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Notes & Comments

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Euphemism alert

On the well-chosen use of the word "youths" by Reuters.

In "Portrait of an Age," G. M. Young's classic overview of early Victorian England, there are a few melancholy pages devoted to the devastating Irish potato famine of the mid-1840s. Young notes in an aside that Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, followed polite opinion in referring to the disappointing tuber as "That Root" instead of calling it by its common name. "[I]n all the prayers offered up for our Irish brethren," Young observes, "potatoes were never mentioned."

Young describes this policy of politesse as "characteristic of Early Victorian manners," and perhaps it was. It is also characteristic of a certain perennial timidity that refuses to call untoward realities by their correct names. Consider the opening of this story from Reuters about the latest rash of rioting in Copenhagen:

DANISH YOUTHS RIOT FOR SIXTH NIG ...

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