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‘Boris’

Asked during the 2019 election to comment on Boris Johnson’s use of the word ‘piccaninny’, Nigel Farage replied: ‘It’s not very pretty, but that’s Boris.’¹ Oddly, though not unusually, the utterance was nudged out of the reach of discussion by according it a sort of natural inevitability, as if Johnson’s vocabulary were the direct emanation of an essence: Boris. Oh, come on, you know what Boris is like.

But in a sense, of course, we *don’t* know what Boris is like – not only because in general, out here in the public domain, we are not really acquainted with the celebrities we read about, but also because this particular celebrity is famously mendacious. What we know is not the truth about him but an image constructed from what he has said or written. The actual position is thus the almost exact opposite of the one implied by Farage: it is not that the language is the expression of a personality, but that the impression of a personality is a product of the language. At this point, students of literature find themselves on familiar ground. After all, the linguistically generated illusion of a knowable person is the very stock in trade of realist narrative. That is to say, Boris is that elementary subject of critical essay writing, a *character*.

For this reason, talking about Boris creates confusion. Agreeing to use the name naturalises the illusion, blurring the awareness that this is not a personal acquaintance but a rhetorical effect. To try and keep it clear in this article, I shall identify the character not as Boris, but as ‘Boris’. When I have occasion to refer to the historical individual, I shall call him Johnson.

‘Boris’, then, is a fairly crude and repetitive character, inscribed many times identically in the textures of a large body of writing and recorded speech. Consequently, a small sample is enough to afford access to it, and I shall use, almost at random, a phrase from an interview in the *Sunday Telegraph* following the announcement of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement between Britain and the European Union (EU) on Christmas Eve, 2020. Johnson was asked about the clauses authorising the EU to impose tariffs if the United Kingdom should diverge in the future from European standards on workers’ rights and environmental protection, and he replied: ‘All that’s really saying is the

UK won't immediately send children up chimneys or pour raw sewage all over its beaches. We're not going to regress, and you'd expect that.'² The point is to assure Brexit-minded readers that although the agreement gives the EU a sanction against certain actions of the British Government, they are actions it would never want to take anyway. There is nothing characteristic about that: anyone in the same political position would make much the same move. But then the Borisian note, unmistakably, is the bit about sending children up chimneys. It has at least four elements, which work together but can be separated out for the purposes of analysis.

1

The first is *idiosyncrasy* as such. Arbitrary and slightly whimsical, the allusion to chimney-climbing children connotes a free individual, someone who articulates without forethought whatever pops into his head. Parallel examples are everywhere. Take the opening of the speech Johnson gave in February 2020, in the Painted Hall at Greenwich. He drew attention to the newly restored ceiling, and said that the painter, James Thornhill,

spent 20 years flat on his back on top of the scaffolding, so rigid that his arm became permanently wonky, and he's left us this gorgeous and slightly bonkers symbolic scene that captures the spirit of the United Kingdom in the early 18th century.³

The praise of the painting, and of 'the spirit of the United Kingdom', is conventional enough. The characterising element, the equivalent of the children up chimneys, is the carefully inserted note of schoolboy colloquialism – 'wonky', 'bonkers'. Through their wrongness in the formal context, these adjectives signify idiosyncrasy as such: all but explicitly, 'Boris' is peeking over the Prime Minister's shoulder and winking at his chums in the audience.

This effect derives its political meaning from the general perception of politicians as inauthentic – not as liars necessarily, but as people who say blandly conventional things because they fear the consequences of saying what they really think. 'Boris' flaunts a lexical waywardness which suggests that he is untroubled by such fears and so that he is somehow not really a politician at all, or only an amateur one, whose prose, like his trademark hair, refuses the usual professional smoothness and signifies his independence of mind. In both these examples, typically, this fearless nonconformity is itself part of the illusion: it is not really that anything unorthodox is being said, only that a vague atmosphere of unorthodoxy is created by the linguistic register.

It follows, incidentally, that denouncing Johnson's occasional exhibitions of verbal offensiveness, like the piccaninnies or the letter-boxes, is not an effective form of opposition.⁴ By providing 'Boris' with censors who try, and fail, to bridle his tongue, it dramatises his spirited refusal to be cowed. It makes him seem uninhibitedly genuine, even when he is telling lies.

2

The second dimension is no less obvious: it is that the line about chimneys is a *joke*. There is obviously no question of sending children up chimneys; when 'Boris' conjures it up as a conceivable feature of post-Brexit Britain, he is kidding. This is integral to the character. Keir Starmer has complained of Johnson's habit of 'flippancy' at the despatch box,⁵ and it appears in all his public genres: exchanges in Parliament, but also books, articles, speeches, interviews. For an indicative example, take his book about Churchill. It starts with a sequence set just after the fall of France in May 1940, whose point is Churchill's magnificent refusal to acknowledge the probability of defeat: it therefore calls for a tragic narrative tone, with high stakes and heroic characters, and on the whole that is how it is written. But it is punctuated by silly jokes about the French. Their generals wear 'Clouseau-like kepis', and their 'abject' Prime Minister, Paul Reynaud, 'knew in his heart what his British interlocutors could scarcely believe – that the French were possessed of an origami army: they just kept folding'.⁶

This illustrates two peculiar features of the Borisian joke. One is that it is indifferent to context: it can crop up when the situation, or even Johnson's own intention, makes it evidently inappropriate. And the other is that on the whole it is not very funny. 'Boris' is not a professional comedian any more than he is a professional politician. He is more like an after-dinner speaker: his pleasantries look for nothing more than a polite chuckle. So what is the point of them?

At one point in his essay on jokes, Freud suggests that 'comic degradation' can be a tactic against the solemn constraint imposed by whatever affects us as elevated. The reverence exacted by high seriousness represents a psychic expenditure, and this is compensated by a joke which, even momentarily, makes the revered object appear low.⁷ A mechanism of this kind is surely at work in 'Boris's' otherwise puzzlingly weak jokes. The negotiation of employment rights is a serious business of state-entailing considerations of fairness, national sovereignty, the balancing of rival interests. Important and rather boring, it forms a sort of mental burden, which is then lightened by the daft vision of British

people as steampunk eccentrics eager for the chance to send children up chimneys.

That is to say: the main function of the joke is not to make you laugh, but to mark out a space of non-seriousness. This distances 'Boris' not only from burdensome solemnity, but also from tiresome facts. In fact, the concern about divergence on labour protections is not that the United Kingdom might 'regress' in this grotesque fashion, but that EU regulations might progress while the United Kingdom's remain as they are. By playfully changing the question, the joke removes the real issue from sight without actually denying its reality. Thus jocular discourse veers away from categorical statement into a larky, provisional space where nothing is definitively true or false. The political usefulness of such a space is obvious.

3

Thirdly, 'Boris' is *literary*. The chimney-sweeping children are not just a piece of historical information: thanks to Blake and Kingsley, they are a byword of early industrial inhumanity, an old chestnut. They are therefore an instance of the importance in Borisian speech of hackneyed quotation. One of the more unpleasant items in Johnson's cuttings file is a sneeringly homophobic piece about Peter Mandelson's resignation in 1998:

In the delicatessens of Elgin Crescent, the sawdust is sodden with tears. For months, years, Carla Powell will go into mourning, her plumage as black as night. For Mandy is dead, dead ere his prime!⁸

That is 'Boris' as sketch writer, quoting Milton's 'Lycidas'. Over twenty years later, here is 'Boris' as Prime Minister, in the Greenwich speech again, quoting Tennyson's 'Ulysses':

this is the moment for us to ... recapture the spirit of those seafaring ancestors immortalised above us whose exploits brought not just riches but something even more important than that – and that was a global perspective. That is our ambition. There lies the port, the vessel puffs her sail ...⁹

The rhetorical functions of the two quotations could hardly be more different: the first is using mock-heroic to satirise a political opponent; the second is seeking unironically to formulate a national aspiration. One is divisive in intention, the other unifying. But the tone is surprisingly unaffected by these differences. Both quotations are hackneyed and

grandiose; both are dropped into their less poetical contexts with a giggle, as if the speaker is putting on a paper crown, aware that it makes him look a little silly. Beyond their immediate purposes, then, the literary tags work to open up a self-mocking gap between the speaker and his words. The quotations are not flagged, so they are almost indistinguishable from the rest of the passage, and this diffuses a vague feeling that the speech as a whole is borrowed from someone else. The style is visibly made out of quotes, sampling, pastiche: it could be called a postmodern political idiom.

This element of 'Boris' sometimes prompts people to compare him to P.G. Wodehouse's narrator-hero Bertie Wooster. The two are linked in an approximate fashion by their conformity to an upper-class English stereotype: the jaunty and air-headed man-about-town. But more specifically than that, there is a similarity in the way the characteral voice is composed. Here at random is Bertie:

To pour into a glass an inch or so of the raw spirit and shoosh some soda water on top of it was with me the work of a moment. This done, I retired to an armchair and put my feet up, sipping the mixture with carefree enjoyment, rather like Caesar having one in his tent the day he overcame the Nervii.¹⁰

This is a typical Wodehouse mash-up: narrative cliché ('the work of a moment'), artless colloquialism ('having one'), and classroom Shakespeare (the pentameter at the end). Bertie's un-self-conscious burling is actually the effect of an encyclopedic collection of borrowed phrases, combined to produce nicely judged moments of comic incongruity. Compare a sequence from Johnson's 2020 party conference speech, where he is talking up the potential of offshore wind generation:

You heard me right. Your kettle, your washing machine, your cooker, your heating, your plug-in electric vehicle – the whole lot of them will get their juice cleanly and without guilt from the breezes that blow around these islands

I remember how some people used to sneer at wind power, twenty years ago, and say that it wouldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding.

They forgot the history of this country. It was offshore wind that puffed the sails of Drake and Raleigh and Nelson, and propelled this country to commercial greatness.¹¹

The jokey mixture of tones is audibly learned from Wodehouse. The hucksterish opening and matey colloquialisms ('the whole lot of them', 'juice') are crossed comically with the Churchillian evocations of our island story, the line from Tennyson's 'Ulysses' we have encountered already, and the stylised bathos of the rice pudding.¹²

Admirers of the Jeeves stories may object that the two characters are fundamentally unlike: Bertie is honourable and a bit dim, whereas 'Boris' is neither. That may well be true, but the decisive difference is not so much moral as structural. In the stories, the incongruities of the narrative voice have an entertaining doubleness: they are at once accidents caused by Bertie's rhetorical cluelessness and comic effects deliberately devised by Wodehouse. Bertie is at sea amid the fragments of his education, but the craft is under firm artistic control. In the case of 'Boris', this separation is impossible, because there is no formal distinction between character and author: we are to suppose that Boris Johnson is both. Consequently, the character's innocent confusion and the author's conscious manipulation run into one another; the effect of the opposition between them is not an articulated comic structure but an evasive facetiousness; the double voicing appears not as art but as duplicity.

At one point in the parliamentary crisis over Brexit, the evasion became, unusually, a direct issue in the House of Commons. Opposition MPs attacked Johnson for using the words 'surrender', 'capitulation' and 'traitor', and Johnson said of their expressions of outrage, 'I have to say Mr Speaker, that I have never heard so much humbug in my life.'¹³ His impenitence is interesting. It came from a feeling of certainty, which can be traced throughout this article, that words will never finally have to be taken seriously, that metaphors can be relied on to remain within their inverted commas, their ludic character understood by all. He saw the contrary view – that publicly deriving metaphors from warfare incites real violence – as pretentious posturing. 'Boris' is essentially, not casually, a licence to say things without having to decide whether you mean them.

4

Finally, besides the paraded idiosyncrasy, the weak jokes and the quoting, 'Boris' is definingly *old-fashioned*. The contentious bits of his vocabulary are often antique (up-to-date racists don't talk about 'piccaninnies' or 'big white chiefs'); the snippets of poetry suggest Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*; the English history, populated by sea dogs and imperial visions, seems closer to *1,066 And All That* (1930) than to any syllabus that Johnson himself is likely to have encountered. The

character projected by this repertoire is a humorous old buffer, always ready to defend the retention of the Elgin Marbles or ‘Rule, Britannia!’ at the Proms.¹⁴ When he thinks about the exploitation of labour, it is typical that he cites a practice which ended in 1875.

As with the other categories, though, this figure is not quite the simple and self-evident object it asks to be taken for. Consider, for example, a prime ministerial article in the *Daily Mail* in late 2020, promising that vaccination will bring an end to Covid-19:

This time we know in our hearts that we are winning, and that we will inevitably win, because the armies of science are coming to our aid with all the morale-boosting, bugle-blasting excitement of Wellington’s Prussian allies coming through the woods on the afternoon of Waterloo.¹⁵

Certainly the voice of the old buffer can be heard in this bizarre analogy. The speaker seems to know the battle by heart, and to relive its excitement as if he had been there: there is the sense of a dotty obsession, a family resemblance between ‘Boris’ and Tristram Shandy’s Uncle Toby. But the Borisian performance of English eccentricity comprehensively lacks the innocence of its models. For one thing, it is once again winking at the audience. Look at the excessiveness of ‘morale-boosting, bugle-blasting’ – at once alliterative, assonantal and comically hyphenated. This is not the description of an important battle, but the bouncy appreciation of a ripping yarn. The enthusiasm is *trying* to be winningly naive; ‘Boris’s’ old-fashionedness, like his eloquence, is post-modern.

For another thing, the conceit takes an inherently global issue – the pandemic in this case, or carbon-free energy in the previous example – and nationalises it. The reference to ‘Prussian allies’ is intended, I think, as a felicitous acknowledgment that the first vaccine to be approved was partly German; but it is nonetheless striking that a clinical achievement should be figured in terms of a battle against a neighbouring country. History is insistently and combatively national history: Drake, Nelson, Wellington. It is over-motivated because it is serving as decor for nationalist ideology.

But then the nationalist appeal suffers from an interesting uncertainty of address, precisely because of its archaism. In theory, the icons of national endeavour work to unite the country around its shared memories. As Brits, we all thrill to the well-remembered bugle. But in reality the unity is imaginary: many British people are indifferent to the island story, and many know nothing about it. Moreover, the writing

knows about this lack of connection, even insists on it: this is after all the *Mail*, which complains periodically of cultural loss, as modish and ignorant teachers deprive the nation's youth of its heritage.¹⁶ When 'Boris' dwells with relish on 'the afternoon of Waterloo', it is *also* a snub to those of us who don't know what he is talking about. So the bugle-blasting rhetoric is inclusive and partisan in the same breath, like Brexit itself: it gestures towards national community, but at the same time flaunts the speaker's membership of an exclusive club.

This suggests that 'Boris' is not merely a personal style but also a minor pathology of Britain's decline. Nationalist themes are endlessly repeated and adorned with a verbal anthology of markers of Britishness. But the ideology constantly acknowledges its own historical belatedness by its withdrawals from populist assertion into a self-parodying coterie. Unlike the conservative heroes he samples, Johnson knows very well that the imperial game is long over – that is why 'Boris' never says anything straight.

Notes

- 1 Interview on BBC Radio Five Live, transcribed by Josh Milton, *Pink News*, 3.12.19.
- 2 Interview in *Sunday Telegraph*, 27.12.20.
- 3 Text at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-in-greenwich-3-february-2020>.
- 4 For 'piccanninies', *Daily Telegraph*, 10.1.02; for 'letter-boxes', *Daily Telegraph*, 6.8.18. The press and social media reactions to both solecisms may be googled almost indefinitely.
- 5 Press conference, 20.12.20 (<https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-speech-on-latest-coronavirus-restrictions/>)
- 6 Boris Johnson, *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2014), chapter 1.
- 7 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, tr James Strachey, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp 260-3.
- 8 The original *Daily Telegraph* piece is elusive, but it was reproduced in an article by Reiss Smith, *Pink News*, 12.12.19. Mandelson's resignation was on 23 December 1998.
- 9 <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-in-greenwich-3-february-2020>.
- 10 P.G. Wodehouse, *Right Ho, Jeeves* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 96.
- 11 Conference speech, 6.10.20, text at <https://www.conservatives.com/news/boris-johnson-read-the-prime-ministers-keynote-speech-in-full>
- 12 The 'people' who dismissed wind power with this eccentric hyperbole consisted of Johnson himself, not twenty years ago but in the *Daily Telegraph*, 2.7.13.
- 13 House of Commons debate, 25.9.19, reported (for example) at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-49833804>

- 14 “Someone needs to restore your marbles”: Boris Johnson reacts to George Clooney’s Elgin Marbles comment’, *Daily Telegraph*, 12.2.14; ‘Proms row: Johnson calls for end to “cringing embarrassment” over UK history’, *Guardian*, 25.8.20.
- 15 *Daily Mail*, 28.11.20
- 16 E.g., “Trendy teaching is “producing a generation of history numbskulls””, *Daily Mail*, 2.7.09. At <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1196911/Trendy-teaching-producing-generation-history-numbskulls.html>