

Some Recent Issues Of The TLS

by Hugh Fitzgerald (March 2010)

A friend of mine keeps his issues of the Times Literary Supplement (hereinafter known as the TLS) and every few weeks I pick up a batch of those he has read, while taking care not to pick up those he has not yet read, or not read to his heart's content. This morning I went by his house, and as is my wont entered, went up to the room with the magazines, and taking care to leave everything on top of the table, but not those copies of the TLS that were in a magazine rack under the table, picked up two issues –January 15 and January 22. I've had a chance to read through them, and thought I'd share some of what I read with you.

The cover of the January 15 issue shows a young William Styron, and the main article is a review of a collection of his letters (“Letters to My Father”) and of “The Suicide Run,” which are “five tales of the Marine Corps.”

I knew a few things about Styron, but it turns out I had got some things wrong. There was all that talk about being a Marine, for example, and I had assumed he had stormed Guadalcanal or Iwo Jima; it turns out he was a Marine from 1943 to 1945, but had been saved from combat by the atomic bombs (that saved so many lives) dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; in the Korean War he was a Marine reservist, but again, as the reviewer James Campbell writes, “never saw frontline action.” The most he endured was apparently this, described in a letter to his father: “Lately the regiment has embarked on a series of hikes, one of which I participated in. It was 36 miles long, took all night, from 8:30 to 7:30, and left me with blisters on my feet the size of half-dollars.” Well, if that's the worst he endured, one has a different view of “William Styron, Marine.”

Louis Simpson, who worked for Bobbs-Merrill, which published Styron's first book, “Lie Down In Darkness,” (you can tell an author by his titles), told him that that novel was “outside of Faulkner, and probably with Faulkner too...the finest novel in English written in a long time. “ It

was nonsense at the time, and that remark did Styron no good.

He won a Prix de Rome, he met an heiress, Rose Burgunder, and married her, and kept writing, and Campbell says that he “secured his place in the team of American galacticos: Saul Bellow, Mary McCarthy, Norman Miller, Gore Vidal, James Baldwin, Truman Capote.” What the hell does that word “galacticos” mean? Stars in the Milky Way? What? Oh, I’ve looked it up at Wikipedia: *Galácticos* (or *superstars*) is a Spanish term used to describe expensive, world-famous football players, having either positive or negative connotations.”

And besides, the word isn’t apt; these writers were individual cranks, never part of a “team.” And neither Styron, nor at least half of the other six he lists, are likely to have been more than the insects of an hour. Possibly, on that list, only the work of Saul Bellow will last, though James Baldwin has a special claque, so may stay embalmed, in the syllabi. Vidal isn’t dead, but his unreadable books will not transcend the removal of his sour and malevolent presence. But why are such people listed, as the Greats – the galacticos – and the novelists and short-story writers whose work will survive – such as Salinger, Updike, Cheever, Flannery O’Connor, and William Maxwell (not to mention the author of “Lolita” and “Pale Fire”) not mentioned at all? What a peculiar view of American literature.

The Confessions of Nat Turner is discussed, with some history for those who don’t know about Nat Turner’s rebellion, and a bit quoted. It’s about the killing, by Nat Turner, of a white woman, Margaret Whitehead, who he desired as a slave, and as a rebel decides to murder:

“Dar! She gone!” Will roared, gesturing with his broadax to the other Negroes, who had begun to straggle across the yard. “Does you want her preacher man, or she fo’ me?”

“Ah how I want her, I thought, and unsheathed my sword...” “Shut your eyes”, I said. I reached down to search with my fingers for a firm length of fence rail and I could sense once more her close girl-smell... Then when I raised the rail above her head she gazed at me, as if past the imponderable vista of her anguish, with a grave and drowsy tenderness such as I had never known and, saying no more,

closed her eyes upon all the madness, illusion, error, dream and strife.”

She “gazed” at him? Didn’t she just look at him? As for the rest of it – the slave who writes “as if past the imponderable vista of her anguish” – where does that come from? And how verisimilar is Nat Turner who described her as having “closed her eyes upon all the madness, illusion, error, dream and strife”?

It’s comical. It’s too bad that the “angry group of black writers” for whom “the novel caused outrage” and who produced “a book of essays, “William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten black writers respond” bothered to “respond,” and I suspect that the outrage was prompted not by the writing itself, but at the presumption of a white man writing about Nat Turner and a slave revolt, and so one is tempted to side, but only this once, with Styron. He had a perfect right to write about Nat Turner. He had no right to write so badly about him.

There’s more about Styron’s anglophobia, and about his “reputation in Britain” that is apparently still high (with what readers, and for what reason – the local color of the Southland?) and then “Sophie’s Choice” with its descriptions of the Polish refugee Sophie, in post-war New York:

“Also, I felt that underneath that healthy suntan three lingered the sallowness of a body not wholly rescued from a terrible crisis. But none of these at all diminished a kind of wonderfully negligent sexuality having to do at that moment, at least, with the casual but forthright way her pelvis moved, and with her truly sumptuous rear end. Despite past famine, her behind was as perfectly formed as some fantastic prize-winning pear; it vibrated with magical eloquence, and from this angle it so stirred by depths that I mentally pledged to the Presbyterian orphanages of Virginia a quarter of my future earnings as a writer in exchange for that bare ass’s brief lodging – thirty seconds would do—within the compass of my cupped, supplicant palms.”

That “truly-sumptuous rear end,” that “behind... as perfectly formed as some fantastically prize-winning pear” that “vibrated with magical eloquence.”

I'm glad to have read this review, because now I never need look into a book by William Styron again. It saves time.

But enough about literature. What about the Life? The Life means that "fourteen-acre spread" paid for by his wife's money, that secured Styron a life of permanent ease, in Roxbury, Connecticut, and the summers in Martha's Vineyard, with le tout Chilmark, including Art Buchwald. "There were friendships with most of the leading American writers of the day" (No there weren't: the friendships were with the group listed above, who do not include any of the leading writers of the day) "as well as with politicians." Being invited to a reception given by Kennedy ("How did they get you here?" Kennedy was said, no doubt by William or by Rose or by both Sytrons, to have said), and he wrote an introduction to Mitterand's memoir—Mitterand, that crook who used to stop off in Mexico to visit a famous sculptor, and order sculptures, costing tens of thousands of dollars, for himself, and bill the French government for his private purchases, Mitterrand who had before, and even for the first few years of the War, been close to the French Right and the collaborators; Mitterrand who built that terrible TGB, Tres Grande Bibliotheque, impressed Styron, naïve about France and ignorant of the memoir-writing political class (why, I've got a few dozen of these, even a used copy of the memoirs of Chaban-Delmas, which I will now sell if anyone is willing to make me an offer), and he gushes idiotically that, having read "The Wheat and the Chaff," he felt himself "cleansed, at least briefly, by the notion of such grace and tenderness dwelling together with the exigencies of power." Christ on a crutch.

Then there's the Depression, and "Darkness Visible," in which Styron says that the "'most significant factor,' in the illness that hospitalized him, throughout a period that began in 1985 and lasted until the end of his life was 'the death of my mother when I was thirteen;' this disorder and early sorrow.....appears repeatedly in the literature on depression." Campbell adds: "He [Styron] concluded that he had not sufficiently mourned his mother, who had become ill with cancer when her only child was four, but had carried this grief inside him until it detonated some fifty years after the event."

Isn't there another obvious explanation? That, with all of his good

fortune, his houses in Connecticut and Martha's Vineyard, his life of leisure, he never learned how to write, and he surely must have had some intimations of mortality, in the ordinary sense, and then in the other sense, that is the opposite of artistic immortality, and it must have upset him? Isn't that a likely reason for his depression, and not some thoughts about having "insufficiently mourned" his mother when he was thirteen? But he wouldn't say this to a psychiatrist, would he?

I just came across some notes on the Hungarian Jewish writer Miklos Radnoti. Here's how it goes:

"Hungarian poet and translator, who is considered one of the most important 20th-century poets of his country. Radnóti was killed at the age of thirty-five during World War II on a forced march toward Germany. After the war Radnóti's last poems, written in a notebook during the march, were discovered from the mass grave in which he was buried.

Without commas, one line touching the other

I write poems the way I live, in darkness, blind, crossing the paper like a worm.

Flashlights, books – the guards took everything.

There's no mail, only fog drifts over the barracks.

(from 'Eclogue VII,' trans. by Steven Polgár)

For more on Radnóti, someone who had every right to be depressed, see [here](#).

A review of Morris Dickstein's "Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression" includes some surprising information about Robert Frost: "Dickstein has some thoughtful and well-justified pages about him. They center on an analysis of his poem of the mid-1930s, "Two Tramps at Mud Time." The tramps are looking for work on Frost's farm. The poet refuses to hire them – it would mean sacrificing some of his independence if he did – and gets on with the job himself. All of which was very much in character. There was no virtue Frost prized more than self-sufficiency. But by implication

the poem was also up to the minute, a thrust at the New Deal and the President whom Frost scoffed at in his correspondence as "his Rosiness." Well, I knew Frost was no Democrat, even though his reading of "The Gift Outright" at Kennedy's Inauguration may have fooled or confused people, but I hadn't realized he probably voted for Alf Landon in 1936. A Republican, forsooth! but of the old school. Hard to know what he would make of today's Republicans.

A review of a book on "Joseph P. Kennedy's Hollywood Years" tells us that Kennedy was no Horatio Alger, but the son of a well-off man who owned a bank, and made Kennedy the President of it at the age of twenty-five. He exploited his Harvard connection to enter Hollywood:

"Kennedy's most brilliant strategy for gaining a foothold in Hollywood was arranging for a series of lectures to be given by movie moguls at his alma mater, Harvard University. The lecture series served the dual purpose of legitimizing the industry with an elite East Coast establishment and flattering the studio executives (mostly immigrant Jews), for whom Harvard embodied the respectability they craved. Kennedy also understood how to get maximum mileage out of this promotional opportunity, publishing the lecture proceedings as a book, "The Story of the Films (1927), and then sending it with a personal note to members of the industry with whom he wished to ingratiate himself."

It sounds very much like what Harvard, and other similar schools do today, in their calculated attempts to win donations by giving various rich people administrative jobs that make them so grateful to be part of Harvard that they donate, which was what the Development Office, and the President's Office, had in mind all along.

Richard Brody's "Everything Is Cinema," about Jean-Luc Godard, is reviewed by the formidable Ramona Fotiade, and I learned two or three things I did not know about him. The first is

that the French actresses— Anna Karina, Marina Vlady, Anne Wiazemsky—all are obviously of Russian background. A coincidence? A hankering for the cathedral on the rue Daru, or at least some *amslavstvo*? Or was it a matter of Slavic cheekbones, and a certain slant of the eyes?

The other thing I discovered about Godard, and that greatly disappoints, is that he apparently became, or perhaps always was, a political idiot: “Attacked...as a pillar of bourgeois respectability in the aftermath of May '68, Godard rushes into agitprop cinema with the eagerness of an “elder taking dictation from his juniors.”...The film-maker’s visit to Prague in April 1969 allows Brody to measure the extent of his subject’s rigid indoctrination, as Godard reportedly dismissed the reality of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia by declaring: “Anyway Czechoslovakia had been invaded by American tanks from United Artists long before the Russians came in.”

And there is worse:

“The following year [1970] Godard...received a commission from the Arab League to make a film about the Palestinian struggle for independence [these were the very years, just after the Six-Day War, when the Arabs were camouflaging their Jihad against Israel were busy in the “construction of Palestinian identity” and pretending their war against Israel was a “national liberation struggle”] called *Jusqu’a la Victoire* (from a Fatah slogan). The project was not completed, but the 16mm footage became incorporated into the video experiment *Ici et Ailleurs* (1976), whose dogmatic stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict [I wonder if Ramona Fotiade would not reconsider this phrase if its dangerous, if here innocent, misrepresentation were brought to her attention] continued to inform Godard’s fictional work for the next three decades, resurfacing in his most recent film, *Notre Musique* (2004).

And even worse:

“Understandably, Brody has little sympathy for the ‘hectoring tone’ of the film, in which Godard himself lectures a group of students on the political virtues of the classical shot-countershot sequence and illustrates the point by pairing images of Jewish prisoners in extermination camps with photos of Palestinian refugees.” *Notre Musique*, Brody comments, ‘is a diatribe in the guise of a meditation, a work of vituperative prejudice disguised as calm reflection.”

I wrote above that there were two or three things, deux ou trois choses – now do I have the right director? – that I didn’t know about him. One was the business with the Franco-Russian Entente. The second was his defense of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, and his willingness to engage in the production of Arab propaganda, and all that nauseatingly followed from his failure to sympathize with, or even to understand, the permanent fight that Israel has had thrust upon it, and that it must conduct in order to survive. And the third thing? What was it? Oh yes, it follows not necessarily from the first but necessarily from the second. Jean-Luc Godard, despite many good movies including *Les Quatre Cent Coups* – oops, now I’m reminded that that one was by Truffaut – turns out to be a shit. Good to have that clarified.

A joint review of two books, one on the English Catholic Community and another on 1688, under the title “Did Butterfield write in vain?” – attracted my brief attention. I once sat across from Herbert Butterfield, at a High Table at Peterhouse, and remember not being able to formulate a question something something about the Whig interpretation of history something something, and so I quickly read the review, both books receiving high marks from the reviewer, and moved on. I read reviews of books on Thomas Tallis (ah, so that’s where the Tallis Singers get their name) and Anne Hunter, eighteenth-century bluestocking, and a novel, “The Age of Orphans,” by Laleh Khadivi, about a Kurdish boy who in the 1920s joins the army of the Shah (father to the Reza Pahlevi

whose overthrow we all regret), becomes persianized and an enemy of the Kurds. At the end the reviewer notes that this novel is the first in a trilogy "that will follow Reza's descendants to America – where Khadivi's own family has settled." Something to look for.

I read with pleasure and profit the long Commentary, this on Herbert Grierson, whose two-volume edition of Donne, published in 1912, was so important to increasing interest in, and elevating the reputation of, that writer whom Grierson called a "metaphysical poet." And then, in 1921, Grierson published "Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century" that fixed in many minds both the importance of Donne and of what were now called the "metaphysical" poets. There's a picture of Grierson with Wodehouse in 1939, just before the war and just before Wodehouse got himself in trouble. The author of this excellent "Commentary" explains the effect of Grierson's edition of Donne on both Yeats and on T. S. Eliot. In "The Background To English Literature" Grierson "set out a theory of tradition"; the writer is connected to his audience by more than a shared language but also "by a body of common knowledge and feeling to which he may make direct or indirect allusion, confident that he will be understood, and not only this, but more or less accurately of the effect the allusion will produce. He knows roughly what his audience knows, and what are their prejudices. A people is made one, less by community of blood than by a common tradition."

I thought of schoolrooms all over America today, and all the melted-down canons, and even the boy from the famous high school who told me he had studied "audio-visual English."

There's so much more to this two-page essay, about Grierson's importance to Scottish modernism, including MacDiarmid (MacDiarmid asked Grierson to write an introduction to his first book, "Sangschaw"). I was surprised to learn that Grierson had, in 1923, published an edition of a most un-Donne-like poet, Lord Byron, whom he praised as the "Scottish

Byron" with his "life and strength, passion and virility, wit and humor" and made a case for Byron to be considered as the Scottish national poet. Cairns Craig ends thus:

Given its impact on the three major early twentieth-century poets of Ireland, England and Scotland, it was only too appropriate for Rosamund Turner to enquire, rhetorically, in 1943, "whether any introduction to a scholarly edition of an early English poet ever had a more marked influence upon contemporary criticism of contemporaries than Grierson's of Donne had on ours. "It would be safe to say, none ever has."

What a wonderful two pages the wonderfully-named Cairns Craig wrote, and that the TLS still manages to offer the general reader.

There was also a review of the diaries and letters of an Irish writer, J. G. Farrell, by another Craig, Patricia, who begins her review with his death:

"'Life is short. Life is very, very short. (Cliché of the week)', J. G. Farrell wrote mockingly to his new girlfriend, Bridget O'Toole, in October 1969. Ten years later he was dead, drowned at the age of 44 when a freak wave came and swept him off a rock at Kilcrohante, County Cork."

With that beginning, I had to read to the end, all the way to John Banville being quoted as saying in the preface to Farrell's "Selected Letters and Diaries: "There was no one like him, nor will there be again."

I read the rest of the reviews, picking up little bits and tidbits and tiddles here and there, and then turned to the short reviews in the back. One, by Trevor Mostyn, of "The Unheard Truth: Poverty and Human Rights," by Irene Khan "with David Petrusek" (did he do all the work? Or just all the research? Or just all the writing?) attracted my attention. I

knew that this was Irene Khan, the Bangladeshi who was welcomed in the West, and became the present head of Amnesty International, the organization from which the admirable Gita Sahgal has just resigned in protest, protest at the way Amnesty International has been supporting Muazzem Begg, let out of Guantanamo, with very unsavory connections, in his insidious efforts to undermine Western understanding, and resolve to oppose those conducting, as Muazzem Begg is conducting, Jihad of the "pen, tongue." The book is not much more, I gather, than a collection of horror stories about the effects of extreme poverty, around the globe, possibly stories gathered for Irene Khan, who is so busy, by David Petrusek. I don't have the feeling that Irene Khan has spent any time thinking about what might explain poverty in a large swath of the globe, where hatred of Bid'a, or Innovation, and inshallah-fatalism, conspire to prevent economic development. Where are the extremes of wealth more extreme, in the whole wide world, than in Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan? And, despite more than thirteen trillion dollars having been received as oil revenues since 1973 alone, the Muslim states of OPEC have yet to create modern economies, and the only Muslim states where there is a semblance of a working economy is in those either that have over time tamed Islam (as in Turkey and Tunisia), sometimes through brute force, or have large numbers of non-Muslims living, and working, in the country (Kazakhstan, Malaysia) which has helped, at least until recently, to lead to diluting of Islam's hold even on its own adherents.

Irene Khan apparently has the found the simple solution to the problem of "world poverty" and its "vicious circle of abuse." It's simple, according to the reviewer: "The solution to world poverty lies in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [with its clauses about the need to guarantee support and jobs for all] adopted by the world sixty years ago, an argument echoed in Kofi Annan's introduction to Khan's powerful book." Of course. Why didn't we all think of that?

The January 22 bore on its cover Repin's painting of long-suffering Sofia Tolstaya, complementing the review inside of her diaries. She didn't care for Tolstoy's view of love: "I copied Lyovochkia's diaries up to the part where he wrote: 'There is no such thing as love, only the physical need for intercourse and the practical need for a life companion.' I only wish I had read that twenty-nine years ago, then I would never have married him." Sofia was his reader, his typist, his agent, his estate-manager, his estate lawyer (parceling out property to the children). She had 13 children, three of whom died in infancy, and two more in childhood. She was forced by Tolstoy to read his record of his premarital couplings – the List of Conquests, the Don-Zhuanskij Spisok, the Don-Juan List, has a literary pedigree looking back to Pushkin and forward to Nabokov, though neither of those writers insisted that their wives read those lists, and she saw the discrepancy between Saint Tolstoy, whom Tolstoyans so admired, and the real Tolstoy:

"Lyovochka is in an extraordinarily sweet, affectionate, mode at the moment – for the usual reason, alas. If only the people who read "The Kreutzer Sonata" so reverently had an inkling of the voluptuous life he leads, and realized it was only this that made him happy and good-natured, then they would cast this deity from the pedestal where they have placed him" Yet I love him when he is kind and normal and full of human weaknesses. One shouldn't be an animal, but nor should one preach virtues one doesn't have." (March 21, 1891).

The review of a re-issue of the abridged version of the Diaries, makes me want to find the un-abridged version, and to read more, especially about her battles with Vladimir Chertkov, who bought the estate next to theirs in order to better act as self-appointed chief of the Tolstoyans.

I scanned, in one fell swoop, the "Letters" page, but stopped to read Joseph Frank taking issue with James L. Rice's article

on Dostoyevsky and the relation of his own ailments to his writing. I once saw Frank's daughter Isabelle at a conference on Longhi in Washington (I stumbled into it just in time to hear Martin Kemp hold forth), and naturally that made me want to read his reply. I was in a good mood, until I came across a review by Francis Robinson of Eugene Rogan's "The Arabs." By now Robinson, to whom Robert Irwin, in charge of the Middle East and Islamic reviews at the TLS, keeps assigning books even though Irwin appears to have come round, partially (or is his contempt for Said limited only to the latter's denunciation of "Orientalism" and not extended to all those apologists for Islam?), about Infidel Defenders of the Faith. It's all there in Robinson's review: Israel is a "client state" of the United States, even though it is clear that Israel will not do the American government's bidding, which is what client states traditionally do, and even though this "client state" has been important in the development of American military technology, especially in regards to drones which have been proven so useful in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and even though this "client state" may yet, without so much as a bye-your-leave for the Americans, do what it feels it must about the Iranian nuclear project. Robinson even has the Sykes-Picot business, and no doubt he accepts the nonsense that the Lawrentians in England never give up on, the idea that Britain "betrayed" the Arabs, just because the Arabs have made up such a narrative, in which they carefully ignore what Sir Henry MacMahon himself wrote about the so-called promises he was said to have made (see MacMahon's letter to The Times in July, 1937). Robinson, who teaches about Islam in the subcontinent, apparently identifies completely with the Muslim Arab worldview. He accepts the notion that the French mandates in Syria and Lebanon were merely a disguise for colonialism, – "and so when they were dressed up with the decency of mandates Syria and the Lebanon were added to the French possessions in North Africa." No, they weren't; they remained Mandates, and there was no large-scale movement of French into Lebanon or Syria, and in both places, it was the presence of the French

that made those countries safe for Christians, allowed the Christians to withstand, for a few decades more, the pressure of the Muslims in their midst.

Robinson sees empire-building everywhere: the British with their Mandate for Iraq “used 100,000 of their colonial (!) troops to squash a national uprising in Iraq.” What is he talking about? The Shi’a tribes revolted against the imposition of a Sunni monarch and Sunni rule; that was not a “national uprising.” He says that “this Arab land as a mandate, along with Transjordan and Palestine, was added to the British Empire.” And he quotes approvingly Rogan as saying “The Arabs were never reconciled to this fundamental injustice.” What injustice was that? It was not the Arabs who drove out the Turks, but the British. It was not the Arabs alone who lived in the Middle East, but many other peoples, some big enough to require, and deserve, states of their own – the Jews, the Kurds, the Armenians, all of whom were originally promised such states – and then many small non-Muslim and non-Arab peoples who deserved some protection, such as the Maronites (who had survived in their redoubt of Mount Lebanon for centuries, against the Muslims), the Alawites (who became, under the French, suppliers of some of the Troupes Speciales to the mandatory authority), Mandeans and Turkmens and Yazidis and Samaritans, all of them requiring some protection against the circumambient Arab Muslims, who claimed then, and claim now, that the whole Middle East belongs to them, and it is the likes of Eugene Rogan, and his TLS reviewer Francis Robinson, who are so quick to agree. The complete inability of the Muslim Arabs to understand, much less sympathize, with the claims of any non-Muslim or non-Arab peoples in the Middle East and North Africa (where the Berbers have their own woes, including the banning, after the French left Algeria, and until the day before yesterday, of the use of the Berber language and the preservation of Berber culture) is shared, this review demonstrates, by their admirers and defenders in the West.

Then Francis Robinson writes that “two new players” in Arab politics appeared. The first was “oil” – here he gets the OPEC price rise all wrong, and one assumes he has never read either the exhaustive study by J. B. Kelly, “Arabia, the Gulf, and the West,” which discusses the 1973 quadrupling of price rises and shows how oil, like all other commodities, is not immune to supply-demand curves, and exhibits price elasticity, though at a rate slower than most other commodities. The second “new player was Islam,” writes Robinson, but Islam was always there, under the thin veneer of Arab nationalism (which could be seen as merely a biding-our-time subset of Islam, at a time when so much of the Muslim world was newly-independent, and still under the control of the first, most secular generation of leaders, and before the OPEC trillions, and the migrant Muslim millions, allowed Muslim Arabs to dream of a larger unity than that of the Arabs – a political unity of the Umma, the Community of Islam. He mentions, following Rogan, the decades of “Arab impotence” as if they are attributable to Western enemies. At no time is there any consideration of the political, economic, social, intellectual, and moral effects of Islam itself – “no greater retrograde power exists,” Churchill wrote so keenly about Islam during his time in the Sudan, but Churchill was a student of men and events and history, while Francis Robinson, merely a Professor of the History of Islam at the University of London, is not.

“December 1987 saw the beginning of the first Palestinian intifada against Israel, in which over one year 626 Palestinians were killed, 37,000 injured, and 35,000 imprisoned. In this context, Hamas, the Islamic Resistance Movement, emerged out of the Muslim Brotherhood...” But what did the “Palestinians” do in 1987 to cause Israel to inflict all those casualties? Nothing at all? No bombs in busses, in cafes, on streetcorners? No attacks all over the place? And as for Hamas suddenly arising then, when was Hamas actually formed? And, for that matter, when was the Muslim Brotherhood created, and what did the Muslim Brotherhood do in Egypt in

1940, or in Syria, in 1980, that led others, than Israelis, to deal with them so violently? And was the Israeli response to Hamas more violent than that of Hafez Al-Assad, or less?

Robinson says that the "end of the Cold War" led to the United States becoming the "hegemonic power in Arab lands." Really? What about the American bombing of Serbian forces to compel an end to Milosevich's campaign in Bosnia and Kosovo? What about the American aid given, by the billions, to the most anti-American peoples on earth, those in Egypt, Jordan, and the "Palestinian territories," with no quid pro quo even hinted at? What about the tens of billions in aid given to Pakistan, even though Pakistan used American aid money to pay for its secret nuclear project (which it kept well-hidden from the Americans, and even today will not allow them to question A. Q. Khan about the whole project), and though Pakistan gave birth to, nurtured, and placed in power in Afghanistan the very Taliban that the Americans are now, with minimal and begrudging Pakistani cooperation, are now spending hundreds of billions to defeat, yet again? Are the Americans really guilty of "hegemonic power" in the Muslim lands, or the Arab lands?

Which Arab lands is Robinson talking about? Do the Americans call the shots in Saudi Arabia? In the Sudan? In Algeria perhaps? What about Libya? What about Lebanon – do the Americans control what Lebanese do? What about Syria – how are they doing in their "hegemony" there? Tunisia? Morocco, perhaps? Or perhaps Egypt, where each year the Mubarak Friends-and-Family Plan pockets 2.5 billion American dollars, and continues to foster anti-Americanism in its population, to vote against America at the U.N., to act as a protector for the Sudanese regime in both Darfur and, even more importantly, in the Christian and animist south, and to pursue, through more effective means, the unending war or Jihad against Israel, while protecting itself against "Palestinians" who spell trouble for the regime in Egypt, not least if they cause

an open war which would lead to Israel retaking, and keeping for good, the Sinai it has been cajoled into giving back to Egypt not once but twice, the last time along with \$16 billion dollars worth of infrastructure (oilfields, airfields, Sharm el-Sheik ready for its tourists).

For Francis Robinson, as no doubt for Eugene Rogan, with him he sees so very eye to eye, the Arabs are victims, and not at the center of a world-wide Jihad, conducted by various means – not merely, not even mainly, through terrorism or through qitaal, conventional combat, but through deployment of the Money Weapon, campaigns of Da'wa, and demographic conquest, that have together made the lives of non-Muslims, both indigenous people and non-Muslim immigrants, far more unpleasant, expensive, and physically dangerous than they would be without a large-scale Muslim presence. And in Islam, it is the Arabs who rule, who call the shots, who order about the Afghans here, or the Pakistanis there, if they see fit. For Islam is, and always has been, a vehicle for Arab supremacism, as the late Anwar Sheikh used to stress, and which he developed in his "Islam: The Arab National Religion." Both Rogan's book, and Robinson's review, are predictable in their expressing the worldview of those who, perhaps because of pre-existing predilections, or perhaps because of professional deformation, review, or perhaps because of both (as Ibn Warraq says so often happens) they are apologists for Islam and, even more, apologists for the Arabs. It's not the Infidels who are the victims of their Jihad; it is they, only they, the Arabs, conducting their various Jihads (the world-wide Jihad being merely the sum of all the Lesser Jihads) including that against Israel, who are for the rogans and robinsons of this world the permanent and only victims.

A few pages later, Nicholas De Lange's review of a biography (by Joel Kraemer) of Maimonides, has some curios: "'Kraemer uses the term 'Arab' as a synonym for 'Muslim': while not explicitly denying that Jews like Maimonides lived within an

Arab society and spoke and wrote in Arabic, he contrives to portray him as not really an Arab.” Does Nicholas De Lange think that others who used Arabic, even took or had forced on them Arab names, such as the Copts, or the Maronites, or Assyrians, or Chaldeans (never mind those who kept up Aramaic) were “Arabs”? Surely he knows that at the time that Maimonides lived, it made sense to think of Muslims as “Arabs” and “Arabs” as “Muslims” and it would have been strange for Moses ben Maimon to think that his use of Arabic would make him an “Arab,” just as we would find strange someone who, in Nigeria or Hong Kong, thought that his use of English made him an Englishman, or still more disturbing, was forced by English conquerors to ignore his own history and think of himself only as an Englishman.

Nicholas De Lange, who has made his name as a literary translator – of, for example, the works of Amos Oz – describes Kraemer as being “unhappy with the current portrait of medieval Spain as a place of tolerance and open-mindedness, suggesting that the so-called *convivencia* ‘was mainly an economic and cultural coexistence, accompanied by competition, mistrust, and hostility.’ The Jews are said to have ‘faced a concrete danger of physical and spiritual extinction.”

Here De Lange doesn’t declare himself, and he should. If he thinks Kraemer is wrong, and his tone suggests he does, then he should offer evidence. He should explain why he is unimpressed with those who are not impressed with the likes of Maria Rosa Menocal and her “Ornament of the World,” finds not only troubling and distasteful but also wrong those who insist that the business about *convivencia* in Islamic-ruled Spain got its start not with historians, but rather with Romantic writers in the West, such as Washington Irving and his *Tales of the Alhambra* and Chateaubriand with his “*Le Dernier des Abencerages*, and that both come out of the desire to offer exotic locales and peoples as part of a lost world better than the one that, just before the end of all kinds of ancient

regimes, was being born in the West, and that perhaps the great original of this was Sir Walter Scott's fantastical depiction, in "The Talisman," of Saladin (a Kurd, not an Arab, but to the West, a leader of the "Saracens") as giving lessons in chivalric behavior to the Crusader nobles.

De Lange manages to call Kraemer into question, but doesn't dare to take his view of 'convivencia' head on. Why not? A review would be the perfect place to do it? He also fails to mention Maimonides' Epistle to the Yemen, in which the subject of the biography under review claimed wrote to co-religionists in Yemen. Did De Lange not notice what Maimonides himself had to say, or not think it worth quoting? And when he got to the subject of "convivencia," why did he not mention the massacre of every last Jew in Grenada in 1066, and the reasons for it? And why no mention of other historians of Spanish Jewry, or Jews in Spain, especially Evariste Levi-Provencal, and how that celebrated historian's view compares to that of Maria Rosa Menocal?

Nicholas De Lange wants to undercut Kraemer, and his tone implying disagreement does the work for him, but nothing else. He presents no facts to rebut Kraemer, and omits much of what he surely has just read about – Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen,

Remember, my co-religionists, that on account of the vast number of our sins, God has hurled us in the midst of this people, the Arabs, who have persecuted us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us, as Scripture has forewarned us, 'Our enemies themselves shall judge us' (Deuteronomy 32:31). Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase and hate us as much as they ... Although we were dishonored by them beyond human endurance, and had to put with their fabrications, yet we behaved like him who is depicted by the inspired writer, "But I am as a deaf man, I hear not, and I am as a dumb man that openeth not his mouth." (Psalms 38:14). Similarly our sages instructed us to bear the

prevarications and preposterousness of Ishmael in silence. They found a cryptic allusion for this attitude in the names of his sons "Mishma, Dumah, and Massa" (Genesis 25:14), which was interpreted to mean, "Listen, be silent, and endure." (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, ad locum). We have acquiesced, both old and young, to inure ourselves to humiliation, as Isaiah instructed us "I gave back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair." (50:6). All this notwithstanding, we do not escape this continued maltreatment which well nigh crushes us. no matter how much we suffer and elect to remain at peace with them, they stir up strife and sedition, as David predicted, "I am all peace, but when I speak, they are for war." (Psalms 120:7). If, therefore, we start trouble and claim power from them absurdly and preposterously we certainly give ourselves up to destruction."

Nor does he mention the massacre of Jews in Grenada, the work of other historians of Spanish Jewry, or the birth of the "convivencia" story in Romantic fiction of the early 19th century, chiefly Irving and Chateaubriand.

A long article, the 2010 Sebald Lecture – on W. G. Sebald – has Will Self, doing an unexpectedly uncomic turn. He quotes the novelist: "To my mind there is an acute difference between historiography and history as experienced history." Self notes that "[t]he experience of real, live Jews was definitely important—and possibly equally significant was that these were English Jews; after all, if, as the old Jewish saying has it, the Jews are like everyone else but more so, then it can be inferred that English Jews are like the English – but more so." There is a lot in this essay, and what it now makes me want to do is to start reading more of Sebald.

There's a review of William Shawcross' biography of Queen Elizabeth, but having just finished Alan Bennett's slender "The Uncommon Reader" I was not inclined to read the review. There was a review of "Incest and Influence," by Adam Kuper, with a linking of the Clapham Sect (Evangelicals inspired by William Wilberforce), through that interesting figure James

Stephen, father of Virginia Woolf, to the Bloomsbury Group with their “secular bed-hopping” and “casualness about sexual intimacy,” and this leads to mention of Angelica Garnett, who then turns up again, eight pages later in the same TLS, with a review of “The Unspoken Truth,” a book of her short stories, containing a recapitulation of her particular provenance, laid out in the review of “Incest and Influence” – that Angelica Garnett was the granddaughter of Leslie Stephen, the niece of Virginia Woolf, and the daughter “of Vanessa Bell and of Clive Bell (legally) and Duncan Grant (biologically)” and, finally, the “wife of one of Grant’s lovers, David “Bunny” Garnett.” After this second go-round, I think I can keep all of this straight.

The review of the poems (in translation) of Guido Cavalcanti, one of Dante’s friends, came as a relief, after so much Englishness, as did the verbal vigilance of the reviewer, Olivier Burckhardt who notes: “The strength of Simon West’s edition is the identification of Cavalcanti with the word *sbigottito* that appears regularly in his poetry. It does not have a single equivalent in English (dismayed, dumbfounded, amazed?) but implies a state of being unnerved; it expresses “the severe shock and bewilderment of the lover and his incapacity to react” when faced with even a single fleeing dart of a gaze from the lady.” Now I can’t get the words *sbigottito* and *sbigottimento* out of my head and I try to think of a better slightly archaic, equivalent. The word puts me in mind of a famous short poem by Dante that describes an outing with Cavalcanti and another friend, the Three Men In A Boat – and that is addressed to Guido Cavalcanti:

“Guido, i’ vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io
Fossimo presi per incantamento,
E messi in un vasel ch’ad ogni vento
Per mare andasse al voler vostro e mio,
Sì che fortuna od altro tempo rio

Non ci potesse dare impedimento,
Anzi, vivendo sempre in un talento,
Di stare insieme crescesse 'l disio.
E monna Vanna e monna Lagia poi
Con quella ch'è sul numer de le trenta
Con noi ponesse il buono incantatore:
E quivi ragionar sempre d'amore,
E ciascuna di lor fosse contenta,
Sì come i' credo che saremmo noi.

This is the poem in which Dante alludes to, but does not dare to name, the girl who appeared "sul numer de la trenta" – that is on the list of the thirty most beautiful women in Florence, because . . . well, because at the first sight of her, he was simply sbigottito, and remained so, as he wrote his poem, at the very thought of her. He stood, you see, literally at first, and then later figuratively, astonished.

To comment on this article, please click [here](#).

To help New English Review continue to publish interesting, timely and thought provoking articles such as this one, please click [here](#).

If you have enjoyed this article and want to read more by Hugh Fitzgerald, click [here](#).

Hugh Fitzgerald contributes regularly to The Iconoclast, our Community Blog. Click [here](#) to see all his contributions, on which comments are welcome.