

A licence to print money? The Listener, 9 April 1987



The other day, I found myself in a book auction organised by Sotheby's, in the West End. There were no £25million Van Goghs, only an Elizabethan manuscript notebook, full of *Henry IV Part 1* and listed at between £120,000 and £150,000. I missed that bit, but, as I looked round the audience, I fell to thinking about the price of words.

The audience, about 100 people on a particularly wintry morning, was a revelation. Some were reasonably well dressed, some in down-at-heel suits, jackets and denims. Some were attentive, some reading *The Times*. Some were there for a killing, some for a laugh. Quite a few desiccated types huddled at the back, and a number of barracudas could be observed at the front. Inevitably, there were tramps in for a snooze.

As I arrived, bidding had begun on a letter written by Dickens to Mrs Gaskell in 1850. It was about her new story, 'Lizzie Leigh', which appeared in the first issue of Dickens' *Household Words*. Listed at £700-£800, it went for £1,600 – not a bad sum for little more than two pages of words. As I sat down, a meditation on love, death and the affections of women, in the shape of a four-page letter written by George Eliot in 1870, went for £2,400. This, I was informed, was a lot for Eliot, who wrote thousands of letters.

What are words really worth? It is a question that gets to you in the Sotheby's auction room (company founded 1744). The carpet and walls are dark green and brown. Sotheby's manual staff are in dark green uniforms. They hold up dark green-jacketed books and letters so yellow they, too, are almost brown. The letters come in wallets; the wallets are there to prevent printed and handwritten words from disintegrating. The Sotheby's attendants, staring straight ahead, unblinking, hold up these fading literary relics with an impassiveness that borders on undisguised contempt for the punters assembled on the floor.

Ruskin's copiously annotated copy of Byron's three-volume *Letters and journals* goes for a good £800. A first edition of Shelley, sold for £420, is, according to the catalogue, 'slightly spotted'. The auctioneer swings his head like a tennis spectator. Arthur Freeman, a famous bidder in these circles, can let his intentions be known without moving either spectacles or goatee. He also writes down the names of successful bidders.

Words are things of beauty, but they are also items of historical evidence. There is a letter by T. E. Lawrence, refusing the Secretaryship of the Bank of England offered him by Sir Montagu Norman in 1924. Listed at £1,150, it goes for twice the price.

Then again, words, along with grammar and punctuation, are matters for the pedantically inclined. There is at Sotheby's a two-page typed letter by George Bernard Shaw, upbraiding Lawrence on the misuse of the colon and semicolon in uncorrected proofs of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Joseph and Sawyer, a well-known dealer, buys it for an inflated £1,600. Authors commanding prices lower than those listed in the Sotheby's catalogue include Thackeray, Wilde, Conan Doyle, T. S. Eliot, Lawrence, Pound, and Yeats. The words of Charles I, Tolkien and Waugh went for list price, while Conrad, Graves, Joyce, the Bloomsburys, Orwell, Massfield and Ian Fleming all went for more than list price. What is apparent is that the price of words is very arbitrary.

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Of course, the words I have been discussing have a special antique value. But a glance at the present price of words shows that there has been considerable inflation over the years. I am told that one receives about £250 per thousand words for freelancing for the *Sunday Times*, and up to £400 a thousand for pieces in the *Daily Express*. I write for neither of these august newspapers; but allow me to record the political economy of a literary art yet more debased than that which they practice: copywriting.

Actually, copywriting is not always whoredom. If you are paid well for writing clean copy about a decent product, and you don't have to go to too many management meetings attended by literary oafs, then the price of words can be exhilarating. Also, there is a certain unforced brevity and elegance to be found in good copywriting. Many people try to achieve those things, but few succeed. The going rate for freelance copywriting now, I hear, is £500 a day. This is for brochures, not advertising: in advertising the rates charged by copywriters in the employ of the big London agencies are more extortionate still. Paid by length, it means that anything up to £1 a word is fair game.

Here prices are indeed outrageous. But a copywriting job for IBM helps put them in perspective. A few years ago, I received £1,500 for five days' work for IBM, writing about 1,500 words on the company's systems for computer-aided design and

manufacture (CAD-CAM, a process, I suspect, very similar to copywriting on a word processor). However, at an early stage of producing what proved to be a successful brochure, IBM challenged my fee. I asked them to picture selling just one £250,000 CAD-CAM system off a print-run of 1,500 brochures costing a total of £1 each to write, design and print. I then put it to them that if just one of my adjectives turned out to be the clinching factor in persuading that single customer to purchase, it would mean a ratio of literary costs to sales benefits in the region of 1 to 166. They smiled derisively but accepted my fee.

THE LISTENER does not pay IBM rates. For me it is a matter of writing for fun and attention. Writing about robots or value-added telecommunications, by contrast, is about elegant engineering. Do not overdo the bullet-points, the cross-headings, the italics and the full stops. Be cautious with the colon and semicolon. Resist the temptation to be so laid-back that, throughout the client's brochure, you brilliantly avoid saying what his company makes or does. Woody Allen once made an advertising industry joke about having had a great idea and then going on to turn it into a concept. The best concepts are literary and graphic devices that are completely different from what the recipient of a piece of sales literature expects. So in this universe, the more off-the-wall your words, the more money you get paid for writing them.

Are words going out of fashion? Are they shortly to meet with that unseemly fate, devaluation? Gorbachev may read books, but people say that Reagan spends most of his time with videos. Newspapers and literary weeklies are thriving in Britain, but the power of wordless graphics is not to be gainsaid. On television, I have seen an American Star Wars scientist claim in all seriousness that the main difference between the Strategic Defence Initiative and comparable Russian arms programmes is that America's computer-animated colour representations of battles in space are superior: 'There is,' he murmured with a lugubriously scientific straight face, 'a graphics gap'.

Faced with this kind of competition, playwrights, novelists, letter-writers, hacks and even copywriters should be concerned.

I believe that the price of words will remain high. But to the extent that pictures today win the argument more frequently than words, the future of the words market is probably less certain now than it has been at any time since those old Shakespearian manuscripts first were written.