

The New Criterion

November 2008

A monthly review

edited by Hilton Kramer & Roger Kimball

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The New Criterion *November 2008*

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Notes & Comments: November 2008

Sun set

September 30, 2008, was a sad day for readers in New York. That day, the last issue of *The New York Sun*, the sprightly broadsheet started by Seth Lipsky, the publisher, and Ira Stoll, the managing editor, in April of 2002, landed on the doorsteps of subscribers. Starting a major metropolitan newspaper is always an audacious enterprise. But it turned out to have been especially audacious in the early part of this decade when newspapers as a genre began an accelerating circulation and advertising decline in the face of competition from the internet and the public's more general retreat from print.

But if the *Sun* labored within an ever-more-daunting business environment, it nevertheless instantly established itself as a must-read newspaper for New Yorkers interested in culture, local politics, and a view of world affairs untainted by the imperatives of political correctness. The *Sun* was brash, independent, intellectually omnivorous, and unashamedly pro-American. The paper was often described as “right-leaning,” but what that really meant was that it was not programmatically, reflexively left-wing. The *Sun* bristled with energy and reportorial curiosity. In the paper's valedictory issue, Mr. Lipsky reprinted an excerpt of some

remarks he had made to the paper's staff. The *Sun*'s backers were a doughty bunch—they had expended tens of millions on this worthy adventure—and they had, as Mr. Lipsky notes,

invested in the ideal of the scoop, the notion that news is the spirit of democracy, and in the principles for which we have stood in our editorial pages—limited and honest government, equality under our Constitution and the law, free markets, sound money, and a strong foreign policy in support of freedom and democracy.

It is not an auspicious augury that praise of “limited and honest government, equality under our Constitution and the law, free markets, sound money, and a strong foreign policy in support of freedom and democracy” has an almost antique ring to it. The *Sun* came into being partly to resuscitate and remind us of the preciousness of those threatened civic virtues.

The *Sun* never completely realized its ultimate ambition—to provide *The New York Times* with a rival and competitor as a “paper of record.” It would have had to become much, much larger to do that. Launched at a moment when newspapers everywhere were contracting, fulfilling that ambition was just not in the cards. But on a number of fronts it not only rivaled but

easily surpassed the *Times*. Its articles on local politics were superb, as were the pages it devoted to legal affairs. Its editorials were tough-minded, articulate, and unsentimental. Of particular interest to us at *The New Criterion* was the *Sun*'s coverage of books, culture, and the arts. The *Sun*'s founding culture editor was Robert Messenger, lately our Associate Editor, and he and his colleagues put together and oversaw the most vibrant and intelligent culture pages of any newspaper we know. In their range, sophistication, and freedom from the disfiguring addiction to the merely trendy, they quickly eclipsed the sclerotic coverage emitted by the *Times*. The *Sun* treated its readers as adults. It wasn't in thrall to the publicity machines of big publishers or the city's large cultural institutions. It published criticism, not rewritten press releases, and it intervened on an astonishing variety of topics with authority, vivid writing, and historical insight. For its cultural coverage alone, the *Sun* will be sorely missed.

But the loss of the *Sun* is troubling on other scores as well. We often have occasion to animadvert about *The New York Times* in this space—it's adolescent cultural coverage and books page, its deliberate blurring of opinion and reporting, its increasingly parochial view of the world. Underwriting those specific deformations is not only a menu of political commitments but also the dangerous luxury of having lived for more than forty years without serious competition. Ever since *The New York Herald-Tribune* closed up shop, in 1966, the *Times* has been the only game in town. That has bred a culture of extraordinary arrogance, intellectual sloth, and journalistic self-entitlement. New technologies—above all the internet—did not provide the tonic of direct competition so much as they instituted a whole new game. The *Sun* was the first serious, if incomplete, challenge in a generation to the *Times*'s lumbering dominance as a daily source of news and cultural reportage. As such, the *Sun* provided an al-

ternative to the echo-chamber of left-liberal elite opinion that *The New York Times* has increasingly mistaken for a description of reality.

The New Criterion *awards*

As we go to press, the staff of *The New Criterion* is busy preparing for our second benefit art auction in New York. Our first auction two years ago, organized on the occasion of our twenty-fifth anniversary, was such a rousing success that we determined then and there to embark on another. By the time you read this, we'll know whether hosting a benefit art auction in the middle of the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression is a prudent undertaking.

Regardless of how well the auction itself fares, there is one innovation this year that is certain to be a success and that we'd like to announce to and share with our readers: The New Criterion Award for service to the cause of art and culture. The award itself is a handsome patinated steel and etched glass sculpture designed for us by the artist Sally Pettus. Some nine inches tall, the modified pyramid is an elegant neo-modernist artifact that is deeply consonant with the aesthetic commitments of *The New Criterion*. We are delighted to acknowledge here our deep gratitude to Sally for her labors on our behalf.

This year we are proud to be able to honor three individuals. The first is the painter William Bailey, whose work we have often written about in these pages. Born in 1930, Mr. Bailey began painting when Abstract Expressionism was at high tide. His signature species of heightened realism sounded a distinctive and independent note at a moment when the art world was smitten with non-objective art. Mr. Bailey's work is greatly admired and occupies a spot in

many major collections, and serves as a bastion of integrity and technical prowess in an art world notably lacking in both.

The second recipient of this year's New Criterion Award is the late André Emmerich, who died last year at 82. For nearly forty-five years, from 1954 to 1998, the German-born Mr. Emmerich presided over one of the most vital art galleries in New York. Not only was he instrumental in bringing important Color Field painters like Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland to the public's attention, but he provided a welcome home for many other distinguished artists, including David Hockney, Sam Francis, Anthony Caro, and William Bailey. But Mr. Emmerich was more than an innovative and successful art dealer. He was also a powerful and civilizing influence on the culture of the New York art world. We are delighted that Mr. Emmerich's widow, Susanne, agreed to accept the award in his name.

The life of high culture is a many-sided affair that requires not only artists and dealers but also patrons with a commitment to supporting art and the appurtenances of culture. The third recipient of The New

Criterion Award this year is Frank Martucci, who for some two decades helped to support work on a new *catalogue raisonné* of the work of George Inness, one of the very greatest nineteenth-century American artists. This impressive two-volume work, written and edited by the art scholar Michael Quick, was published last year to well-deserved acclaim. It is a monument not only to Mr. Quick's discernment and diligence but also to Frank Martucci's commitment to enhance the public's acquaintance with an unfairly neglected American master.

We are as grateful as we are delighted to be able to honor Messrs. Bailey, Emmerich, and Martucci for their important contributions to the life of our culture. An honor is a two-sided mirror, reflecting on both the honoree and the enterprise bestowing the honor. The achievements of these individuals require no ratification by us: they are already widely recognized by the world at large. It is all the more reason that *The New Criterion*—which seeks, in Matthew Arnold's famous phrase, to celebrate the best that has been thought and said in the world—is both proud and humbled to have inaugurated this award with the collaboration of such a distinguished group. They honor us in accepting our homage.

Nothing succeeds like failure

by Joseph Epstein

When Maurice Bowra, then a young don and not yet Warden of Wadham College, Oxford, used to introduce Cyril Connolly, a man six years his junior, he would say, “This is Connolly. Coming man?” After which he paused, then added, “Hasn’t come yet.” Nor would Cyril Connolly come—not quite, never ever, really, at least not by his own lights. To be promising when young can be a terrible thing, for one’s promise all too often turns out to be a pledge on which one isn’t able to deliver. “Promise is guilt,” Connolly would write in his thirties, “promise is the capacity for letting people down.”

When young, Cyril Connolly had that easy brilliance that prods predictions of great things ahead. But he had a taste—a propensity?, an aptitude?—for failure that never left him. He first indulged it seriously by taking a third-class degree—easily enough done when one chooses not to prepare for examinations—which finished off any hopes he might have had for a university career. He nicely kept the pressure off himself by doing near the absolute minimum after coming down from Oxford. He took a job tutoring a spoiled child in Jamaica, which entailed two hours of work at mid-day, with the rest of the time devoted to tennis, bridge, and tropical drinks. He hired on as secretary to the fifty-nine-year-old Logan Pearsall Smith, a wealthy man of letters, a transplanted American, brother-in-law to Bertrand Russell and to Bernard Berenson. The job called for sup-

plying Pearsall Smith with a one-man audience for his aesthetic and anti-American views and acquiring the older man’s taste for good living, for which Connolly himself already had a powerful affinity if not the wherewithal to pay for on his own. From Pearsall Smith he also obtained the view that a superior work of art was of greater value than anything else in the world, including people, perhaps the only thing that truly mattered.

Through Pearsall Smith Connolly met Desmond MacCarthy, another man of promise who, true to the breed, failed to deliver. Both Pearsall Smith and MacCarthy bought into Connolly’s promise. Pearsall Smith wrote to him: “You seem to be the one person who can express the modern sensibility—the ways of feeling of your generation—and when you have a book to publish you will have a delightful success.” (Never, as we nowadays say, happened.) MacCarthy told him that “you have the intellectual daring necessary as well as the indispensable power of perception. I believe in you, and I don’t readily believe in people’s gifts.”

MacCarthy was able to obtain a job for Connolly on *The New Statesman*, initially as a proofreader and writer of brief, unsigned reviews, later as the contributor of a bi-weekly literary article or review. He later performed the same service for *The Times* of London, which he continued to do until the end of his days. The problem was that Con-

nolly didn't really believe regular reviewing was a job worth doing. "I review novels to make money," he wrote in his journal, "because it is easier for a sluggard to write an article a fortnight than a book a year, because the writer is soothed by the opiate of action, the crank by posing as a good journalist, and having an airhole. I dislike it. I do it and I am always resolving to give it up."

In fact, Cyril Connolly was a superior reviewer. In the afterword to his book *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, John Gross writes of Connolly that, "within his limits, how much imagination and wit he brought to his task! A Connolly review (except perhaps towards the end) was always liable to contain a provocation, a suggestive parallel, a phrase that stayed with you, an incitement to read and find out for yourself." For Cyril Connolly, this was nowhere near good enough. Men of letters, in most circles an honorific term, were in his view nothing more than those "trained from their birth to festoon the world with verbiage, to delay, to decorate, to scheme and windify over the reputations which they exist to celebrate, these armchair adventurers, with their arch humour, their quaint, apologetic egoism, their eminence socially and academically, each in his own right a gentleman and a gasbag. . . ."

What Cyril Connolly ardently wished to be was a highbrow novelist in the grand modernist tradition. He seemed always to be starting a novel, which invariably fizzled, with one exception, a very slender, altogether negligible, now quite properly forgotten little book called *The Rock Pool*. Perhaps, as John Gross suggests, he suffered from "an unduly Flaubertian ideal of what literature ought to be." More likely, he hadn't the necessary combination of talent and patience, nor the dramatic sense to sustain a complex plot, required by a good novelist. David Pryce-Jones, whose *Cyril Connolly, Memoir and Journal*, is the best book written about Connolly—I have made copious use of it herein—notes that "exploration of his ego and all its works interested [Connolly] far

more" than "the invention of a plot." He had, in other words, too vast a quantity of self-regard to get out of his own skin to write about other people. Connolly's was the temperament and spirit of the romantic, melancholy division, and there are no great romantic novelists.

What Connolly did instead was write about his inability to write, or at least to do the kind of writing he would himself have liked to have done. This literary threnody became so well established over the years that Edmund Wilson, a man to whom literary costiveness was as alien as sexual temperance, wrote the following ditty:

Cyril Connolly
Behaves rather fonnily:
Whether folks are at peace or fighting,
He complains that it keeps him from writing.

Enemies of Promise postulates that a successful book is one that will last for ten years. Originally published in 1938, the book now reappears, seventy years later, under the imprint of its third publisher. Connolly also wrote, in the first sentence of *The Unquiet Grave*, his miscellany of the aphorisms and *aperçus* that shaped and represented his own thinking, "the more books we read the clearer it becomes that the true function of a writer is to produce a masterpiece and no other task is of any consequence."

If *Enemies of Promise* appears to have passed the ten-year test—or so its republishers appear to believe—it is very far from the masterpiece that was the name of Connolly's desire. The subtext, or hidden theme, of the book, as David Pryce-Jones remarks, is "the loss of will-power and failure of nerve among the English" of its author's time and social class. In Connolly's case, that class was the impoverished upper class. His family was Anglo-Irish, down on its luck. He was the only child born to a military father, much indulged by his paternal grandmother. In one of the autobiographical chapters of *Enemies of Promise*, Connolly tells of being torn as a child in a toy shop over wanting two different toys,

and of his grandmother eliminating the conflict by buying him both. The rest of his life, the import behind this story is, he wanted both toys—wanted all the toys, really. His crowded toy box would include wives, travel, exquisite food, lots of drink—it was Connolly who wrote that “imprisoned within every fat man a thin man is wildly signaling to be let out”—exotic animals, much party-going. The only toy he failed to acquire was the one he claimed to want most ardently of all: the magnificent novel he never found the time, or marshaled the will, to write.

Enemies of Promise can be read as an explanation of why the cards were stacked against Connolly writing that novel. The first third of the book is, ostensibly, an examination of prose style. In it he describes and provides examples of what he takes to be the two reigning styles of the day—a period running from roughly the turn of the twentieth century to the late 1930s—the mandarin and the vernacular. Notable among the mandarins were Henry James, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, Ronald Firbank, the Sitwells, Paul Valéry. With their lengthy sentences, their unstinting emphasis on elevated language, their vaunting of the powers of the imagination, the mandarin writers offered, after the disillusion of World War I, “a religion of beauty, a cult of words, of meanings understood only by the initiated at a time when people were craving such initiations.”

Not all that many people felt this craving, let it be added. “A great writer,” Connolly notes, “creates a world of his own and his readers are proud to live in it.” The mandarins wrote under the assumption that their readers were their equals, though they didn’t much care if they weren’t. Connolly quotes Logan Pearsall Smith remarking that “unsaleability seems to be the hallmark, in modern times, of quality in writing.” Connolly himself later wrote: “Better to write for yourself and have no public, than to write for the public and have no self?”

The vernacular style, exemplified by such writers as Somerset Maugham, Ernest Hemingway, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, and George Orwell, is by design less determinedly elegant than the mandarin. While the mandarin style is intentionally as far from spoken language as possible, the vernacular, like “the best journalism is the conversation of a great talker,” including “nothing that cannot be said.”

Each style, the mandarin and the vernacular, has its weakness: the mandarins tend toward perfection, “the art-for-art-sakers, finding or believing life to be intolerable except for art’s perfection, by the very violence of their homage can render art imperfect.” The weakness of the vernacular style is in its uniformity. “The penalty of writing for the masses” is that “as the writer goes out to meet them half-way he is joined by other writers going out to meet them half-way and they merge into the same creature—the talkie journalist, the advertising, lecturing, popular novelist.” Here, by way of demonstration, Connolly composed a paragraph in which he included sentences from Orwell, Hemingway, and Isherwood, to show that, stylistically, there wasn’t much to choose among them.

The great hope, obviously, was to combine the best of the mandarin with the best of the vernacular styles. This new style would take from the mandarin, in Connolly’s formulation, “art and patience, the striving for perfection, the horror of clichés, the creative delight in the material, in the possibilities of the long sentence and the splendour and subtlety of the composed phrase.” From the vernacular it would take “the poetical impact of Forster’s diction, the lucidity of Maugham, the smooth cutting edge of Isherwood, the indignation of Lawrence, the honesty of Orwell,” and, above all, the careful pruning of the element of the excessive and the discipline of careful construction and execution of plot.

Sounds sensible, even straightforward enough, until Connolly, in the second third of his book, sets out the manifold obstacles in

the path of the writer of his time, which makes this and nearly all other attempts at writing seem all but impossible. These obstacles are the veritable enemies of promise. First among them Connolly felt is that the day had long since past—it ended toward the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century—when it was impossible to write badly, for until then “to write naturally was to write well.” Connolly holds Joseph Addison, in his attempt to make writing popular, partly to blame here for inflating language, bringing affectation into prose style, divesting words of their precision and clogging their meanings with irony and whimsy. Add to this that not only can a writer no longer count on a ready audience, but also he “can have no confidence in posterity”; he can’t even depend on the culture itself surviving. When Connolly asked, “Is this age really more unfavorable to writing than any other?” it is evident that he thought it indubitably was, for the writer is faced with heavier financial burdens than ever before, burdens that have set further traps to subvert his grand aspirations.

Connolly warms to his subject when he gets down to cases, or particulars, which is to say to “the parasites on genius . . . the blights from which no writer is immune.” In recounting these blights, one assumes that Connolly was talking about traps he stepped into in his own career. Among them is veering off into journalism, with its pleasures of “being paid and praised on the nail.” Connolly writes: “Myself a lazy, irresolute person, overvain and overmodest, unsure in my judgments and unable to finish what I have begun, I have profited from journalism.” The art of self-debasement was a Connolly specialty.

Then there is politics, which, when Connolly was writing his book in the late 1930s, with the smell of the civil war in Spain still in the nostrils, Hitler and Stalin on the march, was unavoidable. Politics during such periods was not merely a distraction to writers but threatened to become a full-time job. Connolly was himself engaged but not engorged by politics. He was without keen

political insight; his own politics were standard left-wing loopy, nobody-could-be-so-stupid-as-an-intellectual stuff, so that he could write “capitalism is expelling the artist as Spain expelled the Jews” or suggest that “success is most poisonous in America.”

Sloth, another of the enemies of promise, was closer to Connolly’s bag. “Sloth in writers,” he noted, “is always a symptom of an acute inner conflict.” The enemy he called Escapism had to have also been high on his list; it included drinking (also drugs and religion, two further enemies), and incontinent conversation. The latter is likely to have been most attractive to Connolly, himself a schmoozer of a high power, who writes that “most good talkers, when they have run down, are miserable; they know that they have betrayed themselves, that they have taken material which should have a life of its own, to dispense it in noises in the air.” This sentence has more than a mere whiff of the autobiographical about it, with the sound of ice cubes tinkling in the glass behind it.

Sex and marriage were two more of Connolly’s enemies. “As far as one can infer from observation,” he writes, “it is a mistake for writers to marry young, especially for them to have children young; early marriage and paternity are a remedy for loneliness and unhappiness that set up a counter irritant.” Children, he claims, “dissipate the longing for immortality which is the compensation of the writer’s life.” (Not in the case of Leo Tolstoy, who had even more children than he wrote novels.) Yet, Connolly adds, “there is no more somber enemy of good art than the pram in the hall.” All this is nonsense, of course, and on the subject of writers and marriage, I should say that for the writer, as for nearly everyone else, marrying or remaining single, neither, clearly, is a solution.

One doesn’t have to read too far into *Enemies of Promise* to recognize that Connolly prefers his writers to be unhappy, for he speaks of “the necessary unhappiness without which writers perish.” (Maurice Ravel, taking on the myth of the suffering

artist, said that he got more artistic benefit out of fifteen minutes of pleasure than out of three months of suffering.) Connolly takes things a step further to prescribe that a writer's health should not be too good: "rude health, as the name implies, is averse to culture and demands either physical relief or direct action for its bursting energy." From all of this it would seem naturally to follow that the contemporary artist must bear a wound, "which we [artists]," as Connolly claims, quoting Gide, "must never allow to heal but which must always remain painful and bleeding, the gash made by contact with hideous reality." Oppressed by financial burdens, unhappy, in poor health, psychologically wounded—one wonders how any writing by anyone got done at all.

In the final third of *Enemies of Promise*, Connolly describes his childhood and schooling. He was sent to St. Cyprian's, the same school that George Orwell so memorably devastated in his essay "Such, Such Were the Joys." Connolly holds that, when he was not even seven years old, his character had already begun to deteriorate. Schooling did not rebuild it, though at St. Cyprian's he learned about literature from Orwell and about art from Cecil Beaton, another friend acquired there. At St. Cyprian's he "occupied the position [he] was so often to maintain in after life, that of the intellectual who is never given the job because he is 'brilliant but unsound.'" There, too, he began to cultivate the art of pleasing people.

At Eton, which he entered as a Collegier—that is, on scholarship—he discovered that popularity depended on "a mixture of enthusiasm with moral cowardice and social sense," all of which he readily enough applied. He also learned that "intelligence was a deformity which must be concealed," which he was also only too willing to do. As a result, he succeeded, being elected to Pop, as the school's elite intramural club was called. He later won a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford. If this scholarship appears to confute his claims to supine and sublime slothfulness, he writes, apropos of studying for examinations, that "like many lazy

people, once I started working, I could not stop; perhaps that is why we avoid it."

In fact, Connolly emerged from Eton with impressive erudition and highbrow aspirations. Included among his generation at Oxford were Harold Acton, Robert Byron, Anthony Powell, and Henry Green. He emerged from there, as he says, wishing to be a poet but "well-grounded enough to become a critic and drifted into it [criticism] through unemployability."

In the end, *Enemies of Promise* is an ingenious *apologia pro vita sua* for Cyril Connolly's inability to write his masterpiece. Among the many reasons he adduces for this failure are his parentage, his upbringing, his schooling, his temperament, the era in which he came into maturity, the economy, the conditions of English culture, everything, really, but the weather. The old boy, one begins to think, never had a chance.

"Talent is something which grows and does not ripen except in the right kind of soil and climate," Connolly writes. "It can be neglected or cultivated and will flower or die down. To suppose that artists will muddle through without encouragement and without money because in the past there had been exceptions is to assume that salmon will find their way to the top of a river to spawn in spite of barrages and pollution. 'If it's in you it's bound to come out' is a wish fulfillment. More often it stays in and goes bad."

The sad truth is that Cyril Connolly's petering out seems to have been innate. It wasn't in him to be the kind of writer he wanted to be. His were the skills of the *littérateur*, not of the artist; he was in possession of a lush vocabulary, he had wide learning, and imitative power that he put to good use in his parodies and burlesques. But he was without the depth or the drive required to produce major imaginative art.

He had a good run in the 1940s as the founder and editor of *Horizon*, which was published from the beginning of 1940 to the end of 1949 and was one of the best intellectual journals of the past century—no

small accomplishment and a tribute to his high literary taste.

Connolly was not a man without ideas, though he hadn't the stamina to work them out. In his journal, for example, he writes brilliantly, if all too glancingly, about the shortcomings of Virginia Woolf: "She is not really a novelist—she does not care for human beings. . ."; "her critical essays are full of clichés. . ."; "She grows intoxicated on her own language and suggestion of tip-siness quickly cloy. . ." How fine it would have been to have had a lengthy attack on Virginia Woolf from Connolly forty or fifty years ago—and how many dreary subsequent books extolling her genius, had that essay been written, we should have been spared! But, alas, he was a short-distance runner who had no wish to be lonely.

Cyril Connolly published *Enemies of Promise* when he was thirty-four. He had thirty-seven more years to slog through, writing his reviews, sending them off from Spain, the south of France, and other gentle climes where he indulged his sybaritic tastes. "It was almost as if," David Pryce-Jones writes, "he were under an obligation to spoil near-ideal conditions by ingenious contrivances for wasting time and resources." He grew fat, which he viewed as "the outward symbol of moral and mental fat and that is why I dislike it." A hedonist with a bad conscience, he appears to have been put on earth briefly to charm his readers and lengthily to torture himself. In the end futile literary promise had no greater anatomist, or his own promise no greater enemy, than Cyril Connolly.

A common what?: the limits of reconciliation

by Sarah Ruden

I'm a visiting scholar at Yale Divinity School, not a student, and as a Quaker I can't be ordained, so I delete most of the institutional email notices unread. Vestments and books on preaching and counseling can change hands at astonishingly low prices, the Reverend Mister Manners can strike again and again with sessions to prepare for interviews with parishes, and the Thou Shalt Kill volleyball team can massacre its rivals from other Yale professional schools, all without concerning me. But I eagerly read the announcement that came in July of this year about the first conference to follow from the document called "A Common Word Between Us and You." That public expression by Muslim leaders of their solidarity with Christians had received a warm response from Western churches and universities, and now the conference was warmly entitled "Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed: Implications for Christians and Muslims."

I recalled my excitement about the many luminaries' denial that there was any need for Christians and Muslims to be at each other's throats; I had been proud of the role played by Yale religious scholars. I now wanted to attend the conference and help to assure the guests of Christian goodwill, but also ask some of the hard questions that Quakers in South Africa, my second home, had been asking for decades, especially since the failures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. After a long history of

violence and mutual ill-will, how can lasting peace and goodwill come about? The catastrophically growing South African income divide; the unbelievable amount of crime; the government's assertions—at the probable cost of several million lives—that AIDS is a Western conspiracy; the stubborn and worsening racism in a country that is most people's favorite example of "reconciliation"; and the alliance with ravaging tyranny in neighboring Zimbabwe show that the formulas for mediation that are now most admired have proven, at best, incomplete.

But as I learned to my anger, neither I nor any other ordinary members of the Divinity School community could attend any panels of "Loving God and Neighbor." All of them were closed—extremely unusual for this institution. The purpose of Dean Harold Attridge's email was not invitation but warning: "*I am writing today to let you know how these events might impact life on the [Yale Divinity School] Quad*" (his emphasis).

He continued in normal font. "Firstly, some of you have been asking about any adjustments regarding dress or behavior that might make both you and our guests feel more comfortable during their visit here. I have attached for your information a document prepared by the Reconciliation Program at YCF [Yale Center for Faith and Culture] to guide all staff directly associated with the upcoming workshop and conference in regard to dress and behavior."

My anger grew as I read the attachment, with its tips that would make me almost legal on the streets of Tehran, but quite uncomfortable running errands in the Quad, among my friends and in the middle of the summer.

Because we seek to have a ministry of reconciliation, it is our aim to defer to our *guests'* [author's emphasis] sense of propriety whenever possible, by behaving and dressing in a manner that reflects the honor and dignity we wish to bestow upon our guests. In this specific context, Muslims and Christians are working together to organize this conference, but Christians are the primary hosts, meaning that during this conference we deferentially choose to define "decency," "honor" and "modesty" by what our Muslim guests consider "decent," "honorable" and "modest" (rather than by our own culture's definitions), giving new cultural expression to the dignity and respectability with which we normally conduct ourselves.

When last I checked, the worldwide norm of hospitality was that the guest accepts the way things are done where he is visiting (not that he himself should have to do anything forbidden to him at home) or stays away. But here we were being asked to "defer" in all "definitions"—not just in our actions, that is, but in our thoughts. (This, I guess, would make Yemeni "honor killings" of young women, on the suspicion of sexual impropriety or merely to cover up their rape by their brothers, honorable in our minds.) We were to do this merely to allow meetings between some of our associates and people who would not, for fear of defilement, enter the same building we entered in our usual clothes and with our usual manners.

"Guidance" from an authoritative institution is really precept and command. "Please be courteous toward others and refrain from walking on the grass" is not a request; nor was this a case of "Employees must wash hands": the email went to everyone.

When I had to go to the Divinity School during the week the conference was there (it

moved to the Law School for the second week), I steadfastly—okay, provocatively—wore what I normally would have and behaved as I normally do. (Friends reading this are snorting, but they need to admit that dowdiness, frankness, and a crude sense of humor don't exactly make me a spawn of Satan.) On my second set of errands, I had on sandals and an unbecoming, loose, short-sleeved, ankle-length dress with a medium neckline, and I asked at reception about parking for a visit a male friend was planning to make over the weekend. (I have a Divinity School apartment across from the Quad, because I use the library in the Quad to do research on the Bible.) One of the many extra security guards hovered, visibly unhappy, between me and a woman in a high-security outfit who was seated at a table covered with folders—but she disappeared within seconds anyway.

I am infatuated with Yale Divinity School. No institution has ever treated me better. But it isn't simply that I was ticked off (though I was) at being asked not to wear sandals or speak at any length to any male or even smile at one or shake one's hand, in order to accommodate a gathering I was excluded from, though it was held in my workplace. It's that the Western leaders of what may be the major push for Christian-Muslim reconciliation appear to be so single-mindedly zealous, so prone to create impressions in conflict with reality, and so oblivious of what this could lead to, that a mere waste of time and money might be the *best* outcome.

The first person to bring together the African National Congress and the white apartheid government for talks was H. W. van der Merwe, whom I knew only after the first multiracial elections, when he was a rejected candidate for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and dying of cancer. In decades of quiet activism (he raised money to educate Mandela's daughters, for example), he had always been concerned that reconciliation be solid, because eventually more people can die from the results of a

false peace than from the original violent conflict. The reconciliation of groups is not a magical process that needs only to get started, as if “you just talk to people and meet them face to face, and you see how much like you they are.” They’re probably not much at all like you, and if you pretend otherwise to move things along, you dribble a poison into the water that everyone will be drinking.

Americans are offended at intimations of impossibility, that enemy of inspiration and freedom. Don’t tell Americans that they can’t do certain things, or shouldn’t even try certain things, because the nature of things is against it. The only way you can get away with such statements is by discussing rights, because these are the guardians of inspiration and freedom. This is how I intend to get away with discussing the necessary limits of reconciliation between Christians and Muslims.

I would be thrown out of the Religious Society of Friends (well, “elderred,” anyway) for suggesting that any two groups are beyond the hope of reconciliation, but few in the West could object to the statement that we have to approach others sincerely, as the human-rights cultures we are. That doesn’t mean accepting nothing about others, demanding that they become like us before we even talk to them, but it does mean refusing the same kind of demand from them. If in any instance this principle results in not being able to talk right now or in not being able to talk about a given topic, it isn’t a defeat but a mere acknowledgement of facts, the first step in any mediation that has a chance.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission didn’t achieve real reconciliation because it neglected the truth. This was, on the one side, that Europeans are very attached to their justice system and were appalled to see its essentials rushed offstage, in however worthy a cause—in fact, they couldn’t imagine a cause that wouldn’t be perverted by this expediency: they thought that sharing the human rights they had enjoyed as a minority should come

before anything else. On the other side, the truth was that poverty had led Africans to conceive human rights in starkly material terms: the long delay in reparations and the paltry amounts paid made the chance the victims had to tell their stories seem trivial. It was as if the two sides themselves weren’t meeting, but that instead there was a hasty mock-up of either, draped over representatives neither chose.

Many of these were activist scholars and clergy, impossible to badmouth without seeming to be against peace, love, and understanding. But it quickly became evident that their interests were far from identical with those of the people they claimed to speak for. They were “religious and moral leaders” of—at most—divided and very restless constituencies. Even Desmond Tutu’s fan base was largely foreign, and the dedication of the whole of it was nothing in comparison to what Winnie Madikezela-Mandela could command from a single crowd while she was questioned by the TRC about her role in the death of a young boy. The commissioners were like parents who demand handshakes and apologies from children who are still yelling, “But what about—?” parents much more interested in a quiet life and the credit for a well-disciplined household than whether or not Billy is raising a possum under his bed or Uncle Bert is touching Susie. And no commissioner was without powerful political ties. If embarrassment for the ruling African National Congress or its current allies from the old regime ever emerged from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, it was not the commissioners’ fault.

It is natural to suspect (especially because of the much greater secrecy) that both sides of the “Common Word” project have motivations—if only careerism—beyond the desire to see Christians and Muslims kill each other less often. And it somehow makes sense that ordinary people worldwide are not gushing in letters to the editor and in coffee houses, “Thank *goodness* that they’re talking to each other! Now every-

thing will be okay.” (*The New Haven Register* ran a different kind of outburst from a local—which reminds me that I want some credit here: at least I didn’t call the organizers “pathetic weenies.”) “A Common Word” emerged from Jordan, whose monarchy shamelessly sucks up to Western elites (even to the extent of donating much cash to the good cause of New England prep school education) to protect itself against its own citizens’ demands for democracy; Jordan’s Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad was one of the “notable leaders” at the conference. John Kerry, not noted for religious activism but for other aspirations, gave the opening address at the conference.

The gathering included operatives from theocracies and Islamicist movements, whose backgrounds showed no striking interest in coexistence with Christianity, but rather in proselytizing, banning all media that “expose the movement of certain body parts which are sensual,” and advising the state on the enforcement of such laws. Christian participants, in their public statements, apologized for the Crusades but shied away from the human rights issues the people they purport to speak for consider crucial. The questions are unanswerable. If what’s going on is politics, and we’re all going to be subject to the results, then why can’t we select the participants or even listen in? If it’s theology, then what could the secrecy possibly be for?

I would have no way of knowing whether the actual followers, spiritual and political, of the Muslim leaders invited to “Loving God and Neighbor in Word and Deed” are satisfied. The Muslim guests’ presentation of themselves, however, was downright commendable in its forthrightness. Muslims never seem to fudge their identity; a devout Muslim wouldn’t take off her veil in public for any reason, and blood might spill if a Muslim pundit asked her to do so in order to make Westerners more “comfortable.” How else could I make them “comfortable,” she might ask—with sex or alcohol?

But the Western organizers of the conference have not been honest about me or

the majority of Christians. Admittedly, an explanation is challenging. Among the most passionate beliefs Western Christians tend to have is in the right to believe in anything or nothing and to do as they please in all matters related to religion. *U.S. News and World Report* casually cites a Quinnipiac University poll that would baffle any Muslim who has not been raised in the West: 55% of U.S. voters oppose same-sex marriage, but most of these don’t want the government banning it. Disapproval, in the West, does not equal a desire to suppress.

This kind of superficially divided thinking is not religion hacked up by secularism but is deeply theological in its origins and growth. One of the speeches opening the Law School part of the conference did touch on two basic anomalies often cited in Christian doctrine: the Incarnation and the Trinity. After a year of hanging around a divinity school, it has become part of my own credo that, during the past five hundred years at least, Christians have not cared all that much about the Trinity. Muslims are alarmed at its potential suggestion of polytheism, but Christians have merely settled with joy into what it used to help explain, the Incarnation. Here, while Muslims quail at the idea of the God becoming human and dying in pain and humiliation, Christians embrace the personal love of God the story invites them to, without being bothered by the apparent paradoxes. In fact, that God made His Son human and let Him die on behalf of degraded humanity is the dearest to us of all Christian beliefs. But I will stand on my head (exposing my demonic—though not very attractive—ankles and knees) if any Christian speaker at the conference insisted on the social and political implications of this, in spite of the huge costs the Christian world has paid to vindicate them: Christianity, as a personal relationship with God, must be chosen and practiced in freedom, without human authority getting in the way. To admit this would be to discredit Christian participation in the conference. How many Chris-

tians believe their religious leaders—“religious leaders” carrying a very different meaning in the West—have the authority even to talk about them beyond their backs to outsiders, let alone to negotiate on their behalf?

A point on which Muslims are very persuasive is that how we behave in public is not a trivial matter. It symbolizes our basic beliefs. In 1660, Puritan officials marched the Quaker Mary Dyer to the center of Boston and hanged her for preaching. She had defied several warnings and would have been allowed to leave town unmolested, but she believed that telling her version of the truth—that God spoke without clerical mediation to the individual—in public was worth her life. The Puritans had persecuted her as a woman, exhuming her deformed, stillborn baby and displaying it as evidence of her “monstrous” heresy, but she had persisted in her ministry. For a woman not to accept a restricted role, for her to develop her gifts to their fullest and share them as widely as possible for the glory of God their Creator, has always been in the eyes of Quakers a form of worship, and to die for this is martyrdom. It’s not from fashionable gender touchiness that I don’t refrain from saying in public what I think, and that I don’t dress in public as if I serve different functions there than men. It’s my religion. If other women do the same for irreligious or even anti-religious reasons, I don’t mind. Quakers were prominent in the fight for women’s rights, and it would be against our religion to consider that a gift with strings attached.

But Quakers no longer lead the pack in Christian tolerance. Many denominations now embrace gay and lesbian believers, of which there is a large community at Yale Divinity School. In this connection, the attitude of the YDS-affiliated conference organizers teeters on the edge of a full denial of who they themselves are. They have taught and ministered to and socialized with openly homosexual students, treating them just the same as others and helping

them in their careers wherever possible. They would be in serious legal trouble if they didn’t. But it wasn’t merely the dress or behavior of certain students that would have been the problem in the Quad during the conference, but their existence, their nature (which—believe me—nothing could have hidden). It may not have been a coincidence that the conference was in the summer, when fewer students were around and the most obviously gay men were either overseas or at the other end of the continent. A few weeks later, and the Christian organizers would have had to explain to some of their guests how it was that the youth who had just swished by was not going to be executed but ordained.

The conference discussion panels, to judge from their titles, were whitewashes of these awkward but useful facts about Christianity. “God is Loving,” “Loving God,” “Loving Neighbor”—why not “Love and Ten Cents Will Get You a Cup of Coffee”? The Christian version of love could not have been presented in full, because it would have caused at least the Saudi and Iranian delegates to walk out. For Christians, conforming or enforcing love is not the prize, but rather the booby prize, for those who cannot give up the self and all of its petty customs. The kind of love that counts is love for a gay man whom the believer is afraid will burn in hell if he doesn’t change. The Christian way is, above all, to keep loving him, which can hardly include any coercion of his sexuality. (When that is tried, the great majority of Christians approve of the law intervening).

The Christian God gave up all of His power out of love, gave up even human dignity and human life. An image offensive to Muslims but indispensable to Christians was apparently kept out of the conference: the crucifix. Often worn over a woman’s breasts or on a man’s chest, it is an image not only of God, but also of God dying nearly naked and in agony. To Muslims, it is blasphemy broadcast through lewd idolatry. No explanation is likely to change their minds, but we should at least try to get

across our commitment. We should state plainly that not only are we inspired by this image, but that we shaped our societies around it. It led us to express love not through power but through its sacrifice, so that, over time, we came to see defending the weak as the only legitimate use of force, limited our governments accordingly, and emerged looking—to Muslims—thoroughly godless. We're not: we've merely got the societies our God demanded, and most of us are happy to serve our God within them.

The cost of a phony love-fest between Christian and Muslim leaders could be high. There is already a great imbalance in knowledge or respect, if not both. As part of our confirmation course, when I was a teenage Methodist in rural Ohio in the 1970s, we were taken not only to a synagogue but to a mosque and learned the basics of both faiths. But the Muslim cleric who lectured to us clearly disapproved of Christianity, and the minister misled him to keep the peace. We don't want to be called Mohammedans, the Muslim huffed; we

don't worship Mohammed, who was a man. The minister jumped in to assure him that we were just the same—we didn't call ourselves Jesus-ans or anything like that. I nearly gasped at the lie, but I wasn't bold enough to challenge it.

I'm bolder now. (It's amazing what a decade in Africa will do to you.) And truth in theology while theology approaches politics is worth a bold defense. Essential to Muslim extremism is the notion that the West is decadent and not attached to its professed values. "Violence will weaken political support for Israel" has a religious parallel: "The West resists adopting Islam only because Muslims do not push hard enough against Christianity." Not to speak up for Christianity with complete honesty sends our Muslim interlocutors home with a time-bomb version of us: either that we have no objection to being like them, or that we are in essence like them already. America has made the mistake of assuming our values are universal, and we may be encouraging the same kind of assumption about ourselves.

Herodotus's wheel

by Barry Strauss

Herodotus is the historian of freedom. The founder of history as a literary genre, he is one of two Greek geniuses who have set the agenda of Western historiography for twenty-five hundred years. The other, of course, is Thucydides. We tend to think of them as a balancing act: Herodotus is the historian of the Persian Wars, Thucydides the historian of the Peloponnesian War; Herodotus chronicles the rise of Greece, Thucydides its decline; Thucydides is the hard-nosed proto-political scientist, Herodotus the softer, more open-ended proto-anthropologist. In truth, there is nothing soft about Herodotus. He is the chronicler of the habits of the human heart that make freedom worth fighting for and make it possible to defeat despotism. He is equally the connoisseur of human frailty who knows every step of the slippery slope that leads right back to despotism. There is no more important book for students of the Western past to read.

It is not an easy read, however, because Herodotus is also the historian of complexity. The word "history" comes from the Greek *historia*, "inquiry." Herodotus states at the outset that his work displays the fruit of his inquiries. They were not few in number. The rise and fall of empires, the chronicles of Babylon, Egypt, Lydia, and Persia; the life of the Greek city-state; the ins and outs of everyday affairs from Italy to India, the will of the gods and the lies told by mortals all march across the five-

hundred-odd pages of his great book. The historian's style is charmingly—and mad-deningly—discursive. In one short paragraph, for example, he describes the history of relations between two states including the sealing of a military alliance, an oracle, a past diplomatic mission, the negotiations for the acquisition of gold for a statue of Apollo, and the current location of the statue.

Herodotus seems never to be able to resist an anecdote. Has any historian ever had a better eye for vivid detail? Yet his anecdotes have a point. There is so much laughter and sheer joy in the *Histories* that it is easy to forget the tragedy. "Human prosperity never remains constant," says Herodotus. Great states become small and small great, and so he studies both. More important, states are nothing more than the men and women who make them. Herodotus recognizes the terrible complexity of things but he is not a relativist. The gods are just. They want men to live justly and moderately, and so character counts above all. Affairs of state reflect the actions of individuals, so Herodotus constantly weaves back and forth from a cast of thousands to lone actors, and from kings on their thrones to forgotten faces in the crowd of a small city-state.

Herodotus's inquiries reflect the seriousness of his theme. Rather than simply following his curiosity, he wants to understand what was at stake in the conflict between

Greeks and Persians. As he writes at the outset, "May the great and wonderful deeds—some brought forth by the Hellenes, others by the barbarians—not go unsung; as well as the causes that led them to make war on each other." He also states particular concern with preservation; he writes, he says, in order "that human events . . . not fade with time." Something that he does not state, but which would have been clear to any Greek, was his debt to Homer, the national poet. Like the author of the *Iliad*, Herodotus sets his story in the clash of East and West. It was an old conflict, antedating the Greco-Persian Wars—and they in turn were not new. By Herodotus's day those wars had lasted on and off for over a century, far longer than the ten years of the Homeric Trojan War. Yet each war tested a proposition that was instantly recognized: for Homer, glory; for Herodotus, freedom.

Like the subject of the *Odyssey*, Herodotus was a great traveler. Although he spent much of his life in Athens, he was born and raised in Anatolia (what is today Turkey), and finally settled in a Greek colony in southern Italy. His hometown, Halicarnassus (today Bodrum), was a port peopled by Greeks, Persians, and Carians (an Anatolian people). A tyranny governed the city. According to ancient biographical tradition, Herodotus played a part in an unsuccessful revolution and so was forced into an exile's life. No doubt, but like Odysseus, Herodotus would probably have been bored at home. He traveled with gusto: through Anatolia and Greece, and to Egypt, Phoenicia, North Africa, Italy, and possibly the Black Sea. To get a sense of the span of his world, consider this: Halicarnassus was later conquered by Alexander the Great, while Thurii, the Italian city where Herodotus spent his last years, was later conquered by Spartacus.

No one should approach the wide world of Herodotus without a guide. Thanks to Robert B. Strassler, the editor of the *Landmark Herodotus*, we now have as fine a historical introduction to the *Histories* as we

could imagine. This splendid book now takes its place alongside Strassler's excellent *Landmark Thucydides* as a monument of accessible scholarship.¹

I have been using the *Landmark Thucydides* (in paperback) in the college classroom for the last decade and my students can attest to its value. The *Landmark Herodotus* is just as good, if not better. Andrea L. Purvis's translation is accurate and readable and accompanied by generous notes on every page. The text is bracketed by prefaces, an introduction, a dated outline, and by twenty-one appendices written by classical scholars.

The 127 maps are a dream. The many photographs are gorgeous. The index alone is magnificent, from the sharks off Greece's Mount Athos to the ostrich-skin shields of the Makai (a North African people), from the self-sacrifice of the Greek youths Cleobis and Biton to the siege of the Assyrian city of Nineveh, from the slaves sent as tribute to the Persian king Darius to the Spartan response to omens—and that is just from the letter *s*.

The *Landmark Herodotus* greatly eases the reader's navigation of the Herodotean sea of details. One of the greatest storytellers in all of literature, Herodotus is enjoyable indeed. He is no fictionalizer, however, in spite of age-old charges that he was not the father of history but the father of lies. Indeed, he carefully distinguishes fact from what "they say"; often he expresses reservations or doubts about others' opinions. He reveals sources and admits uncertainty far more than Thucydides ever does.

Ancient editors divided Herodotus into nine books. For the first four books, two stories run on parallel tracks; in the fifth book they converge. Books One through Four recount, on the one hand, the rise of the Persian Empire and, on the other hand, the struggle in the Greek city-states between tyranny and freedom. Books Five through Nine turn to Persia's attempt to conquer Greece and the Greeks' successful defense.

¹ *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, edited by Robert B. Strassler; Pantheon, 1,024 pages, \$45.

Founded by Cyrus the Great *c.* 550 B.C., the Persian Empire was the largest state in history to that date. The empire reached from Thrace (modern Bulgaria) and Egypt in the West to today's Pakistan in the East. Something like one-fifth of humanity lived under Persian rule. By comparison, Greece was tiny. Yet when the Persian king Xerxes (*c.* 486–465 B.C.)—the “Great King,” in Greek parlance—led an expedition across the Aegean in 480 B.C. the Greeks defeated him. Not only that, they drove the Persians back across the Aegean. They liberated the Greek islands and the city-states of Anatolia's coasts, beginning with the Aegean and then eventually continuing southwards to the Mediterranean and northwards through the Straits to the Black Sea. Herodotus wanted to understand why.

What was it about the Greeks that allowed them to stay free? How could little Greece have defeated the mighty Persian invaders? What was “Greekness”—that is, Hellenism? Or were the Greeks different from the various other peoples who had stymied Persian expansion: the Scythians, Ethiopians, Libyans, and Massagetae (of today's Kazakhstan)? Why did the Ionian or eastern Greeks, who lived on the Aegean Coast of what is today's Turkey, fail to throw off Persian rule when their western cousins on the Greek mainland succeeded? Why did Athens defeat the Persian expedition that landed at Marathon in 490 B.C.? Why did most of the Greeks *not* resist Xerxes when the Persians invaded Greece again in 480? After all, of the hundreds of Greek city-states in the Aegean basin, only thirty-one *poleis* united against Xerxes.

The textbook explanation for the outcome in 480 B.C. is Persian hubris and Greek moderation. Arrogance blinded Xerxes. It was naked aggression to attempt to conquer Greece. He had no sense of limits; he was unjust, indecent, and careless of nature's rules (such as not launching a fleet too big to be sheltered by any harbor in the season of summer storms). He planned to cow the Greeks with Persian manpower and equip-

ment, forgetting Greece's superiority in infantry and seamanship as well as its home-turf advantage. The Greeks, meanwhile, kept their heads and won the war. All true, but what gives Herodotus's account its power is his understanding of the reasons for Xerxes' failure and their universality; there are laws governing human affairs. There was nothing inherently arrogant about Persians or prudent about Greeks.

Indeed, in earlier days, the Persians had behaved admirably. Consider a proposal made to Cyrus after his early conquests. A group of his advisers argued that the Persians leave their small and rough country in exchange for a better land. Cyrus responded with sarcasm. He advised his people to carry out the proposal, “with the recommendation that as they did so they should prepare to be rulers no longer, but rather to become subjects under the rule of others. This was so, he said, because soft places tend to produce soft men; for the same land cannot yield both wonderful crops and men who are noble and courageous in war.” His advisers got the point. “They had lost the argument with Cyrus, and chose to dwell in a poor land rather than to be slaves to others and to cultivate the plains.”

But the days of poverty and virtue did not last. Within three generations, Persia went from iron to perfume. Cyrus founded an empire; his grandson, Xerxes, lost its possessions in the Aegean. The wheel turns with terrible regularity. Adversity leads to courage, courage leads to freedom, freedom leads to victory, victory leads to prosperity, prosperity leads to corruption, corruption leads to arrogance, arrogance leads to decline, and decline leads to servitude.

In 480 B.C. the Greeks were at the high point of the cycle. Poverty made them tough and courageous, like the Persians of old. To this the Greeks added intelligence and respect for law as well as moderation. They fought the corruption of tyrants and liberated men from masters. The greatest liberator of all was Sparta. For all its militarism, Sparta championed the rule of law and opposed tyranny everywhere.

No wonder that the emotional high point of the *Histories* comes with Sparta's stand at Thermopylae. Herodotus recognizes the Spartans' courage, prowess, and military excellence, and he cites the nobility and glory of King Leonidas and the three hundred who fought to the death rather than surrender. A problem, however, arises. Faced with Persian aggression, the Spartans would always have "performed great feats and died honorably," but that was not decisive against Xerxes. In truth, "the Athenians proved to be the saviors of Hellas."

In Herodotus's judgment, as long as Persia maintained command of the sea, Greek resistance on land would have ultimately proved futile. Otherwise, the Persians could have turned any defensive line on land by disembarking troops in the Greek rear. The Greeks needed a navy to defeat Persia, and Athens was the only state that could provide that navy. The reason was democracy, a regime whose dynamism the historian describes:

an equal voice in government has beneficial impact not merely in one way, but in every way: the Athenians, while ruled by tyrants, were no better in war than any of the peoples living around them, but once they were rid of tyrants, they became by far the best of all. Thus it is clear that they were deliberately slack while repressed, since they were working for a master, but that after they were freed, they became ardently devoted to working hard so as to win achievements for themselves as individuals.

Democracy made Athenians innovators; it gave them the boldness and sense of common purpose to abandon their homeland in 480 B.C. and risk everything on their fleet. After evacuating most of their country, the Athenians led the Greeks in the naval battle at Salamis and crushed the Persian fleet. They thereby set the stage for final victory the following year in a land battle led by Sparta.

Democracy saved Athens and Athens saved Greece. This may sound triumphalist, but in

fact Herodotus found democracy disquieting. Ancient democracy was direct democracy and popular assemblies were easily misled. "It would seem to be easier to deceive and impose upon a whole throng of people than to do so to just one individual," commented Herodotus about a decision by the Athenian assembly to help the Ionian Greeks make war on Persia—a decision that Sparta had prudently foregone. Nor did Herodotus trust Themistocles, the statesman who founded the Athenian fleet and shepherded it to victory, a man as unscrupulous as he was brilliant.

But that was the least of Herodotus's criticism. He had been just a child at the time of Xerxes's invasion of Greece in 480–79. By the time he completed his book, about fifty years later, he was a mature man who lived in an ugly world. The Greeks had gone from unity in expelling the invader to making war on each other. Athens had turned into Greece's leading sea power and its most vibrant economy; it presided over a naval confederacy that, in fact, had become an Athenian empire in all but name. Athens was, paradoxically, a democracy at home that engaged in imperialism abroad, even to the point of forcing some states to become democracies against the will of much of their elite. Or maybe not so paradoxically.

An Athenian might have defended his country by citing the realities of power. The alternative to Athenian imperialism in the Aegean was not local autonomy but Persian imperialism. To keep the Persians out, Athens could not have avoided difficult choices. It could not have counted on the cooperation of the other Greek city-states; on the contrary, Athens had to expect to find chiselers, free riders, rebels, and traitors. It was only to be anticipated that some Greeks would resist Athenian leadership, and resist violently. After all, when Xerxes invaded, as many Greeks fought for the Persians as for the Hellenic League. In order to keep Greece autonomous after achieving victory in 479, therefore, Athens would have to deny individual Greeks their autonomy. And it had to be prepared to use force.

Sparta, meanwhile, did not see things that way. From the Spartan point of view, Athens threatened to destabilize the military alliance that guaranteed Sparta's security and that undergirded Spartan pride. Sparta remained Greece's leading land power and was the staunch defender of a conservative order. Sparta opposed Athens at many a turn; the two states and their allies had already come to blows before when in 431 B.C. they went back to war. The ensuing conflict, today known as the Peloponnesian War, was more terrible than anything that had preceded it. It lasted on and off for twenty-seven years and its traumas permanently ended the era of cultural confidence bred in the wake of Greece's victories in 480 and 479. The new age would be an era of doubt.

Herodotus wrote in the early years of the Peloponnesian War. Many read the last few pages of Herodotus as a commentary on Athenian imperialism. In those pages he describes the successful campaign in 479 B.C. of an Athenian general, Xanthippus, against a Persian tyrant, Artyaktes, who had lorded it over the Gallipoli Peninsula. Thanks to Xanthippus, Athens now controlled the Hellespont (also known as the Dardanelles), as strategic in antiquity as the Persian Gulf is today, because it controlled the grain route from the Black Sea to the Aegean.

But Xanthippus went too far. He punished Artyaktes by nailing him to a plank—in a kind of crucifixion—overlooking the spot where Xerxes had bridged the Hellespont. First, Xanthippus forced Artyaktes to watch his son being stoned to death. Xanthippus, as Herodotus's audience would have known, had a son of his own. That boy eventually became first man in Athens, the iron-willed imperialist who in 431 B.C. led Athens into the Peloponnesian War rather than make concessions to Sparta: Pericles.

Was Herodotus's parable a warning to Athens? Indeed. Did he want Athens to give up its empire and return to its old days of poverty and virtue? Not likely, because Herodotus knew that Persia still waited in the wings; fifty years after Xerxes' invasion, Athens' fleet kept Greece free. Success was spoiling Athens, though, and the path from Xanthippus to Xerxes was all too short. Perhaps a dose of Sparta's simple virtues might have restrained Athens' arrogance. Disunity had nearly wrecked the Greek cause in 480 B.C. and future problems loomed menacingly. Herodotus would, I think, have wanted Greece's two leading cities to patch up their quarrel. He would not, however, have wanted Greece to cease protecting the freedom that it had once fought for so splendidly.

Prokofiev abroad

by John Simon

Three things give diaries universal interest: the eminence of the diarist; his or her psychological, philosophical, or political acumen; and a distinctive style of writing. The historical significance and the writer's sense of humor are not to be overlooked either. On all these counts, Sergey Prokofiev's diaries score very high indeed.

The second volume, *Behind the Mask: Diaries 1915–1923*, has recently appeared.¹ The first volume, *Diaries 1901–1914: Prodigious Youth*, is of somewhat lesser interest, as prior to age twenty-four Prokofiev (1891–1953) had not yet reached creative maturity. The third volume remains to be published in English, but even that will take us only to 1933, after which, though there are some autobiographical writings, systematic diary-keeping ends.

This, possibly because Prokofiev was then beginning to make return trips to Russia from his self-imposed exile of eighteen years before conclusively resettling in the Soviet Union in 1936. There, such outspoken comments as the diaries contain could have led to prison if not execution. Even the existing diaries were left in American safekeeping by the homebound composer.

This immediately raises the question of why Prokofiev, who did reasonably well in the United States and even better in France

and elsewhere in Western Europe—and who, while claiming to be neither for nor against the Revolution, had some pretty severe things to say about the Bolsheviks—would have wanted to move permanently to totalitarian Russia. The answer is found in a 1933 interview with Serge Moreux: “Foreign air does not suit my inspiration, because I am Russian, and that is to say the least suited of men to be an exile, to remain myself in a psychological climate that isn't of my race.”

There are, of course, exceptions—think of Prokofiev's friend, the classical composer Vladimir Dukelsky, who as Vernon Duke became an even more successful light-music composer in America. On the whole, however, unlike so many immigrants who blend into their new nationality, Russians tend to remain exiles forever.

What is good about the Prokofiev diaries in English is that Anthony Phillips proves himself an able translator and introducer, and an especially apt and generous annotator. His notes go beyond mere clarification, providing such things as the rules of tennis, Prokofiev's favorite sport, or the history of the Brevoort, an artsy New York hotel where Prokofiev spent a brief time. Such things fill us in on the world of Prokofiev, on things that may have, consciously or not, affected him.

Behind the Mask is a problem for the reviewer. Its 713 pages (discounting the intro-

¹ *Diaries 1915–1923: Behind the Mask* by Sergey Prokofiev, translated by Anthony Phillips; Cornell University Press, 775 pages, \$49.95.

duction and various appendices) feature more characters than the longest novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, a good many of whom keep Proustianly recurring in different guises, and, despite helpful notes, are a serious challenge to the memory. Even harder to keep up with are the many journeys and scattered sojourns: "I am going to travel all over the world," the young man had declared, and made a pretty good stab at fulfilling his boast.

The multiplicity of Prokofiev's extracurricular enthusiasms may also leave the reviewer stymied. They include astronomy, botany, philosophy (Schopenhauer and Kant), literature (both reading and writing), card games, championship chess (Prokofiev beat Capablanca and drew with Lasker), languages, ancient history, archaeology, movies (though he never mentions a title), and even roller-coasters.

And then there are the women: besides a few serious love affairs (though always in fear of marriage), numerous characteristic shorter involvements or one-night stands, as well as unconsummated flirtations, momentary arousals, and recorded yearnings. At the end of this volume, however, Sergey capitulates to Carolina Codina, who progresses from Lina through Linette to Ptashka (Birdie), and gets married.

But what about Prokofiev the composer? This volume takes him from revisions of *Autumn*, a slight but charming favorite of his, to rewriting the Second Piano Concerto till well after having completed the Third, one of his masterpieces. Here he composes, among other works, his marvelous First Violin Concerto, the tumultuous *Scythian Suite*, and the ever-popular *Classical Symphony*. Also the chamber version of the jaunty *Overture on Hebrew Themes*, and two major ballets, the humorous *Chout (The Buffoon)* and the mechanistic *Pas d'acier (The Steel Step)*. Furthermore any number of important piano pieces, including the splendid *Visions fugitives*, and the final versions of the Third and Fourth Piano Sonatas. Moreover, the *Five Poems for Voice and Piano* and *Five*

Poems of Anna Akhmatova and, good things coming in fives, *Five Poems of Konstantin Balmont*.

But most excitingly—and for Prokofiev often most frustratingly—the operas: the first version of *The Gambler*, which kept getting bumped or postponed, either out of incomprehension or because of political circumstances—and *The Love for Three Oranges*, which, after untold vicissitudes, finally did get produced. He also works on the first version of one of his two greatest operas, *The Fiery Angel*, the much delayed complete performance of whose final version he sadly did not live to see.

There is innovation in most of Prokofiev's music, except when it was hamstrung by Stalin's edicts. Its sophistication comes, I like to think, at least partly from his travels, his encounters with diverse cultures and the individuals stamped by them. Journeys occupy a prominent place in this volume. First, the fraught wartime trip to Italy at the invitation of Diaghilev, for whom, he tells the young composer, there was in Russia, "After Stravinsky . . . only you." Which did not deter the great impresario from rejecting the would-be ballet *Ala and Lolli* that Prokofiev, a staunch reshaper and reuser, then turned into the popular *Scythian Suite*.

During this trip, young Sergey declares "the most striking of the Romanian women . . . not particularly good-looking, while the most dashing men fall a long way short of an English gentleman," and the people of Serbia "greatly more attractive than the Bulgarians." Traveling with Diaghilev from Rome to Naples, Prokofiev offers an acute portrait of the master showman who "would with irrefutable clarity demonstrate the justice of [his] propositions, however absurd."

In Italy, Prokofiev meets for the second time Stravinsky, whose work he previously did not care for, but now does, especially after the two of them play the piano-duet version of *The Rite of Spring*, and the older composer, "seized by the wildest enthusiasm" for three works by Prokofiev, declares him "a real Russian composer, the only one

to be found in Russia.” Throughout the book, their touchy relations—sometimes admiring, sometimes cool—make for fascinating reading.

So, too, Prokofiev’s relationship with Rachmaninoff, especially tricky when both were giving piano recitals all over America, after which there would be curious meetings in the green rooms that ranged from enthusiastic through amicable to chill. There was, to a lesser degree, an ambivalent relationship with Nikolay Medtner, who remarked about Prokofiev’s compositions “either this is not music or I am not a musician,” but much later, flattered by his piano works being performed by Prokofiev, invited him to a convivial dinner.

Even more spellbinding is the account of a later and longer journey, Prokofiev’s 1918 escape from a Russia more and more submerged in the nascent Revolution to the safety of what was meant to be Argentina, but what, upon his missing an infrequent southbound boat from Japan, led him instead to the United States.

The arduous first leg of that journey, to Vladivostok, was at the last time Transsiberian trains were running, in the midst of bloody Red and White skirmishing which repeatedly put Sergey in harm’s way. The next leg was to Japan, which he found interesting, particularly after an evening spent with a Russian pianist and two “completely wild [Japanese] girls” in a café’s private room, where “the four of us behaved disgracefully.” After some unsatisfactory adventures with “naked geishas,” Sergey eventually records, “In the evening had a Japanese girl, but caution rather inhibited my pleasure.” Despite his “very much liking geishas,” he was later to write, “American women are much better than I thought. Japanese women are less good.”

But this victory for American women was slow in coming. There was to be the dubious compliment “American women behave more freely than we are used to” and the even more questionable, “In the evening I had an American girl, typical of Americans

in being beautiful, flat-chested, and unresponsive.” Finally, “A really gorgeous American girl. At last.”

Because of the dicey goings-on in Russia and fear of infiltration by Communists, U.S. immigration authorities were giving Russians a hard time. Sergey underwent some detention and protracted questioning in San Francisco. “Do you believe in polygamy?” they asked. “I do not have even one wife.” “Have you ever been in prison?” “Yours.” Once admitted to America, he is often sorely impecunious; given that agents are unreliable, recitals are hard to come by, and there is also a bout of serious illness and hospitalization. But Prokofiev already has a modest international reputation, and things begin to look up.

Back in Russia, Sergey had become engaged to petite, pretty Nina Meshcherskaya, but partly because her parents thought her too young, and partly because of her own pusillanimity, nothing came of that. There seems to have been sex with some other Russian girls, but the most interesting nexus was with the gifted singer Nina Koshetz, girlfriend of the married Rachmaninoff until he took off for America. Just what went on between this Nina and Sergey is unclear, he being rather discreet about such matters. Certain it is that when both of them resided in America, Nina sang *Fata Morgana* at the premiere of *Love for the Three Oranges*.

All in all, Sergey had a good youth in prerevolutionary Russia. Coming from a solid bourgeois family, he had enough money for frequent trips around the country, often with his close friend and coeval Boris Bashkirov, who, under the pen-name Boris Verin, wrote undistinguished poetry. Young Prokofiev owned a country dacha, and often summered in the Caucasus, sometimes with his beloved widowed mother.

In America, Prokofiev did not lack for, mostly Russian, friends or for female company. His main girlfriends were the beautiful and passionate Stella Adler, a mediocre

actress but, later on, a prominent acting teacher; Dagmar Godovsky, the freewheeling daughter of the famous pianist Leopold Godovsky, who later become a minor actress in Hollywood movies; and the comely, elegant, and cultured divorcee Maria Baranovskaya, nicknamed Frou-frou. A knowledgeable former Meyerhold student, she proposed marriage to Sergey, was politely rejected, but remained a good friend. And then there was the first wife-to-be, Carolina Codina, of mixed Spanish, Polish, and French descent, a pretty and proper young woman with whom Sergey made slow but steady progress. Often there were somewhat farcical parallel affairs. Americans on the whole did not impress Prokofiev. They “have no conception of poetry,” he complains. Or: “The musical perceptions of the Americans are not sufficiently refined to cause me to pay much attention to them.” They are not even “sophisticated enough to cherish the luxury of such a treasure as Niagara,” whose beauties the travel writer in Prokofiev eloquently extols. Alas, “the American soul is dollar-shaped; here even honor comes wrapped in a dollar bill.” Rachmaninoff “has sold his soul to the devil for American dollars,” giving the kind of concert in America “for which in Russia they would have thrown a dead cat at him.” But even Prokofiev, as recitalist, learns some Bach, Beethoven, and Schumann: “A waste of time, but I have to make some concessions to American taste, which always wants ‘something we know.’”

The composer gradually infiltrates American high society, impressing wealthy men and their patronage-dispensing wives. Some of them publicize or even sponsor him, and his recitals and performances as soloist with various orchestras become often well-attended; proudly he counts, and minutely records, the increasing number of his curtain calls.

Yet with his operas in Chicago and New York there are cancellations—or endless postponements—and only sporadic advances in desperately needed dollars. Other than that, his chief worry is how to get his

mother out of Russia. He sends money, not always successfully, in various ways, and tries to arrange for a visa through sundry diplomatic maneuvers. Eventually, she gets as far as Vladivostok, where she is long stuck, and, with failing eyesight, skirts blindness. Still later she will finally be able to join him.

Trouble with agents and opera managements notwithstanding, he composes most days from nine to twelve; in the afternoons and evenings, he often orchestrates or revises. He also socializes, usually with friends in the arts, many of them Russian émigrés like himself. At last, thanks to the famed soprano Mary Garden’s brief but enlightened tenure at the head of the Chicago Opera, *The Love for Three Oranges* is successfully mounted in Chicago, and has a subsequent even better reception in New York. The critics, over the years, are often rough on Prokofiev—he loses no opportunity to mock or berate them in the diary—but even they begin to be won over. Ever more of his compositions are premiered, frequently under the Boston baton of his longtime booster and former publisher Serge Koussevitzky. He concertizes throughout America, and earns enough money for periodic trips to Europe—mostly France—where his reputation, in good part through performances by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, grows by leaps, if not quite bounds. *Chout* specially proves a big hit. Ravel declares it a work of genius, Stravinsky lauds it as the single modern work he could listen to with pleasure.

Prokofiev is also much relieved by his friend Boris Bashkirov’s escape from Russia. It is not long before almost everyone that mattered to him was in Western Europe: Mama, Linette, Boris, and himself, who had had his fill of America. “After American women,” we read, “French women are charming, elegant, and have such friendly manners.” There were no more vacillations as in America, where he had written, “I revolve between Stella and Linette as the earth spins between the moon and the sun.” No more simultaneous ordering of red roses for Linette and a bouquet of forget-

me-nots for Stella. From now on it was Linette: “from her perspective it was so easy and clear to see that [to marry] was what we should do. But to me marriage was like a heavy stone attached to my foot.”

Musical and literary life was eventful in Paris and Berlin. Literary, because in his spare time Prokofiev enjoyed writing short stories, some of which I find pretty good. He certainly writes well in his diaries, and was the author or co-author of most of his fine librettos. He often remarks that, were he not a composer, he would have been a prose writer or poet. In a sonneteering contest with his friend Boris, he was the easy winner.

Both in Russia and outside, he was great friends with the poet Konstantin Balmont, some of whose works he set to music. In Berlin, he also got to know the poet Valery Bryusov, whose novel *The Fiery Angel* he turned into an opera. Another poet-novelist, Andrey Bely, as the flirtatious angel Madiel and elusive Count Heinrich, was one of the models for that story, just as the long-suffering soldier Ruprecht, the other lover of the maddening heroine Renata, was based on Bryusov. The whole thing was a transposition into medieval Germany of a real-life love triangle.

Now he also met his admirer, the unruly poet-playwright Mayakovsky, Futurist and bohemian, with whom Sergey was ill at ease: “a fearful apache (I always wonder: is he going to hit me, not for any particular reason, just because?)” Still, like Diaghilev and Stravinsky, he enjoyed Mayakovsky’s declaiming his poetry “gratingly, with a cigarette between his teeth.”

Toward composers past and present, Prokofiev had often fluctuating, if not downright negative attitudes. He was intensely ambivalent about Berlioz, Debussy, and Richard Strauss (he found the man better than his music), and about John Alden Carpenter, the only American composer with whom he had friendly relations (he offered Sergey a spare pair of trousers when the latter’s only good pair was stolen). He

despised Meyerbeer and Saint-Saëns, but mostly admired Ravel, whom, to the Frenchman’s embarrassment, he called *maître*. Poulenc and Milhaud’s “occasionally interesting ideas disappeared into an abyss of bad taste.” Though he respected Puccini’s dramatic savvy, he disapproved of his music to the point of leaving *Tosca* after act two.

He sometimes performed Medtner, and usually liked the music of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, though not the latter’s songs. He was in favor of Scriabin (especially the later works), whom he once met and often performed. He generally endorsed the music of Miaskovsky, a close, lifelong friend. The Soviet commissar Artur Lourié he dismissed as both composer and human being. He had rather scant use for Lyadov, Glazunov, and the friendly Taneev, teachers at the Petersburg conservatoire. He had a few good words for Reinhold Glière, his private teacher, and for Nikolay Tche-repnin, the only conservatoire teacher who approved of his music, and he spotted the talent of Nikolay’s son, the very young Alexander.

While all these opinions are worth considering regardless of whether you agree with them, it is the complex artistic and human relations, as noted above, with Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff that are especially fascinating in their reciprocal fluctuations.

I have stressed Prokofiev’s talent as a writer; it is time to offer a sample.

In Paris, Diaghilev had asked me to play through to him *The Gambler* and *Three Oranges*, which provoked yet another attack on me for wasting time composing operas. Stravinsky chimed in to back him up, saying he also thought I was on the wrong path. A noisy altercation ensued, accompanied by much bad-tempered shrieking. I told Stravinsky that I was always ready to listen to his comments on orchestration, in which field I regard him as a master, but that he was in no position to lay down a general artistic direction, since he is himself not immune to error. Stravinsky, a man profoundly certain that he alone has discovered the true path of art and that all others are false,

became incandescent with rage and shouted at the top of his voice, hopping up and down like a sparrow. The gist of what he said was that orchestration could not be isolated from the rest of music: either he was a master in everything he did as a musician, or I did not understand him.

With the object of inflaming him to lose complete control of himself (his tirade interested me chiefly as a theatrical spectacle) I screamed at him: "How can you possibly presume to show me the way when I am nine years younger than you, and therefore nine years ahead of you! Any path forward is the true one, and yours is the path of the past generation!" The effect of this sally exceeds my powers to describe: we almost came to blows and were separated only with difficulty. None of this prevented us from going out together arm in arm, and meeting again in Berlin.

Anthony Phillips, the worthy editor, is also a good writer, but sometimes a sloppy one. Aside from some obvious typos, there are such things as spelling "Ruprecht" absurdly with a double p, as well as misspelling "braggadocio" and "Athénée Palace."

He speaks of Lina as a native of Romania, and gives Grigory Semyonov's death date as both 1945 and 1946. The playwright Sem Benelli becomes "Sein," and Ilya Ehrenburg's eponymous hero, Julio Jurenito, undergoes an unsolicited sex change into Julia. The novel *The Fiery Angel* is at one time a present from a friend, at another, discovered in a New York second-hand bookshop. *Biblia Polyglotta* is published by Plantin "between 1568 and 1773." I spare you several others.

These 1915–1923 diaries make for riveting reading, and I eagerly await the third volume, 1923–1933. What a wonderful thing Sergey's mother (who also rescued a precious score from Bolshevik depredations) did for him when she gave the twelve-year-old a bright green, cardboard-bound notebook as a birthday present. "Sergushechka," she said, "write down in this everything that comes into your head. Don't miss a thing. Don't skip anything." Well, he didn't miss a thing, but, out of discretion, did skip some things. Even so, the diaries became a fine account of a genius's progress and, coincidentally, not a bad chronicle of a troubled era.

New poems
by Daniel Brown & Daniel Hoffman

A math grad

Math's a matter some make
More of than the norm. I'm
Thinking of a math grad
I shared a loft with for a time.
Who a while back had had a break-
Down, he once confessed from bed

To bed. Nothing he thought about
A lot. . . . He pauses. Then goes on
To speak, sane-seemingly enough,
Of a funny class of functions. One
Whose characteristic graph starts out
With the usual smooth take-off,

Somewhere along the line goes
Into a beauty of a loop-
De-loop for whatever reason, then
Picks its rising right up
Where it left off, and never does
Anything like that again.

—*Daniel Brown*

A democratic vista

The poets were speaking at the Symposium
On Poetry and the National Purpose, attended
By many in the crowd, many poets and lovers
Of poetry and many lovers of poets
While one of the poets, the one I'll call
The Poet, was telling the crowd, especially
The members thereof who themselves were in fact
Not poets, that nothing is as significant as Poets,
For it is poets who are the prophets of the race
As well as its annalists, yes, its analysts who notice not
Only what has happened and is happening to the race
But announce beforehand what is going to happen
—And that isn't all; they make it happen,
They change your lives—while, as I say, The Poet
Was saying all this and the crowded crowd
Was brought to the verge of cheers while
He was chanting the terrific openness of the ego
Like a continent uncontained by the roiling steel
Breakers of any sea, he celebrates the openness
Of the great variety counter as plenitudinous as appetites,
Making of everything the ingredients for a possible
Though unexampled ingestion whether of delight
Disgust or what for others would be terror
Like the knowledge of his own death
Which becomes only one layer in his hero sandwich
Surrounded with relish by the cries of the suffering
The outcasts the whores the battle-losers
And the captains of wrecked ships all
Equally in the feast and of the feast and
At the feast with the color green the shouts
Of victors and the amorous bodies
Of young men—you might not think so but it proved
That this unmeasured and immeasurable readiness
To keep from being fenced in by anything by being
The self that does the including excluding
Nothing but tragedy—this, this is the American
Way. The Camerado for whom he waits at the end
Of the long road, *c'est nous*, the children spawned in the open
Nets of his liberties. Between his long spiels

It's we who pick up our tickets at the Thruway
Tollbooths, erect new shopping centers in the interstices
Of his strophes to the future, growing older while his leaves
Rattle in the wind. We turn the page to see his
Democratic Vista—"Never was there more
Hollowness of heart . . . the underlying principles
Of the States are not honestly believed in
Nor is humanity itself believed in," he told us before
A century and a half brought us to the future
He believed in, saying, "I know nothing grander,
More positive proof of the past, the triumphant
Result of faith in human-kind than a well-contested
American national election," a sentiment we
Perhaps had better leave Open-
ended—

—*Daniel Hoffman*

Fiction chronicle

Beside the golden door

by Stefan Beck

God's mercy on the Sad Young Literary Man! When Keith Gessen's debut came out in April—the second book, after Benjamin Kunkel's *Indecision* (2005), to emerge from the editorial staff of *n+1*—it was received less charitably than he'd hoped.¹ Sure, Jonathan Yardley and Joyce Carol Oates praised it; one might think that ample encouragement for a first-time novelist. But just because Grandma finds your sailor suit adorable doesn't mean you won't get Indian burns on the playground, and before long the cruelties of the media website Gawker had Gessen crying in the sandbox.

"I think deep down inside," Gessen told an interviewer, "they know that we're right. Because we are right. And we will bury them." For *we*, read the "generational struggle" Gessen represents. For *they*, read the critics, whatever their complaints, of Gessen's book. One Gawker commenter finished his boast: "in remainder copies of our crappy novels." But guess what? I come to praise Gessen, not to bury him. In *All the Sad Young Literary Men* he's accomplished a near-Wavian satire of his New York City milieu, and, whether or not that's what he intended, such an achievement speaks to an undeniable eye for detail and ear for dialogue. He has captured the zeitgeist and served it to us raw and bloody.

Gessen's story follows three young

men—Mark, Keith, and Sam—as they beat on (and off), borne back ceaselessly by ripple upon eddy of inconvenience. What they have in common is a desire to be remarkable, in the sense of being remarked upon, preferably in print. At the outset of our tale, "It was 1998 and the rest of the world was rich." Not in Sudan, or "the settlements," or Kosovo, which we hear about a few paragraphs later—but *someone* is rich, somewhere, and it isn't Mark: "Mark concluded . . . that he would have a Snickers bar, but [his girlfriend] Sasha should eat." So begins the journey of sacrifice and self-pity, as the men seek fame in the near-total absence of money and opportunity.

Only Keith speaks to the reader in the first person, which, Joyce Carol Oates insists, means that Big Keith is "inviting the reader to assume, or to be mistaken in assuming, that [Little Keith] in some way corresponds to the author." God forbid that some rube might go and *decide* which seemed more plausible! That would run counter to the spirit of "ambiguity," a sprinkle of which can turn the most shameless autobiographer into a "novelist."

I'll assume that Big Keith is not his character, for that character has a lot to answer for—like proposing to his girlfriend at the moment when the election is called in favor of Al Gore. It's an unforgivable confusion of the political with the personal, which deserves to be separate, sacrosanct in a way none of Gessen's characters under-

¹ *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, by Keith Gessen; Viking, 256 pages, \$24.95.

stands. Their minds are always slightly elsewhere, alternating between ambition and baroque self-doubt. There are plenty of women around in this book, but we learn little of any of them. To borrow from Gessen: “[I]f Sam was any sort of semiotician, this was not a good sign.”

That takes us to the crux of this book’s genius. I read it twice before realizing that it isn’t really about literary men at all. It’s about political junkies, intellectuals, guys who tend to be more concerned with ideas than with people. “Mark had spent his twenties,” Gessen tells us, “even that portion of his twenties that he spent married, preoccupied with the problem of sex. He considered it in the positivist tradition of how to find it, of course, but also, and more significant, in the interpretivist or post-modern tradition of how to think about it, how to ponder it historically, how to discourse about it and critique it.”

The problem of *what?* The *what* of sex? While Van Leeuwenhoek here holds his lenses up to a procession of subjects, real literary men fall in (and out of) love, considering it in plain old human terms. Naturally, Gessen is engaged in satire, and makes mincemeat of those who think where they might feel. At times his attitude toward these characters veers dangerously close to sympathy, and you have to remind yourself that surely *he* can’t stand them, either. But on the whole he’s achieved a disturbing, funny slideshow of the intellect run riot.

The difficulty with his strategy is that it makes for difficult reading. The characters in his book are hard to tell apart; while their interests, philosophies, and “problems” are distinct, their voices are less so. They’re uniformly neurotic, Sam to the point of worrying about how many hits his name returns on Google. Each one frets ceaselessly that his time has come and gone. There is the problem of Internet pornography: how to find it, of course, but also how to discourse about it. Such sweaty-palmed solipsism can be wearying, even brutalizing. Marx put it well: “Philosophy stands in the same relation to the study of

the actual world as onanism to sexual love.”

Yet this is, I think, an instructive novel for our election year. It turns out that the “Two Americas,” in John Edwards’s notorious phrase, are not the rich and poor or even the smart and dim-witted, but rather those who find ideas a source of sufficient fascination and those who’d rather spend their time among people—knowing them, that is, not contemplating them like chessmen. Gessen has done an unimpeachable job of showing us the former. Thankfully, we have other novelists, with their more vibrant and humane Americas, to show us the latter.

Humane, however, is not the word that comes to mind when considering Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*.² The book opens in the America of 1690 and is narrated in part by a slave: “You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog’s profile plays in the steam of a kettle. Or when a corn-husk doll sitting on a shelf is soon splaying in the corner of a room and the wicked of how it got there is plain.”

I know what you’re thinking: If only I had tuppence for every time *that* happened!

Everything becomes gradually clearer, although it’s never entirely clear what purpose is served by the confusions of the first hundred pages. Here are some Cliff’s Notes that will improve the reader’s enjoyment: Jacob Vaark, a farmer, is prevailed upon to accept a girl as partial payment for a bad debt. She falls in love with a blacksmith hired by Vaark to create fancy ironwork. This is where the book turns into something like historical erotica:

You probably don’t know anything at all about what your back looks like whatever the sky holds: sunlight, moonrise. . . . The first time I see it you are shaping fire with bellows. The shine of water runs down your spine and I have shock at myself for wanting to lick there.

² *A Mercy*, by Toni Morrison; Knopf, 176 pages, \$23.95.

You can almost make out the embossed gold letters above this African Fabio.

The blacksmith returns the girl's feelings. Disease ravages Jacob Vaark's farm, and eventually he dies. The blacksmith leaves. The services of the blacksmith, something of a holistic healer, are required by the Mistress, and the girl is sent to retrieve him: "Mistress give me Sir's boots that fit a man not a girl. They stuff them with hay and oily corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stockings—no matter the itch of the sealing wax." I won't give away what happens as a result.

"Powerful" in the context of a book review, is very often a weasel word meaning "manipulative." A novel can coerce strong emotions without earning them. *A Mercy* is at times genuinely powerful, because it puts faces and personalities to what for most readers will never be more than a history lesson. That said, its real power is often tripped up, if not hobbled, by two problems: Morrison's programmatic imagination and the clumsiness of her writing. This is a risky thing to say of a Nobel laureate, but it can easily be demonstrated.

First, look at Jacob Vaark. Morrison can't make him totally unsympathetic, for just the reason I've mentioned: It would render her book at best unimaginative and at worst propagandistic—though in this case it would be propaganda for a cause no sane person could oppose. So Vaark is an orphan and a sort of proto-animal rights activist. The first thing we see him do is "free the bloody hindleg of a young raccoon stuck in a tree break." A "trace of raccoon blood on his hands" is later used to indicate his earthy superiority over the "Catholic gentleman . . . sordid and overripe," who sells him his slave, and he "wince[s]" when she is offered to him.

A few pages later he narrowly misses a chance to "shout" at a man beating a horse. He feels "a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays, remembering well their and his own sad teeming in the markets." Disturbing? It's hard to see why it should be, because Vaark is something of a secular saint.

With qualifications. For one, he owns slaves, though he doesn't want to. It's noted that the "third and presumably final house that [Vaark] insisted on building distorted sunlight and required the death of fifty trees." Man is everywhere in chains, but that doesn't stop him from fretting about sunshine and Nature. Forgive me if this, like the detail of a slave noticing "the itch of the sealing wax" against her foot, leaves me unconvinced.

There are, in fairness, some fine details in Morrison's book. The slaves learn "by trial and error . . . what kept the foxes away; how and when to handle and spread manure; the difference between lethal and edible and the sweet taste of timothy grass; the features of measles swine; what turned the baby's stool liquid and what hardened it into pain." Vaark takes a "leisurely meal of oysters, veal, pigeon, parsnips and suet pudding." We can see that our author cared enough to learn a lot. Morrison is fully inhabiting an alien world, one every American ought to understand or at least to be aware of.

But there is too much that doesn't work. How completely we are withdrawn from the historical moment by a phrase like "primary peoples." How we are browbeaten by an allegory in which a European (ahem, "traveler") looks at "the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow" and says, "This is mine." The clanking phrases: "Only bad women wear high heels"; "prepubescent girl"; "reason is not the need," a pointless echo of *King Lear* (II, iv); "[w]ife beating was common," which drags us out of the seventeenth century to a "COPS" rerun.

A character who refers to "the confusion of two things: hunger for you and scare if I am lost" describes bears in the same paragraph: "when they move their pelts sway as though there is nothing underneath . . . [t]heir smell belying their beauty." It is one thing to alternate between points of view, which Morrison does, but this inconsistency within the same voice can't be explained, or ignored.

Perhaps no genre is more difficult than historical fiction, and I record Morrison's missteps partly to underscore what she has

achieved: a racing, vivid depiction of life in the most shameful period of American history. Yes, she suffers from a desire to spell things out for her readers, but it's impossible not to take something significant, a deeper understanding of this country's past, from her latest book.

What is perhaps least compelling about *A Mercy* is its facile treatment of religion. "Shallow believers preferred a shallow god," she writes, claiming the same spiritual X-ray vision that all skeptics of "organized" religion use to lecture us about the quality or authenticity of our belief. And "[t]he timid enjoyed a rampaging avenging god." And nonbelievers prefer nothing—but we should be happy that Marilynne Robinson is not one of them.

When Robinson's second novel, *Gilead*, came out in 2004, over two decades after her debut, *Housekeeping* (1980), not even the most godless reader dared to call it anything short of genius. The brilliant critic James Wood (author of 2003's *The Book Against God*, to keep things in perspective) wrote in *The New York Times* of Robinson's "vivid slashes of poetry" and of her "spiritual force that's very rare in contemporary fiction." Rare to the vanishing point, I'd add.

"Imagine," Robinson wrote in her essay collection *The Death of Adam* (1998), "that someone failed and disgraced came back to his family, and they grieved with him, and took his sadness upon themselves, and sat down together to ponder the deep mysteries of human life. This is . . . human and beautiful . . . even if it yields no dulling of pain, no patching of injuries. Perhaps it is the calling of some families to console, because intractable grief is visited upon them."

This describes her new masterpiece, *Home*, in a hundred words or less.³ John Lennon asked us to "imagine . . . no religion." That sounds pretty pitiful next to the imaginative request made by Robinson, an unapologetic Calvinist, and utterly shames

the tedious atheists we encounter these days. The first of many things to praise about *Home* is that it lays bare the folly of those who pretend there is nothing of value in the Bible. I can think of no other work, except Tobias Wolff's short story "The Rich Brother," that does such incredible things with the parable of the Prodigal Son.

The son in this story is Jack Boughton, who makes limited but important appearances in *Gilead*. *Home* takes place in the same town, at the same time, as *Gilead*—Gilead, Iowa, in the mid-1950s—and its characters are the same. *Gilead* is narrated by a dying Congregationalist minister named John Ames, and is addressed to his very young son. Ames's best friend is a dying Presbyterian minister named Robert Boughton. At one point Boughton's wayward son shows up after a long absence—so long that he's missed his own mother's funeral—and Ames palpably detests him for visiting so much pain upon his greatest friend and confidante. But he never fully understands Jack's pain, the reason for his flight, or the reason for his return. The reader doesn't hold this against him: It took Robinson an entire additional book to explain it to us.

One is forcefully reminded by this fact that a single book cannot contain all that a man thinks or feels or remembers. Next to the attention Robinson lavishes on Jack's soul, the dismissal effected by Toni Morrison in a single sentence—that "[s]hallow believers preferred a shallow god"—reads like lazy, not to mention heartless, negligence. Morrison's "shallow believers" aren't people; they're ideas, cardboard stand-ins for a safe and popular prejudice. There isn't a single character in *Home* who isn't so entirely, lovingly fleshed out that you expect to find him standing at your elbow, saying, "Yes, it was exactly like that."

Glory Boughton, who in spite of being a daughter represents the good son in this story—she cares for her dying father while her brother simply hangs around, struggling not to drink or steal—shows exactly what I mean. Glory's belief is shallower than Jack's lack thereof, because Jack has a

³ *Home*, by Marilynne Robinson; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 336 pages, \$25.

preternatural familiarity with Scripture and theological nuance. But she has a greater talent for empathy and intimacy than any other character in Robinson's orbit. She is good. That may be an unglamorous quality, but it is one to which novelists and people in general would do well to accord greater respect. To be good is far more demanding than to be complex, which most people are already by virtue of being people. It's also a quality that is difficult to depict, or to make interesting, in fiction. Robinson makes us as attentive to Glory as to scene-stealer Jack.

This is not to say that Jack is all bad. He tries against his nature to be better, as he's done his entire life. He seeks his father's forgiveness on mostly honest terms. He has a child whom he loves deeply, with a black woman whom he loves deeply, at a time when this is so incomprehensible that he can't admit it to his own father. And Gilead, as readers of *Gilead* know, was in earlier days an abolitionist enclave! But when Jack offers his tentative approval of civil rights stirrings in Montgomery, his father says:

"I have nothing against the colored people. I do think they're going to need to improve themselves, though, if they want to be accepted. I believe that is the only solution." His look and tone were statesmanlike. He was making such an effort to be mild and conciliatory. . . .

Finally [Jack] said, "I'm a little unimproved myself. I've known a good many Negroes who are more respectable than I am."

His father looked at him. "I don't know where you get such a terrible opinion of yourself, Jack."

In a mediocre novel this exchange would serve no purpose but to remind us that we are meant to like Jack and to dislike his father. In *Home*, it is precisely what it would be in real life: a meeting of two human beings in which prejudice, personality, conscience, and priorities meet and duke it out. Robert Boughton isn't evil or contemptible just because he hasn't reached his son's state of color-blind grace, nor is Jack exonerated

of his own crimes because he holds an opinion that twenty-first-century readers can approve of effortlessly. This is how we know that they're people: They're both good and bad in ways that are credible and not merely pedantic.

While reading *Gilead* and *Home* I stumbled upon William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, a brief but terrifying memoir of depression and attempted suicide. Prior to reading it, I took a fairly strict, uncompromising view of offing oneself, that it was cruel, avoidable, and inexcusable. I was startled to find that Jack's fictional suicide attempt, involving a car he is idly attempting to restore and affording the detail of a diabolically chemical odor about him in church, did more to rearrange my sympathies than Styron's real one. I don't consider this a spoiler. Robinson's specialty is individuals, not symbols, not plot twists, and only books that traffic in the latter can really ever be "spoiled."

Marilynne Robinson's may be the most complex America I've read this year, with the roundest characters and the most precise and gorgeous prose, but the America I enjoyed the most is in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*.⁴ Perhaps that's because *Netherland*, which takes place mostly in New York, describes a city I once lived in, or because it describes the present day, which we all still live in, for good or ill. But I think there's a great deal more to it.

Gessen's book, for instance, vividly describes the present day, but he lingers too long on what is worst and most pessimistic about it. *Netherland* describes the true promise of America, not the resentment, disappointment, and joyless competition Gessen sets forth. *All the Sad Young Literary Men* is about gamesmanship: being smarter, better known, more "correct" than the next guy. *Netherland*, tellingly, is about a game, cricket, in which anybody can join. Where Gessen says, "We will bury them," O'Neill

⁴ *Netherland* by Joseph O'Neill; Pantheon, 272 pages, \$23.95.

seems to say, “We will unearth them.” We’ll give faces to Emma Lazarus’s famous “huddled masses,” as well as to everyone privileged and secure, with the understanding that if we don’t like what we see, we can at least be interested in it.

O’Neill’s narrator is a wealthy banker, Hans van den Broek, from the Netherlands, who lives between London and New York City. His marriage begins to fracture after 9/11 and his wife returns to England with their son. This doesn’t galvanize Hans. Instead, he loiters in the lobby of the Chelsea Hotel, fraternizing with misfits—memorably including, though it may sound contrived, a cross-dressing “angel”—and eventually, elsewhere in the city, a Trinidadian called Chuck Ramkissoon.

There is no other word for Chuck than “dreamer.” Among his several enterprises is the New York Cricket Club, the headquarters of which he gloriously envisions in Brooklyn, on a plot of land he dubs Bald Eagle Field. His naming it with such bold, unironic fervor is a key to his consciousness: He doesn’t want to make America over in his own image, nor to “fix” or “heal” it. He wants to do something more generous and more useful: He wants to embody it. So he argues, in terms no more convincing for being factual, that cricket and not baseball is, historically speaking, America’s original national pastime. He also demands to be buried in Brooklyn’s historic Green-Wood Cemetery, “[n]ot Trinidad, not Long Island, not Queens.”

Who else lies under the Green-Wood? Henry Chadwick, Chuck explains, the “father of baseball” who “played cricket *and* baseball. They were totally compatible as far as he was concerned. He didn’t see them as a fork in the road. He was like Yogi Berra.” He goes on to say, not without criticism of American barbarity, that “all people . . . are at their most civilized when they’re playing cricket.” He advocates better living through cricket: “What’s the first thing that happens when Pakistan and India make peace? They play a cricket match.”

Hans quite reasonably reels at the “Napoleonic excess of the peroration,” the fact that Chuck “had set up a graveside address, for God’s sake.” And he knows that Chuck is not the wholly idealistic innocent he’s pretended to be, because, under the pretense of helping Hans pass his driver’s license test, Chuck has been making Hans an accomplice in his underground lottery: “[W]ithout explanation, Chuck directed me, his driver, to addresses in Midwood and East Flatbush and Little Pakistan in Kensington, a couple of times taking us as far as Brighton Beach.” This, not the New York Cricket Club, is the enterprise that gets Chuck killed.

Later, Hans rehearses another gazetteer:

I traveled in a rented car up the Saw Mill and Taconic parkways. My preparatory examination of the road map had turned up such place-names as Yonkers, Cortlandt, Verplanck, and, of course, Peekskill; and set against these Dutch places, in my mind, were the likes of Mohegan, Chappaqua, Ossining, Mohansic, for as I drove north through thickly wooded hills I superimposed on the landscape regressive images of Netherlanders and Indians, images arising not from mature historical reflection but from a child’s irresponsibly cinematic sense of things, leading me to picture a bonneted girl in an ankle-length dress waiting in a log cabin for Sinterklaas, and redskins pushing through ferns, and little graveyards filled with Dutch names, and wolves and deer and bears in the forest, and skaters on a natural rink, and slaves singing in Dutch.

Everyone has drawn the tidy parallel between Chuck and Jay Gatsby, as if to say that all self-invention is created equal. But there are those who dream only of standing above and apart, no matter how lonely they may find it there, and then there are those who survey the American landscape with “a child’s irresponsibly cinematic sense of things,” and see the bizarre play of people and places and events, and say, like Chuck Ramkissoon and Hans van den Broek, *We are all in this together.*

Theater

The best & worst of times

by Brooke Allen

I'm no great fan of what can loosely be called the *Les Miz* style: the bloated score with great hunks of plot and exposition sung in recitative, the large chorus muttering ominously, the cumbersome and overdesigned scenery, the Pucciniesque penchant for high-volume wailing and howling. I was more than a little suspicious, then, of the new musical version of *A Tale of Two Cities*, especially on learning that it is more or less the offspring of *Les Misérables*. Its subject matter—high drama and epic history during the French Revolution—is echt-Lloyd Webber; its producers, Barbara Russell and Ron Sharpe, met while performing in *Les Miz*; its current cast contains nine *Les Miz* alums. The author and composer Jill Santoriello has produced a score which is all too obviously derivative of Lloyd Webber's signature style, and a book without much wit or originality. And the set designer Tony Walton, old and experienced enough to have known better, has created a set which in awkwardness and complexity rivals anything perpetrated by John Napier (*Les Miz*) or Maria Björnson (*Phantom of the Opera*).

Nevertheless I found myself thoroughly enjoying the show, and the audience seemed to be having as good a time as I was. What made it click? Principally, I think, it's that *A Tale of Two Cities* is just such a wonderful story. Not that it's one of Dickens's best novels—as fiction it is certainly one of his less successful efforts—but just as certainly it has one of the neatest and

most dramatically satisfying plots ever concocted, as perfectly constructed as *The Count of Monte Cristo* or *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. As the drama progresses, the tale's disparate elements fall together in a manner that can only in retrospect be seen as inevitable. Its twinned heroes, the sunny Charles Darnay and the tortured Sydney Carton, are foils to one another both as plot elements and as characters. The interconnections between Darnay, his wicked uncle the Marquis de St. Evremonde, his father-in-law Dr. Manette, and Manette's former servants the Defarges constitute a fine and elaborate house of cards. And the way Dickens has woven all this material into the boiling crucible of Paris during the Terror is very clever indeed.

The other thing this show has going for it is James Barbour, an attractive musical leading man who for the last few years has made a specialty of playing brooding anti-heroes with a dark side (Mr. Rochester, Billy Bigelow, Beauty's Beast). He has taken the full measure of Sydney Carton, one of the greatest roles in all melodrama (who can forget Ronald Colman in the film?!), and milks it for every moment of pathos, romance, and humor Santoriello has provided—and then some, with his startlingly powerful bass voice and the satanic gleam in his eye. The material is over the top, of course, but Barbour plays it all with utter conviction: in musical numbers sentimental enough to defeat almost any performer, he belts out his

lines with a straight-faced, defiant sincerity that seems to be daring anyone to laugh—and gets away with it. He even manages to pull off the famous last line—“It is a far, far better thing, etc.”—with his dignity intact.

The rest of the cast is uneven, though uniformly capable. Aaron Lazar (a former *Les Miz* principal player) makes a lovely, heroic Charles Darnay. As the beautiful Lucie Manette, Brandi Burckhardt is a non-entity, just your standard-issue blonde—but to be honest, the role Dickens created really doesn't call for anything more. Still, a girl with more vulnerability, and charms that are a little less obvious, would have made a far more affecting heroine.

An even more misguided piece of casting is Natalie Toro as Madame Defarge. As portrayed by Toro, this supposedly fearsome revolutionary is a dead ringer for Elaine in *Seinfeld*, and looks as though she'd be more at ease noshing on a bagel in Tom's Coffee Shop than wielding knitting needles in the Place de la Révolution. Gregg Edelman does reasonably well as the elderly Dr. Manette, though most of the stage business he has been given consists of stagey doddering and trembling. Les Minski makes a nicely sinister St. Evremonde, while as the rascally Cockney servant Barsad, Nick Wyman delivers a passable Stanley Holloway impression.

I was really taken aback by Tony Walton's set, composed of large metal structures that lumbered ceaselessly around the stage like a herd of ungainly elephants. There seems to be no purpose for this design, which offers the advantages of neither verisimilitude nor convenience. Some of the units in fact, especially the Defarges' wine shop, with its scores of bottles swaying and lurching, look positively dangerous. The only explanation I could think of was that Walton had been given far too generous a budget, in the misguided hope that he would provide an epic-scale spectacle.

In our modern age of irony, have we moved irrevocably beyond such straight-faced epic? A few years back the Ridiculous Theatrical Company put on a one-man ver-

sion of *A Tale of Two Cities* that was screamingly funny and better theater, in truth, than this musical. But that kind of thing doesn't invalidate the spirit of the original, any more than the current low-budget Broadway parody of *The 39 Steps* makes the Hitchcock film, or the John Buchan book that inspired it, any less wonderful as melodrama. In our more cynical moments we may be inclined to smirk at the heroics of a Sydney Carton or a Richard Hannay, but it would be a pity if we entirely lost the capacity to be thrilled by them.

In any case, even if you find *A Tale of Two Cities* corny it is infinitely more edifying than *13*, the other new musical that opened at about the same time. Not to be confused with the disturbing and quite good film *Thirteen*, whose title the musical's authors (Jason Robert Brown, Dan Elish, and Robert Horn) have shamelessly ripped off, it is an unutterably banal little piece remarkable only for having an all-kid cast: every one of the fourteen performers, as well as the six band members, are actual adolescents. Cute idea, but not enough to make the show interesting.

Here's the premise: Evan (Graham Phillips), soon to celebrate his bar mitzvah, suddenly discovers that he is going to have to leave New York—the coolest city in the world, as everyone knows—and move to a God-forsaken burg in the Midwest: Appleton, Indiana, “a town where UFOs go to refuel.” Settling in at Dan Quayle Junior High School (the show's condescension to middle America is one of its least attractive qualities), he tries to come up with schemes that will make him as hip and popular as he was back home. He kind of likes his cute neighbor, Patrice (Allie Trimm), but at school he discovers that she is considered hopelessly uncool, for one of those mysterious reasons that only thirteen-year-olds can understand. The in-crowd won't come to Evan's bar mitzvah unless he dumps Patrice and the other class geek, Archie (Aaron Simon Gross), who is widely shunned because he has crutches and a

degenerative disease. After some tortured soul searching, Evan comes to the conclusion (what a surprise!) that real friendship is more important than mere popularity. The bar mitzvah proceeds without the in-crowd in attendance, and Evan symbolically becomes a man with Patrice and Archie, his true friends, by his side. Who needs the cool kids anyway?

As you can see from the summary, there is nothing to distinguish *13* from any run-of-the-mill after-school special except the music, which is hardly worth the price of admission. Will today's kids, jaded by the far more sophisticated material that can be seen on any TV station, honestly take any interest in Evan's moral dilemma and can they be in any suspense about its outcome? We have seen this same "message" delivered in countless films and TV shows, almost all of which set it up with more wit and edge than this show can muster. *Mean Girls*, for instance, was a truly funny and clever movie which, unlike *13*, almost made you actually believe the goofy moral—so why fork out the big bucks to see *13* when you can rent *Mean Girls*, or *Heathers*, or *Revenge of the Nerds*, or any number of enjoyable films along roughly the same lines?

But what's really disturbing about *13* is the poverty of the worldview it reveals. Here, in the richest and freest nation in human history, we have allowed our children to be consumed by the ugliest and crudest popular culture in human memory. The kids in *13*, like kids all over the place these days, seem to spend all their spare time texting each other and making plans to "hook up." The most popular competitive sport is shopping. The dialogue in *13*, like that of the larger culture, resounds with a vulgarity that is made particularly poignant by the fact that it seems to be unconscious. For instance: one of the kids says he has "a powerful weapon." Another replies, "Captain Hook also had a powerful weapon. Until he forgot which hand to wipe with." Big belly laugh! And then there is a whole song in which the hunky football player, Brett (Eric M. Nelsen), makes plans to stick

his tongue down his virginal girlfriend's throat. Adorable! In one of the songs, the kids trill on about the magic moment "when your dreams come true." What dreams? Being cool? Getting laid? No loftier ambitions are ever mentioned.

I had hoped that one or the other of my teenage daughters would accompany me to *13*, but oddly enough they preferred to stay home and watch the vice-presidential debate. As I writhed in agony through the performance, I could only be relieved that I hadn't inflicted it on them. Even the canned lines of professional politicians couldn't possibly have matched *13*'s for shallowness and fatuity.

The best that can be said for *13* is that it is not pretentious. This is not the case, alas, for Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, one of the most pretentious plays ever written. Its very premise is bogus, and was bogus even at the time it first appeared (1973), when it was in absolute conformity with the zeitgeist. Like other plays, films, and books of the era (*King of Hearts*, to take a notable example), *Equus* proposed that madness is somehow more passionate, more creative, more *alive* than mere, drab sanity. Not many people believe this any more—the advances made in psychiatry and neuroscience have helped us understand how truly devastating and terrifying mental illness is to those who suffer from it—and *Equus* itself is hardly persuasive, for Alan Strang, the stable boy who blinds six horses in a religio-sexual-psychotic frenzy, is clearly in very deep distress throughout the action of the play. It is simply not credible that anyone could want to change places with him, certainly not Martin Dysart, the civilized, repressed, intellectual psychiatrist who sets out to cure him—or in Dysart's own words, to make him "normal" ("The normal both sustains and kills," the psychiatrist intones sententiously.)

In terms of intellectual fashion, then, *Equus* is such a period piece that one doubts whether it would have received a Broadway revival without the participation of its two stars, Daniel Radcliffe (the screen's Harry

Potter, now nineteen and all grown up) and Richard Griffiths, who dazzled us all in *The History Boys* and who in fact also has a running role in the *Harry Potter* films—that of Harry’s wicked Uncle Vernon.

Both actors do an eminently respectable job without in any way delivering a star performance. Radcliffe possesses a fine intensity which has no doubt been honed in all those focused and reactive *Harry Potter* close-ups, and he even has a measure of personal magnetism, which I did not expect. His future as a leading man is doubtful, though, since he is short and stunted-looking, like so many former child stars. (Those who are talented and lucky enough, like Mickey Rooney or Roddy McDowall, sometimes go on to have adult careers as character actors.) Griffiths performs with admirable restraint, resisting the temptation (which Richard Burton, in the movie, most assuredly did not) of *singing* Shaffer’s insistently poetic lines rather than speaking them. Griffiths in fact is so restrained that he might be accused of under-acting—or perhaps it is just that he is embarrassed by the material, as well he might be.

The most embarrassing aspect is the gay subtext (so close to the surface as hardly to qualify as “sub”) and the overtly gay imagery, which is never recognized or dealt with by the characters. Alan spends a good bit of his time on stage caressing the torsos of the six big muscley guys playing the horses and even kneeling in front of them suggestively. Granted they are meant to be horses, but they are costumed to *look* very much like men, and men right out of a gay fantasy at that. Then there is the scene in which Alan writhes to orgasm atop Nugget, his favorite horse; his repeated description of “cream” dripping from the horses; even the nonsensical advertising jingle he sings on his first appearance in Dysart’s office, with its celebration of a white candy bar full of delectable fluids. So when a human love object shows up for Alan, it’s a little startling to discover that it’s a female—a conventionally

pretty blonde girl, in fact (Anna Camp), with whom Alan hopes to make love but whose advances, taking place in the stables within sight of the horses he has deified, send him into the frenzy which ends with him blinding the horses.

Shaffer’s mixing of sex and religion might have been daring in the 1970s, but now it has become merely predictable. We recognize all the stock elements: the devout, Catholic mother partial to gruesome pictures of Christ being flogged, or of his bleeding wounds; the atheist father who hangs out at the local porn cinema; the family’s repressed and narrow culture. As Dysart points out, Alan has no reading, no history, no physics—only TV. He’s “a modern citizen.” (Too bad he’s not a citizen of Appleton, Indiana, in 2008—he could text his friends and hook up!) Dysart’s interpretation of Alan’s religious fantasies and hallucinations is that “that boy has created out of his drab existence a passion,” and adds that “without worship, you shrink”—a questionable assertion. Dysart actually envies Alan his capacity to worship, realizing that his own treasured paganism is merely academic, a scholar’s vain fantasy.

Directed by Thea Sharrock and with scenery by John Napier, the production is nice to look at, with the horses’ stables opening onto the action upstage and large multi-purpose rectangular blocks used to suggest furniture and other scenic elements. (These come in handy for the vertically challenged Radcliffe to stand on, but the actors are too frequently required to rearrange them, and Griffiths can occasionally be seen sneaking a peek at the masking-tape marks on the floor onto which he is supposed to heave the units into place.) As is so often the case, the high quality of the design only serves, through contrast, to underscore the emptiness of the play itself. I would be very much surprised if *Equus* ever appeared on Broadway again.

Art

Van Gogh at MOMA

by *Karen Wilkin*

Curators at the Metropolitan tell a wonderful story about efforts to attract visitors to an exhibition devoted to the Romantic painter Théodore Chassériau, a celebrated figure in mid-nineteenth-century France, but today not exactly a household name. After a long, unproductive meeting with the marketing department, an exasperated staff member finally burst out, “Why don’t we just call it ‘Van Gogh’?” She had a point. The Dutch-born Post-Impressionist’s name is immediately recognized, even by people who aren’t certain whether it’s “van Go,” “van Gog,” or “van Guh-hch” and who might have trouble identifying any of his paintings unless they had sunflowers in them. The story of van Gogh’s short, troubled life, or at least a version of it that emphasizes his isolation, lack of sales, and instability—and that sliced ear—is so well known that it has become the signature myth of the artist as misunderstood genius. (Not that the basic facts lack drama—born in 1853, Vincent van Gogh dedicated himself to art only in 1880, aged twenty-seven, after failing as an art dealer, a teacher, and a minister; depressed by the lack of attention to his work, and probably suffering from an increasingly debilitating form of epilepsy, he killed himself in 1890.) “The van Gogh’s ear school of art history” is code, among some of my colleagues, for gallery tours led by well-intentioned docents who concentrate on sensational anecdotes instead of aesthetic or historical concerns. A bitter joke among curators is that the show atten-

dance-conscious museum trustees would most like to see at their institutions is “Ancient Gold of the Impressionists from the Royal Collections,” but any exhibition with that guttural Dutch name attached to it runs a close second. Call it “Van Gogh”—however you pronounce it—and record numbers of visitors are virtually guaranteed.

All of which explains why we might be forgiven for greeting something titled “Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night” with cynical thoughts about box office considerations, even if we know that the exhibition was organized for the Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, by such respected scholars as Sjraar van Heugten, Joachim Pissarro, and Christ Stolwijk.¹ The very idea of yet another van Gogh show raises eyebrows. The number of exhibitions dedicated to the painter in this country alone, over the past two decades, suggests that no aspect of either his short, turbulent life or his distinctive body of work remains unexamined. The list includes a traveling selection of paintings from the Van Gogh Museum, a major drawing retrospective, a study of his exchanges with his painter friend, Emil Bernard, documented by both letters and pictures, a close look at his portraits of the postman Roulin,

¹ “Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night” opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on September 21, 2008 and remains on view through January 5, 2009.

definitive surveys of his formative years in Paris and of his last years at Auvers and Saint-Rémy, and an analysis of his relationship with the art-loving Dr. Gachet, who treated him. What could be left?

To some extent, those cynical thoughts about motives turn out to be justified. It seems clear that “Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night” is intended to boost MOMA’s attendance in a way that a small, illuminating exhibition focusing on a less recognizable artist—say, the impeccable little survey of Ludwig Kirchner’s Berlin streetscapes, on view until early November—almost certainly is not. The van Gogh exhibit is designed to swell the museum’s coffers in other ways, too. While museum members may enter the show at any time, non-members, atypically for MOMA, must obtain a free timed ticket; since the number of timed tickets available per half hour is limited and the total number per day is finite, visitors unwilling to wait or to risk being denied entrance will have strong incentives to join MOMA on the spot. Which is not to say that there aren’t more high-minded and positive aspects of the system. As far as I can judge from several visits, the timed-ticket requirement controls the crowds—no mean achievement with a van Gogh show—making it possible to focus, without too much distraction, on the works on view. Mammon and aesthetics, in this instance, seem equally well served.

And it’s plain that “Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night” has ambitions and intellectual justifications far beyond any appeal to the gods of marketing and attendance. MOMA’s show, we are told, is the first to concentrate on his nocturnal themes. The subject itself may seem surprising, since the superheated palette of van Gogh’s best known work is often discussed in relation to the blazing, color-intensifying sunlight of the south of France, an association reinforced by the passionate descriptions of the hues he discovered in his surroundings, in his letters from Arles to his brother Theo and his painter friends, and by the equivalents he devised for those perceptions in his paint-

ings. Yet the selection at MOMA not only makes a convincing case for van Gogh’s long fascination with night skies, twilight, and artificially lit interiors, but also suggests that his engagement with these equivocal motifs—that is to say, his search for ways of evoking the *absence* of light through color, just as he did the *presence* of light—was a fairly significant element in the evolution of his characteristic approach.

At MOMA, we are allowed to follow the entire trajectory of that evolution, from little known early works in which Van Gogh struggles to find a visual language adequate to his intense feelings to iconic mature paintings in which his individualized touch and his distinctive palette become at once the carriers of raw emotion and declarations of original pictorial conceptions. The paintings that illustrate this journey include some pretty spectacular examples, beginning with the ferocious interior of peasants at dinner, *The Potato Eaters* (1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), and culminating with MOMA’s radiant vision, *The Starry Night* (1889). The show is also enriched by powerful drawings that both advance the narrative and enter into a dialogue with the canvases, along with a selection of van Gogh’s illustrated letters—dense sheets of surprisingly legible script punctuated by vigorous little drawings that distill his paintings of the moment into a vital shorthand of calligraphic lines.

Perhaps most importantly, “Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night” is not a bombastic, crowd-pleasing blockbuster, but a modestly scaled, rather sparsely installed, intimate exhibition that encourages viewers to look hard and think about what is before them. Divided into thematic sections and arranged chronologically, the show presents us with small groupings of closely related works that make clear both van Gogh’s devotion to certain motifs and his willingness to experiment with how he embodied those motifs. We begin with sections entitled “Early Landscapes” and “Peasant Life”: drawings and paintings that were mostly executed before van Gogh left Holland definitively, first for

Paris and then for the South of France. Collectively, they are testimony to his initial, strikingly unsuccessful efforts to subjugate his bold touch and expressionist longings to the conventional ways of representing rural life that he was taught during his brief encounters with more or less formal art instruction. The earliest paintings are pretty tame. *Twilight, Old Farm Houses in Loosduinen* (1883, Central Museum, Utrecht), with its deep, soft shadows and its band of low-lying roofs, could be described as a rather hamfisted, painterly version of a Rembrandt drawing with aspirations of being a standard, pellucid evocation of the flat Dutch landscape. The subject may be a specific time of day, but like all of van Gogh's paintings of this period, its grayed tonalities suggest cold and damp more than they do light and atmosphere. But soon after, in *Lane of Poplars at Sunset* (1884, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo) or *Evening Landscape* (1885, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid), we can watch van Gogh find justification for intensified, exaggerated color and heightened contrasts in dramatic sunset scenes. The compositions are still fairly pedestrian, but the nominal subject allows him to play lurid skies against thickly brushed pools of darkness and schematic silhouettes of vaguely threatening trees.

“Peasant Life” introduces a theme that will preoccupy van Gogh for the rest of his life. The centerpiece of this section is, of course, *The Potato Eaters*, demonstrably his most achieved and most ambitious early painting. Van Gogh's first-hand knowledge of the squalid, brutal existence of his neighbors in the southern Dutch province of Brabant precluded any sentimentality or romanticism in his images of laborers—his insistence on living as his parishioners did, as a novice pastor in the region, led to his dismissal from the ministry. The cast of characters in *The Potato Eaters* is notably grotesque, with rough-hewn, irregular faces and gnarled hands. Every contour moves in contradictory directions, every fold and form is accounted for with disjunctive strokes that

keep changing their course, heightening the prevailing sense of awkwardness and discomfort. The lamp-lit interior is rendered in cold, muddy grays and dull ochres, a palette of gloom and dirt whose exaggerated contrasts tend definitely more towards *scuro* than *chiaro*. Van Gogh, we are told, believed that laborers and rural people were closer to the elemental aspects of life and, therefore, somehow nobler than effete urbanites, a conviction that perhaps accounts for the sense that the frugal meal in the dim, cramped, low-ceilinged interior is, in fact, a solemn ritual. The harsh light of the lamp transfigures the thickset, unlovely figures crammed into the rectangle of the canvas by the interrupted diamond of the table. Admittedly, this interpretation may owe something to our seeing the picture through the filter of later images in which a source of artificial light, placed high and center, is made to seem both sinister and sanctifying—the jagged electric lamp in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, for example, or the bare light bulbs in Philip Guston's late works—but it's also true that these examples may owe something to van Gogh's precedent.

The next section, “Sowers and Wheatfields,” documents van Gogh's further explorations of peasant themes, after his move to the south of France in 1888. These images, inspired by the agricultural workers in the fields surrounding Arles and informed by his memories of the Brabant, are unabashed recapitulations of Jean-François Millet's classic depictions of farm laborers, totally absorbed in their repetitive, exhausting tasks—works that van Gogh revered and knew intimately from engravings. Millet's well-known images, “translated” first into black and white reproductions, are translated once again into van Gogh's own language of insistent strokes and uninhibited color, with an admixture of the clarity and economy he had learned from the Japanese prints he studied in Paris. The sludgy, near-monochromatic palette that the Brabant peasants and their dwellings elicited has been replaced by a full spectrum of hot, saturated chroma. Space

tips. The close-valued hues call to each other across the flat plane of the canvas, rather than suggesting depth, further compressing and warping the space. Any lingering possibility of illusionism is denied by van Gogh's relentlessly physical, vigorous touch, which turns the painting into a kind of emblem of effort. In many of these paintings, huge, blazing suns hang low on the horizons, sometimes turning the sowers into brooding silhouettes, but it's impossible to decide whether the time is sunrise or sunset. Van Gogh's desire to encapsulate the ravishing, constantly changing Provençal light is evident but the question remains as to whether these paintings are tributes to the hardworking laborer, close to nature, whose day begins with dawn, or homage to the exhausted peasant whose toil doesn't end until the last rays of the sun have disappeared. The unmodulated brilliance of the van Gogh's palette gives no clue. Even "shadows" are full of color and light.

These pastoral improvisations are followed by interiors and exteriors, painted between 1888 and 1890, grouped under the rubric "Poetry of the Night: The Town" and "Poetry of the Night: The Country." If van Gogh at the beginning of his life as a painter strove to capture the literal and metaphorical darkness of the peasant dwellings of the Brabant, both inside and out, his aims appear to have been very different by the time he reached Arles. He was no less responsive to the particulars of his surroundings and the feelings they aroused in him, but the places he chose to paint are bathed in harsh, artificial illumination that provokes some of his most audacious forays into minimally inflected hues. Some of his themes are classic Impressionist motifs of spectacle and entertainment—a crowded dance hall, a café—along with more idiosyncratic themes—nocturnal townscapes seen from a distance, across the river, with street lights and stars reflected in the water. The last sections include some of van Gogh's most celebrated works, such as *The Night Café* (1888, Yale University Gallery), with its vertiginous golden floor and dull

green billiard table, its red walls and deep green ceiling, and its blazing lamps. The light is pitiless, brutal. I defy anyone who has ever read van Gogh's letters to look at this picture without remembering that he described *The Night Café* as a place where "you can ruin yourself, go mad, commit crimes." "I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green," Vincent wrote to Theo. The equivalent image of a café exterior, with its overhanging awnings and a pool of light from a wall-mounted street lamp, is represented by a powerful reed pen drawing, *Café Terrace at Night* (1888, Dallas Museum of Art). Here, dazzling light is invoked not by chromatic contrasts of dark and light, but by energetic strokes of a blunt pen and untouched paper.

Some of the inclusions in these last sections do double duty, serving as documents of van Gogh's rapid evolution as a painter and as reminders of important events in his biography. His voluntary commitment to a private asylum in Saint-Rémy, for example, is documented by a sunset image of *The Garden of St. Paul's Hospital* (1889, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam). Painted only five years after *Lane of Poplars at Sunset* at the beginning of the show, *The Garden of St. Paul's Hospital* announces an entirely different conception of what a painting can be. In the earlier work, drama and the suggestion of a specific time of day depend on abrupt contrasts of ochre, blue-black, and nearly pure cadmium orange. Darkness dominates, with the dully glowing sky turning trees into silhouettes. We are pulled into the canvas by the perspectival rendering of the allée of poplars, stopped only by the descending disc of the blazing sun. The later painting conjures up fading light with a minimum of tonal inflection. Light, not shadow, rules the picture. Van Gogh plays a fragment of orange and blue sky, made luminous by a broad plane of brick red and flickers of lavender, against the neutral hues of writhing tree trunks that lace the painting together. In contrast to the symmetrical,

graphic structure of the stylized *Lane of Poplars*, the view of the asylum garden seems casual and artless, an improvisational response to nature in the language of touch and color.

Paul Gauguin's tempestuous sojourn with van Gogh in Arles is invoked here by *Gauguin's Chair* (1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), a surrogate portrait in which a splay-legged, strangely animated, curiously anthropomorphic wooden armchair, its arching limbs barely contained by the rectangle of the canvas, suggests the imminent return of the absent painter. Only a blazing oil lamp on the wall and a candle on the seat of the chair signal that this demonstration of the powers of red and green (sharpened by carefully deployed notes of violet and yellow) is a night interior. Similarly, a portrait of a Belgian writer, *Eugene Bloch (The Poet)* (1888, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), qualifies as a night painting because the high-cheek-boned, narrow face, with its blonde beard and moustache, is set against a background of deep blue, punctuated with star-like touches. In a much-quoted letter to Theo in 1888, van Gogh wrote of wishing "to paint the portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings, because it is his nature." To express his affection and admiration, van Gogh added, "I am going to be the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I come even to orange tones, chromes, and pale lemon yellow. Beyond the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination of the bright head against the rich blue background, I get a mysterious effect, like a star in the depths of an azure sky." Was the "artist friend" Bloch?

The implications of the portrait are fully realized in the best-known work in the show, MOMA's *Starry Night*, which essentially concludes the exhibition. (There's some contextual material at the very end, but it's rather anticlimactic.) Since van Gogh was committed to working directly

from the motif, he was both fascinated and exasperated by the challenge of painting at night, striving to encapsulate his perceptions when perception was difficult. He'd complained of the difficulty of working in the Brabant peasants' dark hovel, where he could barely see his palette. In Arles, he seems to have found the solution to painting night skies and nocturnal views by finding a viewpoint from which lightspill from the town provided some illumination. The remarkable results of this method can be seen in one of the exhibition's less familiar, but most potent canvases, *The Starry Night over the Rhone* (1888, Musée d'Orsay, Paris). This urgently stroked little picture seems a more straightforward precursor to the turbo-charged *The Starry Night*, painted a year later, at the asylum at Saint-Rémy. But the earlier painting is hardly literal. The stars radiate, even if they fail to whirl or create eddies in the sky and the streetlights become pulsing wedges of intensity. An inexorable rhythm of choppy horizontal strokes knits the picture together, a disciplined foil for the golden bursts and rockets of stars and streetlights against the expanse of deep blue.

We leave the show wondering about its title, which, given the variety of the inclusions, can seem rather expedient. Then we remember that that it's not "Van Gogh and the Night" but "Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night," a nice distinction that gave the curators a great deal of freedom. I'm not sure I will look at van Gogh very differently because of this show, but I applaud the curators' efforts to consider this all too familiar painter in new ways. I'm grateful for their attempt to replace the over-exposed, over-reproduced cliché van Gogh with the serious painter he really was, and to help people see him from a fresh point of view, perhaps even with fresh eyes. And if MOMA profits substantially from the enterprise, as they obviously intend to do, we can hope that profits will be used to mount more small, intelligent exhibitions like this one.

Exhibition notes

“Mystic Masque: Semblance and Reality in Georges Rouault, 1871–1958”
McMullen Museum, Boston College.
August 30–December 7, 2008

Georges Rouault (1871–1958) has never been a crowd-pleaser. Though he was virtually ignored by the art world for decades, anniversary exhibitions in France, New York, and Boston have reintroduced this challenging artist.

Rouault was born in a cellar during an attack by the Communards against the Germans in Belleville, a working-class district of Paris. As France recovered from the Franco-Prussian war, the country went through a time of intense anticlericalism. Soon afterwards, a cultural reaction against secularism set in; one result was the Christian democratic movement and its push for a socially responsive church. Rouault’s father fervently admired Lamennais, the Breton priest who suffered papal displeasure for his democratic writings, and he passed on this Christian idealism to his son. In fact, the senior Rouault felt so strongly about Lamennais’s censure that he withdrew his son from Catholic school and sent him to a Protestant one.

Against his father’s objections, Rouault began an apprenticeship restoring medieval stained glass. Later, at the *Ecole des Arts Décoratifs*, he came under the influence of the Symbolist Gustave Moreau. Rouault venerated his teacher, but ultimately found Symbolism’s emphasis on dreams and the supernatural to be a Romantic dead-end. He said that he preferred “les réalités modestes et simples.” Still, it was in Moreau’s studio that Rouault met the priest from whom he received his first communion in 1897.

By the early twentieth century, Rouault left behind the academy and took on social commentary in paintings and prints. He realigned himself with Daumier and the great eighteenth-century British caricaturists—other artists who also found the

graphic medium especially rich for satire. Rouault’s eye for the downtrodden rivals that of Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, and Picasso, but without their cynicism and decadence. When Rouault depicts prostitutes and clowns, he finds in these secular symbols the figure of the mocked Christ. Grand guignol becomes Passion Play.

Curated by the Rev. Prof. Stephen Schloesser, “Mystic Masque” assembles 180 works by Rouault, including the groundbreaking *Père Ubu* prints (published 1932), the variations on the Holy Face, and the many portraits of marginal figures like prostitutes and circus performers. Schloesser makes a strong case for the eloquence of the latter works, for their combination of nostalgia and melancholy. Rouault himself described this period (1902–1909) as one of moral upheaval in which he began to paint with “an outrageous lyricism.” While these Fauve-like grotesqueries are not endearing, they do show the fierceness and assurance with which Rouault began to arrive at his characteristic handling of color and line.

Among these circus works is a display case that follows the genesis of an aquatint from *Shooting Star Circus* (1938). Cancelled copper plates and annotated proofs show the complex and somewhat mysterious process used by Rouault and his printer. In the catalogue from the 1945 MOMA exhibit, Carl O. Schniewind noted that while these prints show technical skill, they have a mechanical quality about them: “This may be due to the fact that the color scheme, which is particularly lavish, is somewhat overdone. The original freshness of the concept is stiffened through the numerous mechanical steps which become necessary to obtain the highly complicated final result.” Rouault’s copious notes to “adjust gray green” or “make the flesh of the arm more solid” confirm this assessment—the aquatints do look flat and overworked.

The centerpiece of this exhibition is the astounding *Miserere et Guerre*, an album that Rouault executed between 1922 and 1927

(published 1948). The images began in 1914 as drawings and gouache oils. The oils were then photo-engraved on copper plates. The resulting fifty-eight etchings combine aquatint, drypoint, and brush. Here, too, Rouault compulsively revised the images, but unlike the aquatints, these are marvels of depth and lambent tonality.

It is difficult to overstate the graphic impact of the *Miserere et Guerre* prints. The cumulative effect of the repeated dichotomies—mercy/war, the seen/the unseen, sacred/profane, Christ/man—is to construct an iconography of potent symbols. The horrors of war appear to Rouault not as a catalogue of atrocities, but as a parable of man’s essential weakness and the example of enduring faith.

The labor that Rouault expended on the *Miserere et Guerre* images heightens their materiality—the virtuosic range of blacks, the Byzantine sculpting of line, the glow of the rare whites. This attention to craft as a form of devotion fits with Schloesser’s assertions about Rouault’s essentially medieval spiritualism. Artists of the Middle Ages also saw their work as a way to worship and glorify the Lord.

Schloesser asks us to consider Rouault as the last Romantic. Undoubtedly, the artist drew much from Romanticism, but he seems gradually to have exhausted its effusions. Perhaps, the question should be: Was Rouault the last mystic?

—Leann Davis Alspaugh

“Black Is Beautiful”
De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam.
July 26–October 26, 2008

As you enter the “Black Is Beautiful” exhibition in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, the first words that you read are “Black people are attractive.” These words produced in me, at any rate, a reaction akin to that I used to have when my teacher’s chalk squeaked on the blackboard, or he ran his nail down the blackboard because his chalk had dwindled away to nearly nothing.

Method thinks the curator doth protest too much. After all, would he have written “Slovaks are attractive” or “Amputees are attractive”? There is a whistling-in-the-dark quality about the words that would not entirely have pleased or convinced me if I had happened to be black. The next words are, if anything, even less reassuring: “Artists have known this for a long time.”

This implies that artists have been privy to a kind of knowledge that is not general, that is in some way technical, the result of something that is difficult to understand or to grasp. But is attractiveness the kind of quality that could be apprehended technically?

I think it is perfectly possible for artists to change our ways of looking at the world and seeing what we did not see before. Whether it is part of their vocation to do so is another matter, as is the question of whether any of the artists in this exhibition, of visual representations of blacks in Dutch art from the fourteenth century to the present day, actually had this effect on their contemporaries, but I do not see how anybody could look at the magnificent pictures of blacks painted by Rubens (to name just one artist) without accepting the equal humanity of blacks—something that, after all, has been ferociously denied in the past, and quite recently.

In fact, almost all of the exhibits in the exhibition show Africans (including those transplanted to Holland’s South American colony, Suriname) as individuals, from Jan Mosaert’s pensive and melancholic *African Man* of 1520 down to Nola Hatterman’s *On the Terrace*, portraying a dandy-ish and extremely proud young man at a Dutch café table, over four hundred years later. It is not the individuality of the subjects that comes as a surprise so much as the obvious assumption of their individual humanity by the artists. We have been so conditioned of late to think in Edward Said-ist terms of our own heritage that, even when we know that what he wrote was largely bunkum, we find that it has insinuated itself into our minds like an earwig into the brain.

Of course, this might be the result of curatorial selection, for the curator explains “that the emphasis lies on black people as empowered, independent individuals, and less attention is paid to other themes”—such as racist caricatures, for example.

But what a weasel, low, dishonest word “empowered” is. It doesn’t mean powerful, presumably; it means with the ability to react to circumstances, which is the human condition. It therefore provides no criterion of selection.

Oddly enough, it is only as anti-racist doctrine takes hold in the 1960s that the pictures of blacks degenerate into stereotypes and generic figures. Almost no individuality remains. And how’s this for condescension?

The curatorial note beside one seventeenth-century picture tells us:

Strong men have muscles. They are large and powerful, welcome allies or feared foes. But strong men are also men who held firm to their beliefs and are willing to fight for them. This is why artists working for rich, white Christians often depicted biblical figures or Greek heroes as strong, black-skinned men. The strength and resolution of these strong, black men reflected a little on their patrons by association.

In the modern world, it seems, there is no racist like an anti-racist.

—*Anthony Daniels*

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

The city had its annual flurry of opening nights, and first out of the gates was the New York Philharmonic—they are traditionally first. Lorin Maazel, the music director, embarked on his last season. He came to us in 2002. And, next fall, he will be replaced by Alan Gilbert, who is coming from the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic. We will have years to bemoan or puzzle over or hail him.

As is customary, the opening-night concert began with the national anthem. Maazel conducted it as he always does: purposefully, nobly, meaningfully. He does not consider it a beer-hall embarrassment to be gotten over with. He continued with Berlioz's *Roman Carnival* Overture, which he conducted with flair but also with restraint. This was a friendly, merry account, rather than a rip-roaring one. And then we had our soloist of the evening: Sir James Galway (otherwise "Jimmy"). Who would have predicted, thirty years ago, that a flutist—a *flutist*, of all musicians—would become an international superstar? But Galway has, thanks to his multiple skills.

With the Philharmonic, he played the concerto of Jacques Ibert. He showed his superb technique, which included downright deviltry. And, in the work's slow movement, he produced some lovely colors. But something was wrong with this performance—something that dwells in the mental, and musical, realm. When it was over, the friend sitting next to me said,

"Pretty boring for opening night." Yes, it was—for any night.

But Maazel saved the day in the second half with Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4. Last season, he conducted an entire Tchaikovsky festival—which is part of the bill of indictment against him: the bill that says, "Maazel's has been a backward-looking, unadventurous tenure." That's untrue, but even if it were true: Isn't there something to be said for conducting Tchaikovsky memorably well? Maazel was a pro in the Fourth, and the last movement lifted you from your seat. (And not because you were in a rush to get out, either.)

The Metropolitan Opera opened with a gala featuring the soprano Renée Fleming—that was the official opening. First, the company performed Verdi's Requiem, in honor of Luciano Pavarotti, who died in September 2007. James Levine was on the podium, or rather, in the pit. And this was not a mountaintop performance—one for the ages. That's a ridiculous statement, isn't it? Yes, but Levine gives those—performances of that type. I remember a Verdi Requiem of his in Carnegie Hall. When it was finished, and the musicians had left the stage, the audience was reluctant to leave. I think they wanted to remain in the atmosphere of the performance. I have seldom seen anything like it.

At the Met, Levine had four worthy soloists, including Marcello Giordani—who, as the tenor, was in a ticklish position:

in other words, the Pavarotti position. The great man sang this music many, many times (including on special occasions such as this). Giordani did some faltering, and a lot of it. But he always maintained a basic dignity. And he projects such decency—such goodwill—you root for him, regardless. The mezzo was Olga Borodina, who is simply one of the best Verdi Requiem mezzos of all time—along with Stignani, Horne, and your other favorites. She did not have her best outing on this evening, but who could really complain? The soprano was Barbara Frittoli, who made up for technical problems with a very touching sincerity.

How many times does it happen—that the least-known member of a vocal quartet or cast is the best (or close to it)? Levine's bass, Ildar Abdrazakov, sang his music magnificently. As for Levine: No, it was not a mountaintop performance. But even half-way up the mountain with him—particularly in Verdi's Requiem—is a fine journey.

Before Renée Fleming took the stage at the Met, Lorin Maazel conducted another concert—this one beginning with a new work, *Rhapsodies* for Orchestra by Steven Stucky. He is an American who teaches at Cornell. And his piece is both typical and atypical—typical of his time and not. What is typical? Like so many modern pieces, *Rhapsodies* employs a lot of percussion. Indeed, future historians of music may look back at our time as “the Percussion Period.” Also, there are bird-in-the-jungle sounds, sci-fi, or sci-fi-ish, effects—you know these moves. And why are composers so stingy with melodies? It's a mystery. Maybe none occurs to them.

But *Rhapsodies* is a good and worthwhile piece. Stucky applies washes of sound, and he layers his sound interestingly. Moreover, his piece has an intelligent and natural arc. And despite those modern moves, he recalls the American Neo-Romanticism of mid-century: Piston, Schuman, Persichetti, and those boys.

This concert had a soloist, Yefim Bronfman, who played Rachmaninoff's Piano

Concerto No. 3 in D minor. No one now living plays this work better than he. I will set down just one detail: He played his opening measures in perfect unison—which is much harder than it looks or sounds. I once knew a woman who remembered how Rachmaninoff himself had played these measures. She wondered at the evenness of them—and she would approve of Bronfman.

Maazel and the Philharmonic made good partners in this concerto, doing more than conductor and orchestra usually do. (This is traditionally a piano vehicle, pure and simple.) And, after intermission, they performed Ravel's *Mother Goose* Suite and Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin* Suite. In the first, Maazel was suave and urbane, but also child-like—not exactly a quality we associate with this hugely sophisticated man. In the Bartók, he was stylish, daring, exotic—like the music itself. A greatly satisfying concert.

That opening gala at the Met was a glittering affair, complete with red carpet, and celebrities to walk it. Fleming herself is a celebrity. After the gala, they handed out samples of her new perfume, which is called *La Voce*, from Coty. That's fame—fame beyond opera houses. Fleming is an exceptionally versatile singer, in addition to an exceptionally good one. She sings a range of opera roles, and a range of songs. For opening night, she sang three of the roles for which she is best known: Violetta (in Verdi's *Traviata*), *Manon* (in Massenet's opera of the same name), and Strauss's Countess (in *Capriccio*). I should say, she sang excerpts from those roles.

And how'd she do? I thought of Tiger Woods: Sometimes, after he wins a tournament, he says, “I didn't have my A game.” This drives some of his fellow pros nuts: that he wins without his A game (and says so). Well, so it is with a performer of Fleming's caliber: She did not have her A game. But she played well enough to win, and she richly deserved her applause—and the honor of opening the Met season.

Carnegie Hall's season opened with an all-Bernstein concert, anchored by the San

Francisco Symphony, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. This year marks the late Bernstein's ninetieth birthday—and you know how the music business loves an anniversary. Anniversaries are practically its organizing principle. Tilson Thomas led off with the Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*—and a marvelous job he and the orchestra did. They were completely idiomatic in this rightly beloved music: not too “popular,” not too “classical”—perfect, actually.

In the course of the concert, Tilson Thomas gave a speech, as musicians are wont to do now. And he said that Bernstein was “a proud LIB-ER-AL!” That's how he said that word: with three distinct, fist-shaking syllables. Audience members went wild with joy and delight. It was one of those self-congratulatory New York moments: not a murmur of dissent. *Aren't we all wonderful?* Tilson Thomas then said that Bernstein wanted to make music “to inspire a better world”—and we all know that only liberals wish a better world. Furthermore, we might ask: Was Bernstein a liberal, in any true sense? When he was raising money for the Black Panthers, who were killing cops with abandon, and having to pay legal fees, what liberalism was he advancing?

Anyway, this was a concert—despite Tilson Thomas's speech, despite the audience's self-congratulation. And it was, on balance, a good concert. But we might ask about Bernstein in the long term. As I see it, *West Side Story* will live forever—as long as there's anything like musical theater. About the classical music, one cannot be so optimistic. *Serenade*, the violin concerto of sorts, is a good piece. But some of us think that most of Bernstein's classical music will disappear with his friends and general circle—the “Lenny” crowd.

Don't try telling that to anyone in New York, however. He still has god-like status. In an interview published in Carnegie Hall's program, the following question was put to Alan Gilbert, the Philharmonic's incoming chief: “We speak of the three Bs: Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. It may be too soon to add another, but if you were to try,

would you include Bernstein?” Gilbert did not say no. He said that Bernstein “deserves to be considered in the pantheon of great composers.” He'll get along just fine, will Gilbert, in New York.

To the Met again: When Karita Mattila does *Salome* here, she goes all the way—that is, she appears stark naked (briefly) at the end of the Dance of the Seven Veils. Patrons are sure to bring their binoculars: even if they're sitting in the first rows. I'm not sure that this full monty adds much, except for notoriety. And I'm not sure that Mattila's dance is terribly Salome-like: It is trashy, slutty, and Vegas, rather than mysterious, seductive, and Oriental. She might as well have a pole. But you wouldn't throw this dance out of bed for eating crackers.

And the role of Salome is far more than a dance. The Met revived Jürgen Flimm's 2004 production of Strauss's opera. And Mattila was absorbing in it. She is “the consummate singing actress,” people say, and they're not far off. She is especially complete in *Salome*. You may not agree with every jot and tittle (and jiggle), but this portrayal is one of the most compelling in opera today.

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center had a good idea—kick off its season with a program of octets. Was the Mendelssohn included? No, but there are other octets—just none as winsome (and remember that the composer wrote his piece when he was sixteen—just sixteen). CMS offered works by Françaix, Stravinsky, Shostakovich, and Schubert. Stravinsky's octet is for woodwinds and brass—and it's nice to see them get the spotlight for a change, in a world dominated by strings. Especially welcome was the clarinet of David Shifrin, who has been extolled in these pages as one of the best instrumentalists in the world. He repeatedly confirms that.

Schubert's Octet in F major, D. 803, is a clear masterpiece—and also an hour long. What did Dr. Johnson say about *Paradise Lost*? “None ever wished it longer than it is.” I doubt anyone has ever wished D. 803 longer, either. It may have seemed particu-

larly long in the CMS performance, which sagged some. But, to say again: a masterpiece, clearly.

Very clearly a masterpiece is Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which the Met revived. You may tire of this oft-staged masterpiece—but not in a first-rate performance, which is what we had. Presiding in the pit was Louis Langrée, a Frenchman well-known at Lincoln Center: He is music director of the Mostly Mozart Festival, which occurs in the summer. And he had onstage a slew of worthy singers. I will touch on a few of them.

Don Giovanni was Erwin Schrott, the Uruguayan bass who is approaching celebrity (though not at the Fleming level). With his flowing hair and bare chest, he looked like Fabio, the model whose image appeared on countless romance-novel covers. Schrott was often as smooth in his singing as he was in his appearance. At other times, he struggled, vocally. But he always exuded charisma, a must for the bad old (or young?) don. Don Ottavio was portrayed by Matthew Polenzani, one of the great Mozart tenors in memory—no more need be said for now. And Zerlina was the young New York-born sensation Isabel Leonard. She was simply delectable, doing everything Mozart (and Da Ponte) could have wanted with this country lass.

Seeing her, you think of a favorite musical anecdote—at least I did: An experienced concertgoer took a friend, a newcomer, to an event featuring Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (famously described as “the most glamorous woman in Europe”). When Schwarzkopf walked onto the stage, the friend gasped, “And she sings, too?”

As I noted earlier, sometimes the least well-known member of a cast turns out to be the best—and that was arguably true in this *Don Giovanni*. Portraying Donna Anna was a Bulgarian soprano named Krassimira Stoyanova. She has an extraordinary voice: melting, poignant, adaptable. That voice is lyric, but it can penetrate easily. Her technique was unflinching throughout the opera (and Mozart gives Anna plenty of room to falter). And she showed herself to be a smart, smart

musician. Composer and librettist could not have asked anything more from *her*, either.

Back at the Philharmonic, Lorin Maazel conducted the Mahler Tenth, which as you know is a single movement: The composer had time to complete the Adagio, and no more. This music needs beauty of sound—and the Philharmonic failed to provide that. Indeed, the strings were downright painful. But Maazel did some interesting things with the score: giving it bite and sass. Also, one sforzando made the lady in front of me jump. (I think she'd been snoozing.) All through the Adagio, Maazel was measured and logical. He was also a little grim and dutiful—more heart would have been nice. Often, people accuse Maazel of being a cold machine—even of not liking music. This is baloney, of course: but sometimes you can forgive people for making the mistake.

On this concert, he also conducted a piece of his own: his Music for Flute and Orchestra, with Tenor Tuba Obbligato, Op. 11. (Tenor Tuba Obbligato!) Maazel composed this piece for his friend Galway in 1995. And it is well crafted—a brainy score from a brainy guy. It is episodic, balanced, a little slick. There are modernist touches—you could even say clichés—and there is considerable beauty, too: for example in a section simply called “Song.” There is also humor. At one point, the audience laughed out loud—and Maazel, on the podium, smiled when they did. It must be satisfying to a composer when people laugh at his jokes.

The soloist was the Philharmonic's principal flute, Robert Langevin, who is not a Frenchman but near it: a Quebecker. French people have a special relationship with the flute (despite Galway and notable others). And Langevin was superb in his conductor's piece, technically and musically. In an interview once, he said that he loved the flute for the astonishing variety of sounds it can make. He showed many of these sounds here.

On another day, Maazel conducted a concert that began with a Bach *Brandenburg* concerto—No. 5. Maazel is doing these concertos this season, his last with the Phil-

harmonic: Wise and soulful is the man who knows to honor Bach. But this performance of No. 5 was pretty painful: weak, feeble, sleepy. A failed experiment, I'm afraid. The harpsichord onstage was barely audible. Why not a piano (Glenn Gould-style)? And here was something curious: Throughout the middle movement, there are only three players—a trio—and Maazel conducted them every step of the way. It didn't help.

Following the Bach was a new piece by Bernard Rands, a British-born composer who has long lived and worked in the United States. His piece is called *Chains Like the Sea*, or rather, *CHAINS LIKE THE SEA*—what those capitals mean, I can't tell you. The two sections of the piece are labeled in small letters: “the sabbath rang slowly” and “rivers of the windfall light.” But music doesn't care about words, if it is instrumental. It doesn't care whether those words are written by Dylan Thomas or you or me. What does Rands's piece sound like?

It is squirmy, bleak, mysterious, and tense. It uses a lot of percussion. Melody is scarce, or absent. In other words, it is a modern piece, like innumerable others. People sometimes say that all Vivaldi concertos sound alike. It's not true—but if it were, at least they'd have the excuse of having been written by the same man.

CHAINS LIKE THE SEA has a pleasantly violent ending. There are other worthwhile pages, too. In fact, the whole piece is worthwhile. Its maker is obviously a man of intelligence and skill. But the awful question is, Will anyone desire to hear this piece, as years go on (or even months)? Does it matter? I suppose there is the satisfaction of having expressed what is in one.

On the second half of the program,

Maazel conducted Tchaikovsky's Suite No. 3 in G, which is kind of an honorary symphony: part of Tchaikovsky's symphonic canon. Maazel conducted the suite with power, sweep, and stringency. The Scherzo was a touch heavy—fairies wore army boots. And that magnificent ending section could have had more pomp and majesty. It was tight and fast—but also thrilling. As a bonus, Maazel conducted an encore—the Csárdás from *Swan Lake*, which oozed the Old World in rhythm and overall feeling. Our maestro put on a damn good show.

La Gioconda, Ponchielli's opera, requires six singers. (Dancers, too—let's not forget the Dance of the Hours.) You need three women and three men, all of whom have important music to sing. And the Met arranged a high-quality cast—which included Olga Borodina, whose Laura is unsurpassed. But let me just highlight one singer, at the end of this chronicle: Ewa Podleś, the Polish contralto who sang La Cieca. La Podleś had not appeared at the Met since 1984. She was in her early thirties then. And she is still a wonder of nature (please pardon the cliché). Her voice arises from some primordial realm, and she seems to be able to do whatever she wants with it, technically. As La Cieca, she was riveting—in her singing, I mean. You would have expected that. But she also showed herself to be a committed actress. She is a total operatic performer—in addition to a concert singer and a recitalist.

We all know that she's a great singer. And great singers are rare. But Podleś is rare even in the small class of great singers. Most everybody is like someone else—at least one someone else. Podleś is pretty much like no one, standing alone. And doubly astounding for that.

The media

Carefully crafted narratives

by James Bowman

“All week long, the images screamed financial panic,” wrote Philip Kennicott in one of his trademark thumb-suckers for the *Washington Post* Style section. “And if it seemed the same ones were appearing over and over again, it’s in part because the media don’t exactly know what they’re looking at yet.” Well, he’s got that right, anyway. From the media’s point of view, at least in the first instance, the worst thing about the financial panic or “meltdown”—a favorite “crisis” word since the 1970s—was that no one knew what the story was. Bad things were happening, but it wasn’t quite clear why they were happening or who could be blamed for them. Who were the good guys and who were the bad? One obvious way to tell the story was in terms of a grimly satisfying comeuppance for the greedy capitalists on Wall Street, and this version got something of a workout. But you could tell that the media’s hearts weren’t really in it—perhaps because the would-be villains were also the most visible of the victims. As Mr. Kennicott acknowledged, the anguished broker clutching his brow was the symbol—or, as he portentously (and pretentiously) put it, the “synecdoche”—of the crisis to the media. This is partly, he adds, because so many ordinary people whose retirement accounts are invested in mutual funds are similarly clutching their brows. Everybody with a 401(k) would now have to be numbered among the greedy capitalists.

At the same time, Mr. Kennicott wonders if the real import of it all will be a reversion

to a story he and many others had thought to have gone out of style, if not to have been entirely forgotten:

Failure on Wall Street may no longer be imputed to collective hubris, or experienced as some kind of abstract hurricane that blows up from time to time. Wall Street may become what it once was: a metaphor not for the whole of America, but for wealth and privilege, in contrast to want and suffering. There is a rich imagery for articulating that understanding, but it hasn’t been seen for decades, and it’s terrifying to imagine its recurrence.

As if to bear him out, his *Post* colleague Steven Pearlstein was writing on another page on the same day that “the reason we are in this fix is because markets, at least for the moment, are broken and can’t be relied on to allocate capital more wisely than Hank Paulson. A little bit of well-timed, well-crafted socialism is just the thing to save capitalism from itself?” Now where have we heard something like that before? Oh, right. It is the standard liberal talking point about the administration of the sainted Franklin Delano Roosevelt which, as we right-wingers have never succeeded in getting it through our thick skulls, did not introduce socialism into America but rather “saved capitalism.”

Well, the old stories are always the best, I suppose. The day before, the *Post* had run a

front-page “Analysis” piece by Anthony Faiola titled “The End of American Capitalism?”—which, like Beatrice and Sidney Webb’s original title to *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* (1935), seems to have been designed to lose its question mark in the second edition. Certainly, after the government’s \$700 billion bailout of the credit markets, followed by a partial nationalization of the major banks, he had a point. Suddenly everyone was reviving the saying attributed to the British liberal statesman Sir William Harcourt in Victorian times that “We’re all socialists now.” So it could hardly be surprising if we were using socialist language to tell a socialist story based on the Marxist legend about something called “capitalism” which was once supposed to exist precariously poised between the two historical eras of “feudalism” and “socialism,” one of which hadn’t happened yet but doubtless would in short order.

It seems to me an attractive idea to classify Marx not as a great philosopher or economist—still less, of course, as a prophet—but as a great journalist. For he did what all journalists seek to do, which is to construct a story (or “narrative” as even quite ordinary people are now learning to call it) that accounts for confusing, complex, and often unwelcome events in a way that becomes widely accepted not only by his readers but also by the readers of his readers and even by people who don’t read at all. The enduring nature of his story was obviously owing to the fact that it had clear-cut heroes and villains, that after many a difficulty and setback the heroes were portrayed as triumphing (or bound to triumph) over the villains, and that there was a sense of fate or inevitability, even divine guidance—with “History” in the role of God—about this happy ending. Most importantly, it encouraged a mass audience to identify itself with the good guys and their sense of grievance against the bad guys who were few in number and different from them in having lots of money. One of the things that people demand from journalism, now as then, is guidance as to whom to hate.

Oddly, as it might seem, although the revolutionary socialist era never dawned in the industrialized world in quite the way that Marx had predicted, even the people who did not go on believing that it would, some day, continued believing in the wicked and exploitative “system” that socialism was supposed to supersede—perhaps just so that the next time there was a financial panic they would have someone or something, other than the panickers themselves, to blame. More oddly, in my view, those who positively repudiated the Marxist narrative also retained the Marxist language, proclaiming themselves proud capitalists and insisting that the capitalist system must bring about, in fact and for everybody, the workers’ paradise that socialism could only promise. It should have been foreseeable that this would get them into trouble when hard times came along the next time. “You said capitalism ‘worked,’ didn’t you?” the socialist might reasonably ask. “So what have you got to say now?”

Of course, “capitalism”—the socialist word for economic reality—*does* work, just not to produce the utopian dream of easy abundance for all. That remains a fantasy no matter what the words used to describe it. Instead, it works to produce rewards for the provident and punishments for the improvident, and it is these latter that the new socialist narrative seeks to champion by mitigating their punishment with some proportion of the rewards which have been confiscated from the provident—who have by now become so used to the treatment that they are expected meekly to accept and even welcome it. They have 401(k) accounts too, after all.

Although bits of Marx’s narrative—including all the most important and predictive bits—have since been called into doubt, it cannot but seem remarkable that after more than a century and a half, as the late crisis showed, so much of it remains current, albeit in many local adaptations. In many parts of the world—and in some parts of America itself—America as a nation and a collectivity naturally takes on the role of the

wicked capitalists, allowing even fabulously wealthy Arab sheikhs or their scions, such as Osama bin Laden, to assume that of the oppressed and exploited proletariat. This kind of anti-Americanism is now so common in Europe that it has resulted in a Nobel Prize in economics for Paul Krugman, Bush-bashing columnist for *The New York Times*. But in most of the American media, the classic version is Mr. Pearlstein's, derived from FDR's, in which the capitalists are divided into the good and the bad kind, the "malefactors of great wealth" and Republicans on the one hand and the enlightened upper-class champions of "the people" like FDR himself on the other.

The latter have been saving the ungrateful former from the consequences of their own greed with homeopathic doses of socialism for three generations now, at least according to the American media's master narrative, so of course the current difficulties in the credit markets slotted right into it—apart from the small but not unimportant detail that the enlightened prince destined to save the people and the good capitalists from the rampaging bad capitalists had not—yet—been elected. Of course he was on the way. Very much so, in fact. Barack Obama was clearly nature's and multiculturalism's version of the aristocratic JFK, whom the media saw as the second iteration of FDR and the prototype of all his other successors and would-be successors for nearly half a century. To many in the media, Senator Obama seemed already president in all but name, so it must have seemed monstrously unfair to the devotees of the old story that, four months too soon, the face of capitalism's savior appeared on the scene in the improbable guise of that well-established villain, George W. Bush.

That's why it was understandable that, even in the act of ratifying the President's massive bailout package, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi could not forbear to blame the Bush administration itself, seemingly seen by the vast majority of the Democratic party as the *fons et origo* of all the evil and misfor-

tune in the world, for the fact that there had had to be a bailout in the first place. For one brief glorious moment it almost seemed as if this inopportune reiteration of the Democrats' and the media's stock narrative of Bush administration bungling, stupidity, or malignity would cause the measure to go down to defeat. But the Republican rebels, perhaps shamed by David Brooks's calling them "nihilists" in the pages of *The New York Times*, swiftly fell back into line. Yet how should they have held out against it when even John McCain seemingly bought into the dominant media narrative—including, most remarkably, the part of it which attributed the market's big sell-off to Republican "deregulation"? For when, in one of their "debates," Senator Obama attempted to inculcate Senator McCain, along with other Republicans, for this supposed deregulation, the latter had nothing to say in his own defense.

It's not as if he had nothing to say. Along with some Republican co-sponsors, he had introduced a bill in 2005 to increase the regulatory oversight of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the two worst offenders in the generation of the toxic debt that had caused the banking crisis, which had in turn caused the stock sell-off. And what had happened to this bill? It was defeated not by those wicked, regulation-hating, laissez-faire Republicans but by Democrats, including Barack Obama, who depended on the well-organized political action committees of the two agencies in defiance of the most elementary sense of equity or ethics, to funnel large amounts of money in the form of campaign contributions to themselves. Perhaps Senator McCain simply forgot about this episode from three years ago. He is getting on a bit, they say.

More likely, he saw the hopelessness of changing the widely accepted media narrative as it was taking shape in the closing weeks of the general election campaign and which was repeating at every opportunity, along with Senator Obama and the Democrats, some variation on the theme that, as Jonathan Chait put it in *The New Republic*,

“Republican governance has brought orgies of deregulation.” Mr. Chait would have been hard put to it to come up with any examples of deregulation from the last eight years, if he had attempted to do so, but of course “Republican governance” could include anything up to and including Herbert Hoover that could be made to fit the media’s template—which was also, not coincidentally, that of the Democratic narrative in the election campaign. This portrayed an irresponsible president and Republican party, drunk on power and wedded for doctrinal reasons to their blind belief in a dangerously wild and uncontrollable laissez-faire capitalism, which had indulged themselves for eight years in an orgy of “deregulation” issuing in the present crisis.

In fact, the Republican governance of the second Bush era began with the bankruptcy of Enron and was in many ways defined by the bipartisan regulatory overkill of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, which was enacted in response to the last occasion when the media had demanded that “speculators” and others they represented as belonging to the bad variety of capitalists should be given exemplary punishments and subjected to increased government monitoring. In the latest crisis, everything that had gone most egregiously wrong was subject to regulation, yet it went wrong anyway—and things, like hedge funds, that were not subject to regulation did not go wrong. As Sebastian Mallaby, a lonely voice of reason, put it in *The Washington Post*, “the key financiers were the ones who bought the toxic mortgage products. If they hadn’t been willing to buy snake oil, nobody would have been peddling it. Who were the purchasers? They were by no means unregulated. U.S. investment banks, regulated by the Securities and Exchange Commission, bought piles of toxic waste. U.S. commercial banks, regulated by several agencies, including the Fed, also devoured large quantities.”

The worst offenders, the Enrons of this phase of the business cycle, were Fannie Mae

and Freddie Mac which, according to Charles Calomiris of Columbia University, “bought more than a third of the \$3 trillion in junk mortgages created during the bubble and . . . did so because heavy government oversight obliged them to push money toward marginal home purchasers”—which obligation, he might have added, had in turn been pushed on the government by “community organizers” like Barack Obama. “Regulation,” not for the first time, became a euphemism for governmental self-dealing while the legislature which had created these agencies in the first place neglected its own clear duty to provide effective regulatory oversight of those they had thus given privileged positions in the mortgage marketplace. “So,” as Mr. Mallaby writes, “blaming deregulation for the financial mess is misguided. But it is dangerous, too, because one of the big challenges for the next president will be to defend markets against the inevitable backlash that follows this crisis.” Good luck with that!

For this part of the story just doesn’t fit very well with the tale the media has had to tell ever since FDR. That’s how even the regulation-happy populist John McCain was said by David Alpern, editor of *Newsweek*, echoing Senator Obama, to be “associated” with this mythical bugbear of deregulation. Also contributing to the all but irresistible magnetic force of the media and Democratic narrative has been the toxic levels of anti-Bush feeling in those precincts over the past eight years, which had already created a disaster narrative of the Bush administration—loosely based, insofar as such things are ever based on anything, on the missing Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq and Hurricane Katrina—well before there was a disaster. This is the habit of mind which cries, in the words of an Associated Press headline of last June, relentlessly mocked ever since by James Taranto of *The Wall Street Journal*, “Everything is seemingly spinning out of control.”

Perhaps it should not be wondered at, then, that things really did seem to be spinning out of control three months later, or

that the President should have had to bear the blame, as he does for so much else. It's come to something when normally so astute an observer as James Wolcott can write that "I blame Bush for everything and will continue to blame him (and Vice President Dick Cheney) for everything long after we're all dead of gas gangrene," and careful readers are reduced to wondering if he might—particularly as his *jeu d'esprit* appeared in the pages of *Vanity Fair*—just conceivably be serious.

Both these two media narratives have obviously served Barack Obama well in the wake of the crisis and made it seem more likely than ever (at the time of writing) that he must succeed to the patrimony with which the media have long been eager to endow him. His story thus became—or at least was on the way to becoming—the latest redaction of the story first formulated by Karl Marx and subsequently adapted and further refined by Franklin Roosevelt and three generations of journalists and Democrats—but I repeat myself—who came after him. Senator Obama's election began to look as inevitable as the dictatorship of the proletariat or the withering away of the state. All good news, you might think, for the media consensus, and yet the media themselves seemed out of sorts: querulous and snappish and annoyed out of all proportion when someone like Sarah Palin came along to threaten a change in the story they have so carefully crafted. Here's how Sam Schulman, in a brilliant article in *The Weekly Standard*, explains this ill-temper:

The man to blame for the media's misery—and by extension, everyone's—is Evan Cornog, the associate dean of the Columbia Journalism School, a friend and a fine historian. In 2004, he published a book called *The Power and the Story*. It was a guileless act with dreadful consequences. Cornog's subtitle reveals all: "How the Crafted Presidential Narrative Has Determined Political Success from George

Washington to George W. Bush." . . . Cornog, innocently, thought candidates and campaign strategists crafted the presidential narrative. Journalists misunderstood. They believe their job is to construct the presidential narrative themselves. So instead of journalism—even biased, self-blinded, incompetent, selective reporting and ill-informed, self-interested commentary—the media, from top to bottom, craft narratives. Nearly anonymous wire service cubs do narratives. Syndicated columnists, glamorous and grizzled alike, do narratives. Gwen Ifill narrates first and moderates actual debates later.

Of course, crafting narratives is at least two or three steps up the status-ladder from merely reporting the news. But if the journalist's self-conceit as artist and poet must be satisfying in one way, his vulnerability, and that of his carefully crafted narrative, to mere events must produce at least an equal amount of dissatisfaction. As Mr. Schulman notes,

In the campaign that takes place in real life, not narrative, new facts emerge constantly. New facts the press once upon a time called "news," which sold newspapers and grew audiences. Now, so invested are journalists in narratives that new facts and new personalities make them anxious and unhappy, instead of eager and interesting. And that anxiety they communicate to us—fewer and fewer of us—daily. The news industry, which has thrived for centuries as a chorus reporting what it sees, now has seized the author's job and invents the plot. No wonder the audience for newspapers and television news has been dwindling so quickly.

It's enough to give new heart to those of us who will not be inclined to welcome the now seemingly inevitable Obama victory. At least the tired old story-line about the misadventures of American "capitalism" will at last have to change. Won't it?

Books

The house in his mind

by Eric Ormsby

Draperville, Illinois, doesn't appear on any road map, but it occupies as permanent a crossroads in the American imagination as Winesburg, Ohio, or Grover's Corners, New Hampshire. Like Sherwood Anderson or Thornton Wilder, William Maxwell gave Draperville, his fictionalized stand-in for Lincoln, Illinois—where he was born on August 16, 1908—something of mythic status. But the similarities go only so far. For both Winesburg and Grover's Corners succeed as idealized types; they correspond to cherished images of small-town America. Draperville, by contrast, comes to life brick by brick, porch by porch, street-corner by street-corner; the lives of its inhabitants may be as pinched and yearning as any to be found in Winesburg or Grover's Corners, and yet they have the quirky grandeur of the irreducible: none of them could be mistaken for anyone else, few of them could be extrapolated into archetype. This is perhaps because Draperville was neither invented nor contrived. It was a lost place which arose by an act of reclamation out of the rubble of memory.

In the two-volume set of Maxwell's works, which the Library of America has brought out to mark the centenary of his birth, the novels and stories which have Draperville as their setting display a particular, almost indefinable vibrancy.¹ But even *The Château* of 1961, his rather Jamesian version of *The Innocents Abroad*, which takes two guileless young Americans to

post-war France, could be read as "Draperville in the Loire." His remembered mid-Western birthplace had by then become a state of mind as well as a cherished whistle-stop. Beside these novels, beginning with *They Came Like Swallows* in 1937 and culminating over forty years later in *So Long, See You Tomorrow* and *Billy Dyer*, his two indisputable masterpieces, the fiction Maxwell set elsewhere feels somewhat contrived. It may be the effect of re-reading them in sequence among the more powerful Draperville narratives, but even "Over by the River" and "The Thistles in Sweden," two of his most admired short stories, both set in New York, strike me as written to order; both were published in *The New Yorker* (where Maxwell had a distinguished parallel career as fiction editor) and both appear calculated to appeal to the rather predictable taste of its readers. (As Christopher Carduff points out in his excellent *Chronology*, Harold Ross refused to publish Maxwell's fiction set in the Midwest, insisting on locales limited to "the East Coast, Hollywood, Florida or Paris." Ross was, in his blithely knowing way, the most unwitting of provincials.)

1 *William Maxwell: Early Novels and Stories*, edited by Christopher Carduff; Library of America, 997 pages, \$35.

William Maxwell: Later Novels and Stories, edited by Christopher Carduff; Library of America, 994 pages, \$35.

The Library of America edition opens with *Bright Center of Heaven*, Maxwell's charming first novel, a comedy of manners published in 1934 (and out-of-print until now), and presents his succeeding works in order of publication. The five collections of short stories, forty of the inimitable fables he called "Improvisations," a few prefaces and a brief speech of thanks to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (for the award of its Gold Medal in Fiction in 1995), are included as well. His one pronouncement on the art of fiction, "The Writer as Illusionist," delivered at Smith College in 1955 (but scribbled down in nervous haste, at the very last minute, on the train to Northampton), rounds off volume one and shows Maxwell at his most characteristic, transforming a formal public address into an occasion for madcap parable. The second volume closes on a note of appropriate finality with his moving essay "Nearing Ninety."

Maxwell, who died in 2000 at the age of ninety-one, ends that last essay with the words, "Every now and then, in my waking moments, and especially when I am in the country, I stand and look hard at everything." To "stand and look hard at everything" could have been his motto as a writer. Over fifty years earlier, in *The Folded Leaf* of 1945, his narrator declared, "Seeing clearly is everything." This sounds admirably straightforward. The exceptional clarity of his prose and the surface calmness of his narrative stance do give a constant impression of clear-sightedness. He seems a quiet sort of writer, unflinching in his authorial courtesy, fair to a fault, unfashionably scrupulous, even fastidious, perhaps in the end a bit too buttoned-down; an image of dusty equanimity haunts his reputation.

The appearance of this edition of his works should alter that image for good. To read Maxwell's fiction in its entirety, one book after the other in the order of their appearance, is to gain a vivid awareness of American life in its smallest, most telling details over the course of nearly a century, from the grumpy banter of an immigrant

cook in a rural kitchen to the speechless sorrow of an abandoned dog on a ruined farm. But it is also to encounter a sense of loss of such irremediable and pervasive intensity as to be almost beyond the telling. "Seeing clearly" has seldom been so ambitious.

For Maxwell, the indispensable corollary to clear-sightedness was what Henry James called "the sense of the past." This Maxwell possessed to a remarkable degree. He was an obsessive master of the backward glance. There was nothing sentimental in this mastery; he could certainly wax nostalgic but he was no chronicler of nostalgia. His excavations of the past are often tender but more often they are hard and pitiless. Whenever he returns to Draperville, he does so the way a damaged witness might return to the scene of an accident. It is as though by tracing the faded blood-stains, by touching the half-effaced skid-marks, he can somehow reconstruct the full shock of all that befell him there. This has the added effect of casting his depiction of small-town America at the turn of the last century in an unexpected light. In Draperville, everything, down to "the order in the cupboards and the heavy propriety of the cook-stove" (as he puts it in *Bright Center of Heaven*), hovers at the very edge of a future which has long since passed; everything is fraught with what might be termed retrospective anticipation.

If there is a fixed point in Maxwell's increasingly deft manipulations of time throughout his work, it coincides with the death of his mother on January 3, 1919, at the age of 37. Stricken with Spanish Influenza followed by pneumonia, Blossom Maxwell died in a hospital thirty miles from home after giving birth to her third son. Maxwell later remarked, "My childhood came to an end at that moment." But where his childhood ended, his work as a novelist began. He first wrote about his mother's death, and the successive shock-waves of grief which spread out afterwards to engulf his father, his brother, and himself, in *They Came Like Swallows*. (An immediate success, chosen as a dual selection of the Book of the

Month Club, the novel has remained in print since it was first published in 1937—quite a record for an author widely regarded as “neglected.”) In the novel, the older brother Robert is tormented by the fear that he has caused his mother’s death by kissing her when he was quarantined with Spanish Flu. Reportedly, this was Maxwell’s own long-held fear; it may go some way towards explaining why that early loss left so enduring a scar: Maxwell returned to the death of his mother repeatedly in his novels and stories, and did so well into old age. It was a loss which, by his own admission, simultaneously devastated him as a child and formed him as a writer. But the grief that informs these works is personal in a larger sense as well, as if the death of his mother signalled a larger death. In their quiet way, his novels are elegies for a lost America.

In *They Came Like Swallows*, Bunny, the younger brother (and the character modeled on Maxwell himself as a child), reflects wistfully that “what he most wanted was for time to stand emphatically still, the way the sun and the moon did for Joshua.” To make time “stand emphatically still” was a wish which Maxwell himself, not surprisingly, shared. Again and again in novels and stories, he moves through the rooms of his childhood house like a recording ghost; there’s something at once spooky and poignant in his exactitude. The precise placement of the lost objects of the past—not only the furniture in the parlor but the view from a kitchen window—loom with as much significance as their remembered contours. In *The Folded Leaf* of 1945, his third novel, young Lymie Peters reflects that “the odd thing was that now, when he went back to the house in his mind, and tried to walk through it, he made mistakes. It was sometimes necessary for him to rearrange rooms and place furniture exactly before he could remember the house the way it used to be.” Only by recovering the smallest details of inanimate things could the lives they surrounded be summoned back. For Maxwell—in this, oddly like the old

mnemonic theorists of the Renaissance—memory itself could be represented as a house: forgotten corners and neglected nooks, if correctly recalled, might be coaxed into yielding up some eloquent memento.

Of course, as Maxwell knew all too well, nothing, and least of all words, can make time stand still. If the sheer impossibility of the venture gives his work its distinctive poignancy, it also allows him an amazing wackiness at certain moments. One of his favorite devices is to give furniture and other inanimate objects, as well as birds and beasts, speaking parts in his narrative. In *Time Will Darken It*, his 1948 novel of marital mistrust, a typewriter abruptly adds its two cents’ worth to a scene of great tension (“This is a place of business,” it pipes). In *The Château*, not only the sky, the swallows, and the statue in the square chime in, but the pissoir, “ill-smelling, with its names, dates, engagements, and obscene diagrams,” belches out a solemn geometric axiom. It’s hard to know what to make of this very Maxwellian device; certainly it’s disconcerting, as if Daffy Duck were suddenly to appear on stage during a performance of *King Lear*. But in a world wrested out of impossibility, as his was, perhaps it’s not so strange for a pissoir to quote Euclid.

As this suggests, for Maxwell the key to the house of the past was to be found neither in archives nor in the snapshot album—that “great American encyclopedia of sentimental occasions,” as he called it—nor in local histories or yellowing country newspapers, nor, perhaps least of all, in the deceptive twists of unaided recollection. He drew on all of these in his fiction, of course, but it was the pattern of the past, not scattered facts, which gave it meaning. And for that only story would serve. In *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, he spells this out:

What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of story-telling that goes on con-

tinually in the mind and often changes with the telling.

Even so, when stories recover the past, it stands revealed as a past shot through with artful distortions, cunning hesitations, fine-spun fabrications. To rescue the past from oblivion is not simply to call back the exact look and feel of things on a particular day at a particular time and place; it is to conjure up all the encrypted nuances, all the retrospective glosses, with which that moment—indecipherable in itself—has become encrusted. To make matters worse, memory is a scribe who delights in erasures. It is the task of the storyteller not only to capture all memory's rubbed-out marginalia, but also to restore its strategic distortions to the light. Maxwell put it bluntly when he wrote, "In talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw." For this subtlest, most exacting of novelists, the house of remembrance, "with its infinite number of rooms that you can wander through, one after another after another," had to be vast enough for all the falsehoods we dream up to make the past bearable. They, too, are part of the tale.

The anti-historian

Piers Brendon *The Decline & Fall of the British Empire, 1781–1997*. Knopf, 816 pages, \$37.50

reviewed by David Pryce-Jones

The Decline and Fall of the British Empire is a title suggesting that its author, Piers Brendon, sees himself a worthy successor to Edward Gibbon. And indeed Gibbon is often invoked in these pages as though he were a guiding spirit. A man of the Enlightenment, Gibbon attributed right and wrong in accord with the preconceptions of his day. But he had the imagination, the empathy, to appreciate that people in the past had other beliefs and standards and so did things differently. For the historian, description is

one element in coming to terms with the past, and passing judgment is another, and the ability to keep them distinct is what makes Gibbon great.

Piers Brendon is instead an anti-historian, that is to say one who describes the past not in order to capture how it really was but only for the sake of passing moral judgments about it. For him, the past is to be judged solely in the light of the present, as though the outlook in today's moral and intellectual arena is not just the product of the times but rather some sort of final word. The anachronism is deliberate, for the whole purpose of this book is to give substance to the single, very simple, and eminently fashionable preconception that the British Empire was always and everywhere a criminal enterprise. Those who ran it were scoundrels, profiteers, or boobies, whose talk about spreading civilization was nothing but hypocritical cover for murdering innocent natives, for racism and spoliation. "Lust for loot," in Brendon's phrase, was the real and abiding motivation of all such.

Sketching pen-portraits of the Empire's proconsuls, governors, and soldiers, Brendon maintains a steady level of scorn for their activities, rising to mockery for their persons, sometimes in singular details concerning their domestic lives and tastes, the shape of their moustaches, and even their foreskins. However much these men may have been praised in the past for their contribution to the nation, not one earns Brendon's unqualified approval or escapes his sneering. Clive of India suffered from "nervous attacks" but still "garnered several hundred thousand pounds." Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington, was "a man of majestic littleness." Governor-General of Canada, Lord Durham advocated reform "while treating all humanity as his inferior." Lord Palmerston, one of the most successful of Foreign Secretaries, was "incurably frivolous." Ahead of the Blackshirts by almost a century, Thomas Carlyle was nevertheless "anticipating the language of fascism." Prime Minister Salisbury was "A thick-skinned, short-sighted, cross-grained reac-

tionary, known as the ‘Buffalo.’” (Even minor personalities have their nicknames slung round their necks—thus Sir Bartle Frere is “Sir Bottle Beer,” Walter Monckton is “the Oilcan,” Sir Hugh Foot is “Pussy-foot” as though the cut and thrust of long-ago politics furnished lasting judgments of character.) Viceroy Lytton was “a minor poet and a major popinjay.” Viceroy Curzon was said “to have the habits of minor royalty without its habitual incapacity.” And so on and on and on.

Those who stood in the way of the Empire are in contrast admirable, no matter how many lives were lost as a result of their opposition. Tipu Sultan (the “Tiger of Mysore” who was killed by the British in India in 1799) was “intelligent, cultured and witty.” The Maoris were “formidable warriors,” as well as “adept at commerce.” Zaghul Pasha, organizer of the first nationalist riots in Egypt, was “Ruthless, charming, eloquent, and vain” while the al-Azhar mosque at the center of the agitation he aroused was “radiant” and “revered.” In Iraq, King Faisal, scheming against the British who had set him on his throne, was “slim, bearded, and aquiline,” bearing himself with “regal dignity.” In India, Gandhi’s “god-like moral stature, which transfigured his wispy frame, gave him unique authority.” Although engaging in warfare that set back his country for decades, Gamal Abdul Nasser “behaved like the embodiment of national will.” In Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta “preached patriotism and moral uplift,” and Robert Mugabe was “the Lenin of Africa.” And so on and on, as ever.

The British habitually over-reacted to resistance and protest, according to Brendon, as evidenced for instance by their brutality after the Indian Mutiny, all the more barbarous because the setting was one of picturesque beauty and riches:

The storming of the city . . . was a bloodbath. . . . A prolonged and ferocious battle followed through the narrow streets, walled gardens, white mansions, domed mosques and cypress

groves. The British advance faltered as soldiers got drunk on pillaged alcohol. . . . The carnage shocked even a hardened young subaltern like Frederick Roberts. . . . Lieutenant William Hodson compounded the horror by murdering three of Bahadur Shah’s sons, who had surrendered with their father. . . . The city was sacked with the same ruthlessness and a vast amount of hidden treasure was unearthed. As usual, Queen Victoria (who deplored the unchristian spirit of vengeance) acquired some prize articles.

In the equally beautiful and placid Ceylon, no less typically, the brutal British

overthrew the ancient Kandyan kingdom. They exiled its monarch to the subcontinent, looting his throne, sceptre, sword, footstool and other royal regalia. They turned his Audience Hall first into a church and later into a court. They imposed their own system of rule. They suppressed resistance ferociously, provoking a national abhorrence for the conquerors.

Or again, General Sir Gerald Templer was “dynamic and dogmatic . . . also surprisingly lucid” as he set about using “Dyak headhunters and Fijians descended from cannibals” to build “a police state” with “totalitarian restrictions” for the purpose of suppressing Communism in Malaya. Following this example, another general responded to the Mau Mau in Kenya by masterminding “a regime of searches, curfews, contagions, restrictions, shortages and forced labour,” which on one page prompts Brendon to evoke the Soviet gulag and on the next page Auschwitz. And so on, and still on, until the Empire met the wretched end it deserved.

Imperialism is a complex phenomenon, one bearing on the entire human race throughout recorded history. Two parties are involved, necessarily one stronger and the other weaker. Over the centuries the countries of Europe had become too equal for imperialism among themselves, territorial disputes notwithstanding. Among the causes of

British strength were trade, exploration, Protestantism, and the industrial revolution, but these could never have amounted to empire-building without the weakness of others. Muslim and Hindu rivalry in India, despotism in Asia, and tribalism in Africa ensured that whole areas of the globe were stagnant, incapable either of progress or defense, but exposed to outsiders with the vitality to conquer and colonize them. If history has a law, it appears to be that the strong will always dominate the weak until such time as the weak learn how to become strong themselves. As it happens, countries that were never within a European empire—Afghanistan, Yemen, Ethiopia—have experienced the greatest difficulties in overcoming poverty and backwardness.

In common with every empire, including those in the Asia and Africa of earlier centuries, the British certainly waged some destructive wars, and were capable of the stupid or self-serving acts that so excite Brendon, and especially in the treatment of Ireland. What he leaves out altogether is the other side of the picture. The British suppressed slavery and piracy and a good deal of tribal and customary barbarity as well. Hitherto unknown in those parts of the world, political processes began through the formation of parties and movements and elections. Legislative and executive councils were first steps in representative government. Judges, civil servants, and District Commissioners by the thousand were responsible for civil and legal administration free from bribery and corruption. The phrase “law and order” at last crops up some 500 pages into the book, but Pax Britannica was a reality, the achievement of the men Brendon so easily jeers at.

Brendon either ignores public works, or deprecates them. For instance, he believes that the railways were laid in India not for the general benefit but in order to transport artillery, and that telegraph lines were only a means of control. But besides railways and communications, the British built harbors and ports, hospitals, schools, technical colleges, and universities. Veterinary science

was a novelty. Hundreds of printing presses spread free speech, also a novelty. Why is there no mention of those who devoted their careers to improving what they found abroad, men like Greene Pasha who eliminated cholera in Egypt or Willcocks Pasha who built the Nile dams? Sir William Jones was one of the greatest Orientalists of all time, the founder of Sanskrit scholarship, enrolling Indians in his studies through the Asiatic Society of Bengal—Brendon confines discussion of him and his work to a slanderous aside purporting to show racism towards Indians. James Prinsep drained malarial swamps, and also researched the origins of Buddhism. Unrecorded by Brendon, there were thousands of such benefactors, men of the quality of Henry Thomas Colebrooke, A. H. Layard, or Henry Rawlinson. Taken together, they were responsible for recovering in one country after another identities and cultures that had disintegrated and almost disappeared, and as a result people all over the empire became aware of their past and could take pride in it.

In the end, recovery of identity and culture was bound to finish as nationalism. People proud of their past would no longer tolerate foreign rule; the British had always known that their presence could not be extended indefinitely. Nationalism was the agent that mobilized the weak, and converted them into the strong. In addition, the two world wars had shrunk the moral and the military standing of the British. Ambitious nationalists saw their chance to take power. Well over twenty independent countries emerged, and the record is mixed, sometimes tragic, because a majority of them came under one-man rulers or military regimes. Resentment and anger, if that existed, has long since been generally tempered with regret for lost stability.

Someone who analyzed the process of imperial withdrawal as though speaking on behalf of the voiceless masses was Elie Kedourie. Born and growing up in Baghdad, he had taken for granted the protection afforded by the British. Once the British

had left, however, Iraqi officers soon seized power, and Kedourie was forced into exile to save himself. Responsibility for this lay primarily with the Iraqi regime, but indirectly with the British who had not prepared a better alternative. Whether out of guilt or some sense of abasement and defeat, British intellectuals have proved unwilling to criticize any aspect of the new Third World, instead almost uniformly blaming Britain for whatever miseries nationalist rulers were inflicting on those within their reach. The historian Arnold Toynbee, then widely considered a sage, was an outstanding representative of the type. This is how Kedourie described Toynbee's contribution to the formation of public opinion:

Listening to the far-fetched analogies, the obscure references, the succession of latinate, polysyllabic words, and one involved period following another, we begin to discern the shrill and clamant voice of English radicalism, thrilling with self-accusatory and joyful lamentation. *Nostra culpa, nostra maxima culpa*: we have invaded, we have conquered, we have dominated, we have exploited.

Brendon writes more straightforwardly than Toynbee, but he plays comparable linguistic tricks. A selection of unfamiliar and unexplained words in his narrative includes *shroffs, lorchas, joey, fumarole, huma, moshag, ackee, xebees, cenchona, karosses, pombe, dura*. Furthermore he borrows terms from many of the languages of the empire, with their translation in brackets. What is served by the information that shrimp paste in Burmese is *ngapi*? Or that *kotoko* means porcupine in Ashanti? Or that a flaxen cloak in Maori is *kakalau*? These and dozens more examples can only have been dug up from the literature, and borrowed to intimidate by giving an impression of omniscience on a par with Toynbee's obscure references and latinate polysyllables.

The source of the thrilling and self-accusatory lamentation that both these writers have in common remains a mystery, one

that is central to the times. In reality, the virtues and vices of the British Empire have to be compared to those of the Romans, the Mongols, the Arabs, the Spaniards in South America, the Mughals, the Ottoman Empire, the Germans in Africa or the African tribal rulers among themselves, Russia in its tsarist expansion and then its Soviet incarnation, even the French in Annam and Algeria. Britain does not come out worst. The depiction of special and one-dimensional British villainy rests upon suppression of truth as well as suggestion of falsehood. But why the masochism, why this perverse confusion of description and judgment?

One possible answer is that the likes of Toynbee and Brendon are snobs, believing themselves to be morally superior to those they are writing about. They are laying claim to a finer and more up-to-date sensibility that permits them to condemn and ridicule the crude and benighted figures of another age. Another possible answer is that they have staked out a comfort zone. The Empire was certain to dissolve sooner rather than later, and since the loss is within living memory, and still raw, the British should console themselves with the thought that it was not worth having in the first place—as schoolboys like to say, good riddance to bad rubbish. Alternatively, there may be an uncomfortable perception that the strong and the weak of former times have unexpectedly exchanged positions, and it would be as well now to profess a guilty conscience for past strength and apologize to all those with whom the British came into contact in the days of their eminence. And perhaps there is a yet further underlying perception that without the protective periphery of the empire the metropolis itself is now collapsing, and in their turn the British are experiencing the disintegration of their identity and culture, and must accustom themselves to it. This would necessitate a total misrepresentation of their past, indeed the replacement of their history with a complete anti-history, and Brendon is just the right man for that.

The houses Pugin built

Rosemary Hill

God's Architect: Pugin & the Building of Romantic Britain. Allen Lane, 624 pages, £30

reviewed by Roger Sandall

Greek versus Gothic—porticoes and columns versus pinnacles and spires—it was a struggle that could have gone either way, with the new British Houses of Parliament (1835–1847) built to resemble the Parthenon. But after Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin entered the lists the issue was never in doubt. He had matchless energy; he turned an idle taste for medieval decor into an architecture of serious religious conviction; and between about 1830 until the 1880s the advocates of “pointed” architecture increasingly had their way. As Rosemary Hill says in her superb biography of Pugin, *God's Architect*, the growing influence he exercised in these years substantially changed the face of Britain.

It needed changing—politically as well as architecturally. On the one hand was the tide of social discontent leading to the Reform Bill of 1832. On the other was the steady disfigurement of town and landscape produced by a headstrong and heedless industrialism. Of the two, Pugin was always more sensitive to the second. This was because he was the son of a French émigré who published *Examples of Gothic Architecture*, an illustrated series for which the young Pugin regularly accompanied his parents, visiting, studying, and drawing English cathedrals from the age of six.

Sir Kenneth Clark in *The Gothic Revival* felt disinclined to dwell on Pugin's childhood: “At this period of their lives, it seems, men of talent are all much alike—the same solitary school-time, the same violence of temper, the same omens of a brilliant future.” We know what he means. But Rosemary Hill properly gives Pugin's childhood more space. Only by understanding the profound impression left on him during his early visits to Lincoln Cathedral and York

Minster, which planted “ideas and impressions that would last all his life,” can we understand both the passion of his vocation and its limitations. His enthusiasm for medieval buildings was combined with a hearty contempt for neoclassical Renaissance styles—including the architecture of St. Peter's itself. Largely self-educated, he was never apprenticed to an architect, never studied architecture formally, and when in his teens he quit working for his father, he enthusiastically joined the theater at Covent Garden.

Stage-struck between the ages of sixteen and twenty, Pugin became a valued scene-painter and designer, his greatest triumph coming (in Clark's words) when “his correct and gorgeous scenery made a success of the opera *Kenilworth*”—an adaptation that made much of Kenilworth Castle. Rosemary Hill tells us that this was a time when “spectacle was taking over from acting.” At Covent Garden, Pugin befriended the workmen at the theater, many of them sailors who “knew the ropes” both on deck and in the flies, bought himself a boat, and began the lifelong habit of wearing self-designed clothing on the lines of a seaman's rig. “God bless my soul,” said his father to a friend one day, “this morning I met my boy Auguste in the disguise of a common sailor, carrying on his shoulder a tub of water which he had took from the pompe of St. Dunstan.” He had little money; at Covent Garden he sometimes slept in the boxes, and not always alone.

One might emphasize the connection between the theatrical and aesthetic ideals of the Gothic Revival, as the author of *God's Architect* does, writing that “the art of illusion” was common to both. (She at one point describes Pugin at the age of twenty-one as “a stage designer and draughtsman with ambitions to be an architect.”) Or one might contrastingly emphasize an important difference—namely, that when Pugin turned from the theater to serious religious building, it was in moral revulsion against the “lies” and “shams” of that same art of il-

lusion. The second is more important. Sham ruins serving much the same function as stage décor had been built in the English countryside since 1746. Nature was required to be picturesque, and there was nothing more picturesque than ruins. Sham ruins were known as “follies,” and they were combined with slightly more serious medieval pastiches such as modern castles well into the nineteenth century. From all of this Pugin turned contemptuously away, resolved, as he wrote in various places, to restore true Christian architecture as it once had been.

That would be difficult. What Pugin himself had in mind, and what his aristocratic patrons expected (some of whom had castles they wanted rebuilt), were often very different things. As much a work of history as of biography, *God's Architect* takes us through the Tractarians and the Oxford Movement, the Camden Society and Young England, the group Hill calls the Romantic Catholics represented by Kenelm Digby, the growing dissatisfaction within the Church of England, and the growing number of those who would recant and join the Catholic Church—John Henry Newman among them. According to Hill, when Pugin at the age of twenty-one launched his architectural crusade his sole idea of Catholicism was “the faith of England in the Middle Ages.” He knew nothing about the modern Catholic Church: “The only Catholic he knew personally was Edward Willson, who was steeped in the same English antiquarian tradition and who had taught him to call the architecture of the Middle Ages ‘Catholic.’”

Willson led him to Henry Spelman and William Dugdale, and convinced him that the Reformation was a defining disaster in English history that wrecked the social and physical fabric of the Church and had been a “terrible blow” to the arts that “adorn and soften life.” Having little formal education, little sense of chronology, and not realizing that the Renaissance and “pagan” neoclassicism came first, the English Reformation assumed in Pugin’s mind a false importance in the history of architecture overall. In

Hill’s words, he believed that “everything had gone wrong at the Reformation and had been getting worse ever since.” One had to go back there and start again. In a letter to a friend in 1834, as he moved toward embracing Catholicism, Pugin wrote (the style and spelling are his own):

I can assure you after a most close & impartial investigation I feel perfectly convinced the roman Catholic church is the only true one—and the only one in which the grand & sublime style of church architecture can ever be restored—A very good chapel is now building in the north & when compleat I certainly think I shall recant.

In 1835 he did so, laconically remarking in his diary, “Finished alterations at Chapel received into Holy Catholic Church.”

Architects are always at the mercy of patrons. A man might aspire to build cathedrals (and with St. Chad’s, Birmingham, 1838–1841, Pugin created the first cathedral in England since Christopher Wren’s St. Paul’s), but will the patron agree? Pugin was lucky to have the sixteenth earl of Shrewsbury in his corner, a wealthy Catholic and a loyal supporter through the thick and thin of the architect’s declining health. The earl had inherited property valued at £347,511, and his initial requirement was that the Shrewsbury country seat of Alton Towers in Staffordshire be improved. His predecessor, the fifteenth earl, had filled the gardens with Indian temples, Chinese pagodas, and a model of Stonehenge. The sixteenth earl wanted none of that. Instead what he wanted were scenes from *Ivanhoe*, and Pugin worked at transforming Alton Towers for many years. More significantly, Shrewsbury funded what Hill describes as “one of the most admired and visited of all Victorian buildings.”

This was the church of St. Giles in the little Staffordshire town of Cheadle. *God's Architect* has some fine illustrations, and these show why the church aroused such admiration. No detail of ornament or fixture

had been overlooked. Cardinal Newman described St. Giles as “the most splendid building I ever saw . . . enough to convert a person. The chapel is on entering a blaze of light. I could not help saying to myself ‘Porta Coeli.’” That is exactly how Pugin intended it to be seen and experienced. A full-blown work of high Romantic art, “for Pugin it marked the point, perhaps the first, certainly the last, where his religious and aesthetic ideals were seen to be equally fulfilled,” Rosemary Hill writes. “It convinced architects and Catholics alike and it remains his best known and most loved building.” From the stunning image of the interior reproduced as color plate 14, one can see what she means, and also why Newman was so impressed.

Among the visitors who came for the church’s consecration in 1846 was Charles Barry, the architect appointed to design the new Houses of Parliament. Pugin’s second most celebrated patron (if also his least remunerative), Barry was finishing his great work beside the Thames; it was only much later that the extent of Pugin’s contribution was known. This matter was muddied by a bitter dispute that broke out between the two families, but the truth is roughly as follows: Without Pugin’s mastery of medieval detail the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben itself would not look the way they do; without Barry’s overall direction and control they would not exist at all. Clark writes:

The silly question, “Who was the architect of the Houses of Parliament?” is well forgotten; but it is worth remembering that every inch of the great building’s surface, inside and out, was designed by one man: every panel, every wall-paper, every chair sprang from Pugin’s brain, and his last days were spent in designing ink-pots and umbrella-stands.

What about the man himself? What was he like? Neither smooth nor discreet, dressed eccentrically, sometimes dishevelled and dirty, he was voluble and loud and when frustrated swore like a seaman. All this was combined with immense good humor.

We’re told that in the room where he worked—with nothing more than a rule and a rough pencil—there was “a continual rattle of marvellous stories and shouts of laughter.” He had tales to tell of the sea, of trips to Flanders to buy religious antiquities, and of being wrecked on the Scottish coast (“there is nothing worth living for but Christian architecture and a boat,” he once said). No one, writes Clark, could escape “his medieval vehemence and whole-heartedness.” The ecclesiastical world fired his imagination, and he loved its language:

The stoups are filled to the brim; the rood is raised on high; the lamps of the sanctuary burn bright; the albs hang in the oaken ambries and the cope chests are filled with orphreyed baudekins; and pix, and pax, and chrismatory are there, and thurible and cross.

In Salisbury, where early in his professional life he built himself a house, a solicitor and authority on church music named John Lambert found Pugin’s enthusiasm and warmth irresistible, and welcomed him into his Catholic circle. Cardinal Newman, however, though at first an admirer of Pugin and his work on St. Giles, was finally unable to bear the man himself. He described Pugin as an “immense talker” who was “rough tongue-free unselfgoverned.” This reaction was perhaps natural in a man of exceeding refinement who once laid it down that “a gentleman is seldom prominent in conversation.”

Though more than rough and unstoppable vehemence was involved. Newman finally decided he was dealing with a “bigot,” a harsh opinion his encounter with Pugin in Rome did nothing to soften. In 1847, recovering slowly from a serious bout of insanity (he would die within five years of the terminal consequences of a disorder contracted in his rackets days in the theater), Pugin had taken himself off to Europe with almost no luggage, one shirt, his sailing clothes, and looking both unclean and eccentric. His faith in Gothic was unshaken: he was now determined to con-

front the Renaissance and speak his mind. Rome he found “disgusting and depressing,” he loathed the “paganism” of both the Renaissance and the Baroque, and he told two prelates “in immediate attendance on the Pope” that he “expected St. Peter’s to be rebuilt in the Gothic style.” What he may have told the Pope himself Hill does not say.

Should we be much worried about all this? I don’t think so. Pugin was a great religious artist; his rough ill-educated prejudices were inseparable from his gifts; and Rosemary Hill makes all of this reasonably clear. Of her book it is difficult to speak too highly. It should be on every serious reader’s list.

Small acts of disdain

Alison Light

Mrs. Woolf & the Servants:
An Intimate History of Bloomsbury.
Bloomsbury Press, 376 pages, \$30

reviewed by Theodore Dalrymple

An American economist, I think it was, once remarked that a single servant is worth a household full of appliances; in my experience, he was absolutely right. To be relieved of the tedium of looking after oneself, and of the day-to-day tasks that can make life such a trial and a bore, is to enter a state of near-bliss. One of the reasons that some of our polymathic ancestors were able to achieve so much was that they never had to do anything for themselves.

But there are also difficulties with servants. No man, said Napoleon, is a hero to his valet; and a servant is inclined to know more about you than you might wish him (or anyone else) to know. It is always a pleasure to discover that others have feet of clay; it is not so pleasurable to realize that others must have made the same discovery about you.

Virginia Woolf added a few complications of her own to the normal difficulties of the

servant-master or -mistress relationship. She was that peculiarly emblematic type of our age, a person of advanced views and reactionary feeling. It is in fact very difficult to align harmoniously one’s emotional responses with one’s intellectual standpoint. Fervent democrats often despise most people; nationalists are appalled by the stupidity and backwardness of their fellow-countrymen; Communists are avid for money and exclusive privilege; puritans lust for the flesh. Sometimes it seems as if only indifference to the fate of others is genuine and heartfelt.

Virginia Woolf was not so lacking in compassion that she felt no self-pity; far from it, self-pity was one of her ruling passions. Indeed, she was an evangelical self-pitier, which accounts in large part for her popularity and historical importance. While her life had its frustrations, as most lives do, and its share of tragedy, as so many lives of her epoch did, it was nevertheless one of considerable privilege that she managed to transform in her own mind into something approaching tragedy caused by injustice. She forgot Doctor Johnson’s great dictum that all judgment is comparative—including, or perhaps I should say especially, about one’s own life.

And so, in dealing with her servants, as this interesting book shows, she often managed to think of herself as almost martyred by them; she was always the injured party in any dispute. Her servants worked long hours in harsh conditions, of a kind not met with anywhere in the Western world today, but she nevertheless berated them in her diary and in her letters for their stupidity, their lack of finer feeling or accomplishment, their suspected dishonesty and even their greed when, like Oliver Twist, they asked for more (despite her advanced views, she never offered them more than the going rate, and sometimes a little less, the annual wages of a servant employed by her being at one time no more than one percent of her own annual income). She thought that they were so different in kind from her own class that no real communication could exist between her and them, as

if they were aliens from another planet. She wrote repeatedly that subjective understanding of their lives was impossible for her.

And yet, as this book also makes clear, she could be kind to her servants in an impulsive kind of way. She demanded far less formality of them than was usual for her time; she arranged treats for them; she continued providing a small income for at least one of them after her retirement though she was not legally obliged to do so. Those of her servants of whom we have any knowledge remembered her with some affection and expressed their gratitude to her. As is so often the case in human affairs, the record was distinctly mixed.

Most people, I suspect, will want to read the book more for what it tells us about Mrs. Woolf than what it tells us about the social history of domestic service in Britain, with which it is also concerned. Here the author's social history is of the most orthodox kind: she implies, for example, that until state intervention in 1870 made education compulsory, the majority of the poor population of Britain was illiterate. This is not so; according to the later Professor E. G. West, 94 percent of the male population that was past the age of education in 1870 was already literate, a figure that is unlikely to have improved very much in the intervening years. And certainly the fragments of the letters to Mrs. Woolf from the servants that she quotes indicate a level of literacy among them at least equal to that expected of people of their social class today; moreover, they express themselves with a refinement of feeling that is not often to be found even among their social superiors today.

What do we learn of Mrs. Woolf? I think the principal thing is her almost comical lack of self-knowledge, not a slight defect in one who made of herself an object of profound study. Over and over again she said that she longed to be free of servants, so that she could have her privacy and not be obliged any longer to engage in trivial quarrels with them. They would no longer

interrupt her in her work, and distract her from it with their "human mind[s] wriggling undressed," "almost incredibly without the power of analysis or logic."

But who, here, was completely without the power of analysis or logic? Mrs. Woolf believed it to be completely *infra dig* for someone of her background, status, and talent to have to answer a ring on her front doorbell for herself. At one point, it is implied in this book, she scarcely knew how to do so. She certainly had no vocation for washing and scrubbing, and she relates her forays into the kitchen as a breathless schoolgirl might relate a school outing. Mrs. Woolf making a pie definitely has the air of Marie Antoinette playing shepherdess about it, and one cannot imagine her putting meat through a mincer, for example. That would be a culinary task too far.

Now there is nothing discreditable in any of this: I am no fan of washing and scrubbing myself, labor-saving devices notwithstanding. But it is surely not a very difficult thought that, if one is not going to do these things for oneself, someone has to do them for one (assuming that total squalor has been ruled out as a possibility). The inconveniences of having that person do them are inevitably to be balanced against the inconveniences of doing them oneself, and—if one has the money—of choosing between these inconveniences. And once one has made one's choice, one should shut up about it.

Mrs. Woolf remained querulous about her servants, however, and reminded me of those white women in southern Africa who, never having lifted a finger for themselves, complained bitterly about the stupidity and incompetence of the blacks who served them. This they often did in their presence, making the mistake (which is sometimes made in hospitals by nurses when a stroke deprives a person of his power of speech) of believing that those who cannot speak cannot hear.

The Woolfian comedy reaches its peak in the sacking of her cook, Nellie Boxall, after eighteen years. She described the period

leading up to it as “the most disagreeable six weeks of my life,” which must either be an exaggeration or an indication of a very sheltered and self-absorbed existence. But at the very time she was extolling her own freedom from “an affectionate domestic tyrant,” and complaining about “the unworkability of the system [of domestic service],” Mrs. Woolf was looking for an immediate replacement for Nellie Boxall. Life without a cook was unthinkable for her. Mrs. Woolf’s dream of complete independence was bogus. Who, then, was completely without the power of analysis or logic?

Is this all second-best bed stuff? (I refer here to Orwell’s essay on Dickens: “Some years later Mr. Bechhofer Roberts published a full-length attack on Dickens in the form of a novel [*This Side Idolatry*], but it was a merely personal attack, concerned for the most part with Dickens’s treatment of his wife. It dealt with incidents which not one in a thousand of Dickens’s readers would ever hear about, and which no more invalidates his work than the second-best bed invalidates Hamlet.”) The answer depends on the extent to which the worth of someone’s writing depends upon the consistency of his ideas with his life. That extent cannot be very great: if Mrs. Woolf’s books are good, they would have been good even had she treated her servants a lot worse than she did actually treat them. In so far as she is regarded as a moral exemplar, however, a free-spirited bohemian, the details provided here undermine the claims made on her behalf.

One small personal note. After my mother’s death, I discovered from her letters that, on her arrival in England as a refugee from Germany, she had gone for a time into service in an area of the country not very far from where the Woolfs lived. She never spoke of the episode. The then-recently formed National Union of Domestic Workers, founded to improve the conditions for servants, was deeply opposed to the “influx of foreign refugees . . . wanting domestic work,” and “absolutely refused to accept foreign entrants for mem-

bership.” The union must have feared a depression of wages. Would my mother have wanted Mrs. Woolf as an employer? That depends, I suppose, on whether she was better or worse than the average employer. But on the evidence presented here, she would have considered my mother as scarcely human, at least not in the sense that she considered herself human. And, in my experience, it is relatively small acts of personal disdain, rather than greater, structural injustices, that rankle and enrage people.

The price we pay

Bart D. Ehrman

God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer.
HarperOne, 304 pages, \$25.95

reviewed by Martin Gardner

I have just finished reading *God’s Problem* by Bart D. Ehrman, a professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His earlier book, *Misquoting Jesus*, made the *New York Times* bestseller list. A former fundamentalist, Ehrman graduated from the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, did graduate work at Wheaton College (Billy Graham’s alma mater), and obtained a doctorate at Princeton Theological Seminary. Slowly over the years, he lost his faith in Christianity. His new book explains why. It is the latest in a surprising spate of books defending atheism. The book’s subtitle is *How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*.

Like all writers on the topic (theist, atheist, or pantheist), Ehrman distinguishes two main aspects of the so-called “problem of evil”: 1) Evils caused by human behavior. A demented man fires an automatic into a crowd. The lives of those killed are as rationally ended as if they had been killed by an earthquake. Hitler murders millions of Jews. Stalin murders even more without re-

gard for race, color, or creed. 2) Evils caused by nature.

Christian theologians, going back to St. Augustine and earlier, have reasoned that God is unwilling to prevent such crimes by withholding his gift of free will. If we lacked free will, Gilbert Chesterton liked to say, there is no point in thanking someone for passing the mustard. Free will is at the heart of human consciousness. We can't have one without the other. We are not robots doing what we are wired to do by heredity and experience. But if we are free to do good or evil, so goes the argument, our very freedom makes evil behavior possible. If it were otherwise, the earth would be populated not by humans but by robotic featherless bipeds similar to the social insects—bees, wasps, and termites. This is a plausible argument, and Ehrman does a good job of presenting it even though he doesn't buy it.

Why God permits natural evil is not so easy to explain. An earthquake can end the lives of thousands. Millions in Africa may die of starvation. In Genesis we read about a flood that drowns almost the entire human race, including little babies. In that case the murderer was not nature but God himself. I once had lunch with a fundamentalist Seventh-day Adventist. When I asked him how he defended God's drowning of innocent infants he astonished me by saying that God foresaw the future and knew that the babies would all grow up to become malevolent men and women! I was tempted to stand and shout "Touché!" It was a thought that had never occurred to me.

Why does God permit massive suffering? An old argument—it traces back to ancient Greece—goes as follows. God is either incapable of abolishing natural evil, in which case he is not omnipotent, or he can but won't, in which case he is not good. How can a theist go between the horns of this dreadful dilemma?

Of course this is no problem for an atheist. Evils are simply the way the world is. But for a theist the problem can be agonizing.

Indeed, it is probably why most atheists are atheists. There is an answer, though not one likely to persuade any atheist. Surprisingly, Ehrman only briefly mentions it in connection to Rabbi Harold Kushner's popular 1981 book *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Kushner's "Why" rests on the belief of many theists, past and present, that there are severe limits on the powers of any sort of deity. Thomas Aquinas somewhere writes that there are many things God cannot do. One, he can't alter the past. I doubt if anyone today thinks God could, if he liked, erase Hitler from history. Two, God cannot do things that are logically impossible. The saint's example: God can't create a perfect human who at the same time is a perfect horse. A mathematician can add that God can't make a triangle with four sides, or cause 2 plus 2 to equal, say, 7.

Not only must pure mathematics be free of logical contradictions, but applied mathematics as well. If objects in the outside world maintain their identities, then two apples plus two more apples can't result in any number of apples except four. The same is true of cows, stars, and all other things that model the number 1. It is best, Aquinas wrote, not to say there are things God can't do, but to say there are things that can't be done.

Let's see how this applies to natural evils. When God created the universe, or as a theist would say, started the process of creation, he not only limited the process to a world free of contradictions, the world also had to obey unalterable laws. It is not possible, say, for planets to go around the sun in elliptical orbits, and at the same time travel in square orbits. It is necessary also that gravity remain constant. Life could not exist if gravity turned into a repulsive force that sent everything flying off into space. If the earth suddenly stopped rotating, as the Bible's account of Joshua's miracle suggests, the result would be equally catastrophic. Indeed, if all laws were not unbreakable the world would be far too chaotic to support life.

The fact that stable laws are essential for any conceivable universe with sentient life at once makes natural evils inevitable. If someone carelessly loses balance at the edge of a cliff and topples over, you can't expect God to suspend gravity in the region and allow the person to float gently down. If a piece of heavy masonry dislodges from the top of a tall building, and is on its way toward the head of someone on the sidewalk, you can't expect God to divert its path or turn it into feathers.

Suppose a man falls asleep while driving a car down a thruway. He crosses the median and smashes into another car, killing a woman and her three children. Such tragedies are the terrible price we pay for a universe with unalterable laws of velocity and momentum. If God were obliged to prevent all accidents that kill or injure, he would have to be constantly poking his fingers into millions of events around the globe. History would turn into a chaos of endless miracles.

The necessity of order in the universe can also explain why God doesn't intervene to prevent medical horrors. Consider the Black Death that killed a third of Europe's population. Why did God not prevent this awful plague? A possible answer, weak though it may seem, is that the existence of deadly microbes was the inevitable consequence of biological laws essential to the evolution of intelligent creatures. From this perspective, evolution was perhaps the only way God could fabricate such unlikely animals as you and me. Irrational deaths from diseases and other biological causes such as cancer are the prices we pay for evolution—for the miracle of being alive.

It is easy to see how similar arguments apply to natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, lightning that starts fatal fires, and other natural evils. Laws of physics obviously apply to movements of the earth's crust that cause earthquakes. Laws of rain and lightning make inevitable the occasional starting of fires. Deaths from quakes and lightning are the prices we pay for the laws of physics without which there

could be no universe. Do I *know* this is why God permits such disasters? I do not. I only put the explanation forward (it goes back to Maimonides and even earlier) as the best I have encountered in the vast literature on the topic.

The most famous defense of this explanation was the *Theodicy* written by the great German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. He coined the term "compossible" for a universe free of logical contradictions and with unvarying laws. He imagined God considering all compossible universes, each with its unique set of laws. Many physicists today, especially those working on superstring theory, not only take seriously Leibniz's vision of a "multiverse" containing perhaps an infinity of compossible universes, they believe such a multiverse actually exists!

Leibniz further imagined that God selected for creation the universe with the smallest amount of unavoidable human misery. The notion that Leibniz was naively unaware of the vast amount of pain in our world makes him out to be an idiot, which of course he wasn't. He even shared with Newton the invention of calculus! Voltaire's much admired satire about Dr. Pangloss missed the whole point of Leibniz's *Theodicy*. Suffering, for Leibniz, was the price we pay for a possible universe.

Leibniz also knew that humanity is capable of eliminating most irrational suffering. We can invent clever ways to construct buildings and houses that withstand earthquakes. We can find ways to prevent deaths from floods. Science can discover cures for the ills of both body and mind. Today we have vaccines that prevent polio and smallpox. We can construct artificial limbs. Blindness can be prevented by removing cataracts. Some fine day we may even find ways to forestall famines, and eliminate epidemics and wars.

Leibniz's vision can be given a contemporary form as follows. After God selected the best compossible universe—the one with the

least amount of necessary suffering—he adopted what could have been the only way to create such a universe. Somewhere in a higher space he started a quantum fluctuation that triggered what astronomer Fred Hoyle derisively called a “Big Bang.” The bang generated a set of fundamental particles, fields, and laws—a fantastic mix in which you and I were there *in potentia*. The particles and fields, together with a set of laws, were such that after billions of years gravity would form galaxies, the suns and planets, and on at least one small planet life would begin and ultimately evolve such grotesque creatures as you and me. History would begin its slow and painful crawl toward a utopia in which pain would be minimized. Humans would eventually, as H. G. Wells closed his *Outline of History*, stand on the earth as on a footstool and stretch out its arms to the stars. Manifestly there is nothing new about this scenario. You find it in the writings of eminent theologians of all faiths, as well as in secular variants in which God plays no role.

Meanwhile, as the plot (God’s or otherwise) unrolls, there is no denying that enormous evils, with their inevitable injustices, haunt human history. Millions still perish and suffer needlessly from earthquakes, accidents, disease, and other causes. Good persons die young while bad persons live comfortably to old age. Is there any way a caring God, whose eye is on the sparrow, can rectify such obvious injustices? The only conceivable way is to arrange for some sort of afterlife. Every theist then faces the following trilemma:

1. God is unable to provide an afterlife, in which case his power seems unduly limited.
2. God can provide an afterlife but chooses not to, in which case his goodness is tarnished.
3. God is both able and willing to provide an afterlife.

Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, unread today by most philosophers and even by

most theologians, is a vigorous defense of the third horn. Kant did not want to disappear. True, there are intelligent persons who insist they have no desire to live again—H. G. Wells and Isaac Asimov to mention two. I think they lied. Carl Sagan, another atheist, was more honest. He said it would be wonderful if he survived death, but he saw no evidence for such a hope. Woody Allen recently said he had no desire to live on in his films: “I just don’t want to die.” Boswell, in his life of Samuel Johnson, tells Johnson about a conversation with David Hume. “Hume said he had no desire to live again, He lies, said Johnson, as you will quickly discover if you hold a pistol to his breast.” The great Spanish poet, novelist, and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, once asked a farmer if he believed it was possible there is a God but no afterlife. The rustic responded “Then wherefore God?”

A strange question now arises: If there is an afterlife, will it be in a world with free will and science such as to permit both kinds of evil? An East Indian would almost surely answer yes. As for me, I haven’t the slightest idea. How could I possibly know?

Back to *God’s Problem*, the book that triggered my long-winded speculations. It is hard to imagine how a better, more persuasive volume could be written on why irrational evil implies atheism. When you read a book on the topic by an orthodox Christian, such as C. S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*, or his *A Grief Observed* about the death of his wife Joy from cancer, you sense Lewis’s agony as he struggles to believe his own arguments. It is not only his pain that troubles Lewis, it is also his awareness of the enormous amount of suffering that continues to plague humanity. By contrast, there is little agony in Ehrman’s book. There is only a huge relief over finally abandoning a youthful theism.

Ehrman’s rhetoric, eloquent and powerful, differs from the rhetoric of other books on evil in that his central theme is this: Nowhere does the Bible give a satisfactory answer to why a benevolent God would

allow such massive misery. A “Scripture Index” at the back of the book lists almost two hundred Old Testament verses, and more than one hundred New Testament verses.

Ehrman’s detailed analysis of the Book of Job is at the heart of his treatise. He makes clear that Job is a stitched-together hybrid of two documents by different authors. The first describes scenes in the land of Uz that alternate with scenes in heaven where God and Satan argue about Job’s faith. The second is a much longer section of poetry. The wealthy Job endures incredible God-caused blows that include the destruction of seven sons and three daughters, yet Job’s faith in a loving God never wavers.

The moral of this much admired fantasy is simple. Irrational suffering is an impenetrable mystery. “God knows something you don’t know,” I once heard Oral Roberts say at a funeral in Tulsa. Who are you, the Lord shouts at Job from a whirlwind, to question the motives of the creator of the universe?

Faking it

Jonathan Lopez The Man Who Made Vermeers: Unvarnishing the Legend of Master Forger Han van Meegeren. Harcourt, 352 pages, \$26

reviewed by Marco Grassi

Does the world need another book on Han van Meegeren, or, for that matter, on Johannes Vermeer, the great Dutch seventeenth-century artist whom van Meegeren so assiduously forged during the 1930s and ’40s? Probably not, but the truth is that these two compatriots—separated by three centuries—will continue to cast their spell on future generations: the artist through the mystery of his life and the magical allure of his paintings, and the forger through the sheer audacity of his deception.

The van Meegeren saga has become, over the last fifty years of re-telling, a staple of popular culture: how a painter of middling

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talent and success undertook to hoodwink virtually the entire art-world establishment by producing not copies, not even derivations, but true *inventions* in the style of Vermeer. They were pictures—depicting elaborate Biblical subjects—for which there were no known original prototypes but which critics and scholars readily accepted as genuine because it was firmly believed by those same experts that Vermeer *should* have painted them. In effect, the forger “rediscovered” the paintings whose existence art-historians had already imagined and that were simply thought to have gone missing.

The first of these concoctions, *The Supper in Emmaus*, was such a resounding success that the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum of Rotterdam immediately acquired it with great fanfare in 1937. Van Meegeren went on to create five more paintings in this vein, although it is clear he progressively lavished less and less technical attention and inventive energy on them. No matter: one (*Jesus Among the Doctors*) was snapped up in 1943 by the Rijksmuseum of Amsterdam to keep it out of the clutches of the occupying Germans. In fact, just a year before, the *über*-collector Hermann Göring had spirited away to his Carinhall estate *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. Van Meegeren’s involvement with this sale earned him, after the war, an indictment for collaborating with the enemy. And it was at this juncture that the forger’s story takes on a truly mythical dimension. In his defense and with an air of supreme braggadocio, van Meegeren produced, under the watchful eyes of his captors, his last forged Vermeer (*The Washing of the Feet*). Voilà! . . . disbelief, chagrin, outrage, instant fame, and instant apotheosis—from wily and corrupt collaborator to national hero, not only for having duped those pompous art-world critics but for having cheated the hated Reichsmarschall.

Convicted for forgery at his 1947 trial and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment, van Meegeren, aged fifty-eight, succumbed to heart failure in December of that year and, with characteristic flourish, exited the scene.

Thus he was never to serve a day behind bars, a fact that has since been invariably viewed as justice mercifully accomplished.

Jonathan Lopez does not quite see it that way. In his meticulously researched and amply documented account of van Meegeren’s career, the author of this most complete biography to date sets out to expose (“unvarnish” as he puts it in the sub-title) the colorful forger in a way that runs counter to the established mythology—no longer the picaresque adversary of the art establishment and the cunning operator who subverted, in his own way, the despised Nazi occupation.

Picking up the van Meegeren story from a much earlier date than the famous “Biblical” paintings of the 1930s and ’40s, Lopez identifies a number of Vermeer forgeries that appeared more than a decade earlier, attributing these to him without hesitation. Created with an iconography much closer to the known and accepted work of the Delft artist, these paintings eventually found their way to distinguished American collections through the highly regarded firms of Duveen and Hanns Schaeffer. Another, *The Girl in the Red Hat*, passed, one might say with flying colors, through the respected Cassirer Gallery of Berlin to the collection of Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza in 1931. If van Meegeren was indeed the hand behind these deceptions, then, Lopez argues, his detour into forgery was hardly a late, splenetic fling of inspired fantasy, but a life-long, carefully plotted pursuit of profit and subterfuge.

Although the author has marshaled an impressive array of circumstantial evidence in support of this thesis, the fact remains that van Meegeren had enjoyed a reasonably successful career as a portraitist and commercial artist until he retired to the south of France in the late 1930s to devote himself full-time to Vermeer. He himself never mentioned the “early” paintings in his various post-war depositions, and they are absent from the careful and comprehensive study of van Meegeren’s works published in

1949 by Paul Coremans, the respected Director of the Institut Royale du Patrimoine Artistique in Brussels. Ironically, if these forgeries had, indeed, been executed by van Meegeren as Lopez claims, they were to prove by far his most successful, surviving critical scrutiny well into the late 1950s; two hung in Washington's National Gallery and the other in a well-known upstate New York private collection. The Thyssen painting's attribution to Vermeer was similarly long-lived.

Even though Lopez's biography falls short in its goal of proving van Meegeren to have been a dedicated and sinister art-world trickster from his youth, it does shed fascinating light on the political and social milieu in which he moved during the 1920s and '30s. In Holland, as elsewhere in Europe, the erosion of established order, greatly accelerated by the catastrophe of the Great War as well as the first dramatic successes of international Marxism, engendered strongly nationalistic, reactionary, even religious sentiments among the bourgeoisie. There can be little doubt that van Meegeren, in his published writings, political sympathies, and friendships—and even in his art—reveals himself as an arch-conservative. Van Meegeren's involvement with the stridently right-wing periodical *De Kempshaan* (The Fighting Cock) is recounted here for the first time in detail, and it adds an important dimension to the forger's biography—yet that fact alone is hardly sufficient evidence for viewing this talented, high-strung, and impossibly self-absorbed eccentric as a crypto-Nazi.

A decided merit of *The Man Who Made Vermeers* is the accurate account it gives of the technical means used by van Meegeren in his craft. Literally re-inventing in his studio the phenolformaldehyde resin patented in 1904 as Bakelite, the forger was able to create painted surfaces that not only appeared to be antique but also possessed the required resistance to solvents typical of genuine older oil paintings. This is but one of a wealth of other information that, to-

gether with an exhaustive bibliography, make this biography a rich trove of reference not only for van Meegeren, but also for the art world between the wars and the forces that shaped opinions and destinies during that troubled period. Whether the forger emerges from such close scrutiny a decidedly different—and far darker—historical figure remains uncertain.

Tapping them veins

Jules Verne *The Golden Volcano*.
University of Nebraska Press,
362 pages, \$15.95

reviewed by Colin Fleming

I once had a professor who believed that the impressive titular number of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* referred to oceanic depth, rather than distance traveled. "That's where the anglerfish lives," he'd say, like the good Monsieur Verne had invented a species to join the ranks of the strange ichthyoid and quadruped creations that got him branded as the father of science fiction.

The Jules Verne of *The Golden Volcano*—his novel of the Klondike gold rush, now published for the first time in English—is different. He's the writer, in warm wraps and bearskin cloak, behind this posthumous novel that dates from the first few years of the twentieth century, when our man would dash around his rooms from one desk to another, at work on five or six novels at a time.

The popularly loved Verne had already forecasted the future, imagined technologies that we'd eventually go on to realize, sent his characters to the moon and back, tossed off one scientific in-joke after another, and made his march on literary Dreamland—that realm of the romantic and the fanciful where the Verne-inspired Little Nemo would later repair for his slumbers, and a few nightmares, with lambent denizens serving as everyday scenery.

So what about M. Verne the reluctant prospector then, the man with firsthand knowledge of glitter and pyrite and fortunes found and lost, who wandered the Klondike in 1899, conducting his researches? This was the fellow who hated gold and what it did to men so much that he wrote this novel—practically vomited it forth, you might say, given that the hacking and retching of purging, in sundry forms, is a key motif throughout the work. This isn't the Verne of sea-demons and rocket ships; it's more like Verne doing his best Frank Norris imitation, but with a little more sententiousness, and some caustic and hilarious asides, most coming from the co-lead character Summy Skim (a guy whose normal, frothy manner is well-strained throughout the novel, as befits his pun-based name). No use looking for any sci-fi, preternatural argot. There isn't any. Verne had tired of the yoke, even if he refused to dash it to the ground:

my intention for the novels that are still left for me to do is to spice them up as much as possible by using every means provided by my imagination in the rather restricted milieu in which I am condemned to operate.

Conan Doyle talked this way sometimes about Holmes, but he was referring to what was almost too much public love for a character, despite his other successes. For Verne, "condemned to operate" is a phrase that we can read as "Why are my literary talents slanted towards writing about doctors, inventors, explorers? Cursed empiricism!" *The Golden Volcano* is a departure, then, even if it's still something of a scientific novel. It deals in exactitude: maps, engineering principles, the frank and unavoidable traits and behaviors of animals, climate, and men. After Verne's death, his son Michel had a go at the manuscript, softening it up, replacing Verne's slag and detritus with prettified hokum: like a dual-wedding at the end. Not so scientific—which is to say, realistic. For Verne, the intractability of science was a barometer to

illustrate just how deeply avarice and caprice will get you.

The plot is basically a succession of road trips. Ben Raddle, an engineer, and his cousin Summy Skim, a farmer-hunter, learn that their wayward uncle has died and left them a gold claim in western Canada. They make the journey there from their home in Montreal with a plan to sell the property and return, but instead end up working the claim until it's flooded over. A dying prospector tells the cousins of a sort of Xanadu, a volcano inside the Arctic Circle jammed with nuggets, and away we go, with Skim serving as Verne's stand-in, the teetotaler at the bacchanalia. He's also as drolly metaphysical a character as you'll find in early twentieth-century naturalistic fiction. Apprised of the cold by a pushy thermometer salesman—it is, after all, the Klondike—an attempt is made to counteract nature with surrealistic logic: he'll take the device that only registers minus sixty centigrade, rather than minus ninety.

As the science is made more explicit and the environment exacts its pounds of flesh, metaphors and parables deepen. Verne's Klondike is hell without the flames and bright hues (a visual conception that also informs Frank Hurley's *South*, shot on expedition in 1914 with Shackleton, or William Bradford's polar scenes). Ships have their insides crushed in the grip of ice, fissures split the ground, toxic vapors escape from their holds deep in the earth. Unless you're a naturalist, there's nothing here for decent men—just the chase. Verne loves the idea that the chase doesn't pay, even when it pays—like when a miner finds himself a vein that meets his needs. Desire is satiated, with no real human sustenance to speak of. Sick of waiting for their volcano to erupt and dispense its riches, Raddle conceives a plan to divert a nearby stream into a hole blown into the rock at the base of the structure, thereby triggering an explosion. Thus manipulated, the volcano sends its contents heavenwards, only to have the treasure land in the nearby ocean.

Notebook

The black holes of BHL

by James Bowman

Here's a new definition of "intellectual" for you. It's a man (or, of course, woman) who can say something like this with a straight face: "Of course there are pragmatic considerations in every life. If you have a beloved wife who is dying, you will devote a lot of time to her, and you forget about those who are suffering far away. That is ok. But there is no metaphysical, ontological, anthropological reason that makes you more responsible for this one who is close than for these others who are far away." That is a summary by the French intellectual superstar Bernard-Henri Lévy of the thought of his fellow (Lithuanian-) French intellectual superstar—the species really only exists in France—Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995). On this view, Levinas represents the *reductio ad absurdum* of Enlightenment thought. Taken seriously, the principle of Levinas "that fraternity precedes the commonness of a genus" would make war ethically impossible, and "BHL" (as he is known to his many fans in France) foregathered with a number of American intellectual luminaries in March of 2006 at Skidmore College to see, in effect, just how seriously this idea could be taken.

Pretty seriously as it turns out, now that an edited transcript of their lucubrations has been published in the Spring-Summer edition of *Salmagundi* as "War, Evil, and America Now." M. Lévy is clearly the Socrates of this Symposium, and the others who are present—Jonathan Schell, Benjamin Barber, Jean Elshtain, Jackson Lears,

Carolyn Forché, Michael Massing, Philip Glotzbach, and Robert Boyers—defer to him as the acknowledged celebrity in their midst. As the title suggests, they are all discussing his book, *War, Evil, and the End of History*, which was published in English in 2004, but of course they range far beyond mere philosophy—most frequently in their obsessive return to the iniquities of the American war in Iraq and of the administration that has prosecuted it. Now you'd think that a gathering of philosophers and intellectuals setting out to discuss a political subject like this might have taken some trouble to round up a diversity of views. Or at least more than one view. But apart from one or two outbursts by a somewhat shamefaced Professor Elshtain, they are all alike as peas in a pod when it comes to the questions before the conference, including the questions of the war and the Bush administration.

That gives the whole exercise a strange feel, like that of a debate in which one side has unaccountably failed to show up—or not been invited at all. Come to think of it, this is not so strange, is it? We are already thoroughly familiar with such shrill homogeneity of opinion from other intellectual gatherings sponsored by the journals of the Left. The result is also familiar. Genuine debate having been cut off, the event swiftly degenerates into hysterical and hyperbolic assertion, each speaker seeking to top the last in displaying the virulence of his own

case of what Charles Krauthammer calls Bush Derangement Syndrome. Professor Lears seems to me to take the prize, but it is a close-run thing. In particular, I call the attention of political epidemiologists to the long screed beginning on the journal's two-hundred-and-forty-sixth page with a mention of "one of the most serious constitutional crises of our history," and ending with the professor's characterization of a ritual obeisance by President Bush to one of his predecessors in office—that "overrated blowhard" Theodore Roosevelt—as tantamount to a revival of "the rhetoric of regenerative war."

Almost every article of the professor's catalogue is as absurdly overstated as these two, where it is not wrong, tendentious, or self-contradictory. In this gathering, however, not one of them is even debatable. No, I take it back. At one point, when Professor Lears refers to our elected leaders—though he also believes that they were *not* elected and cites Mark Crispin-Miller's crackpot theories to that effect—as "a gang of thugs who are interested only in power," he is gently reprovved by Professor Elshtain. "The situation we confront is not just about a gang taking over. It just isn't." I wonder if the first "just" there was meant to go, like the second, before rather than after the "not," or if the gang, like the thugs, is stipulated. Either way, it is a handsome concession in this context, an illustration of the only *understatement* of the conference, also made by her, which is that "often in a university setting people become so insular that they fail to realize the resonance of issues [like abortion] that seem to them easily resolved."

Alas, her lone voice crying in the wilderness that "it's important for intellectuals to acknowledge that people they disagree with can be quite capable of making nuanced moral decisions" falls on deaf ears. There is one all-too-brief moment when the superstar himself seems to float an otherwise unthinkable hypothesis: "Maybe underneath or behind Bush's war, there are some ideas. Some ideas with which you and I disagree,

but ideas." But this proves to be only a passing fancy. Elsewhere, BHL does not scruple to refer to the conference's common bugbear as "criminal" and to fault the Left in America for not being serious about impeachment.

The most interesting idea thrown open to the consideration of the colloquium by its cynosure is that of the "black hole" which grows out of his idiosyncratic and idiotic notion of the "end of history." I use the term idiotic advisedly, both in the ancient Greek and the modern American sense. For he uses it not in the Hegelian sense that Francis Fukuyama does, "as a sort of accomplishment" but as an abdication of political responsibility. To him, the world's most intractable problems amount to "a sort of zero degree of history, where a large portion of the world is written out of history." In other words, the end of history is the end of *meaning* in history, and the blackness of the "black holes" of Bosnia, Iraq, Darfur, or Rwanda or any of the other "trouble spots" across the globe becomes more intellectual than moral. BHL wants to lead our sympathies in the direction of the victims of these black holes, but the sufferings he is calling attention to are really his own: he just doesn't understand them or the political violence which has created them. However black the holes may be to the Bosnians, Iraqis, Darfurians, or Rwandans, they are much more blackly incomprehensible to the understandings of these enlightened liberals who find their sufferings "meaningless."

This seems to me to be a remarkable abdication of the intellectual's duty—if intellectuals can be said to have any duties—to think and to understand. The concept of the black hole is even applicable retrospectively, as when Benjamin Barber says that World War I "was a war with almost no narrative that makes very much sense. Talk about a war about nothing but theft and violence and you're in World War I." The fact that the people who actually fought and died and suffered in the First World War did not

think it was a “war about nothing but theft and violence” means nothing to him—any more than the fact that the sufferers of Bosnia etc. didn’t suffer from his own lack of understanding of why they were being murdered does to M. Lévy. That brainiacs like these experience such sufferings as meaningless is enough to cancel out and make irrelevant any meaning the violence may have had—as a few not-very-strenuous inquiries would have informed him it *did* have—to the participants on either side. If the intellectuals don’t understand it, then it must not be understandable. It is an utterly anti-intellectual—and, not coincidentally, solipsistic—point of view.

But the concept of the black hole is really part of a larger attempt on the part of BHL and his NBFs to explain to themselves, more than to anyone else, how they can be (as they claim to be) anti-dictator, anti-terrorist, anti-Islamicist, even anti-“Islamofascist,” while still hating “neocons,” whom they see as being not much if at all better—not in spite of but *because* they are the only ones doing anything about these things. For these eggheads, the problem of terrorism must remain an epistemological no-go area lest they find themselves allied with the hated Bushites and neocons. Obviously, the ability to close your eyes completely to the reasoning behind the Bush administration’s intervention in Iraq—or to dismiss it as a mere disguise for such discreditable motives as “oil”—is very useful if you want to go on to characterize it as “a gang of thugs who are interested only in power.” But you need this deliberate blindness because the thugs stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the immorality, or at least the moral meaninglessness, of their own actions.

There is a wonderful circularity about all this which is masked by the saving obscurity of the black hole, and M. Lévy has high hopes of selling his product even to ordinary Americans whom he praises as “perhaps the most guilty people I know” because they all feel guilty about what he thinks—and, presumably, what they also think—they did to the Indians.

There is today a debate in France about whether there were some positive aspects to colonialism. Half of France still believes in that idea, which is frankly disgusting. In America the very different tendency to guilt is a kind of victory, I think, which was really achieved not only with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but with the victory of the political correctness movement.

This is the first time I have heard political correctness described, admiringly, as a “movement.”

Of course there are probably as many Americans who refuse to feel guilty about the Indians as there are Frenchmen who refuse to feel guilty about the empire. BHL just never meets any, because all his American friends take care that no dissenting voices shall be heard in their debates. But this is what gives rise to a comical sort of intellectual populism in the Frenchman and his American admirers as they hurl their brickbats at those they think of as intellectuals in the Bush White House. “So maybe it’s worth asking if we want intellectuals, even so called good intellectuals, to be engaged, when what we’re likely often to get is engagement by guys like the neo-conservatives who have brought us all the very bad ideas guiding Bush and his comrades.”

What it all comes down to, shorn of the vitriol and the hyperbole and the foolishness, is some version of the sterile moral utopianism of Emmanuel Levinas. Thus, in the words of Jonathan Schell: “What we need is a conception of humanitarian obligation, and an implementation of it, and instruments for implementing it, that are not imperial in character.” In other words, what we need is a square circle. And if we don’t get it, we’re not only going to brand as criminals those who don’t give it to us, and who stick to the only version of “black hole” humanitarianism with any chance of success; we’re also going to take refuge ourselves in a magnificently stylish, celebrity-approved nescience that will certify our moral purity—and our political irrelevance. This is mere childishness.