

Letters

Sylvia Plath

Sir, - The myth of the Plath estate is fast becoming as unpleasant and artificial as the Plath myth itself. It seems the same group of hacks, self-publicists and extreme feminists are busy with both. It is dismaying to see their misinformations taken up unhesitatingly by serious reviewers.

In his piece on Linda Wagner-Martin's recent unauthorized biography of Sylvia Plath (April 29-May 5), Mark Ford sees fit to repeat several inaccuracies concerning the Plath estate.

He states that large chunks of Wagner-Martin's book had to be cut "to avoid court action". This is untrue. Wagner-Martin sent me various manuscripts of her book in order that I give her permission to quote from Plath's writings. As literary representative of the estate, all I asked was that she justify, by substantiations from her sources, the many passages in her successive manuscripts that were no more than invention of a low order or dramatized scraps of fifth-hand gossip. She was unable to do so and her publishers cut large tracts of her drafts. The book still has many inaccuracies (some of which are repeated trustingly by Mr Ford), including vestiges of the cut material plus similar passages popped in just prior to publication of the US edition.

Ford takes it upon himself to mention Ted Hughes's "secretiveness" about Plath's papers. Yet these papers have been available for years in the two American university libraries that house them.

He further claims that Anne Stevenson's coming biography has had five rewrites "to satisfy the pernicky Plath estate". The Plath estate consists of Ted Hughes and his and Sylvia Plath's two children, none of whom has had anything whatsoever to do with Ms Stevenson's working methods. Acting as Ms Stevenson's literary agent I sold her book to Penguin and Houghton Mifflin on the understanding that a wealth of new biographical

material that has been made available to Ms Stevenson would be in her book. Such material has been coming in throughout these rewrites and I encouraged her to include it.

There is a great fashion for sensationalized debunkings in the American unauthorized literary-biography industry and related journalism.

My experience of these writings over the years has been of shockingly low standards of research. The most outlandish speculations are presented as facts. Such information as is available is "shaped" according to the author's "point of view" (in Wagner-Martin's case this was crudely feminist, a bent much more in evidence in the fictions she was obliged to cut than in her final book). Isn't it high time that writings of this kind were viewed in this country with more scepticism and distrust?

OLWYN HUGHES.
38 Stratford Villas, London NW1.

Vladimir Nabokov

Sir, - Andrew Field, who chose not to reply in the *TLS* to my review of his *VN: The life and art of Vladimir Nabokov* (April 24, 1987), has recently paid for a large space in your classified columns (April 15-21) to advertise the book's paperback edition and its new foreword, "The Nabokov Mafia". In this foreword he explains the world-wide dismissal of his work by Nabokov scholars as proof of the existence of a Nabokov mafia, established by Godfather Nabokov. Curious.

Things become curiously and curiously. Field then attempts to attack not only my *TLS* analysis of some typical errors in his book but also my own not-yet-completed Nabokov biography, of which he has not seen a single page.

I will confine myself to his comments on my review.

In his new foreword Field declares it "ridiculous" of me "to leap upon the year's

difference between Kerensky and Lenin and say that [Field] did not know when the Russian revolution took place. It did indeed take place in 1916/17." Only in the strange world of Field's mind. Field simply remains oblivious to the fact that in the real world the February Revolution took place in February 1917, not February 1916 as two of his books have it.

By defending his formulation "February 1916, when the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky overthrew the Czarist regime", Field proves he does not know that (1) the mood of Russia in February 1916 seemed many years away from revolution; (2) the February Revolution took place in 1917; (3) the first provisional government was formed only after street riots and the Petrograd garrison's desertion had made revolution a fact; (4) Kerensky's provisional government was formed not in February 1916 or even during the February Revolution but five months later still, in July 1917. Field somehow fails to recognize his elementary historical howlers, even when they are pointed out to him. How does one deal with such a man?

Why should it be ridiculous to expect a biographer not to bungle historical facts that he could easily check in an encyclopaedia? If he fails to master common public knowledge, what chance will there be of his discovering the myriad private facts of another person's life?

Field thinks I made a "ludicrous fuss" of his not knowing when Nabokov lived in Switzerland. All I pointed out - and it was far from an isolated case - was that Field does not know even what countries Nabokov resided in for two whole years of his life, between his arrival in Europe in 1959 and his settling in Switzerland in mid-1961. Throughout his book Field shows he does not know *where* Nabokov lived at particular times, or *why* he lived there rather than elsewhere, or *what* he did or wrote while in this place or that. It may be ludicrous to expect such knowledge of Field, but surely not of a biographer.

BRIAN BOYD.
Department of English, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

Derridean Logic

Sir, - Alan Donagan writes (Letters, June 10-16) that "when philosophy was the lowly *ancilla theologiae*, theology accepted the responsibility of making sense in terms of the propositional calculus . . .". I am confident that he would agree that the serious interest of philosophers of all persuasions must be engaged by the question whether this responsibility is accepted or rejected by negative theology. For reasons Derrida gives, for example in the essay "Comment ne pas parler" contained in the collection *Psyché* mentioned in my review (May 13-19), his work is not negative theology. That there is nevertheless some degree of analogy is suggested by his statement that although "the law has often been considered as that which . . . governs the order of representation . . . perhaps the law itself manages to do no more than transgress . . . all possible representation".

This statement in turn invites comparison with Wittgenstein's influential remarks concerning bedrock ("absolute presuppositions"? and the fact that we follow rules blindly). In the decades since those remarks were made some philosophers have shown an increasing interest in analysing the possibilities of so-called deviant logics and many have maintained that the laws of the predicate and propositional calculi need for various important purposes to be augmented by laws regarding rhetorical performance and by descriptions of actual and imagined contexts which display these laws at work. In my review of Christopher Norris's book on Derrida there was space to refer to only one context to exhibit the working of the law of law of Derrida's logic of the supplement which can be represented only provisionally by the formula that the accidental or contingent, which traditional logic excludes from the essential or the necessary, is included in the latter. Norris describes or refers to many more such contexts in the writings of Derrida. An examination of them will reveal, I believe, that Derrida accepts the responsibility of making sense in terms of the propositional and predicate calculi, but that, like many philosophers who consider themselves to belong to

the analytic tradition (not to name Hegel, Nietzsche and Professor Donagan's theologians), he finds that it makes sense to accept also that the logic of propositions and predicates has to be supplemented as soon as propositions, predicates and questions of the form "What is . . .?" cease to be all that is pertinent.

JOHN LLEWELYN.
Department of Philosophy, University of Edinburgh, David Hume Tower, George Square, Edinburgh.

Israel and the Arabs

Sir, - Roger Scruton (Letters, May 6-12) and Malise Ruthven (Letters, May 27-June 2) seem to agree on the use of the term "usurpation" to describe the foundation of Israel. But while Professor Scruton appreciates that any conquest and State-founding is a usurpation of sorts, the Zionist reconquest of "Palestine" is rooted in historical right and so "resumption" would be more accurate in this case. In any event, I would like Mr Ruthven to explain to me why the Arabs who conquered Palestine in the seventh century AD were any less "usurpers" than the modern Zionists.

Ruthven's reply to my earlier letter (April 8-14) obscures the fact that the West Bank was never assigned by the United Nations to King Abdullah but, rather, annexed illegally between 1948 and 1967. As to Deir Yassin, Ruthven quotes Jacques de Reynier's account at second hand. The book is scarcely unbiased, though that may be a matter of opinion. What is certain is that Reynier arrived at the site two days after the fighting and then vanished for another two days. His reliability can be judged from the fact that on different pages he gives different numbers of those killed. The actual number of bodies, as counted by an eyewitness, was 250. Of these, we now know that 116 were those of Arab residents, the remainder including those of Arab irregular troops.

This is a factual matter which can be established positively, though Ruthven has not bothered to do so. For the historian, however, the process by which facts are mythologized is as interesting as the facts themselves. Sadly, Mr Ruthven seems unable to understand that Zionist historiography stands direly in need of a reinterpretation capable of explaining just how such episodes as Deir Yassin have been mythologized by Israeli, Arab and outside historians alike.

PAUL LAWRENCE ROSE.
Reuben Hecht Chair of Zionism and Zionist History, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel.

'Themes on a Variation'

Sir, - Because I was unable to correct the proof of my review of Edwin Morgan's *Themes on a Variation* (June 10-16) my quotation from his affecting sonnet "Pilate at Fortingall" was wrongly rendered. The "deceptively casual" iambic pentameters of "the sestet's simple, remarkable terminal couplet" should read:

and washed his hands, and washed his hands, and washed his hands, and washed his hands, and washed his hands.

PETER READING.
Ragleth View, Little Stretton, Salop.

Sigismund Augustus

Sir, - I hate to sound pedantic, but I fear that Anthony Burgess has got it wrong when he writes, in his review of Karol Wojtyła's *Collected Plays and Writings on Theatre* (March 11-17), that it was King Sigismund Augustus's proposed marriage to "a commoner" that had the Polish nobles up in arms. The lady in question was Barbara Radziwill, and though her family have been accused of many things over the centuries, I do not think anybody ever suggested that they were common, not even in 1547. The reason nobody liked the idea was that the Radziwills were growing too powerful, and the reason they protested was that a Polish monarch was supposed to consult the parliament before contracting a marriage.

ADAM ZAMOYSKI.
33 Ennismore Gardens, London SW7.

AMONG THIS WEEK'S CONTRIBUTORS

W. H. Barber is Emeritus Professor of French in the University of London (Birkbeck College), and is General Editor of the critical edition of the *Complete Works of Voltaire*, in course of publication by the Voltaire Foundation, Oxford.

T. A. Birrell's *English Monarchs and their Books: From Henry VII to Charles II* appeared last year.

B. C. Bloomfield is the Director of Collection Development, Humanities and Social Sciences, at the British Library.

John Butt is a lecturer in Spanish at King's College, London. His books include *Writers and Politics in Modern Spain*, 1979.

Tim Dooley's *The Interrupted Dream: Poems 1971-1984* appeared in 1985.

Richard S. Dunn is visiting Oxford this year as Harmsworth Professor of American History. He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, and is the author of *Sugar and Slaves*, 1972. He is working on a comparative study of slave life in Jamaica and Virginia.

Gabriel Jospovici's most recent novel, *Contre-Jour*, was short-listed for the 1986 Whitbread Prize.

Anthony Hobson's books include *Great Libraries*, 1970, *Apollo and Pegasus: An enquiry into the formation and dispersal of a Renaissance Library*, 1975, and *Humanists and Bookbinders*, due out this year.

Douglas Johnson is Professor of French History at University College London.

Jonathan Keates's novel *The Strangers' Gallery* appeared in 1987.

Lord John Kerr is Chairman of Bloomsbury Book Auctions.

Eric Korn is an antiquarian bookseller in London.

Shena Mackay's books include *Dreams of Dead Women's Handbags*, a collection of short stories, and the novel *Redhill Rococo*, which was awarded the Fawcett Prize last year.

Rosamond McKitterick is a Fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge. She is co-author of *The Sudeleys: Lords of Toddington*, 1987, and the author of *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians 751-987*, 1983.

J. Hillis Miller is Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Irvine. His most recent book is *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James and Benjamin*, 1987.

A. J. Minnis is Professor of Medieval Literature at the University of York, and General Editor of *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature*.

Kenneth Minogue is Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics. His books include *Thatcherism: Personality and politics* (with Michael Biddiss), 1987, and *Alien Powers: The theory of ideology*, 1985.

David Nokes lectures in English at King's College, London. His *Jonathan Swift: A hypocrite reversed* was published in 1985.

Robert O'Neill is Chichele Professor of the History of War and a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford. From 1982 to 1987, he was Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, London.

Richard Osborne's *Rossini* in the Master Musicians Series was reissued in paperback last year.

Keith Potter is Senior Lecturer in Music at Goldsmiths' College, University of London.

Lois Potter is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Leicester, and General Editor of Volumes One and Four of the *Revels History of Drama in English*, 1981.

J. K. Powis is a Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford, and the author of *Aristocracy*, 1984.

S. S. Prawer's books include *Caliguri's Children: The film as tale of terror*, 1980.

James Raven is Drapers' Research Fellow at Pembroke College, Cambridge. He is completing a study of the economics of the eighteenth-century book trades.

Peter Reading's most recent collection of poems, *Final Demands*, was published earlier this year.

Christopher Reid's collections of poems include *Katerina Brac*, 1986, *Pea Soup*, 1982, and *Fête Champêtre*, 1981.

N. A. M. Rodger is the author of *The Wooden World: An anatomy of the Georgian Navy*, 1986.

Harold Shukman is a lecturer in Modern Russian History and a Fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford. He is the editor of *Blackwell's Encyclopedia of the Russian Revolution*, due for publication this month.

John Sturrock's books include *The French New Novel: Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Alain Robbe-Grillet*. His translation of Proust's *Contre Sainte-Beuve* appeared in the Penguin Classics series last month.

Tzvetan Todorov's *Literature and its Theorists: A personal view of twentieth-century criticism* was published earlier this year.

H. R. Woudhuysen is a lecturer in English at University College London.

Boyd, Brian. "Vladimir Nabokov." *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4446, 17 June 1988, p. 677. *The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, 1902-2014*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200455218/TLSH?u=learn&sid=TLSH&xid=30774730>. Accessed 11 May 2020.