At once the 'lie' and the 'elite' of crowds;
Who pass like water filter'd in a tank,
All purged and pious from their native clouds;

*(Don Juan* By Lord Byron - Canto XIII)

This was the first use of the word 'elite' in the English language since the mid-15th Century, when it was used to described a Bishop-elect. It was itself a ‘borrowed’ term from the old French *eslite* ('selected' or 'chosen ones'). Though Byron seems to be indulging in a bit of sarcasm in *D
on *Juan*

, the term fell into common usage and generally came to describe a group of people who set
themselves apart from society through their tastes in the ‘finer things in life’. The term was
sometimes used interchangeably with ‘snobs’, but there is a vast difference between the
pretentions of snobbery and the rigorous defence of values that was a characteristic of elitism.

I say ‘was’ because although there is an Elite with us today, it bears no similarity to the informed
and practiced Elite of which Kingsley Amis was an exemplar. Whilst the older Elite saw
themselves as guardians of culture, who would make the occasional demand on the Arts
Council to cough up the cash to cover the overspend in productions of Wagner at the Royal
Opera House and would demand the expulsion of anyone who dare to present themselves, at
the high temple, in denims, they did hold to a system of values, even if those values were for
their exclusive appreciation.

By contrast, today’s elite are philistines, but instead of keeping their ignorance to themselves
they see their aim as an egalitarian crusade to spread the word of their Gospel. Their contempt
for the old guard matches their horror of ‘chavs’ from areas such as Wythenshawe in
Manchester or Norris Green in Liverpool.

Both ‘toffs’ and ‘chavs’ are seen to represent an ‘Old England’ that the smart set would prefer to
forget about. Whilst having no compunction about giving voice to their naked hatred for white
working class youth (usually male), in the same breath they mock the ‘toffs’ and all that is
associated with the old school tie brigade. As Brendan O’Neill says: “In reality, it is a highly
individuated campaign rather than a political battle, motivated more by the politics of envy and
resentment for the rich than by anything resembling a principled position . . .” (see Brendan
O’Neill  *The culture war on toffs and chavs* ). As such they offer little alternative to the cultural
traditions of the old Elite, beyond some vague relativist concept of respect for other ‘cultures’
and that the rest of us adhere to their version of niceness.
Amis had nothing but contempt for the upper class who spoke pedantically; careful to enunciate each spoken word. He referred to them as *wankers*. However it was the lower orders that he saw as the real enemy, though he was rather reserved in labelling them ‘berks’:

*Berks* are careless, coarse, crass, gross and of what anybody would agree is a lower social class than one's own. They speak in a slipshod way with dropped Hs, intruded glottal stops, and many mistakes in grammar. Left to them the English language would die of impurity, like late Latin.

(Quoted by Martin Amis. *Guardian*, 27 May 2011)

As such, Amis indicated the class nature of language, which can be traced back to the Norman conquest when many French words entered the language. For instance the Norman nobility created a system in Briton of separating the terms for animals and their meat. The animal name is English ("cow", "sheep", "pig") while the names of the meats derived from these animals is French ("beef", "mutton", "pork"). This suggested the gap between the noble dinner and the commoners *mete* (a term which referred to food in general) that they slaughtered.
In many ways *The King’s English* acts more as a companion to H.W. Fowler’s *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (published in 1922)*, which was re-issued by Oxford World’s Classics in 2009 (and is the only readable reference book that I know of). The point is that both books have a certain quaintness to them as their subject is hardly taken seriously these days. Each book represents a middle-class trend of professionalisation - asserting itself as a unique strata from the businessmen and shopkeepers – who were increasingly playing the role of state functionaries in institutions and the evolution of modern local government from the 1830s onward. This trend coincided with the growth of interest in languages (see David Crystal’s introduction to H.W. Fowler.

*op. citet* p.viii - ix); their history and regional varieties, which saw a growth in vernacular literature, from writers such as Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, that continued up to the outbreak of World War 2.

Whereas Fowler’s book was a response to an inquisitive and confident middle class, Amis’s *The King’s English* can be seen as a last gasp attempt to save the English language from ‘barbarism’. What is striking about Amis’s book is how subjective it is. It would be easy to simply dismiss it as the ramblings of some old reactionary. It is certainly not rigid in its analysis of words, terms, prefixes, suffixes, idioms and pronunciation, but it is the outcome of a learned and passionate mind.

The entries are in chronological order and, for the most part, are the result of Amis’s frustration. Some might prefer ‘intolerance’ and that does seem to be the case when Amis is discussing ‘Americanisms’. He opens the section by declaring his pro-American ideals and pointing to the fact that as far back as 1789 Benjamin Franklin sent the lexicographer “. . . Noah Webster a list of unauthorised words that should carry a ‘discountenancing mark’ in his eventual *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828)” [p.26].

*American*
English evolved from the various dialects of the early settlers but took on a greater (political) importance with the War of Independence. With the rise of America as a world power - particularly in the post-WW2 period – Americanisms came to replace many aspects of Anglicism and Amis bemoans this, citing the Fowler brothers, who in their book *The King’s English* (1906), made clear that “The English and the American language and literature are both good things; but they are better apart than mixed.”

The section on the use of ‘And’ is one of the most hilarious, yet informative, parts of Amis’s book; suggesting how easy it is to make a blunder as well as creating a great deal of confusion. Having pointed out the misuse of a comma in a sentence that is also a list (peas, carrots and broccoli); noting the tendency to put a comma after the penultimate word and before ‘and’, he then goes on to point out that ‘and’ can be used more than once in a sentence as well as stating the legitimacy of using ‘And’ to begin a sentence.

Amis never shies away from his prejudices and the subject of this book allows him plenty of scope to indulge them whilst wittily avoiding causing offence. Take the section on the word ‘execute’ where he states that the term was generally thought to describe judicial decapitation. And those who held to this definition he refers to as the ‘half-educated’ [p. 64].

The most interesting parts of *The King’s English* are those that deal with socially or politically-loaded words and uses. Having stated that he looked forward to the total equality of men and women, if only because it would bring about the end of feminism, he points to the problem with writing ‘he’ or ‘she’ and seems to agonise about is because, as he states; “. . . I would rather be safe than sorry, and to find myself the occasion of some feminist outburst about unconscious (or conscious) chauvinism . . . “ [p. 68]. Originally published, posthumously, in 1998, it is incredible to think that, though meant in jest, this statement speaks loudly to us in these more delicate times where offence is taken as a result of the most innocent of things (e.g.: see
In the section on Political Word, Amis reminds us of how the word ‘refute’ had, in the mouths of politicians, morphed from its original meaning of proving the falsity of an argument or statement to simply becoming an expression of denial. It is what George Orwell, in his essay *Politics and the English Language* refers to as ‘pretentious diction’: “The result, in general, is an increase in slovenliness and vagueness.”

There is one aspect of political or social abuse of language that is not noted by Amis in his book and yet it is something that is symptomatic of ‘pretentious diction’ (the meaning of the word ‘pretentious’, sometimes loses its way. Many use the term to suggest ‘self-indulgence’ rather than what it is meant to signify: pretending to be other than that which a person - or an item or factor) actually is.
The word ‘community’, for example, has seen its definition turned on its head. At one time a term that described a geographical habitat, suggesting an exclusive location, today we talk of ‘the gay community’, ‘the online community’, ‘the disabled community’ and even ‘the intelligence community’ (making spying, infringing the rights of individuals and torturing people sound like quite a cosy pastime). At a stretch, referring to ‘the black community’ or ‘working-class community’ is excusable as in towns and cities there are areas where certain demographic groups predominate. But to use it to describe a group of people with a common preference, physical attribute or vocation is not only lazy, it is also downright irritating.

Over the past decade or so society has seen the evolution a disturbing trend of medicalisation of human behaviour and this has been reflected in the language that we use. The term ‘homophobia’, for example, was first used by a psychologist, George Weinberg, to describe heterosexual men’s fear that others might think they are gay. The term ‘xenophobia’ has largely replaced the word ‘racism’, yet its specific meaning is a fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or of anything that is strange or foreign and is one of the earliest categorised neuroses from the turn of the 20th century. And when a phobia doesn’t exist . . . why . . . make one up. ‘Islamophobia’ was created as a handy buzzword for a phenomena that had not even asserted itself: ‘a hatred of Muslims’ (even my Word 2010 spellchecker doesn’t recognise it).

Of course it suits the purpose of today’s elite to dismiss those who hold different views as pathological because they are then not required to enter into debate with such people. Another term ‘borrowed’ from psychology is ‘being in denial’, usually used against those who question aspects of environmentalism and has the same censorious effect as the use of the suffix phobia.
The term ‘Rights’ (as in ‘ownership of’) is a term that has morphed from a common understanding of something won through social struggle (the ‘right’ to vote, the ‘right’ to free speech, trade union ‘rights’, etc.) into some vague notion of expectation. So we encounter animal ‘rights’, a child’s ‘right’ to play, etc. But these are not rights, as we understood the term to mean up until recently, they are expectations based on our moral understanding of civilised behaviour.

Concern about the English language, and its abuse, has a long history. 1690 saw the publication of John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke was concerned with ideas and notions and particularly the transmission of those ideas. He noted that words were “signs of our ideas only, and not things in themselves.” In 1755 Samuel Johnson was alarmed enough about, what he saw as the lack of structure in the English language, to build on the work of previous lexicographers, such as Sir Thomas Elyot (c. 1490 – 26 March 1546), to begin work on the definitive *Dictionary of the English Language*.

Orwell [op. cited] recognised the dangers of the abuse of language:” . . . if thought corrupts
language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation even among people who should and do know better.”

Amis, like Fowler before him, was also concerned with spoken English as it is used in dialects. Under the section Hyper-urbanisms he points out how the word ‘like’ “is always turning up in disreputable circumstances, for example, only bad people [my italics] say ‘It tastes good like a cigarette should.’” On the issue of Four-letter words Amis points out how their acceptance in literary circles has undermined their impact for suggesting intimacy with others or their humorous impact, “except on the lower deck of our society.” [p.74] On page 87 ‘get’ and ‘got’ are said to be expression ‘lazy/stupid people fell back on because they were too stupid/lazy to think of or to know genteel words like obtain or possess.”

Interestingly enough Amis separates the concepts pronunciation and accent. Whilst accepting that an accent is a product of someone’s upbringing and background it is the mispronunciation of words, that he finds intolerable. Under the heading ‘Pronunciation as it is now’, Amis points to the fact that pronunciation is no longer something that is passed from generation to generation, but in times of greater social mobility people ‘learn’ about the use of grammar from an ever expanding media. The use of text messaging (not ‘texting’) has led to a new construction of the written language that sees no need for punctuation, even though the tools for it are available on all mobile phones. This has spread to electronic communication, with its array of acronyms such as ‘LOL’, which I now know to mean ‘laugh out loud’ (and in these sensitive times, it should come as no surprise that there is a necessity for such a term in order to indicate that the reader should not take offence). To an old git like myself, these terms and acronyms have become a foreign language, born out of some need to express oneself with a degree of urgency. I’m sure if Amis were alive today he would share my dislike for the phenomena.
But, in actual fact, the same sort of approach has been a part of English language for a long time. The need to confound the ‘outsider’. Originating in the East End of London, there is no certainty about why rhyming slang evolved. Some think that it might be the result of some form of cryptic speech, brought in by political activists or to allow some sort of collusion between merchants in order to confuse customers at market stalls. Whatever the reason, the practice certainly spread to other regions of Britain, including Liverpool.

Perhaps the most original accent in Britain is Scouse. Like Dublin, Liverpool is a city that is divided between North and South. Both cities have a greater deviation away from English in the northern sections. In the Ballymun area of North Dublin, for instance, the accent is so strong as to appear almost foreign to the outsider whilst in the southern parts of the city the accent has more of a lilt to it and is as close to the King’s English as you are liable to find in any other part of Ireland. The south side of Liverpool is also home to a more softer accent.

The Irish are largely felt to have impacted on the evolution of Scouse. But up until relatively recently there was a still a strong link to Lancashire dialects. If one considers the times of Merseybeat (and the evolution of the ‘professional’ Scouser) back in the early 1960s, what is striking is how different the accent is to what we hear on the streets of Tuebrook or Walton today. For example, the early pronunciation of the word ‘hair’ would sound like the word ‘her’ when spoken by Cilla Black. Today that manner is reversed and the word ‘her’ is pronounced as the word ‘hair’. Female Scousers have retained that guttural sound that is common amongst North Western dialects, whilst the lad’s (or should that be ‘Laahs’?) accent has developed a nasal twang to it (the closest I’m aware of is the Mancunian accent as spoken by Pete Shelley, of The Buzzcocks fame).

Another aspect of Scouse that I found irritating when I moved to Liverpool six years ago, is the tendency to have nouns ending in vowels. So ‘Christmas’ in Scouse is ‘Crimbo’ and ‘Post Office’ is ‘Postie’ (this latter may cause confusion to many from outside the city, as the term usually
applied to a postman - especially amongst younger children - in large parts of England). As far as I am concerned Scouse, like any other dialect adds to the richness of the English language and whilst I feel that the accent should be taken more seriously and not just be another ‘funny way of talking’ I have developed a liking for it.

I think that today’s elite will welcome Amis’s book as some aspects of it reflect their own prejudices about the working class (or the ‘Underclass’ as they would see it) whilst treating Amis’s defence of English as something old-fashioned and not applicable to the Britain of today. There is a certain irony in this, as historically it was the ‘lower orders’ who seen as the barbarians. Yet today’s elite, unlike the old guard, are happy to wallow in their own ignorance. For me it is the example set by the Guardian newspaper that illustrates the modern elite’s philistinism. Over a decade ago they were happy to trumpet their ignorance by publishing a collection from the newspaper’s ‘Corrections and Clarifications’ column as a book. And things have been going downhill ever since.

I do not share Amis’s pessimistic view that the language cannot be rescued from the assault upon it. In his essay [op. cited] George Orwell made this observation:

*I said earlier that the decadence of our language is probably curable. Those who deny this would argue, if they produced an argument at all, that language merely reflects existing social conditions, and that we cannot influence its development by any direct tinkering with words and constructions. So far as the general tone or spirit of a language goes, this may be true, but it is not true in detail. Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority.*
I would like to think that, for all its faults, Kingsley Amis’s book will go some way to rescuing the English language from the madness imposed on it by today’s elite.