

Letters

The Conquest of Peru

Sir, - I am at a loss to understand how Mario Vargas Llosa thinks that simple repetition of the central points of his abridged lecture on Peru in his letter of February 20 in any sense answers the criticism I levelled against it. One did not find his argument unclear, but merely unconvincing.

Although his admission that there is much for which to thank the demographers and ethnohistorians is welcome, he apparently yields this ground without allowing that it weakens his case for the primacy of so-called "narrative" history. All kinds of historical analysis have their place and each of them has a particular subject to which it may best be applied. Mr Vargas Llosa is plainly unimpressed by ham-fisted and shoddily written Marxist history - this being the type to which his references to "scientific" and "ideologically correct" must apply - and who could fail to be unhappy with bad work, from whatever perspective it is conceived? And yet, the historians with whom he takes issue remain unnamed.

He is certainly free to draw a tenuous link between the violence of Peru's conquest by the Spaniards and contemporary societal difficulties in Latin America, however little such a fantasy may help us to understand the complexities of many different countries on two continents. But I am suspicious of such persistent defensiveness about a largely unsuitable approach to historical work - at least for this subject - and the implication that hostility to Romanticism (which I apparently share with these bad historians) amounts to philistinism. One does not seek to extinguish the role of the individual in re-casting historical discussions, but rather to find a balanced context in which to place him. Of course Hugo is to be admired, but I will take my history from Braudel any time, and from the exponents of the *Annales* school among Latin Americanists.

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'Conspiracy of Silence'

Sir, - I was pleased to read Nicolas Walter's letter (February 20) replying to Joseph Brodsky's review of Barrie Penrose and Simon Freeman's *Conspiracy of Silence* (January 30), in particular Walter's defence of E. M. Forster's statement, "If I had to choose between betraying my country and my friends, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country". I would, however, like to add some further observations, for, as I discovered during the research for my study of E. M. Forster's stories and essays (Macmillan, Spring 1987), there hardly exists a discussion of Burgess or Blunt or MI5 in which that sentence is not recalled, always with the same innuendo as it carries in Brodsky's coy reference to "E. M. Forster's high camp dictum", with its hints of Firbankian excess, self-indulgence and coterie homosexuality. But there is no need thus to particularize and hence trivialize Forster's claim. "Camp" - high or low - is an absurd description of Forster's writing, which is founded on the ethical co-ordinates of personal loyalty, integrity and tolerance. The line need carry no sexual subtext. But even were it to, it would be no less admirable. How many would raise an eyebrow had the choice been between wife and country?

We would do well to remember that it was Montaigne who wrote "a unique and dominant friendship dissolves all obligations". This is no upstart idea; indeed it provided the basis for the long tradition of humane liberalism that Forster found himself ruefully defending in his 1938 essay. For Forster, the individual was the reference point of value, especially at a time when dictators "incite [their citizens] to mass antics" and even democracies forget their ideals "as soon as the drums beat and the bombers hum". It was a belief bound up in his awareness of the tragic incapacity of our public institutions. It is not, as he wrote later in the essay, that there are no decent people, but that "no device has been found by which these private decencies can be transmitted to public affairs". Making the link between public and private obligations is precisely what this "dictum" is about.

It is also worth recalling that Forster became

president of the National Council for Civil Liberties in 1934. He wrote and broadcast frequently on the "coming darkness" and he was aware, too, of the degree to which all statements (and the failure to make statements) are political acts. Although he had glimpsed "in the human make-up", as he wrote in "Ferney", the extraordinary essay of Voltaire's and Europe's last moment, "deadness and depths that no acuity could penetrate and no benignity heal", he persisted in his belief in the individual. He would continue, as he wrote in his *Commonplace Book*, "to talk this nineteenth century stuff with a twenty century voice", even as the news from Europe and the news from home (what he called the "shutting down of criticism") became ever more alarming. The (in)famous statement can thus be read as almost a dare to himself. From his perspective in 1938 it seemed more than likely that he would be called to account.

It is about time, as Nicolas Walter reminds us, that those who hasten to dismiss Forster's words ("silly and self-righteous" Roger Scruton called them in a letter to the *TLS*, October 17, 1986), or to use them for a spurious causal link (Cambridge-friendship-treason), stopped to re-read them in the context of the other darkly probing essays in *Two Cheers for Democracy*. They would find a much tougher, perplexed and perplexing assessment of moral choice than the journalistic caricature of the past seventeen years has allowed.

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'Fear, Myth and History'

Sir, - One sign of the current failure of nerve in British historiography is the preoccupation with "revisionism" and degrees thereof. Such labelling apparently does duty for the historian's, and the reviewer's, legitimate concern with the approximation of an imaginative argument to what might sensibly be made of the historical evidence. Barry Coward finds my *Fear, Myth and History* (February 6) excessively revisionist. This view seems to rest on an assessment of my motives in writing the book which is incorrect, and a reading of the book's argument which is equally incorrect. I did not, contrary to Dr Coward's assertion, write with the "determination to attack Christopher Hill". Indeed, I repeatedly assert in the book my admiration and respect for Hill's great scholarship and achievements. But he, like the rest of us, is fallible and sometimes his mistakes are significant. The motive behind my study is to offer an explanation alternative to what I believe to be an erroneous one on the part of Hill and many other historians. The degree of revisionism involved is surely not so important as whether I have got it right or not.

Here again, I am afraid, Coward is not a reliable guide for your readers. He argues that Bauthumley, Coppe and Clarkson were radical and implies that I deny this, which I do not. He asserts that all three "argued that sin did not exist, or at least had no moral force", but this is patently not the case with Bauthumley and Coppe, as I argue at length in the book. Clarkson wrote one significant antinomian tract but appears, when he wrote it, to have been an isolated individual and not a member of the group with which Ranterism has falsely been identified.

So the substantive issues raised in my book are not critically dealt with in Barry Coward's review and "revisionism"-gauging is the substitute. This seems an unfortunate outcome for my book, your readers and British historiography.

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'Cooking Fish'

Sir, - I feel I should point out a fundamental error in the poem, "Cooking Fish", by Dominic Fisher (January 23): "arse" (stanza 2, line 3) should read "arsehole", or, more correctly, "anus". Fish do not have arses.

Support for my view is given by *Chambers' Dictionary*: "arse: (now vulg.) n. buttocks." A fish with buttocks - now that I would like to see.

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Which twin uses Tokalon? Nabokov said the magazine *Chisla* reminded him of this advertisement - see Brian Boyd's letter, below.

'Novel with Cocaine'

Sir, - One amusing new piece of evidence ought to resolve for good the controversy conducted partly in your pages over Nikita Struve's attribution of *Roman s kokainom* (*Novel with Cocaine*) to Vladimir Nabokov (Letters, August 9 and 30, and December 20, 1985).

In an unpublished letter of July 24, 1934, now at the Beinecke Library, Yale University, Nabokov wrote to his friend the poet Vladislav Khodasevich that he had just seen the new issue of *Chisla* (the very issue containing the opening section of *Roman s kokainom*) and as always felt reminded by the journal's style and dubious allure of advertisements for Tokalon facial cream. How dismissive he meant to be can be seen from the advertisement [above] he especially had in mind, one of the more grotesque in the most fatuous publicity campaign in the Russian émigré press.

Frame 1 in a four-frame comic strip: Jean, in grey half-tone shade, laments to radiantly white-faced friend: "George will be late home. I'm sure he's involved with that blonde again." Friend replies: "My husband was no better, Jean, but I'll tell you what I did." Frame 2: Radiant friend finishes whispering to dot-faced Jean: "... And in three days all my blackheads and enlarged pores had disappeared." Frame 3: George, to white-faced, confidently beaming Jean: "Sorry, Jean, I'm late again. Oh! What have you done! You look wonderful!" Frame 4: Friend, inset, on phone: "Did you follow my advice, Jean?" Jean, into receiver: "Yes, with complete success. Now George loves me more than ever" (*Poslednie Novosti*, June 15, 1933).

Other Tokalon advertisements could be crasser still. "Two million women want to get married - but does the colour of your skin attract men? ... Out of 100 men, many of them millionaires, 96 declared that they were attracted most by a woman with soft, white, velvety skin and a face whose colour is young and pretty" (*Poslednie Novosti*, September 15, 1933).

Despite all the evidence already brought against his hypothesis, Professor Struve persists in his attribution (*Vestnik russkogo khristianskogo dvizheniya* 146 [1986]). Surely even he cannot argue away the scorn in Nabokov's letter. By 1934 Nabokov and Khodasevich were close enough to let each other in on the hoaxes they staged against their literary opponents in the emigration, who included the *Chisla* crowd. Even if Nabokov had written *Roman s kokainom* and for some strange reason sought to keep the fact hidden from his wife and from Khodasevich, his pride would never have let him - no matter how desperately he might want to mask his authorship - apply the greasepaint of Tokalon cream.

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Poets in Partnership

Sir, - Hilary Davies's review (February 13) of our books, *The Mudlark Poems and Grand Buveur* and *The Lion from Rio*, is damagingly misleading and infinitely condescending. Shuttle is welcomed back as a good caryatid from "ground that has been so well tilled as to arouse misgivings", which is presumably Davies's viperish way of referring to her womanist work (particularly in our joint book on menstruation, *The Wise Wound*). You would not know from Davies that Shuttle's book contains sexual poems, of one of which Sylvia Kantaris (*Outposts*, Winter 1980) commented: "I can't remember ever before having read so direct a

poem, by a woman, about the act of love." There are also poems about the unconceived boy-child (the infant animus who becomes inner counsellor), poems of poetic enjoyment of menstruation, of the synaesthetics of dream-life, in praise of vicious and noble animals, and of the delicate power negotiations between adults and children. All this is blurred in Davies, who uses wet blanket phrases like "a wide range of preoccupations", "sensitive exploration" and "genuinely fresh", and even has to put inverted commas round "feminine sensibilities". Where Davies draws aside her skirts, Kantaris is exactly specific: "This is a book about love... as a fully realisable way of life despite moments of alienation, anger, distraction and all the inevitable problems of adjustment and readjustment within it."

Nor have Redgrove's poems anything to do with "la nostalgie de la boue", which is Émile Augier's phrase, not Baudelaire's. Mary Douglas says that what is excluded from everyday life by taboo is a source of power. *The Mudlark Poems and Grand Buveur* are comments on this proposition. Mud is seen as carnival, self-sculpture, world faeces, the plutonic Big Store, tacit fertility, entry to liminality and return, source of renewal (as in Jules Michelet) and gateway to Persephone's kingdom. Alcohol is seen as a Rubáiat, a delusion, sacrament, self-destruction, sexual induction, frustrator of sex, gourmandizing, instrument of empathy and transformer by fermentation. Thus are excesses discriminated, when Davies says they are not. Nor are the poems particularly adjectival. So one must conclude that they have simply got up her nose, and her review is crudely apotropaic.

Though we don't want to indulge in mud-slinging, there is another and uglier possibility. Her first paragraph praises us for being married and yet little influenced creatively by each other (which is not true). The review doesn't seem able to cope with sensuality or the hilarity which goes with it; it is bleakly humourless. It tries to pretend that Shuttle is not sensuous and hates Redgrove for being so, and this stance now looks sexist. It is trying to unmarry us, as though people should not live in creative partnership if they are woman and man.

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Dennis Wheatley's Crime Dossiers

Sir, - I used to be rather ashamed of what Eric Korn calls "Dennis Wheatley's crime dossiers" (February 20): fifty years ago I had literary aspirations and the dossiers were just a jape. But after seeing them described in the *TLS* as "one of the peaks of intellectual, imaginative and typographic achievement, by which... our Western civilization may be judged", you must forgive my getting puffed up enough to claim my share of the credit. This was for the idea, the plots and the clues; Dennis Wheatley wrote them and, most importantly, persuaded (or rather bullied) Walter Hutchinson to publish the first one.

Impeccable though Mr Korn's judgment doubtless is, his facts in this case are not quite accurate. Webb and Bower *did* reproduce the dossiers a few years ago complete with hair, bus-tickets and bloodstains, a typographic wonder indeed. I have not seen the cheap (£9.95 against the original 3s 6d, or 17½p) edition with *photographs* of the clues but, with such a quote, look forward to the royalty statements.

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"Novel with Cocaine." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4379, 6 Mar. 1987, p. 241. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, 1902-2014, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200171002/TLSH?u=learn&sid=TLSH&xid=74ddb963>. Accessed 11 May 2020.