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A Letter from Michael Wallerstein to Charles Moore

on the occasion of the latter's boasting about his ignorance

Dear Mr Moore,

I take up my pen—figuratively—to respond to a piece of yours appearing a few months since in *The Saturday Telegraph* on the matter of the number of things you claim never to have done.

I think, first, one feels moved to wonder that the former editor of a national newspaper which attracts respect throughout the world should so openly declare his ignorance of so much. Would it be possible to find such a confession from, say, the editor of *Le Monde*? Is it not a little strange that you seem not to feel that the immense voids you unashamedly proclaim may in some manner disqualify you from proffering opinions on the world? Second, one suspects that there are more and other voids that you do not reveal and that you are yourself, perhaps, quite unaware of.

To take up the first point: you have, you say, never read a work (?word) of Marx or Rousseau, and yet you have spent a lifetime in assailing the Left. How effective can any such assault have been, then? The first necessity in any battle is to know one's enemy, is it not? But, without having read these authors, how can you be sure they do represent the enemy or the Left—or, indeed, anything else? You seem to assume that they must, somehow or other, speak with a similar voice and have similar opinions; but what is the basis of such an assumption? Who, then, are those of the Left you have read and tackled on their own ground? In other words, how much else, one wonders, have you not read that you may even be unaware of not having read?

The second point is far larger: you give lists of authors and books you have never read; for example, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Anthony Powell and then Balzac, Zola and Victor Hugo. You list these as though they were all of a kind, all equal in worth. You seem quite unaware of any profound distinctions to be made between them. You say that, of all Lawrence's works, the only one you ever read through to the end is *Lady Chatterley's Lover*—and that for base reasons. Has it never occurred to you to try re-reading that novel to find out, as a now mature man, what you will undoubtedly have overlooked as an adolescent: its social and political critique, for instance? You say you gave up in your attempts to read the works of the first list because they were all “boring”. But where did the boringness lie? Many people are “bored” by practically everything that demands any degree of intelligent attention and response, whether in literature, music, history, art or politics. Things may be trivial, wrong-headed, perverse, obscure, obscene, beyond one's reach; but to call anything merely “boring” is to expose oneself.

To speak of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moby Dick* in the same breath would, I imagine, give both Defoe and Melville some surprise. Where is the common ground—adventure stories? If so, let us include Enid Blyton and C. S. Lewis in that list.

I think, perhaps, the clue to all this lies in your musings about *Mansfield Park* and *The Faerie Queen*: that you would be hard put to recount all the details. This implies that literature, to you, is in no way different to geography and history and science; they are all “things” to “learn” and to remember—in order to pass an exam, presumably.

I believe you once described Tony Blair as being “really rather shallow”. To that one feels inclined to say “yes, quite so, but then there are more ways than one of being shallow.”

yours sincerely,

D. M. Wallerstein

A longer letter by Michael Wallerstein, Dear Mr Howard, subtitled The Changing of Modern English, is on sale in our Shop.

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