# Still Here - by Clive James

Everybody knows the story of how Mark Twain read newspaper stories about his death and said they were much exaggerated. But to know how he felt, you need to have read your own obituary, or at least to have read an interview in which you seem to be knocking on death’s door.

On Thursday morning the Daily Mirror carried just such an interview with me. It was harrowing. You would have thought that I had only a few hours to live. The strange thing, though, was that I never gave the interview. The Mirror made it up.

They made it up by getting hold of a transcript of the instalment devoted to me of the BBC radio show “Meeting Myself Coming Back” (to be transmitted tonight at 8pm) and selecting a few dozen quotes so that I seemed to be practically expiring in the arms of the journalist assigned to register my dying breath.

The process of lifting the transcript was made easier by the Beeb’s weird decision to dress it up as a news story and hand it to their website several days before the scheduled transmission. As far as I can guess, the broadcasters are under the impression that such an alliance with a printed medium will increase their listening figures. But why do a broadcast at all, if it all appears in print first?

All, but not quite all. What I might say for the radio, where the tone of voice is under my control, would not be the same thing as I might say to a newspaper journalist, where the tone of voice is more under his control than under mine. In the radio interview I say that I am getting near the end of my life. Well, at my age everybody is. But if you put the statement baldly into the Mirror it sounds as if I am passing out in the journalist’s lap.

If I did so, I would do my best to bite him in the upper thigh, for he is a very mischievous fellow. Like many of his colleagues, and indeed like his own proprietor, he seems not to have taken any notice of the Leveson enquiry, which is really about press ethics, and about how the press is to be supplied with some ethics if it can’t manage to find any by itself. He, my interviewer at the gates of doom, is like one of the old lags out of Evelyn Waugh’s classic novel Scoop, which I just happened to have been re-reading this week.

During my life I have read the book several times, each time with growing awareness that Waugh wasn’t exaggerating when he made every journalist in the book a confidence man. Journalism on that level is practised with a remorseless logic. Why say that you are quoting from the transcript of a broadcast when you can just leave it to be assumed that you have conducted a proper interview? If the victim objected, would anybody listen?

I’m not objecting, because I haven’t got time. In the interview I am represented as saying that I am losing my battle with leukaemia. Well, of course I am. Eventually I must. But the main thrust of the broadcast is, I can assure you, quite merry. In my life I have managed to get a certain amount done, and my chief aim now is to live longer so that I can do more. My current book of poems, Nefertiti in the Flak Tower, hits a pitch that I have been working towards all my life, and I sincerely hope that I am not finished yet. I enjoy life, but work has always come first. And the people I love feel the same about their own work. Nobody is a member of a leisured class.

Indeed there is only one leisured class I can think of, now that the old aristocracy must spend the winters working flat out to get their stately homes ready for the summer tourist season. The most flagrant leisure class in recent history consists, dare I say it, of journalists. There are hard-working journalists, but they are not writing pieces like my death-bed interview.

Journalists who write junk like that aren’t really working at all. As happens in Scoop, they take dull stuff out of one tray and brighten it up until it is ready to go into another tray, on its way to publication. Evelyn Waugh was a master at parodying the mental processes involved, because he had something of the malicious gossip in his own personality. But he was careful to put most of that malicious impulse into his novels, which were avowedly fictional.

To be the kind of newspaper writer who doctors fiction until it sounds like fact is to work a confidence trick. I fully admit that everything attributed to me by the Mirror journalist I did actually say, but he shifted the context by leaving out when and in what circumstances I said it. He thus turned one kind of fact into another kind of fact, which means he turned it into a fiction.

I’m getting to be an old man now. I still have a few years left, I hope, even with my range of ailments, but I’m definitely no spring chicken. I would have thought that my years of celebrity were safely behind me. They never amounted to much. They had mainly to do with television, which people forget, although they don’t often forget a face. Only yesterday someone in the street said “I always enjoy your shows, Mr Anderson.”

But if you were ever on television the press never forgets it, because for the press, television is a measure of achievement. If you have been up there, you must be somebody, and will always be that somebody even if you head for the exit.

So when the Mirror ran its piddling fake interview, the telephones started to ring, and newspapers wanted a last article from the dying man, if necessary transmitted by telephone from the intensive care unit. I hope my wonderful hospital, Addenbrooke’s in Cambridge, wasn’t too much pestered. I know my agent was, not to mention my family. In keeping with my somnolent metabolism over the past couple of years of illness, I was slow to find out about the fuss. It was already fully developed before I tuned in. Instantly I thought: well, I could sure do without this.

But actually it comes with the territory. The ruling factor in this story isn’t press perfidy, it’s the power of the BBC. This programme “Meeting Myself Coming Back” is a big draw, mainly because its producer is a whizz at tracking down bits and pieces of your past performances which by now you have forgotten ever happened, and to which you will react as if electrified.

And there is nothing more covetable in the whole land of the media than a solid BBC radio audience. When I did “A Point of View” for Radio 4 it used to pull three million people. This programme will do at least as well. And people will remember it and discuss it. The journalists for the cheap press are uneasily aware that nobody cares much about what they say. Hence their sad conviction that they can say things any way they like, even if it means staging a man’s funeral for him just because he makes a few down-in-the-mouth remarks. Talk about getting the hearse before the horse.