

The New Criterion

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Week in review

by Isaac Sligh

Recent links of note:

“The Tourist: Philip Roth’s Czech kgb file”

Jared Marcel Pollen, *Tablet*

Following the recent publication of Blake Bailey’s biography of Philip Roth, the world of letters has been aflutter with both remembrances and *damnatio memoriae* of this complicated man. Brooke Allen waded into the fray with “Philip Roth’s plot against himself,” a perceptive, even-handed review of Bailey’s book in this month’s issue of *The New Criterion*. The conversation about Roth naturally centers on the author and his lovers; in his life as in his literature, sex was front and center. Yet there was another lesser-known passion of his, unveiled in this article by Jared Marcel Pollen for *Tablet*. Inspired by the writings of Franz Kafka, Roth traveled behind the Iron Curtain in 1972 to Prague, the city of Kafka’s birth, where he became involved in a campaign to rescue the voices of suppressed Eastern European writers. Pollen paints a vivid picture of Roth’s astonishment at the stifling banality of the arts and everyday life under the Communist regime.

“Symphony of a Thousand Millennia”

Mathew Lyons, *Literary Review*

Suetonius records in his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (121 A.D.) that the Roman emperor Tiberius was obsessed with knowledge to such an absurd extreme that he was in the habit of interrogating certain grammarians (a notoriously smug class of teachers in Ancient Rome) with questions such as “*Quid Sirenes cantare sint solitae?*” (“What song were the Sirens in the habit of singing?”). It’s an intentionally impossible question to answer—how can one recover the sounds of the distant past?—yet one that Sir Thomas Browne commented in 1658 was, “though [a] puzzling question . . . not beyond all conjecture.” In a way, Browne was right. For *Literary Review*, Mathew Lyons reviews two new books on the history (and prehistory) of music and discusses recent discoveries that are changing our understanding of mankind’s ancient relationship with the art form—including a forty-thousand-year-old flute pitched to the pentatonic scale.

Podcasts:

“Music for a While #43: Embraceability.”

Jay Nordlinger, The New Criterion’s music critic, talks music—but, more important, plays music.

Dispatch:

“Gagging on the silver spoon,” by Anthony Alofsin. *On the eccentric businessman Harold McCormick, his wife Ganna Walska & the inspiration behind Citizen Kane.*

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