

LETTERS TO THE
EDITOR

APRIL 19, 2017



Othello's age

Sir, – Jerry Brotton (“Turning points – New approaches to *Othello*”, Arts, March 31) seems to me to strain a possible Islamic connection – which is nowhere mentioned in the play – and to miss the central points of the story. Othello does not “compare himself to a Turbaned Turk” in Aleppo. On the contrary, he kills him for “beating a Venetian and traducing the state”. Likewise the Willow Song, though sung by the servant

Barbary, is actually English, taken from Percy's *Reliques*.

The central themes of the story it seems to me are two: (a) age; and (b) cultural background. Colour is actually of less importance; only two characters in the story ever allude to it: Iago and Brabantio. No, it is age which divides Othello and Desdemona. Othello is “somewhat declined into the vale of years” – not surprisingly since he is the general of the Venetian forces. One would expect the general to be a man of middle age. And naturally one would expect him to be jealous of a young man, Cassio, who is the same age as Desdemona and more appropriate as a suitor. They share a cultural background, which is conspicuously different from Othello's – who “until some nine moons wasted had spent his life in the tented field”. As Othello watches Cassio with Desdemona he is uncomfortably aware that they are matched by age, background and upbringing. Cassio is the natural husband for Desdemona and Othello must realize it. That is why Iago is able to play so effectively on Othello's fears, until he is destroyed by jealousy. And that's what the play is about.

Laurence Carter
Farnham, Surrey.

First Yevtushenko

Sir, – Only a few weeks ago I opened an inlaid box bought in days of yore on Lake Como and, in a fit of unaccustomed tidiness and unsentimentality, I took out an antique (empty) cigarette packet – I think it was Camel – and put it in the bin. It had been left on the table after I had chaired a standing-room only meeting in the debating chamber of the Men's Union (yes, that's right) at Edinburgh University in the academic year 1961–2. The speaker and smoker was that wild young risk-taker, Yevgeny Yevtushenko.

J. C. (NB, April 7) said that the *TLS* first took note of him in February 1962. Did we pip you to the post? I no longer know the exact date of the visit. My Penguin *Selected Poems* is also dated 1962 (and priced 2/6) and already elides his first name; its back cover describes the poet as “the fearless spokesman of his generation in Russia. In verse that is young, fresh, and outspoken he frets at restraint and injustice”. Of course, the high

point of the meeting had been his impassioned reading of “Babi Yar”.

Ann Lawson Lucas
Beverley, East Yorks.

James Hutton and Thomas Browne

Sir, – Reviewing the current exhibition ‘*A Cabinet of Rarities*’ (February 3), Ruth Scurr remarks that Sir Thomas Browne “deserves to be much better remembered”. I write to echo and reinforce Scurr’s assessment with a previously unnoticed and important derivation from his writings. It is the much-quoted aphorism in the coda to James Hutton’s 1788 *Theory of the Earth*, the greatest Enlightenment contribution to earth sciences. It concludes that Earth’s geological record reveals “no vestige of a beginning, – no prospect of an end”. This emphatic dismissal of Revelation 22:13: “I am alpha and omega; the beginning and the ending” triggered the end of Bible-based earth history.

But was Hutton’s memorable and mellifluous epithet

self-penned? I suggest not, because of earlier writing by Browne in his *Religio Medici* (1643). The relevant passage (with my italics) is in Section 11 that discloses a sceptical aspect to his character in relation to Genesis:

Time we may comprehend, 'tis but five days elder than our selves, and hath the same Horoscope with the world; but *to retire so farre back as to apprehend a beginning, to give such an infinite start forward, as to conceive an end* in an essence that wee affirme hathe neither the one nor the other . . .

Browne gently and subtly attacks the biblical exegesis of the planet's origin and fate. It illustrates why Browne's book was banned by Vatican censors. Readers should particularly compare the italicized words with Hutton's more prosaic precis: Hutton clearly ingested the magic of Browne's prose; they also had Leiden MDs in common.

Browne's pensive statue (1905) graces a central space in modern Norwich. Few provincial cities can boast such worthy advertisements to their philosophical ancestors; chiefly his tolerance of differing cultures, religions and politics in a city whose wealth was

founded by European immigrants. The City of Norwich School in the 1950s to the 80s hosted both a Sixth Form “Sir Thomas Browne Society” (a debating club) and a “Paramoudra Club”; the latter a geological debating and field club (forerunner to the Geological Society of Norfolk) founded in the 1950s and devoted to the philosophy of Sir Charles Lyell.

Mike Leeder

University of East Anglia, Norwich.

Lady Marmalade

Sir, – To add to the history of the word marmalade (Letters, April 7), I have just received, from Spain, as a present, three small jars of sticky goo labelled Mermelada de Vino Tinto, dark red, and Mermelada de Pedro Ximénez, dark brown, and Mermelada de Gin-Tonic, milky transparent. So the word is still used in various forms.

Ann Baer

Richmond, Surrey.

Alarmed

Sir, – I would not object so much to Philip Womack ascribing uneasiness of tone to my book on Norse Myths if he had not misquoted me in trying to prove his point (April 7). Freyja was, so the poet of Lokasenna tells us, so *alarmed* that she farted, not, as Womack claims, “adamant”, which indeed makes little sense. Which of us is actually writing up unthinkingly from notes? And if Womack does not like the farting, he had better take it up with the medieval poet who chose to include it in his poem.

Carolynne Larrington
St John's College, Oxford.

Upward in the USSR

Sir, – I read with some bemusement Rod Mengham's review of Peter Stansky's biography of Edward Upward (March 24), a lifelong Marxist-Leninist who, despite living to 105, never let go of his devotion to an appalling ideology; and a writer for whose work there

appears to be little serious critical respect.

Upward paid a visit to the USSR in 1932. Mengham writes: “Russia was undergoing a period of famine at the time, but Upward and his travelling companions . . . were shielded from this”. Well yes, there was rather a famine. It was engineered by Stalin and killed 7 million people. And Upward’s devotion to communism no doubt helped the process of shielding: other reporters did try to publish true accounts.

In the same issue you publish an exchange between Randall Swingler and John Lehmann on Upward’s writing. This tit-for-tat between the apparatchik and the fellow traveller is of some historical interest, but I am left with the unanswered question: why are adherents of one of the most atrocious regimes in history still the recipients of so much interest in literary circles?

Alan N. Cowan

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Ngũgĩ’s legacy

Sir, – In her review (March 3) of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Birth of a Dream-Weaver: A writer's awakening*, Noo Saro-Wiwa presents a serviceable chronology of Ngũgĩ's political development. As the third part of Ngũgĩ's autobiography, however, and taken together with *Globalectics* (2010), this memoir assumes a deeper importance.

At bottom, Ngũgĩ's quarrel is with the very structure of language, a phenomenon that many scholars still consider to be the greatest problem in science. Ngũgĩ thinks of language as a kind of quicksand: once you are in it, you become part of it and there is no escape from it. How can the African experience be recreated in English, especially when its literature assumes that Europe is the centre of the universe? "To read the text with the eyes of the world; it is to see the world with the eyes of the text." Having laid out the insidious dangers of colonial linguistic domination by tracing its ubiquitous alienation from his Gikuyuness, Ngũgĩ urges African writers to cling to their mother tongues to express themselves. To write in Kikuyu and then have Swahili and English editions published simultaneously is hardly the ideal solution. Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, in

which there is no such thing as patriotic art or science, seems as romantic now as it was then. Yet the idea of imaginative literature belonging to the world is still attractive. Unsurprisingly, Goethe tells his readers of *Kunst und Altertum* that “I am convinced that universal world literature is in the process of being constituted”. At a time when the world is witnessing the greatest language die-off in history, losing some 40 per cent of known languages, Ngũgĩ’s attempts at keeping African languages alive may be his most important legacy.

Jack D. Rollins

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Verbivocovisual

Sir, – While I am flattered to be credited by J. C. with the invention of the portmanteau term “verbivocovisual” in his note on my book *Explodity* (NB, April 14), I must point out that the term was in fact borrowed by the Brazilian concrete poet Augusto de Campos and others from *Finnegans Wake* (1939). It was intended to express a multi-sensory totality of language, optical acoustics and graphic space.

Nancy Perloff

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‘Go Home, Unicorn’

Sir, – If *Go Home, Unicorn* were to be reprinted, Iain Jamieson might be disappointed (Letters, April 7). According to the summary of the sole copy available on AbeBooks, it is not a “headless corpse” novel from the golden age of detective stories but instead a work of science fiction, “a novel about transmutation of the species”. Still sounds interesting, though.

Matthew Cobb

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University of Manchester.

‘Les Misérables’

Sir, – I am grateful to William Doyle for his mention of my translation in his review of David Bellos’s *The Novel of the Century* (April 14). His reservation

regarding the titling of Victor Hugo's work as *The Wretched* has been generally shared: the Penguin US edition was published as *Les Misérables*, and the Penguin Classics edition is now also published under the same familiar title.

Christine Donougher
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