
pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Spearmint Rhino - 07-04-2008 08:41

I'm currently dipping into Will Self's Junk Mail (a collection of his early-ish journalism), and I've been struck by his use of arcane vocabulary.

Now, one man's arcane vocab is another man's pub--talk, and I definitely don't want to give the impression that I want my writers to communicate solely in monosyllables. One thing I loved about the writings of Simon Reynolds and our own Wingco in the late 80s Melody Maker was the way it made you stretch yourself: they were using words and concepts which were just out of reach, but in such a way that you made the effort to grasp them and familiarise yourself with them. (Indeed, I still find myself reaching for my dictionary during Hartley Sebag-Ffiennes' Arsenal match reports...) However, there seems to be a difference in intention with Will Self.

I've just read a piece he wrote for the Modern Review about The Disposable Heroes Of Hiphoprisy's album with William Burroughs, Spare-Ass Annie. In the space of one page, he's used the words 'pabulum', 'declivity' and 'moue', two of which I don't understand and the third a borrowed French word with whose English usage I'm unfamiliar. In the context of a piece which is just dripping with arch contempt for 'low' culture such as hip-hop, and to only a slightly lesser extent the Beat prose of Burroughs, the use of that kind of language seems to carry a meaning secondary to the literal definition of the words themselves: it's saying "I went to an Eton Group school and Oxford and you, my intellectual gerbil of a reader, did not."

Again, I don't want to give the impression that I am against a florid turn of phrase. In fact, it's the thing which attracted me to Self in the first place (and made me shell out for tickets to see him speak in Hove at the end of the month).

It's just that in this context it depressed me. Whether accidentally or intentionally, it reinforces the suspicion that while Self may like to present himself as a transgressive druggy bohemian, he actually shares exactly the same rigid mental hierarchy between High Culture and Low Culture as the establishment which raised him.

Or am I reading too much into it?

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by EIM - 07-04-2008 08:50

Hmmm. I'm not sure. I didn't understand a word of it.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Spearmint Rhino - 07-04-2008 09:01

I've got a vague memory of writing something similar (though not about Will Self) on the old board, so clearly it's something which gets on my wick more than it should.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by EIM - 07-04-2008 09:06

I had to read a Will Self book for one of my numerous uni courses. I found it difficult to read and more than a little gratuitous. I can't be arsed flicking through a dictionary every page or so, but then maybe Self isn't writing his books for people like me. Which is fair enough, I can do without being patronised by what may as well be a text book.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by 1890 - 07-04-2008 10:24

I like the challenge, in the case of the three words mentioned in the subject, I haven't got a clue about the first one but the second one I'm familiar with and the third one is indeed french and I'm pretty sure it is used in the same way as in

French. As for Will Self reasons to use a florid vocabulary, I'd say it's part genuine love of words, part to dazzle his readership, there is an element of showmanship at play but I'm not entirely sure it's there to draw a line between him and the low-brow masses.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by ursus arctos - 07-04-2008 10:39

Pabulum is Latin and is indeed the source of the better known word Pablum, which was originally a trade name.

In addition to being foreign/archaic, it also can mean a number of rather different things in English, two of which are pretty much opposites (see 2&3 below). There have to be better words available to convey his message.

From Merriam Webster:

"Main Entry: pab-u-lum

Pronunciation: \Épa-byY-IYm\

Function: noun

Etymology: Latin, food, fodder; akin to Latin pascere to feed — more at food

Date: 1733

1: food; especially : a suspension or solution of nutrients in a state suitable for absorption

2: intellectual sustenance

3: something (as writing or speech) that is insipid, simplistic, or bland"

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Not me - 07-04-2008 12:43

I've read loads of his stuff, and I think the only problem here is: Will Self is completely clueless about pop music and pop culture. If he'd used plainer English to get it wrong, it would still wind you up; this his just him bluffing around the fact that he's hopelessly out of his element. He actually used the word "trindie" (his contraction of "trance" and "indie") to describe Hot Chip on Late Review, and claimed you had to be on drugs in a club to enjoy what's actually a fairly sophisticated, completely un-danceable, self-interrogating pop record for grown-ups.

I really enjoy his antediluvian lexicon on the whole, mostly cause I get to learn some new words (some of which were really handy for reviewing Plastikman or whoever in under 150 words for Bang). I think the test is: if you still have to look the word up after encountering it a couple of times, it probably wasn't worth using.

Self's very obviously showing off, but only really in a bid to make life a bit more interesting. I didn't go to a posh school or Oxbridge, and I don't know anyone who did (barring the odd OTFer), but I reckon his style is so over the top it has to come from dictionary/thesaurus/arcane literature usage rather than any real-life culture. I don't find that alienating.

I've always understood pabulum to mean something akin to baby food: bland slop. (Our caterers at work are called Pabulum, a pretty bad choice.) "Moue" is basically "pout" with the advantage that you almost make a pout by saying it. I guess "declivity" uses one word where two will normally do ("downward slope") and avoids cliché, even if it is a bit clunky.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Wyatt Earp - 07-04-2008 12:54

His parents must have run out of money at some stage, because although he started at University College School (which is indeed Eton Group), he ended up at a state school. Mine, in fact. He'd left by the time it went comp though.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by 1890 - 07-04-2008 12:55

Declivity is pretty useful to describe the slope of a road, path or ski run.

Will Self reminds me of MC Solaar incidentally (which considering Not Me comments about his pop ignorance is quite ironic...), they affect the same barrage of arcane vocabulary and verbal musings, both to good effect in my opinion.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Tubby Isaacs - 07-04-2008 13:32

I know all three words, but that might be because I've got a degree in French and classics. In spite of this, I find him very hard to read indeed.

Someone's aiming a book at my demographic is quite flattering.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Wyatt Earp - 07-04-2008 15:23

I know all three words, but then I went to the same school as Will Self.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Wyatt Earp - 07-04-2008 15:23

(Did I mention?)

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Spearmint Rhino - 24-04-2008 22:44

So, I just met Will Self, after he gave a talk (and read from his new novel The Butt) in The Old Market, Hove.

Like a coward, I didn't have a go at him for his arcane vocabulary or his cultural snobbery, partly because he'd already fielded those issues in the Q&A session: someone asked him what pop music he likes (none), and the very first question was "Do you talk to your kids like that?" (which I thought was quite brilliant).

I mentioned that we're theoretically colleagues on the Independent, and he complimented me on my column, which was nice. ("You're not one of the conformists.") I got him to sign my copy of Junk Mail.

Tell you what, though. He's a real old ham when it comes to recitation, like a regional Shakespearean thesp. He's much more accomplished as a spontaneous public speaker, and stalks the stage with the confidence of a man who has a really big willy.

Oh, and he doesn't look that much like our Purv in the flesh...

Now I just need to look up 'palimpsest'.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Not me - 24-04-2008 22:50

I think the Carcass had one of those one the other day.

It's an old piece of writing over-written with a new one, kind of thing.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Not me - 24-04-2008 23:05

Aren't book readings really dull, though. I've only ever been to one (Alasdair Gray - who I figured was bound to peg it soon, but who's decided to paint an enormous ceiling for a few years instead - with Will Self and Ali Smith supporting) and it all felt a bit pointless and stiff really.

I mean, I've got a signed copy of Lanark now, but so what? It's not a souvenir of any great moment. I've also got "Darth Vader"'s signature from when the cunt deigned to turn up in Norwich once. His breathing problems seemed to have cleared up, and he scrawled a cursory "D Var" on a post-it note for me like everyone else, before giving the costume back, signing on and fucking off down the pub, probably, the goth cunt.

I was impressed that Self had to bend double to read from the lecturn provided, though.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Spearmint Rhino - 25-04-2008 12:14

Not me wrote:

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I dunno, I really enjoyed it. Maybe Will Self is an unusually good orator, but it left me thinking I ought to go to more of these things.

(My next one is Neil Tennant interviewed by Michael Bracewell, but I don't think that's tied in with a book.)

Yes, he is very tall...

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Not me - 25-04-2008 17:25

See, that sounds really good to me, as would Will Self in conversation (which he's great at).

I just don't think fiction's suited to performance; it's not really designed for it. One or two writers - William Burroughs was a good example - add something with their presence and delivery, but I think they have to be very first-person, self-mythologising guys who personify the exotic culture they write about.

Self aims more at detached satire with his fiction. It's not nakedly autobiographical, and doesn't aim to bring a marginalised or alien culture to life; it goes for the opposite effect usually - recasting damply suburban north London lives in grand and absurd circumstances. As he's said in recent interviews: he's an arch-conformist.

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Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by boris - 25-04-2008 22:54

I went to see (hear) Douglas Adams a few years back, reading from that book he wrote about endangered species. It was truly excellent even though (or maybe because) the whole Q&A session afterwards was about the Hitchhikers books. He was an excellent reader, and an even better spontaneous speaker, and certainly wasn't averse to using the odd florid phrase, and all the better for it (I thought).

Really glad I went to that, as it's not something that particularly floats my boat (I don't think I've been to any others). He, too, was really hammy at times, but it seemed well suited.

I don't suppose he went to your school as well, Wyatt?

Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Andy C - 26-04-2008 00:16

Douglas Adams went to the same school as Noel Edmonds.

Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Wyatt Earp - 26-04-2008 16:47

Will Self was the most terrifyingly articulate schoolboy I ever met: possibly this was a "public school kid slumming it in the State sector" thing, but I suspect that wasn't the whole story. He was in the Sixth Form when I was in the First Year, and at the time was, I'm pretty sure, in the CP. We served on the same School Council.

Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by meerkat - 27-04-2008 09:03

"I went to an Eton Group school and Oxford and you, my intellectual gerbil of a reader, did not."

Didn't go to either, and have been known to use all three words. I don't think the use of 'big words' necessarily signals one-up-manship.

Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by wingco - 27-04-2008 21:36

I should just say, after "thank you SR", re the opening post, that Oxbridge education, for all its crusty deficiencies, did not involve an over-use of pabulum, declivity, or moue, a word whose meaning I first gleaned from reading PG Wodehouse when I should have been reading Sir Philip Sidney at college. In tutorials and lectures, dons tended to express themselves in very simple language, I always found - not, I felt, to dumb down or because they themselves were unsophisticated, but out of a desire to communicate and perhaps to demonstrate that the concepts they put forward did not need to be shrouded in obfuscation but could stand the test of "plainspeak" without their complexity being compromised.

As for Self, I always said he'd never use an everyday word like everyday when the word "quotidian" would do. I had to review his last novel. "Quotidian" makes its first appearance within about 50 pages. I suspect his motives are mixed; to celebrate and retrieve the more neglected, elegant corners of the language - and to show off.

Re:pabulum, declivity, moue

Posted by Ginger Yellow - 28-04-2008 10:44

At least "quotidian" is a really cool sounding word. It makes "everyday" seem less, well, everyday.

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