

## Slovenly Apostrophes

Dear LRB contributor,

I have it in for apostrophes. Of course not all apostrophes. Some are so established as to seem necessary, like those indicating possession (Jenny's long fingers). And the omission of an "o", in words like "can't", seems relatively inoffensive as you will shortly see. But I hate the "we're", "we've", "it's", "I'd" and their ilk. I would (of course) allow these usages in quotations where that is what the quoted author wrote, and in direct speech where the sound of lazy diction is being captured. But not in standard English prose. I am shocked at the frequency with which these offensive apostrophes occur in The London Review of Books. I note the way they are sprinkled around, as though editorial policy demands them; not quite at random, more clustered, as though the lowly copy editor finds the task boring, or distasteful, as I certainly would. (I take this to be an American influence from the 'parent' organ — The New York Review of Books.)

[1] One objection is the momentary confusion created between the slovenly apostrophe and the genitive. [e.g. "As far as Beatty's concerned, there's no 'solution' to the 'race problem'"; c.f. "In the end, Beatty's sellout argues most cogently..."; LRB vol. 38/1 p. 18].

[2] Another objection is that these shortcuts are ungrammatical; they abolish the verb of the sentence (or phrase).

[3] They are also illogical. I would have less to resent if these apostrophes only indicated a dropped letter, not the elision of two words into one. They should then be printed with a gap between the mangled and unmangled words; we 'd, we 're (not we'd, we're). Fussy readers could then recognise the intended grammar, and read the words correctly if they wish to.

[4] They are ambiguous. We do not immediately know which verb has been eliminated. Does "I'd" mean "I would" or "I had"; does "we're" mean "we are" or "we were"?

[5] Such writing seems to overlook the fact that we write the 'sense' to be conveyed, not the 'sound'. We do not normally write, "innernashnal", we write "international" as it indicates "between nations"; not "aluminum" nor "labatry" but "aluminium or laboratory; unless the slovenliness is what we wish to convey.

[6] They are slovenly. I do not (in general) say "I've..." or "I'd..."; I say "I have...", or "I would...".

[7] And above all, they are unnecessary. I hate having these unnecessary, slurred, ambiguities thrown at me when I read.

I would be very interested to know if you insert your own apostrophes, or if they are inserted by others during the editorial process.

Yours, Cawstein

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