

LETTERS

Gandhi

To the Editor:

In the 20 years I have been writing, I have not as a rule publicly commented on the reviews of my books. I feel, however, that I cannot let pass Paul Johnson's favorable review of my book "Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles" (Feb. 7) without a comment. It is Mr. Johnson's privilege to review, as he does, Gandhi's life instead of my life of Gandhi. It is his privilege to complain, as he does, that I do not place Gandhi in his historical context, when at least half of the book is concerned with Gandhi's place in history. It is also his privilege to indulge, as he does, in loose thinking: He says of Gandhi, "He aggravated India's problems, not least the problem of her untouchables, for whom he fought so bravely. As Mehta says, they now number 100 million and are worse off than ever," implying not only that untouchables are worse off because of Gandhi but also that I hold this view. And so on. But I don't think it is Mr. Johnson's privilege to assert "the near-impossibility of an Indian writing a wholly objective life of Gandhi." What kind of racist nonsense is this? Does he really mean to say that an Englishman could not write an "objec-

tive life" of Churchill, an American of George Washington, a Frenchman of Napoleon, or is it only an Indian who is somehow incapable of being objective? As it happens, most of my life has been spent in America and England, and I am now an American citizen, but I cannot imagine that Mr. Johnson would wish to deny the advantages of my having spent my childhood in India, since it gave me a knowledge of Indian languages that enabled me both to study Gandhi's writings and to interview his apostles.

VED MEHTA
New York City

The BBC

To the Editor:

In discussing the recent book and forthcoming television series "The Age of Uncertainty" (April 3), your reviewer and the distinguished Oxford scholar Mr. Michael Howard was sufficiently agreeable about my part—informative, erudite and amusing are all words that I cherish—so it must seem dangerously churlish for me to register an objection. And I do not do so on my own behalf. Our disagreement is all in the area of fair comment.

I do believe Mr. Howard is unjust to the talented people who guided my BBC efforts and who struggled to give visual form to so resistant a subject matter as political economy. Writers have a professional tendency to wonder why anything should be done with images—to engage in what Mr. Howard would call television-bashing. But he is surely wrong in saying that all critics so reacted or expressed more valid objection. A goodly number were enthusiastic. Having regard for context, and without at all offering a complete list, I would note that Chris Dunkley of The Financial Times, a highly respected observer, concluded that the overall result as "compared with nearly all television [was] superb." The Daily Mail said of some of my colleagues' strokes that they would have been "envied in any play" and, in later noting that the issues could have been put more soberly, concluded that the only "snag" was that "hardly anyone would bother to pay attention." The Times Educational Supplement warmly praised Adrian Malone and

his team "for the way they transformed Galbraith's ideas into visual terms." The Yorkshire Post similarly approved the presentation, and The Birmingham Post (with others) rebuked those who suggested that it should all have been, as Mr. Howard implies, a lecture by Galbraith. The Washington Post, The New York Times and Variety correspondents were unreservedly enthusiastic—all thought the visual effects imaginative, ingenious and very entertaining.

Mr. Howard could not have known of this latter response but he might have seen reference to a more decisive one. At Brighton a few weeks ago the BBC staged a five-day "Showcase" of its productions of the past year to sell them to foreign broadcasting networks. About a hundred representatives of foreign networks attended. With marked benefit to BBC finances and the British balance of payments, this series—on economics, of all things—was in a tie with a drama ("The Duchess of Duke Street") as one of the two best sellers. Since my voice will not appear in the German, Japanese or other broadcasts and my face is not all that compelling, something must be attributed to the dramatization and illustration, the part where there is no language bar.

But I do not plead for a judgment on my BBC friends, only that all here remember that they soon can decide for themselves.

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH
Cambridge, Mass.

Memoirs

To the Editor:

I enjoyed reading the review of Neruda's "Memoirs" (March 13) along with Frank MacShane's warm account of Neruda in New York, and Robert Bly's powerful translation of "Walking Around." The reviewer, José Yglesias, wrote about Neruda and his life in a shrewd yet brotherly way. This was a pleasure reading, because Neruda's "incomparable body of poetry" is such a vital work of art. But, after I finished the review, I felt unsatisfied and then angry with it. I wanted to hear something about the one who wrote "these marvelous, exasperating memoirs" in English. Who is he? How does he know Neruda? Is he a poet too? What fantastic sense of both languages allows him to

sound like Neruda, that "poetic genius"? How does he create those great literary moments that Yglesias says are "succulent leaves that we should not do without"? The problem was the review didn't even thank the translator, Hardie St. Martin, and didn't say what should be said about his vital work of art.

Next time, I hope. We must recognize translators.

JONATHAN COHEN
Setauket, N.Y.

Before Vidocq

To the Editor:

M. Vidocq may have been the first detective and the inspiration for Poe's M. Dupin and Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, as Newgate Callendar repeated in his review of "The Vidocq Dossier" (March 27), but I have found a literary anticipation of them all, in a 20,000-word novel published the year before Vidocq's birth.

A moral tale called "The Fortune Hunter," printed in seven installments in Isaiah Thomas's Royal American Magazine (Boston) in 1774, written under the pseudonym "Altamont," it opens with a constable and a war-weary veteran walking the midnight streets in London to aid the watchmen. The veteran was an Ur-Watson, a "faithful myrmidon," who had braved 19 battles, 32 sieges and 315 skirmishes, before devoting himself to preserving the peace. Wearing a coat of many colors and carrying a lantern and a cane, he was puzzled when the "midnight magistrate" spied a large sack atop the neighborhood dunghill and cried out "Stop thief!" The constable explained, using his deductive powers, that the laden bag meant that a thief must have just abandoned it as they approached.

The rest of the story deserted these characters, except to show both as venal buffoons, and traced, instead, the defeat and reclamation of a fortune hunter who was the contents of the sack. Outsmarted and having mended his ways, the scoundrel was given a commission in the army and promptly died honorably on the field of battle.

But "Altamont" may have invented the basic elements of the detective-and-attendant formula. I wonder who "Altamont" could have been

JOHN R. OSTERHOLM
Worcester, Mass