

A008

### **The author's voice**

No one doubts that, as Mary Evans says (Letters, Spring 1993) a copy editor is needed where the author sends in a defective manuscript. The objection comes when, as so often nowadays, the author's work is not defective but some copy editor thinks it can be 'improved'. This trespasses on the author's prerogative.

An important factor in literary work is the author's 'voice', that distinctive tone that marks his or her work as different from that of any other person. On the day I read the letter from Mary Evans I also read various authors' comments on style in the 'Wordpower' supplement to *The Sunday Times* (21 March 1993). The following quotations indicate what I mean.

*David Lodge*: 'all great writers have distinctive and immediately recognisable ways of using language'. *David Hare*: 'Absolute individuality is essential for a great writer and an absolutely recognisable voice'. *William Trevor*: 'you can define [style] as a writer's way of fingerprinting his work'. *Martin Amis*: 'It is your very being that creates your own style'. *Alice Thomas Ellis*: 'I like to hear a recognisable voice'. *Penelope Lively*: 'Style means individuality and accuracy of expression. In other words, you can recognise the author of an unattributed passage'.

Even those who do not aspire to be 'great' writers need to have their own voice. This is inevitably muffled and distorted, if not destroyed altogether, by the interference of copy editors.

Apart from that, there is no guarantee that the copy editor will be more competent than the author. I gather that Mary Evans is herself a copy editor. I would have more confidence in her expertise if in her letter she had not commented 'my italics' in relation to words in a passage that is clearly her own composition and not a quotation.