light of literary experience, I find this unusual. Authors have no divine right to expect attention for their books, but they are bound to ask themselves what the reasons for their failure might have been. Relating the story of an unknown hero many years after the event is not an enterprise of world-shaking importance. Still, at a time when Britain's Sunday newspapers were publishing long excerpts from new books relating for the tenth time the life story of Anthony Blunt, and for the twentieth time the Blake affair, when day after day there were long reports on the front pages from Australia about a book on Roger Hollis that had as yet not even been published, how was one to explain the absence of even a single line to report a story which, if nothing else, was of a certain human interest?

It could have been mere "accident". I discussed the problem with some friends, and they mentioned similar recent experiences. There was the affair of the "Griffin", alias Paul Rosbaud. A distinguished American scientist had recently uncovered the identity of the man who had been Britain's most important scientific source in Germany—the man who had passed invaluable material to the Allies throughout the War. Rosbaud settled in London in 1945 and (together with Robert Maxwell) founded the Pergamon Press, but their collaboration did not last long. The book has now been translated into ten languages, including Norwegian; but no British publisher has showed interest. (I understand that the tenth publisher who was approached has just, very sensibly indeed, decided to publish the book.) Then there was the case of the definitive biography of Chaim Weizmann by Professor Yehuda Reinharz, a professor at the University of Michigan, which was published by Oxford University Press in New York and London. The author received several important awards in the United States and his book was highly praised. In Britain, however, not one review, despite the fact that Dr Weizmann had been a British citizen, had taught at a British university, had made an important contribution to the British war effort, had been a confidant of leading British politicians; and, generally speaking, had been an ardent Anglophile all his life.

There were other such cases, and they pointed to several conclusions—that parochialism is on the rise (admittedly not only in Britain), that interest in events which lie 50 years or more in the past is strictly limited, unless the books refer to some prominent Establishment (or anti-Establishment) figure in politics and literature. Above all, the lesson seems to be that a meretricious interest in scandals, disasters, and debunking has become considerably greater not only in the press but in publishing as a whole. Eduard Schulte was not a saint but he was, on the whole, what the Russians used to call "a positive hero": the rare figure of a man standing up for his beliefs and willing to risk his life. In an age in which there is much greater interest in traitors, collaborators, and similar villains, perhaps editors and publishers are right: perhaps the stories of good people do tend to be boring. We should pay more attention to Shakespeare: "Men's evil manners live in brass, their virtues we write in water. . . ."

But I still am persuaded that a debt had to be paid. Even though we failed to get full recognition for Eduard Schulte, the messenger of a tragic truth, I am glad we wrote this book.

AUTHORS

Harvey Tyson's article is based on remarks made to "Challenging the Censors", a World News Media Action Conference (organised by the World Press Freedom Committee) held recently in London.

A. S. Byatt's story is included in her collection *Sugar and Other Stories*, published in April by Chatto & Windus, who also published her novels *Still Life* (1985) and *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978).

Allen Curnow's latest book of poems is *The Loop in Lone Kauri Road*, published last year by Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press.

Jean-François Revel writes a column for the Paris journal *Le Point*. His most recently translated work, *How Democracies Perish*, was published in 1985 by Weidenfeld (London) and Doubleday (New York).

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LETTERS

Steiner's "Holocaust"

IN YOUR March issue you published a letter from me grumbling about the élitist and anti-Socialist characteristics of ENCOUNTER. I take it all back. Be as nasty to the Left as you like as long as you go on publishing such deep, such unforgettable articles as George Steiner's on the Holocaust ("The Long Life of Metaphor", February). I'm sending for copies to pass on to friends. If they don't understand it, they'll at least be made to realise by contrast how small and boringly we think in England now.

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Of "Wops" & "Kikes"

THE REFERENCE BY Richard Mayne (in "Column", ENCOUNTER, February) to ethnic insults like *"wop"* for Italians, *"sheeny"* or *"yid"* or *"kike"* for Jews, *etc.* and *ad nauseam*, raises a number of interesting questions about their lexical origins and derivations. Etymology is not a branch of ethics, but verbal self-consciousness may help to "relativise" usage and pacify some epithets.

On the subject of *"Wop"* the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933) merely notes it as a "term of contempt, U.S. slang". The *Supplement* (vol. 13, p. 320) quotes P. G. Wodehouse's *Psmith Journalist* of 1915: "He's a wop kid" and also Sinclair Lewis in 1928: "Too many foreigners—fellows with Wop names and Hunkey [Hungarian] names. . . ." But I believe that Eric Partridge in his *Dictionary of Slang* (1961) was the first to register its derivation from the Spanish *"guapo"*, presumably due to the Spanish imperial domination of so many Italian lands (Naples, etc.). But *guapo* signified "a dandy", and well-dressed Spanish courtiers might well not have been offended, although in Northern and indeed English eyes it would have had increasingly negative overtones.

So—as Luigi Barzini, who grew up in New York City, recorded in his American memoir—kids on the streets beat themselves to a pulp for "ethnic honour" when the taunt of "Wop!" was heard. The battle was over a word in another language and referred to a style not remotely their own. The Italians were also stuck with another accidental "insult", *dago*, which was derived from a corruption (*OED*, vol. 3, p. 8) of

"Diego, an equivalent of *James"*. What's in a name? A bloody nose.

Noses were also bloodied—as Melvin J. Lasky observes in his account of the "Falashas" in Israel (ENCOUNTER, January), when young Tel Aviv schoolboys called the black Ethiopian pupils *"Cushies"*. What should have been in a name? At the very least a badge of honour—for *Cush* is referred to in the Bible as a land from which a "lost tribe" of the Jews, according to a divine prophecy, would one day return to Zion.

The Jews, in the perspective of 2,000 years of persecution, were more sinned against than sinning, and were often the victims of the strangest, most ironic and paradoxical terminological insults. One of the most vicious terms of disparagement was—and indeed is—*"kike"*. To be called a *"yid"* is, by comparison, a mild and Dickensian term of disparagement; for it is an obvious derivation from the German *Jude*, and is a name by which Jews often refer to each other (often in Eastern Europe pronounced *"yeed"*). Thus it has no secret power for the ultimate in viciousness. In my view this requires a grotesque verbal transformation, with a subconscious or unconscious twisting of innocent meanings into pernicious, primitive tags.

"Kike" is perhaps the most dramatic example of this dialectic of opprobrium. What mediocrity attaches to other unpleasant designations!—to such epithets as *"Heinies"* for the Germans (or "Jerries" or "Krauts", *ex sauerkraut*); *"Frogs"* for the French (*ex grenouille*); *"Limies"* for the English (*ex citrus fruits*); "nigger" for the Africans (*ex* Negro *ex* black). The special perverse power for hurt and harm of *"kike"* must come from its derivation from what Plato called the most beautiful thing in the universe, namely the form of a *circle*!

Here there is some dispute among the experts. In his book *Our Crowd* (1967) Stephen Birmingham—following H. L. Mencken—records the history of Jewish families in New York and how the Ashkenazi names ending with *-sky* or *-ski*

turned into the neologism via repetition-play of *"kee-kees"* etc.

Leo Rosten begs to differ. In his *Joys of Yiddish* (1968) Rosten offers a lexigraphical alternative which, if not exactly joyful, has this built-in ironic ultimate, which features in all the best, or worst, ethnic insults.

When the great waves of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe arrived on Ellis Island (in New York harbour) during the decades before the First World War, an official registration form was required to be signed. The Jews were unable to fill in the form or to sign it. Some may have been illiterate; but even the literate ones wrote not in Roman-English letters but in Hebrew script (even when the language was Yiddish). The customary X was rejected: making a cross would be anathema. Thus they were encouraged to sign with a circle, an innocent O, which in the Yiddish vocabulary is known as a *keikel*, a little circle being a *keikeleh*. As Rosten explains:

> "Before long the immigration inspectors (on Ellis Island) were calling anyone who signed with an 'O' instead of an 'X' a *kikel* or *kikeleh* or *kikee* or, finally and succinctly, *kike*. . . .
>
> Why did Jews make an 'O', never an 'X'? Because of the profound fear, not to say revulsion, felt for the symbol of the cross—which to them represented not only a barbaric form of execution (which they never practised), but the very sign under which they themselves had been persecuted, and their ancestors brutalised and slaughtered. . . .
>
> And so those who drew *kikelehs*, on Ellis Island or wherever the hardy peddlers travelled (signing account books with a little circle), came to be known as *'kike* men' or *'kikes'*. . . ."

Thus did Plato's "most beautiful and ideal form" get redrawn into the tragic Western history of ethnic prejudice.

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Will a Reformed Gorbachov Régime Be "Co-existable"?

Dilemmas & Dangers of Change—By GEORGE URBAN

LORD GLADWYN (Letters, ENCOUNTER, February) raises a number of subtle questions about the desirability of co-existence with the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachov.

Although virtually no one in the Western world now advocates the warlike elimination of the Soviet threat to the non-Soviet world, it nevertheless continues to be in the interest of the Western democracies to weaken the reach of Soviet expansionism and un-

dermine Soviet domestic strength by *unwarlike* means. If that is what Lord Gladwyn has in mind when he mentions *"Zusammenleben"*, I am all for it.

But here we run into a problem. The leader of the Western Alliance is a poor and unwilling player in using unwarlike instruments of power such as "public diplomacy", propaganda, and subversion to end Soviet subversion. How, one may ask, does any US administration propose to bring pressure to bear

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