Defending the Word

Sir, – Rightly or wrongly, none of the four Dylan lyrics quoted by Daniel Karlin (“Poet of Record”, October 21) would, I think, make it onto the poetry pages of the TLS. The “narrow, conservative but defensible definition of ‘literature’” persists simply in the defence of the Word untouched by performance, especially by its Maker.

Bob Dylan wrote his words to be sung; Les Murray does not. The world popularity of the one (100,000,000 albums sold) and the relative modesty of the other, perhaps indicate where a Nobel Prize for Literature might go, and where a hundred other awards and riches do.

JOHN GALLAS
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Mercy

Sir, – Clive Sinclair (Freelance, October 21) is right to point out that the Old Testament contains many references to mercy as an attribute of God and mankind. But since Shylock shows no mercy to Antonio, doesn’t that make him a bad Jew?

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Donald Trump

Sir, – Elaine Showalter’s excellent

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

You and your brain

Sir, – Both Richard Holton, in his review of Andy Clark’s Surfing Uncertainty (October 7), and Raymond Tallis, in his follow-up letter (October 14) supporting Holton’s review, misuse the distinction I drew (1969) between the personal and subpersonal levels of ascription and explanation. Indeed it is persons – not brains – who believe, decide, intend, understand things, thanks to events occurring in their brains, and indeed confusions can result if one incautiously attributes the full-fledged personal level mental states and acts to the specialized subsystems of brains. The parts of your brain responsible for the pain you feel are not themselves in pain, to take an obvious case, nor does your motor cortex sign the contract; you do. But that does not mean that properly extended, actually, truncated versions of mentalistic ascriptions to brain subsystems are always misleading in the British armed forces. Like HRC, female service personnel are routinely categorized as “sluts/slags” or “bitches”. In the light of their increasing participation in combat roles on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, exceptional females have earned the title of honorary man. The problem is that, as HRC has also unfortunately found, it is an almost impossibly narrow identification to maintain.

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of a famous article, “What the frog’s eye tells the frog’s brain” (Lettvin, Maturana, McCulloch and Pitts, 1959). “Eyes don’t tell! Only language-using persons can tell!” However, Haven’t we outgrown the complacent insularity of ordinary language philosophy? Holton and Tallis are not alone; P. M. S. Hacker and Max Bennett devote half a book to perpetuating this mistake (Neuroscience and Philosophy: Brain, mind, and language, by M. Bennett, D. Dennett, P. Hacker, J. Searle, 2007) and I devote my quarter of that book to demolishing it in detail. Andy Clark’s book deserves a review by someone who has escaped the Sixties and is ready to take seriously the twenty-first-century issues that confront us.

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The Roman Audience

Sir, – Emily Gowers begins her review of my book The Roman Audience (October 28) with the assertion that “[t]he Romans cherished a romantic ideal of direct spoken communication between author and listeners” (which Romans, when?), and she ends it with the suggestion that “Roman literature” (in scare quotes) was “a carefully considered... “presenting a reasoned hypothesis”, and “wildly” means “but it’s one I won’t even consider”.

Gowers notes my reference to “what he calls, with Theresa May, ‘ordinary working people’”, but does not reveal that I was quoting Cicero. His phrase was “homines infima fortuna, opifices denique”, and his point was the enthusiasm of such people for “listening to history”. That seems to me to be a surprising piece of information that life or practice from any substantial dramatist, except Ben Jonson perhaps, and distinctly Protestant writers could offer praise of the monastic life at length, in e.g. The Noble Soldier, The Captives or If It Be Not Good. Whereas I can only find respected Protestant clergy present or referred to in seven plays, I gave up counting the Catholic examples. No one will claim that many of the dramatists were crypto-Catholics but they were rarely intolerant Protestants.

BRIAN FIRTH
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Alexander Selkirk

Sir, – A generation of Defoe scholars has laboured to refute the “misconception” (as Maximilian Novak calls it in his biography of Defoe) that Defoe’s fictional history of Robinson Crusoe was based on the story of Alexander Selkirk, or that the Pacific island of Juan Fernández was the model for Crusoe’s island. This “mistake” (quoting Novak again) is repeated by Andrew Lambert in his book Crusoe’s Island and is not challenged in the review by Nicholas Crane (October 14). Surely it is time to put to rest this old calumny, which interferes with the discussion of Robinson Crusoe as a work of literature and the imagination.

GEOFFREY SILL