you will pardon me such an antique phrase.

My condition was genetic, but it felt psychological. I knew that I had lost touch with something, and that the soap-box words were no longer capable of restoring enough of what had been half-unknowingly jetisoned. Different words had to be found, with different functions and a different purpose. But how? and why? Why-Why-Why? The same desperately repeated question I had asked myself without any sort of answer, or any ability to tell my mother or my father when, at the age of ten, between VE day and VE day, I had been trapped by an adult's sexual appetite and abused out of innocence. If anyone cares to look, really look, at my work over the years they would not take too long to see how the great bulk of it is about the victim, someone who cannot explain, cannot put into the right words, or even cannot speak at all. But I do know, without doubt, that the nearer writing approaches self-therapy the worse it becomes. As I have just said, but now in a shifted context, different words had to be found, with different functions. But how? What used to be weeks in hospital then stretched into months in hospital, but still the especially English type of betrayal deep into the oh-look-at-me! folds of the most precious
language would not break itself open. The love of my family, and the steadfastness of my wife Margaret, in particular, became for a long while the only or major defence against a near-total reclusiveness. This is, of course, before chemotherapy lifted the bondage, providing a large degree of emancipation at the price of intermittent liver biopsies and a regular up-chuck time that seemed entirely fitting for one who had for too long, and with a dangerously religious temperament, felt that only truly meaningful sacrament left was for people to gather at the muddied and until cross-roads at evintide in order to vomit. Collectively.

All right. This is getting too extreme. It is becoming embarrassing. You should not ask a writer to deliver one of these pieces, because too many of you too much of the time are paid not to let anything remotely resembling real emotions or real writing get anywhere near anything other than weary-sigh-distance of your so regularly emptied Out Trays. But don't shuffle and fret. Just look upon this as a day out, as you might a trip to the Zoo.

In any form of personal crisis, all kinds of memory and aspiration, hope and disappointment, grief and bloody-mindedness fly up at you as suddenly and as startlingly as the little Yellowhammer bird used to do from the prickly gorse-bushes of boyhood. And in that unbidden mix, as though out of a fever, I began at last, and seriously, to make links that I had studiously or even furtively avoided making for too long.

"Only connect" said E.M. Forster, that great novelist whom Murdoch's nasty little rag would presumably dismiss as an airy-fairy old foolier. But, yes, what a good word: connect. The verb which far better than the merely technical transmit is it not actually, certainly what should be the defining activity of all television - especially that threatened and peculiarly self-thrusted section which has no need, and indeed no remit, to package up A, B, or C-defined groups of the allegedly passive on behalf of predatory advertisers. The section of broadcasting which, above all else, and quite separately from any temporarily dominant political language or so-called 'Management Culture', must continually remind itself that it is not a business trying to distribute dosh to its shareholders, not owned by its current administrators, not a company entitled to build Chinese walls around its momentary practices, but something held in trust and in law for every citizen of this misguided and too-long-abused group of nations we, for probably a few decades more, call Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I have already described with real gratitude how the radio days of my childhood widened the horizons, and sometimes made them shimmer. Those plummy voices spoke as though from another land, and yet they did not seem to be trying to make one a stranger in it, let alone a shopper. I think, even, that they were trusted, unlike virtually all the other manifestations of power and authority. But perhaps this was partly due to the fact that you could not see the pictures, and radio people too often quote with pride the child who so famously said that she preferred the radio to television "because the scenery is better".

Television could scarcely resist calling itself 'a window on the world', as it did in its early days, even using the subtitle on 'Panorama'. But windows have frames, and the frames are part of a structure that has already been built. I have said, many years ago, that, on the television screen, it is often when the set is switched off that it actually picks up a direct or true reflection of its viewers, subduced into a glimmer on its dull grey tube. When the set is on, alive with images, the window analogy persists because, away from the expensive brilliance and often genuine sophistication of title-sequences, logos and the commercials, most of television, most TV journalism, most of its decidedly over-long News Programmes, all of its proliferating soaps, most

of its dramas, pretend or assume or wish that the picture in the frame - adjusted for a laugh, a snigger, a gasp or a tear - is showing us things as they really are.

So-called Naturalism is by far and away the dominant mode, and easily the most characteristic syntax of television grammar. But one of the troubles of supposedly showing things-as-they-really-are (the Window problem) is how difficult it then becomes in the same grammar not to make people feel deep in their souls that this is also more or less the way things have to be. Hence the shock-horror-puzzle patterns, the inflated status of those bus conductors called News Readers, the odd and only temporarily effective splash of sensational indignation, the random violence, the unmediated sexuality, and the presence of critics who almost uniformly perceive their function to be joke-makers and snide-mongers. Who can blame them?

Our television has been ripped apart and falteringly re-assembled by politicians who believe that value is a monetary term only, and that a cost-accountant is thereby the most suitable adjudicator of what we can and cannot see on our screens. And these accountants or their near-clones are employed by new kinds of Media Owners who try to gobble up everything in their path. We must protect ourselves and our democracy, first by properly exercising the cross-ownership provisions currently in place, and then by erecting further checks and balances against dangerous concentrations of the media power which plays such a large part in our lives. No individual, group or company should be allowed to own more than one daily, one evening and one weekly newspaper. No newspaper should be allowed to own a television station, and vice-versa. A simple act of public hygiene, tempering abuse, widening choice, and maybe even returning broadcasting to its makers.

The political pressures from market-obsessed radicals, and the buckster atmosphere that follows has by degrees, and in confused self-defence, drawn the BBC so heavily into the dogma-coated discourses of so-called 'market efficiency' that in the end it might lose clear sight of why it, the BBC, is there in the first place.

I fear the time is near when we must save not the BBC from itself, but public service broadcasting from the BBC. The old Titan should spawn smaller and more nimble offspring if its present controllers cannot be removed. Why not think about it anyway? Why not separate Radio from Television? Why not let BBC2 be a separate public service broadcaster? Let us begin to consider afresh how the thousands of millions of pounds or licence money could be apportioned between two, three or four successors to the currently misled Corporation. One of the successors could certainly be a publishing or commissioning authority on the model of Channel 4.

Indeed, Channel 4, if freed from its advertisements, could continue to evolve out of its original, ever-precious remit into a passably good model of the kinds of television some of us seek. Michael Grade is becoming, by default, the new Director General, and the ironies, if not the comedy, of such an unexpected grace remind me that it is time to wind down before I exhaust myself with my own restraint. I prefer a dialogue, and that will be possible on Sunday.

Thirty years ago, under the personal pressures of whatever guilt, whatever shame and whatever remaining shard of idealism, I found or I made up what I may unwise have termed a sense of Vocation. I have it still. It was born, of course, from the already aborted dream of a common culture, which has long since been zapped into glistening fragments by those who are now the real, if not always recognised, Occupying Powers of our culture. Look in the pink pages,
and see their mesh of connections. Open The Sun and measure their aspirations. Put Rupert Murdoch on public trial, and televise every single second of it. Show us who is abusing us, and why. Ask your public library - if there is one left - to file the Television Franchise Applications on the shelf hitherto kept for Fantasy, Astrology and Crime bracket Bizarre bracket.

I was exceptionally fortunate to begin my career in television at a time when the BBC was so infuriatingly confident about what public service broadcasting meant that the question itself was not even on what would now be called the agenda. The then ITV companies shared much more of this ethos than they were then willing to acknowledge. Our profession was then mostly filled with men and women who mostly cared about the programmes rather than the dividend. And the venomous hostilities of the small minority who are the political right - before its wholly ideological transformation into the type of venal, wet-mouthed radicalism which can even assert without a hint of shame that ‘there is no such thing as society’ - before those people had yet launched their poisoned arrows. Clunk! they go. Clunk! Clunk! And, lo and behold, we have in the fullness of such darkness been sent unto us a Director General who bares his chest to receive these arrows, a Saint Sebastian eager for their punishing stings.

The world has turned upside down. The BBC is under governors who seem incapable of performing the public trust that is invested in them, under a Chairman who seems to believe he is beading a private fiefdom, and under a chief executive who must somehow or other have swallowed whole and unsalted the kind of humbug: punctuated pre-privatisation manual which is being forced on British Rail or British Coal. But I do not want to end on a malediction. Let me remind myself of how to paint the clouds with sunshine. I first saw television when I was in my late teens. It made my heart pound. Here was a medium of great power, of potentially wondrous delights that could slice through all the tedious hierarchies of the printed word, and help to emancipate us from many of the stifling tyrannies of class and status and gutter-press ignorance. We are privileged if we can work in this, the most entrancing of all the many palaces of variety. Switch on, tune in, and grow.

I hope it is clear by now that I happen to care very much about the medium that has both allowed and shaped the bulk of my life’s work, and even my life’s meaning. However, I do have the odd hour or two in each day in which to pretend to be a St. George rather than a St. Sebastian. I therefore hereby formally apply in front of witnesses of substance, here at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, for the post of Chairman of the Governors of the British Broadcasting Corporation.