

The New Criterion

October 2009

A monthly review

edited by Hilton Kramer & Roger Kimball

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The New Criterion *October 2009*

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Notes & Comments:

October 2009

Cushing Academy, RIP

Cushing Academy, in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, *looks* like a traditional New England prep school. It boasts the ivied halls, the well-kempt playing fields, a venerable pedigree dating back to 1865. Like the unhappy scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, however, this bastion of respectable secondary education evidently lacks a brain.

That, as any rate, is what we surmise from the academy's decision to do away with its library and all of its books.

Yes, you read that aright. Thomas Parkman Cushing, who originally endowed the school, was careful to stipulate that it be provided, in addition to other accoutrements befitting an educational establishment, with a "suitable library." James Tracy, the current headmaster, finds the whole idea of a library, and the objects they traditionally contain, positively quaint. Speaking to *The Boston Globe*, he actually said, apparently without embarrassment, "When I look at books, I see an outdated technology, like scrolls before books." (Did someone whisper, "Barbarian!?" Where is Cushing's Board of Trustees? Don't they realize what a disaster this shortsighted capitulation to trendiness is for the school?)

According to the *Globe*, Cushing is "one of the first schools in the country to abandon its books." Can we hope that it will also be one of the last? In pursuit of a "bookless

campus," Cushing is disburdening itself of its library's 20,000 books and spending \$500,000 to establish a "learning center"—the name, the *Globe* reports, is tentative, but whatever they settle on you can be sure the scare quotes will be appropriate. Of course, once you dump a library's books, you have a lot of extra space to fill, so Cushing (tuition, room, and board \$42,850, plus a \$1,500 "technology fee") will be spending \$42,000 for some large flat-screen monitors to display data from the Internet as well as \$20,000 for "laptop-friendly" study carrels. In place of the reference desk, the *Globe* reports, Cushing is building "a \$50,000 coffee shop that will include a \$12,000 cappuccino machine." So, at a moment when American students are positively inundated with various forms of electronic media competing for, and eroding, their attention, an institution entrusted with (in Thomas Cushing's words) "strengthening and enlarging the minds of the rising and future generations" decides to jettison one of civilization's most potent aids in furthering that project. Fifty grand per annum for a school without books. Good work!

Headmaster Tracy, dazzled by all those colored lights and promises of painless instant enlightenment, has betrayed his responsibility as an educator. He has thrown his lot in with the party of "Now," heedless of the fact that education must embrace the past if it is to prepare for the future. We are reminded of the fellow who, years ago

when computers were first becoming a force in schools and universities, put about a rumor of a new device of unimagined sophistication. It promised to put the world's knowledge at your finger tips. It was small enough to fit in your hands, light enough to be carried anywhere. It required no power apart from human curiosity. It was called the Built-in Orderly Organized Knowledge, or BOOK for short. It is unfortunate that headmaster Tracy didn't think to acquire some to put next to his new cappuccino machine.

Harvard's latest PC travesty

We admit, however, to experiencing a brief flash of empathy with Headmaster Tracy when a 1,095-page tome entitled *A New Literary History of America* plopped heavily on our desk. Edited by Greil Marcus ("notable for producing scholarly and literary essays that place rock music in a much broader framework of culture and politics than is customary") and Werner Sollors (a Professor of English and African American Studies at Harvard), this curious waste of wood pulp is published by Harvard University Press.

It is difficult to communicate the global awfulness of the book, the pretension mixed with smarmy demotic knowingness, the preposterous glorification of pop culture, the constant deflation of serious cultural achievement by means of sociological analysis. Perhaps the first thing that should be understood is that, despite its title, *A New Literary History of America* is only incidentally concerned with literature. A fair percentage of its approximately 200 chronologically arranged entries purports to deal with literary texts or figures. But the whole focus, the whole tone and gestalt, of the book is on extra-literary phenomena. An entry for 1982 is devoted to explaining how "Hip-hop travels the world": "Perhaps hip-hop's greatest contribution is the ease with which it inhabits contradiction." It is hard

to argue with that. The entry for "1956, April 16" dilates on the significance—Oh, what great significance it is said to possess!—of Chuck Berry's pop song "Roll Over Beethoven." An entry for 1970 is devoted to the porn star Linda Lovelace (she of *Deep Throat*). And so on. Nineteen-thirty-eight saw the introduction by Action Comics of Superman. In 1945, "Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie record together for the first time." Another entry for 1945 is devoted to the atom bomb. The tagline: "Nobody apologized, nobody atoned."

For the editors, the year 1969 was memorable partly because the *Complete Poems* of Elizabeth Bishop appeared, but mostly because "Seymour Hersh breaks the story of the My Lai massacre" ("American crimes" is the operative phrase in that essay.) The penultimate essay, by which time we've reached 2005, is devoted to—Can you guess?—Hurricane Katrina. "If, for that moment," the editors ask, "New Orleans was the nation, did the nation still exist?" Care to answer that? But the real point of that portentous non-question comes in the next sentence: "If it did, did it deserve to?" The unexpressed answer to *that* question, of course, is "not really."

Not then, anyway. Not when George W. Bush, the villain of the essay, was president. But when we come to 2008, the book's last entry, the clouds part and redemption is at hand. "Barack Obama is elected 44th President of the United States" reads the ecstatic headline. This is the apogee, the denouement, the culmination of all that *A New Literary History of America* has been building toward. If a book could sing, it would now burst into song. Instead, the book's final entry consists of that headline and a series of propaganda posters by Kara Walker, an "African American artist who explores race, gender, sexuality, violence, and identity." And that's what this bloated travesty is really about: the left-wing politically correct worldview in which literature, in which cultural endeavor generally, exists only as a prop in a "progressive" political agenda. Harvard University Press should be ashamed.

Welcome National Affairs

In April 2005, after a run of forty years, *The Public Interest*, the distinguished quarterly founded by Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol, ceased publication. It was a sad moment for anyone interested in intelligent analysis and debate about the direction of the American polity. It is with pleasure, therefore, that we welcome the advent of *National Affairs*, the successor to *The Public Interest*, whose inaugural issue appeared last month.

The handsome new quarterly (and it is a special pleasure to see such attractive typography and graphic design) is edited by Yuval Levin, a prolific journalist and fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. In his opening editorial, Mr. Levin writes that *National Affairs* will aspire to

help Americans think a little more clearly about the challenges of governing ourselves. We will publish essays about public policy, society, culture, politics, and the world of ideas, with an eye to what a responsible and thoughtful American ought to know and to think about, and with a special concern for domestic policy and political economy, broadly understood.

Judging by the first issue, Mr. Levin has succeeded admirably in realizing this aspiration. Wide-ranging essays by Michael Barone, Ron Haskins, Charles Murray, Leon Kass, William Schambra, Wilfred McClay, and others establish a very high level of reflection about the future of the American dream, the state of higher education, the direction of our political culture, and other issues. These essays represent the best, by which we mean the most effective and responsible, sort of political observation. They are engaged, but not doctrinaire. As Mr. Levin puts it,

National Affairs will have a point of view, but not a party line. It will begin from confidence and pride in America, from a sense that our

challenge is to build on our strengths to address our weaknesses, and from the conviction that chief among those strengths are our democratic capitalism, our ideals of liberty and equality under the law, and our roots in the longstanding traditions of the West. We will seek to cultivate an open-minded empiricism, a decent respect for the awesome complexity of life in society, and a healthy skepticism of the serene technocratic confidence that is too often the dominant flavor of social science and public policy.

To which we can only add, Amen.

An additional feature of *National Affairs*, available through its web site at national-affairs.com, is the complete archive of its predecessor, *The Public Interest*. Readers may also avail themselves of website to subscribe.

Irving Kristol 1920–2009

This issue of *The New Criterion* was on press when we received the sad news that Irving Kristol, the distinguished editor, writer, and intellectual enabler, had died, age 89. *The New Criterion* will have more to say about Mr. Kristol's important legacy in a future issue. For now, we wish to record our sorrow at his passing and express our condolences to his widow, the distinguished historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, and his children (among whom is the distinguished commentator William Kristol—"distinguished" seems to be a Kristol birthright). There is a melancholy symmetry in the fact that Mr. Kristol's passing should coincide with the inauguration of *National Affairs*, a magazine for which he acted as intellectual midwife. But then that describes many magazines: *The Public Interest*, as we noted above, and the English monthly *Encounter*, of which he was, with Stephen Spender, a founding editor. Mr. Kristol was also instrumental in the creation of *The New Criterion*, on whose board he served in its early years. We will miss him greatly. RIP.

The prophet of personal space

by Anthony Daniels

Until quite recently, whenever I read D. H. Lawrence I felt as if I had been immersed in a tepid bath of bodily fluids taken in the booth of a fairground soothsayer. I found his paganism ridiculous, his prose frequently overwrought and hysterical, and some of his ideas distinctly fascist, if not outright Nazi. As for his eroticism, I found it about as compelling as a gourmet would find appetizing a detailed description of the workings of the digestive system, right up to the inevitable denouement thereof. I thought some of Lawrence's poetry was good, even very good, but (curious idea) I thought it good despite its provenance.

One is not obliged, of course, to maintain one's attitude to any subject to the bitter end, in the teeth of any evidence that it might be mistaken, merely because it has been one's own. And, rather late in the day no doubt, I began to revise my opinion because of a book by David Ellis about the author's death, which showed (to me at least) Lawrence's character in a much more favorable light than the one in which I was accustomed to seeing him.¹ Lawrence seems to me now possessed of considerable dignity, nobility, and even heroism; it is hardly surprising that a reassessment of the character might lead me to a reassessment of the work.

¹ *Death and the Author: How D. H. Lawrence Died and Was Remembered*, by David Ellis; Oxford University Press, 273 pages, \$39.95.

Until Ellis's book, I confess, my idea of Lawrence was largely derived from Bertrand Russell's autobiography. In the second volume, Russell describes how Lawrence's vehemence at first had a deep effect on him: so much burning conviction, after all, must have had something to justify it. A letter from Lawrence to Russell, in 1915, when both of them opposed the war, even drove Russell to consider suicide. According to Lawrence, Russell's pacifism was but another kind of bloodlust, and if, Lawrence continued, he wasn't able to base his opposition to the war on hatred of everyone equally, on sheer misanthropy in other words, Russell should stick to mathematics, where at least he could tell the truth.

Russell, who was not of course himself completely immune from a tendency to fatuity (as perhaps none of us is), overcame his brief dalliance with Lawrence like a man who overcomes pneumonia by crisis. His ultimate judgment is damning indeed:

I discovered that he had no real wish to make the world better, but only to indulge in eloquent soliloquy about how bad it was. If any body overheard the soliloquies, so much the better, but they were designed at most to produce a little band of disciples who could sit in the deserts of New Mexico and feel holy.

Nowadays, of course, Lawrence's disciples are more likely to sit in the English literature departments of universities than in any

desert whatsoever, and, indeed, were more likely to have done so by the time Russell wrote his autobiography. But Russell damns Lawrence even more completely than in the above:

He had a mystical philosophy of “blood” which I disliked. “There is,” he said, “another seat of consciousness than the brain and the nerves. One lives, knows and has one’s being in the blood, without any reference to nerves and brain. My blood-knowing is overwhelming. We should realize that we have a blood-being, a blood-consciousness, a blood-soul complete and apart from a mental and nerve consciousness.” This seemed to me frankly rubbish, and I rejected it vehemently, though I did not then know that it led straight to Auschwitz.

That such a man could have influenced Russell (who, after all, did not fall for the charms of another man claiming omniscience whom he was to meet soon after Lawrence, namely Lenin) suggests that there was a *je ne sais quoi* about Lawrence: that he was, in effect, the Madame Blavatsky of English letters.

Another of Russell’s charges against Lawrence was that he found the philosopher’s regard for facts contemptible. Perhaps Lawrence had rather hastily concluded that, if Gradgrind respected only facts, people who respected facts were only Gradgrinds. But, certainly, knowing too much can on occasion get in the way of appreciation or enjoyment. I felt this was the case with Keith Sagar’s learned and lucid book about the ideas that lie behind Lawrence’s poetry.²

Let us take, for example, Lawrence’s fine poem “Snake” written in Sicily. It begins:

A snake came to my water-trough
On a hot, hot day, and I in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there.

² *D. H. Lawrence: Poet*, by Keith Sagar; Troubador, 181 pages, Paperback, £15.

Lawrence then describes the snake’s elegance with affecting tenderness. He (or the narrator of the poem) feels honored by the snake’s presence and the fact that it does not flee him. But then:

The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are
innocent, the gold are venomous.

At first, Lawrence resists the call of his education to attack the snake, but, in the end, his education wins. He throws a log at it, not killing it, but hastening its retreat into a dark hole in the earth. Afterwards, Lawrence feels remorse at his mean and pitiful action:

And I thought of the albatross,
And I wished he would come back, my snake.

As a response to a particular situation, this seems to me fine, sincere, and moving, but when, as Professor Sagar insists quite convincingly that it should be, it is taken to embody a much deeper philosophy, appreciation of the poetry gives way to philosophical assessment. And because the philosophy is not very good, to say the least, such an assessment is bound to decrease rather than increase appreciation of the poem. This is indeed an ironic result for a poet who set so much more store by instinct, or “blood consciousness,” than by thought.

The idea behind the poem is twofold: first that what we learn by education, at least in the West, is thoroughly rotten, corrupting, and life-denying, in that it divides us from the deeper, instinctive, and only really authentic levels of our being; second that, instead, we should develop a kind of mystical, accepting pagan response to everything in the universe, including snakes, seeing their peculiar rightness and beauty and self-sufficiency.

But is our education, by which Lawrence means more than two millennia of our cultural tradition, really quite as stultifying as

he, with the fury of a disappointed lover, suggests? Or quite as much in need of him as a kind of literary Siva, equally destroyer and creator, as he implies? I don't want to nitpick, but Lawrence's condemnation seems to me a little sweeping, not to say cavalier. Of course, I understand certain things about Lawrence that might be offered in extenuation of his over-generalized view: his domineering mother, for example; his Victorian nonconformist background; his close acquaintance with the dismally ugly industrial towns of England (with which I, too, am familiar, and for which, despite—or is it because of—the fact that it is a considerable achievement to reach even the level of mediocrity in them, I retain an affection); and, above all, the cataclysm of the recent First World War. But actually to have concluded that the whole of the civilization of which the First World War was a late manifestation had been rotten from its very start is a bit like having read *Mein Kampf* and concluded that the alphabet and printing press had led to no good.

In any case, as Professor Sagar points out sotto voce, the end of one of Lawrence's poems, "Mountain Lion," is not exactly a testimony to Lawrence's outrage at so much wasted human life. Lawrence is walking in the mountains of New Mexico and comes across two Mexicans who are carrying the body of a dead mountain lion that they have just shot:

So, she will never leap up that way again, with
the yellow flash of a mountain lion's long
shoot!

And her bright striped frost face will never
watch any more, out of the shadow of the cave
in the blood-orange rock,
Above the trees of the Lobo dark valley mouth!

We feel the pity of the destruction of so beautiful a creature, killed for reasons not at all clear; even one of the killers says, "Hermoso es!" ("It is beautiful!"). Perhaps we should have been prepared for the final verse, because, when Lawrence meets the

two Mexicans, he exclaims (in the poem): "Men! The only animal in the world to fear!" So the conclusion is:

And I think in this empty world there was
room for me and a mountain lion,
And I think in the world beyond, how easily
we might spare a million or two of humans
And never miss them.

We? Who is this we who might never miss a million or two of our fellow-beings, so much more dispensable than a single mountain lion? (In *Women in Love*, Lawrence asks, through the voice of a character, "Don't you find it a beautiful clean thought, a world empty of people?")

We, whoever we are, are not very far from the sensibility of those who put to death 100,000 mental patients as being "life unworthy of life," especially when we remember that those who instigated the mass murder were very keen also to be good to animals. Professor Sagar quotes a passage from Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious*:

The next relation has got to be a relationship of men towards men in a spirit of unfathomable trust and responsibility, service and leadership, obedience and pure authority. Men have got to choose their leaders, and obey them to the death. And it must be a system of culminating aristocracy, society tapering like a pyramid to the supreme leader. The intense passionate yearning of the soul towards the soul of a stronger, greater individual, and the passionate blood-belief in the fulfilment of this yearning will give men the next motive for life.

And for killing, of course. I do not see, in the circumstances, how Russell's assessment can very well be dismissed out of hand, though Professor Sagar manages no more asperity in response to Lawrence's fascistopagan vaporings than to say, "The delicacy and sensitivity and balance of the best European poems has gone."

While Lawrence did not live to see the Nazi horrors, and there is no reason to

think that he would have approved of them (quite the reverse), it is astonishing to me, in this era of academic political correctness, in this era of sub-editorial inquisitions, with its searching out and compulsory replacement of such appallingly machismo words as “actress,” how the evident emotional and intellectual connection between Lawrence’s underlying philosophy and the nastiest political ideology in history has either been missed or wholly forgiven.

Let me return briefly to the poem “Snake.” So long as it referred only to the snake that Lawrence had actually encountered, or had even imagined encountering, no crassly empirical objections rose in my mind by way of objection, but when the snake was generalized into the kind of new pantheistic paganism that Professor Sagar suggests that Lawrence was hoping to propagate, I am afraid my own actual encounters with snakes, or rather my actual encounters with African children bitten by puff adders, recurred to me. These fat and sinister vipers lie camouflaged and sluggish in the bush, until disturbed or trodden on when they strike with lightning speed; the little child’s leg swells up; the tissues of his bitten leg can become necrotic and slough off; the pressure of the swelling can cause gangrene; and the loss of fluid into the tissues can cause severe shock and death.

My aging edition of *Manson’s Tropical Diseases* (19th Edition, 1987) tells me that 15,000 to 20,000 people then died annually in India of snakebite, as well as 900 in Sri Lanka. More to the point, at the very time Lawrence was writing (before the advent of scientific treatment), 3,000 died every year in Burma alone. Therefore, I can understand and sympathize with, though not necessarily subscribe to, the monotheistic mysticism that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well,” in the sense that there is a divine providence that oversees everything and renders individual instances of suffering meaningful and even hopeful, and also to the atheist viewpoint that there are many manifestations of nature so beautiful that they are worthy of rev-

erence and preservation, and we destroy them to our own impoverishment.

Yet I find Lawrence’s pantheism (I don’t know what else to call it) facile and evasive, a forerunner of that most dispiriting of all modern statements of self-congratulation, “I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual.” Thus, the line “Men! The only animal in the world to fear!” is good poetry and good rhetoric, but bad as the basis for a philosophy, for the good and sufficient reason that it is simply not true. But Lawrence wants us to suspend disbelief and pretend that it is true, for then, and only then, is the return to the natural, to the pre-civilizational, almost pre-human existence that is beyond good and evil, a goal worth pursuing. This seems to me balderdash, a radical rejection of the inherent difficulty of human life.

A book of essays, *Windows to the Sun: D. H. Lawrence’s Thought-Adventures*, by various hands, deals with the relation between Lawrence’s writing and his ideas. It was from this book that I learned a surprising fact: at Nottingham University, there is a chair of D. H. Lawrence studies. Since (at least as far as I am aware, though I might be entirely mistaken) there are no chairs of Dickens, Conrad, Austen, Wordsworth, or any other British author studies, it is to be presumed that Lawrence is deemed, at least in some quarters, to be of unique importance and significance. And here a vision of hell—admittedly one of many that I have had—opened up to me: the study of D. H. Lawrence, to the exclusion of all else, for ever and ever and ever.

Liberally scattered throughout the essays are phrases of precisely the kind that make me think, unfairly, that D. H. Lawrence is always at his worst. “Two single beings, constellated together like two stars,” “inheritance of a universe of dark reality,” “the dark sensual body of life,” “midwife to the unborn homunculus,” “to jump like a desperate clown through the vast blue hoop of the upper air,” “her paroxysm of violent sensation”: it all sounds to me like a Black Mass performed in a vegetarian restaurant.

The most striking thing by far about Lawrence's ideas is their banality. The introduction to *Windows to the Sun* starts the ball rolling by telling us that, in Lawrence's opinion, an artist is by nature transgressive, the enemy of convention. One has to stifle a yawn, for by now, surely, we are all transgressed out. Even at the time when Lawrence enunciated this opinion, it was hardly original; of its truth or otherwise, I need hardly speak.

Professor Sagar, who contributes an essay to the book, lucidly enunciates Lawrence's philosophical ideas. Among them are that every man has the obligation to formulate his own religion and to amend it throughout his life; the necessity to live "authentically," that is to say, without giving in to social pressures to conform; a kind of pantheism, one of his last written pronouncements having been that "we ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos"; utopian socialism; and "biocentrism," or deep ecology, according to which (to put it bluntly) man should live as one with the lice and the centipedes. Missing from this list is Lawrence's inclination to authoritarianism and his irrationalism.

Perhaps it is not altogether surprising that Professor Sagar, who published his first book about Lawrence more than forty years ago, should find these ideas interesting and important, but I side with Russell, who dismissed them as worthless and added that they could not be forgotten too soon. There is little doubt, I think, that the ideas did inform both his fiction and his poetry.

Let us examine one small instance of this, in the late, and well-known, short story "The Rocking-Horse Winner." In this story, an upper-middle-class family lives above its means; and the whole atmosphere of the household is mysteriously impregnated with the thought that more money is needed to maintain it. Responding to this thought, and wishing to ignite love from his otherwise unloving parents, who are constantly preoccupied by finances, Paul, the son of the

household, decides to gamble on the horses, in syndicate with a servant called Bassett who is a devotee of the turf. Paul is astoundingly successful and quickly accumulates large sums of money. But even these are soon spent extravagantly by the parents, and the urgent need for more money recurs. In the last gamble of his life, Paul places all he has won on a single outsider, and thereby wins a fortune (about \$5 million in today's money), but in the process contracts that old standby of Victorian fiction, a brain fever, and dies.

The story, of course, is a condemnation of a false or bad scale of values. Instead of love, Paul's parents seek social position, hence the imperative for the upkeep of appearances and their unquenchable thirst for money. The suggestion at the end of the story is that, in the parents' social circle, a dead son in exchange for so much money might not be an entirely bad bargain. Even if snobbery and materialism are old targets they are not necessarily stale, for these vices spring eternal in the human breast.

What renders the story implausible even as a parable (for it is written as social realism) is Paul's manner of picking winners in forthcoming races. He rides an old rocking-horse furiously until, by means totally incomprehensible and utterly undescribed, the name of the winner is vouchsafed to him through the ether. When no name comes to him in this manner, he loses most of his bets, in the way that most bets are normally lost by gamblers. But when he's absolutely sure (the word "sure" italicized, to give it mystical strength), as a result of his communion with the great Bookmaker in the Cosmos, he always wins.

This is part of Lawrence's constant war, not on rationalism, which is a target worthy of attack, but on rationality, which is not. It is one thing to emphasize the importance of instinct, imagination, intuition, and the role of implicit knowledge, over and against the cult of the fact and purely deductive logic; it is quite another to imply that facts (other, presumably, than the names of horses) and logic are contemptible and of no importance in themselves. In other words, Law-

rence's irrationalism is a consequence of his completely undisciplined mind, combined with an almost Old Testament belief in his own prophethood. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that "The Rocking-Horse Winner" opens in Biblical style (Lawrence's mind had been soaked in the Bible as a child): "There was a woman who was beautiful, who started with all the advantages, yet she had no luck." This is writing of a distinctly hieratic kind.

But when all is said and done, a writer of imaginative literature cannot be assessed wholly by his ideas. If he could, there would be no difference between philosophy and literature; Tolstoy, for example, would long have been consigned to the ranks of the eighth-rate. Lawrence was often a far better writer than the value of his ideas—almost nil—might suggest.

Lawrence's life, in which he showed an angular but very deep probity, at least by comparison with most of humanity, might predispose us in his favor. Born sickly into an English mining town, with only a socially ambitious (if domineering) mother for an advantage, he became, by dint of sheer intelligence, talent, and force of character, one of the principal literary figures of his age, a man whose novels are worth reading nearly a century later (of how many can that be said?), an excellent linguist and translator, and a poet of considerable force. His output was formidable in size, all the more so as he died before his forty-fifth birthday, and most of it is still in print. When one considers that he was plagued by chronic ill-health, nearly dying several times in his short life, one is filled with admiration. Surely anyone who reads David Ellis's account of his final struggle with tuberculosis (which, incidentally, is medically accurate), will not remain unmoved by the lines of one of his last poems: "Now it is autumn and the falling fruit/ And the long journey towards oblivion."

At his best, Lawrence depicted the world into which he was born very movingly. In the short story "Odour of Chrysanthe-

mums," for example, written before he was entirely obsessed by his philosophy, he recounts how the body of a miner, killed in a freak accident, is brought back to the house of his now-widow. The couple had been far from happily married; the poignancy of her confusion of sentiments is conveyed with the greatest sensitivity. This is great writing.

But Lawrence was also capable of great insensitivity. The really obscene thing about *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is not the sex scenes, but Lawrence's complete and chilling lack of sympathy or feeling for Sir Clifford. It is surely not mere political correctness to spare some thought for the disabled but an attribute of the most elementary humanity. To have chosen Sir Clifford's paraplegia, the result of a war injury, as a symbol of inauthenticity, is almost stunning in its callousness. The implication is that Sir Clifford almost chose his injury in order to serve as such a symbol, a case of blaming the victim if ever there was one. Why even Richard III, a far greater villain than Sir Clifford, earns some sympathy and understanding:

I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
Into this breathing world scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them,
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time
Unless to see my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity.

If Richard is worthy of this much understanding, how much more worthy is Sir Clifford, even if, pre-injury, he were not wholly admirable (as which of us is)? Once ideas get hold of him, something deeply selfish, profoundly unsocial and solipsistic enters Lawrence's vision, a quality that others remarked in him and that nullifies utterly his natural sensitivity. This is all the more apparent because, at the time he was writing *Lady Chatterley*, Lawrence's illness was in the process of rendering him impotent; while a Freudian might very well

ascribe the story to the process of reaction formation, morally speaking, Lawrence ought, as a result of his own experience, to have expressed more, not less, than usual sympathy for Sir Clifford.

Lawrence's antagonism to stifling conventionality also often blinded him to important and rather obvious moral dimensions of the situations he describes. After all, convention is often founded on moral insight, even if it (also often) goes far beyond what that compliance with that insight would require. For example, in his late novella *The Virgin and the Gipsy*, the unctuous Reverend Saywell is left by his free-spirited wife. Saywell is so odious that we are supposed only to understand and applaud her act of self-liberation. But she leaves her two young daughters in the care of the Reverend Saywell, apparently without regret or scruple, surely a proceeding of the utmost irresponsibility if he is as odiously life-denying as he is portrayed. It is no doubt trite to say that once children have been brought into the world, the wishes, desires, and satisfactions of the parents become of less importance than they were before their birth. Indeed, the interests of the children become morally paramount.

Triteness, however, is not the opposite of truth; we see in Lawrence the prophet of

the wholesale abandonment of children in pursuit (allegedly) of one's "personal space" that is not an attractive feature of our age. It will not escape notice that Frieda Lawrence did in life exactly what Mrs. Saywell did in fiction. Lawrence in effect is playing Dickens to Frieda von Richthofen's Harold Skimpole, except that, unlike Dickens, he is giving her his seal of approval:

I ask only to be free. The butterflies are free.
Mankind will surely not deny to Frieda von Richthofen what it concedes to the butterflies!

In summary, then, Lawrence was a man of brilliant gifts and determined character, who adopted bad ideas because he insufficiently distinguished the frustrations contingent upon his particular situation in life from those consequent upon human existence itself (a common enough failing). He also raises in a particularly acute way the question of whether a writer has a right to be remembered for his best work, for which we should be grateful because it adds something valuable to the common stock, or whether he must be judged also by his inferior work, his bad ideas, and whatever results therefrom. There is, perhaps, no definitive answer to this question, which is why a critic's work is never done.

Never such innocence again

by *Andrew Stuttaford*

Except for the vague impression of a heavily built, benignly gruff, occasionally encountered man with short silver hair, I cannot claim to remember my great-uncle Tom very well. Tom Royden was, I understand, an English country doctor of the old school with a lady friend down the road, a flourishing practice, a keen interest in songbirds, and a shrewd understanding of the practice of medicine that owed as much to common sense as to science. I can remember, just, being told of his death in 1966 (I was eight), and the flock of cheeping, singing, and trilling folk that moved into our house shortly thereafter.

Not so long later, four bulky, musty volumes turned up at home, each stamped with a different date from the first decade of the twentieth century, each smelling of sixty years. Battered and fine, their covers embossed with cowboys, Vikings, and other examples of the formidably tough, they had belonged to my great-uncle all his life. Now, I was informed, they were mine. They still are, artifacts of an era over long before I began, belongings of a man I never really knew, and, in some senses, an introduction to both. To read them was to be transported back from the Beatles on the transistor to *Daisy Bell* on the calliope, from phasers on the starship to battles on the veldt, to a time and a place that was no longer sepia, no longer *then*. To read them was to sit with young Tom turning those same pages on some long-forgotten Edwardian afternoon,

and to wonder about the child that the old man had once been.

The four volumes in question were collections (“annuals”) of all the editions of the *Boy’s Own Paper* issued each week over the course of a given twelve months. Tom’s 1909 annual happened to cover the period from October 3, 1908 to September 25, 1909, but in reality it oozed the ideals, assumptions, and myths of any year plucked from the three or four decades in which imperial Britain slid from its Victorian apogee into an Indian summer of, perversely, even greater splendor. It was a period of rapid social change yet, all things considered, extraordinary social peace, a social peace of which the *Boy’s Own Paper* was both symptom and, in its own small way, architect.

“The prince of boys’ papers” (as the *London Times* once described it) was published by, of all people, the Religious Tract Society, an organization founded in 1799 to spread the word of the Lord amongst those with “little leisure and less inclination to peruse entire volumes.” The RTS soon expanded its activities to include the publication of materials designed to save souls overseas but never stopped keeping a sharp eye on those in peril back home. With Britain’s ever more literate population displaying a growing appetite for less than salubrious publications, there was much to look out for. Appalled by the public’s grimy tastes, the society’s committee met in 1878 to discuss “providing healthy boy literature to counteract the vast-

ly increasing circulation of illustrated and other papers and tales of a bad tendency.”

The *BOP* (as it quickly came to be known) debuted on January 18 the following year. To guess that this worthy committee’s notion of “healthy boy literature” would be glum little pamphlets filled with clerical homilies, Gospel stories, and tales of biblical derring-do is to underestimate the subtlety of the Victorian mind. Despite a cover price (one penny) pitched low enough to put the new paper within the grasp of youngsters from almost all social classes, production values were high, complete with masthead designed by the conqueror (British, naturally) of the Matterhorn, Edward Whymper, and Latin motto: right from the beginning, the creators of the *BOP* were signaling that they took their paper—and its readers—seriously.

If the *BOP*’s packaging was good, so too, at their best, were its contents. These were crammed each week into sixteen densely printed pages (there was also a monthly edition which, like the annual, came with some extras) filled with a nicely chosen, well-illustrated blend of story-telling, practical advice, sports coverage, accounts of faraway lands, technological updates, sagas of self-improvement, competitions, puzzles, career opportunities, instructions on how to make various new-fangled devices at home, patriotic tidbits, and informative chat about hobbies, particularly the care and maintenance of pets: the first issue featured “My Monkeys and How I Manage Them” by Frank Buckland, M.A., a touch of Noah in a paper where most of the writing on pets was focused on Britain’s rather pedestrian domestic fauna. The origins of Tom’s aviary may well lie in the practical, unsentimental guide to rearing birds that was a regular feature of the *BOP* in his youth, and which (in the January 30, 1909 issue) included this typically hard-headed piece of advice for the owners of pigeon lofts: “Don’t keep wast-ers. Pigeon-pie is good.”

The challenge of the dreaded penny dreadful was met head-on. Amongst the

stories serialized in the paper’s early editions were *Nearly Eaten*, *Nearly Garrotted*, and *How I Lost My Finger*, all by James Cox, R.N. (M.A., R.N.—at the *BOP* credentials counted). In the words of G. A. Hutchison, the paper’s founding genius and first managing editor, the *BOP* had to appeal to “boys not their grandmothers,” an attitude that helps explain a series of not notably grandmother-friendly articles from the 1880s dedicated to “peculiar punishments”:

It is singular that a Chinaman will prefer to die by crucifixion rather than beheading. He has the greatest horror of appearing in the next world without his head and therefore chooses a slow and lingering death rather than a quick one.

That’s the spirit.

But while, as legendary *BOP* contributor Dr. Gordon Stables, R.N., noted in October 1908, there was no “namby-pambiness” or “silly goody-goodness” about the stories the paper ran, no “British boy ever found in [them] even the remotest suggestion to do that which was not right and gentlemanly,” reassuring words for the parents and schools whose approval underpinned the paper’s continued success. If the *BOP* had sermons to preach—it did, sometimes overtly, sometimes not—they were rooted in patriotism, decency, hard work, and fair play (the practice of clubbing seals was, noted the author of one 1887 tale, “too much like hitting a man when he is down”) rather than the peculiar intricacies of theology. Despite the best efforts of some in the RTS (stoutly resisted by Hutchison), in the pages of the *BOP*, God was the God of that splendid nineteenth-century hymn, immortal, invisible, and wise, emphasis on the second adjective. He was there—around, reassuring, in charge, and basically British. There simply was no need to go on about Him.

Under the circumstances, it’s no surprise to find that of the two articles most directly regarding the church to be found in Tom Royden’s 1909 annual, one (from May 29)

concerned the Rev. W. W. Beverage, “ministerial athlete” and unfortunately named temperance campaigner, and the other, “Athletic Parsons,” published the following week, hymned the sporting achievements of a series of sporting clergymen:

The number of parsons who take part in the first rank of games is not, of course, as large as that of those who have given up active participation after taking Holy Orders, but for all that there are some excellent representatives of muscular Christianity in the first flight of several games.

My suspicion is that young Tom will not have lingered too long over this revelation nor, for that matter, over other distinctly eat-your-greens pieces, including—hang on to your hat—a lengthy description (May 8, 1909) of what the London County Council (“a municipal mother of boys”) was doing for young people and, from August 7, 1909, “The Boyhood of Tennyson” (“his father had a delightful library”).

Mercifully, the corner of the *BOP* inhabited by sporting parsons, bountiful municipalities, and the doings of future poet laureates was a small one. The long-running serials, generally tales of adventure or public school, that constituted the paper’s mainstay were a source of far livelier entertainment. Tom will have begun 1909 with an issue (January 2) that included the fourteenth installment of both *In the Heart of the Silent Sea* (“The two boys, left unceremoniously by the screaming natives, had nothing for it but to follow in the wake of the fugitives”) and *Rowland’s Fortune* (“Having seen that two of the ruffians were dead, we returned to where the third lay. This was the fellow Don Carlos had beaten down with the flat of his sword”), as well as the first chapter of *The Quenching of the Fiery Tide*, a tale of ancient British fighting folk (“Conan, the exquisite, laughed scornfully”). The public schools were represented by *The Bluffing of Mason* (“Mason was a beast—everyone said so”), *Mr. Lattimer’s Tax* (“The two boys obeyed,

one with a gleam of triumph breaking through a frown of concern; the other, pale and defiant”), and *The Doctor’s Double: An Episode at Monkton School*.

A large number of these once-ripping yarns now sag badly, and, as anyone who has waded through that fiery tide could tell you, others were not much good to begin with. But it’s impossible not to notice the sophistication of their grammar and vocabulary. The *BOP* may have had a tendency to patronize its audience, but it usually did so without talking down to them. It says a lot that amongst the writers who wrote for the *BOP* in its first three decades were Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (the *BOP* was “one of the first papers that grew tired of returning my MSS and published them instead”), Jules Verne, R. M. Ballantyne, and the great G. A. Henty, the author of a long sequence of novels (*Wulf the Saxon*, *Under Drake’s Flag*, *The Young Carthaginian*, and many, many others) often involving an enterprising young lad, stirring historical times, and a respectable amount of bloodshed.

The formula worked. Precise data are hard to come by, but the paper’s weekly readership probably peaked at around a million in the late 1880s, the highest level reached by any such publication. Thanks not least to competition from the likes of *Chums* and, later, *The Captain*, more up-market (and racier) ventures unburdened by the high-mindedness and rich-man-in-his-castle, poor-man-at-his-gate social inclusiveness that were key parts of the *BOP*’s ethos, the paper’s circulation fell sharply in the following decade, but it continued to boast a readership that ran easily into the hundreds of thousands and a significance in British life that was more than a matter of mere numbers. It had become, and was to remain, a national institution (a 1929 lunch to celebrate the *BOP*’s fiftieth anniversary was attended by both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition) and deservedly so.

Those who produced the paper clearly felt a genuine responsibility towards their readers, very few of whom would have had

any chance to attend the Eton-and-Harrow surrogates where so many of the *BOP*'s school stories took place, settings that owed as much to the *BOP*'s ceaselessly aspirational creed as to snobbery. In part, these stories were, like today's *Gossip Girl*, an opportunity for vicarious thrills in a privileged, inaccessible world, but, in part, they were also intended to train their readers how to behave like the public schoolboys they could never be. In similar vein, a recurrent theme that ran through stories both factual ("Boys Who Have Risen"; "Dunces Who Became Famous"; "From Wheelwright's Bench to Academy: the story of George Tinworth's boyhood") and fictional (*From Powder Monkey To Admiral*; *From Fisher Lad to Fleet Surgeon*) published by the paper was that of the poor boy made good. Not everyone could become an admiral, or even a fleet surgeon, but the *BOP* would still do what it could to help its readers make something of themselves.

This may be the only charitable way to interpret the paper's often shatteringly abrasive advice column, much of it written by that fierce foe of namby-pamby, Dr. Stables, a Scottish "gentleman gypsy" and wildly prolific writer (*From Fisher Lad to Fleet Surgeon* was one of his) who spent much of his time traveling the country in a purpose-built caravan accompanied by dog, parrot, coachman, and valet. A tartan-clad, fantastically bewhiskered, counter-intuitively married (he was a father of six) man, Stables was in his sixties by the time that Tom Royden was reading the *BOP*, but he cannot be said to have mellowed with age. His frequently questionable prescriptions (many of which can be found reprinted in Karl Sabbagh's marvelous *Your Case is Hopeless: Bracing Advice from the "Boy's Own Paper"*) placed heavy emphasis on the "cold tub" and the avoidance of a habit too ghastly to be referred to directly (readers' letters themselves were rarely published) and little in the way of good cheer.

Even when the advice was sensible, the delivery tended to be brusque. In the March 6th, 1909 issue, G. F. D. (VITALITY) was told:

Don't be a little fool. You are, I suppose, by this time in the hands of these quacks. Your money will go, and you'll get worse.

But the Edwardian era was predominantly an age of optimism. Like the paper for which he wrote, Stables was no doom-and-gloom reactionary (well, not always). The previous week he had written how "the boy is improving vastly. The ordinary town lad is a gentleman compared to the boys we found in our streets in the early eighties." Progress!

Those behind Tom Royden's *BOP* were comfortable with change, but confident that it would be on the right lines and be able to coexist comfortably with the best of what had gone before. To read those issues from 1909 is to be struck by the strong sense of continuity they convey. The cover price (maintained with difficulty) was the same as it had been thirty years before, the editor Hutchison ("the experienced old captain," in the words of one advertisement) was still at his post, and Stables was just one of a number of contributors who had been published there for decades.

Even the serials, rambling on for months (*In the Heart of the Silent Sea* sailed on for an exhausting thirty-three weeks) reflected this notion of permanence, a notion unsurprising in a paper published in the heart of an empire on which the sun was never supposed to set. This was the empire whose past, present, and glorious future permeated almost every issue Tom read that year, whether in poetry ("The Song of the Union Jack"; "Britannia Victrix") or as a subtext (without much sub about it) of many of the serials or in reports from the imperial territories ("Romance of Surveying: Thrilling Stories Told by the Men Who Are Now Mapping Out Our Possessions"; "Birds'-Nesting in India"; "Rhodesia's Thin Red Line"; "Our Somaliland Fleet").

This was, the *BOP* made clear, a Boy's Own Empire, one run by the sweet, just, boyish (the last a telling adjective in this connection) masters of George Santayana's infinitely flattering description. The nation

that built it was fair, benevolent, and, in all senses of the word, the best. When foreigners appear in Tom's annuals, it is usually as objects of curiosity and genial, but unmistakable, disdain—an expression of a feeling of not necessarily unkindly superiority that sharpens noticeably when some of the subject peoples of the empire come into view. The *BOP* wins no prizes for cultural sensitivity, something that has earned it the not so genial disdain of generations of tut-tutting academic commentators with very little cultural sensitivity of their own.

Of the cataclysm that was to overturn this ordered world only a handful of years later, taking many of the *BOP*'s former readers with it, the only hint in the 1909 annual is this passage from a real-life account of a camping holiday in Germany by Algernon Blackwood, an author better known for stories of the supernatural than for his vacation reminiscences. On this occasion, however, the problems were caused not by ghosts, but by the Kaiser's police:

On previous trips, when we camped too near the towns, *die Polizei* often came to ask us what our business was. Often, too, they were very disagreeable and troublesome, poking about in our tents, searching through our kit in the boat, evidently suspicious that we were spies of some kind.

To be sure, the *BOP* of the late Victorian and Edwardian ages was somewhat more militaristic in tone than it had been before, but it was so in a way that, more often than not, brings to mind Powell and Pressburger's Colonel Blimp rather than anything more sinister. Its attitude was a manifestation of the blithe (over)confidence in British might that played such a role in the country's fatal decision to go to war in August 1914. It was not an anticipation, eager or otherwise, of that conflict or the horrors it would bring.

The *BOP* made it through both world wars (although the weekly edition had been scrapped in 1913) before finally succumbing to changing tastes and publishers in 1967,

just a year after Tom's own death, to live on in memories that have grown only fonder. And not just memories. Academic disapproval now has to compete with not only indulgent nostalgia but also the implied compliment paid to the old paper—and its disgraceful archaic values—by the success of *The Dangerous Book for Boys* (2006), which is, in many respects, an affectionate updating of the *BOP*, a point underlined by the fact that the cover of the British first edition was designed to resemble one of the old annuals.

Even if we don't cheat (and we shouldn't—that wouldn't be the *BOP* way) by counting this unexpected coda as some sort of resurrection, the length of the paper's actual lifespan—nearly ninety years—remains a tremendous achievement. The *BOP*'s remarkable durability was a testimony to the strength of the culture from which it sprang, a testimony to the strength of its own distinctive vision, and also to the way that culture and paper merged within the minds of some sometimes equally remarkable readers. In the introduction to his book *The Best of British Pluck—The Boy's Own Paper Revisited* (1976), the author Philip Warner recalled his time as a POW of the Japanese working on the Bangkok-Moulmein railway in 1943:

Food was inadequate and appalling; the work was . . . exhausting; the . . . guards seemed scarcely sane; malaria . . . and a host of other diseases were rife. . . . Men died with steady regularity. Around was the jungle, hot, oppressive, menacing. There was really no hope of survival. . . . I remember one day looking round at the scene and saying to myself: "What an extraordinary situation! It's like some strange adventure in the *Boy's Own Paper*." Suddenly it was less real, more bearable: after all *BOP* characters lived to tell the tale. Fantasy perhaps, but in certain conditions illusion may be more genuine than reality.

That's the spirit.

The sovereign ghost of Wallace Stevens

by William Logan

Wallace Stevens was not quite a teenager when Whitman died. Divided by some sixty years and the Civil War, these famous stay-at-homes were both elbowing representatives of a character peculiarly American. It was cunning for Whitman to pretend to be an American rough, though his rough edges were largely of his own making, and inspired of Stevens to conceal his poetic imagination beneath the wool suit of an expert in surety bonds. One life might be laid upon the affinities of the other: they shared the nonconforming education (Stevens a Harvard man, but a non-degree student); the late access to mature poetry (*Leaves of Grass* published at 36, *Harmonium* at 43); the belated recognition and almost bardic status; the vagueness about the private life (we are as mystified by the sexuality of the one as the other). These are the types and conditions of self-invention, the restlessness of an American identity more familiar as lighting out for the territories, both men staying put in a country founded on the idea of moving on.

The poet has interior landscapes in which to disappear and conformities without that conceal a radical soul within—Stevens was a lawyer, so was his father, so were his two brothers. What is Jagers or Tulkinghorn but a man paid to keep secrets? (One might say of Stevens that the secret he kept at last from himself was the secret of himself.) Finally, there is the poetry, its achievement an imposed wholeness, Whitman endlessly tinkering with and augmenting *Leaves*,

Stevens wanting to lodge his life's work under the title *The Whole of Harmonium: The Grand Poem*.

Just as a forged oil or period drama eventually betrays the date of its creation (as if there were a terrible secret it could not contain), poems eventually reveal the terms of their time—we become old enough to read them in their spectral hour, and they become old enough to let us. Here too, Whitman and Stevens form a nexus more than an estrangement: their love of exotic places and foreign words; the multitudes they contained but resisted; their imaginative excess or overplus. One could never confuse two poetries so divorced by influence or design, the poems formed in different periods with different antagonisms. (Yet aren't these the most philosophically addled of American poets?) The shadows of biography give access to something less than architecture but more than accident—the progress of a country that encourages certain types of character, or at least does not eliminate them. At Whitman's birth, the territory west of the Mississippi lay vastly unexplored; until the Mexican War the far west and southwest were not yet America. The America of twenty-one states added only seventeen more before the birth of Stevens—when young, he knew a country still barely formed.

We include Stevens in that catchall group the moderns, those poets who changed American verse into something still recognizable a century later. The moderns were

rudely different from one another, yet they gave American poetry an immense armory of practice not exhausted yet. Their heirs now have heirs (and those heirs, heirs); their legacy of redskins and palefaces, of the raw and the cooked, invented the poetry we call our own—and much that the English and Irish call their own as well. If their impulses were variant, their poetry in part incompatible, and their relations at times hostile, Frost, Stevens, Williams, Pound, Moore, and Eliot largely set the terms for the poetry written afterward.

The compelling thing about the moderns is that a reader doesn't have to choose among them—each is a monument to choices made and values discovered. To adore one is not to adore all; but one can adore all, or almost all (my own blindness extends to Williams), without reservation or rank. Part of the invention of self proved to be breaking the contract with the settled assumptions of period verse. It's easy to underestimate this moment in American letters, when certain boundaries and stock notions about poetry were, in geological terms, erased almost overnight. Between 1909 (*Personae*) and 1923 (*Harmonium*), there was a tectonic shift in what a poem had to do to be called a poem.

Harmonium is one of the most violently original, uncategorizable books ever published by an American poet. Critics said Stevens's "diction, in strangeness of effect, lags but little after Miss Sitwell"; that "you are struck by a sort of aridity"; that one poem "defies completely all rational explanations. . . . What strange subterfugitive symphonies of infinitesimal tomtoms titillate the listener's ears." (Reactions to *Leaves of Grass* had been even more bewildered). Even eighty-six years later, a reader finds himself lost in the land of the Oklahoma firecat and the Palaz of Hoon, falling among characters like Don Joost and Chieftain Ifucan of Azcan, having wandered into a bizarre world more familiar in Lear's limbericks or Carroll's nonsense verse. There are poems that don't start in the right place and

poems that stop in the wrong one. Some are cast in plodding end-stopped blank verse, some have a smattering of rhyme, and some indulge in the wild shouts and alarums of "Ohoyaho,/ Ohoo," "tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk," and "Tum-ti-tum,/ Ti-tum-tum-tum!" In short, the poems are so strange, so unlikely, sometimes they don't seem poems at all.

One of Stevens's demonic gifts is be able to write beautifully, almost at will:

You know how Utamaro's beauties sought
The end of love in their all-speaking braids.
You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
That not one curl in nature has survived?
Why, without pity on these studious ghosts,
Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?

I might complain about the talking hair, which lies barely within the license of metaphor (in part because the stillness of *ukiyo-e* prints and the almost unreadable whitened faces make every gesture in Utamaro speak—whether the flash of a kimono's design or the melodrama of a woman's most animalistic feature, her head of hair), but the final image is redolent of the terror and possession of dreams. Yet later in the same poem, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (surely the smuggest title in modernist verse and the most madcap), Stevens writes:

The fops of fancy in their poems leave
Memorabilia of the mystic spouts,
Spontaneously watering their gritty soils.
I am a yeoman, as such fellows go.
I know no magic trees, no balmy boughs,
No silver-ruddy, gold-vermilion fruits.

Everything direct and suggestive in the first passage seems padded with horsehair stuffing here, translated into a musty language out of Burton's *Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* or FitzGerald's *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Part of Stevens's imagination emerged from such baggy, perfumed Victorian translations, though his ornamen-

tal phrases out-Burton Burton and out-FitzGerald FitzGerald. Stevens's imagination is more distorted than clarified by his eastern pillow-book fancies (perhaps insurance lawyers were the equivalent of sultans—I suspect their underlings thought so). Whenever he indulges in his visions of Persians or Aztecs or whatever they are, his imagination grows reckless and incontinent.

Disaffected with the modern, especially the modern city, Stevens wrote his fiancée in 1908, “That elevated train coming home with its negroes and cheap people! Dearest, keep me from seeing all that. It is nonsense but it wrecks me.” Real life was the nonsense—that’s the ugly end of Stevens’s aestheticism, the denial of the humdrum, mundane world outside (not just blacks as a faceless class, but “cheap people”). Stevens never felt the vivifying humanity of subway passengers apparent in the peephole photographs of Walker Evans. Stevens’s unpleasant side has often been ignored. He was more generous ten years later, when he wrote during the draft that followed America’s entry into the Great War:

The negroes on the platform ran up and down shaking hands with those in the cars. The few white people who happened to be near took an indulgent attitude. They regard negroes as absurdities. They have no sympathy with them. I tried to take that point of view: to laugh at these absurd animals, in order to understand how it was *convenable* that one should feel. But the truth is that I feel thrilling emotion at these draft movements. . . . It makes no difference whether the men are black or white.

This is responsive observation coiled around casual racism (the black draftees are perhaps still *absurd animals* to him—his benevolent feelings seem provoked more by the draft); such passages measure how narrowly Stevens avoided a suffocating misanthropy. He wasn’t beyond writing from Cuba a few years after that he had gone “up to a nigger policeman to get my bearings and found that the poor thing could not even understand me.” *The poor thing*.

The giddiness of early Stevens, the tragic-comedy that attends even his more serious verse, never entirely left him, but like most comic routines it could not be mechanically repeated without becoming tiresome or desperate. (As one critic wrote of *Harmonium*, Stevens “must . . . take in more of human experience, or give up writing altogether.”) The poems are so peculiar, critics were a while catching up. To love Stevens, you have to love his deformities and even his monstrosities, as you do the wretched, self-conscious lines in Whitman. (A poet’s bad lines are sometimes those he feels he *has* to write in order to call himself a poet—and occasionally just the lunatic edge of an imagination that under similar anxieties produces a masterpiece). The poems are diminished and even ruined by such oddities, but without the arterial energies they solicit and unleash, the better poems might be nothing. The license of exaggeration and exorbitance is the guilty evidence of the pressure of imagination elsewhere.

It’s hard at first to know how to take lines like “When this yokel comes maundering,/ Whetting his hacker”—the pleasure for the poet seems to lie largely in the jointed grotesqueries of the language. The words parse, but are excess to the lines’ reason. (The preposterousness of such lines has licensed a lot of freakish language since.) So much of even very good Stevens is cast in this language—half fairy tale, half kindergarten gibberish—the reader must embrace the vice as a virtue and simply admire the emperor’s clothes. Much ink has been spilled justifying stanzas like

The lacquered loges huddled there
Mumbled zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay.
The moonlight
Fubbed the girandoles.

The poem is titled “The Ordinary Women”—those same cheap people Stevens loathed, though he tries to see them transformed. R. P. Blackmur, in his swamp-clearing essay “Examples of Wallace Stevens,” defends the poet against charges of preciosity:

The loges huddled probably because it was dark or because they didn't like the ordinary women, and mumbled perhaps because of the moonlight, perhaps because of the catarrhs, or even to keep key to the guitars. Moonlight, for Mr. Stevens, is mental, fictive . . . ; naturally it fubbed the girandoles (which is equivalent to cheated the chandeliers, was stronger than the artificial light, if any). . . . I am at a loss, and quite happy there, to know anything literally about this poem. Internally, inside its own words, I know it quite well by simple perusal. The charm of the rhymes is enough to carry it over any stile. The strange phrase, "Fubbed the girandoles," has another charm, like that of the rhyme, and as inexplicable: the approach of language, through the magic of elegance, to nonsense.

So it's all nonsense and *elegance*, then! Elegance is the vacant form of eloquence.

This argument is unsatisfying in a number of ways. The poem isn't nearly so mysterious. *Loges* has a specific meaning—originally referring to the theater boxes beside the stage, later it indicated the lower rows of a cinema balcony (the *OED* has so far ignored this meaning). Loge tickets could be more expensive than those in the orchestra, sometimes having plusher seats; and it is not likely to the loges, with their spacious and dramatic view of the screen, that these ordinary women have repaired. We know they have no money to spare ("Then from their poverty they rose"), so an evening at the cinema ("They crowded/ The nocturnal halls"), with its "lacquered loges" and gilt appointments, would be an escape from care ("They flung monotony behind"). I'm going to assume that these women are watching some eight-reeler rather than a play, because the 1910s and 1920s were the great age of the silent screen—the everyday refuge of the working poor. The film may be some Douglas Fairbanks feature set in a palace, perhaps *The Three Musketeers* (1921). The Dumas classic certainly has "civil fans" and coiffures in abundance, and there is the famous subplot involving the theft of the

queen's diamond brooch ("How explicit the coiffures became,/ The diamond point, the sapphire point,/ The sequins/ Of the civil fans!").

Of course, it doesn't have to be any particular film—Hollywood noted very early the romantic effect of castles and palaces. And the "palace" ("They flitted/ Through the palace walls") may be the picture house itself—*Palace* was a common theater name. The film would not necessarily have been silent, of course; big-city picture palaces employed ensembles or even orchestras in accompaniment (the talkies threw thousands of musicians out of work). After *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), major releases were provided with full scores. The classical guitar is not a standard instrument for orchestra, but could be called in as a score demanded. Even so, the "guitars" to whose music these women "flitted" might have been imaginary, heard with the inner ear—a fantasy that begins in the cinema and ends in reverie.

To "fub" is to cheat, a variant of "fob" (Shakespeare has "fub'd off" in *2 Henry IV*). A "girandole," according to the *OED*, is a "branched support for candles or other lights, either in the form of a candlestick . . . or more commonly as a bracket projecting from a wall." One might see the former in a palace, or the latter in the lobby of a cinema or on the walls of the auditorium itself. The poem manages to mingle the world in the screen with the architecture of the cinema, but that's surely the point—the viewer is most easily translated from the commonplaces of one world when there are points of contact with the other. (In Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), the hero steps into the world of the screen, so the illusion is an old one.) If the moonlight "fubbed the girandoles," the romantic moon—arc light for centuries of lovers—fools or deceives the house lights in the cinema. (This must be the moon in the film, not the one floating outside.) Presumably it is for just such escapist make-believe that the ordinary women pay their dime—the artificial moonlight seems more real than what casts

shadows on their way back to their ordinary lives.

The scene these women watch and then enter (having left behind their coughing, their “dry catarrhs”) is presumably the “vapid haze of the window-bays” on which such cinematic moonlight falls—only a lighting effect, of course. The counterfeit moonlight deceives the paltry light of their world for an hour or two. (The light that projects through the nitrate film stock to cast shadows on the silver screen—the hazy conic beam caught by the smoke floating in cinemas of the day—would be a kind of moonbeam, too.) This cinematic reading of the poem, I discovered belatedly, was advanced as long ago as 1959 in a lecture by Clark Griffith, according to William Burney, who develops a somewhat off-center variant in his book *Wallace Stevens*. Oddly, critics still treat the poem, in Harriet Monroe’s words, as if its “play of whimsicalities . . . seem a mere banter of word-bubbles.”

The astonishing thing is that Blackmur, as close to a genius as American criticism ever produced (excepting only Poe), gave up on meaning so easily, or was just as enchanted by what he took to be nonsense as the women by the nonsense on the screen (even critics want the transports of fiction). It’s not even clear if he understood what Stevens meant by *loges*. If they were “huddled,” the seats might have been tightly compacted, but *loge* seats were usually spacious. Blackmur turned this into a bizarre fantasy where the *loges* dislike the ordinary women and mumble about them—but the *loges* are more likely a metonym, the more refined cinema-goers muttering at the screen in the same romantic tremor as the ordinary women. The mumbling in the *loges*, “zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay,” is neatly picked up a few stanzas later, when the guitarists “rumbled a-day and a-day, a-day.” The viewers sound enraptured, the guitarists merely morose, as if singing an antique chorus (“Alack a day!” or “A-well a day!” may be the phrase referred to).

After the mumbling in the *loges*, the force of the following stanza (“And the cold

dresses that they wore”) suggests that the poor women have been transported to the “haze of the window-bays” on the silver screen. The “cold dresses” could be either the thin cotton dresses such ordinary women ordinarily wear or the sheer gowns of the women on the screen, with whom the poor women identify. At the end of the poem, the movement is reversed, and the women abandon the guitars, and “to catarrhs/ They flitted/ Through the palace walls.” They return to their petty illnesses and daily complaints, leaving the Palace, or whatever palace the Palace projected.

I am at a loss, and quite happy there, to know anything literally about this poem. For Blackmur, the poetry lies in the ignorance, in the near approach to nonsense. (I suppose many readers still feel that way.) It’s difficult to know what Stevens would have thought of this, but I suspect he was as mystified by his admirers as they were sometimes mystified by him. No man writes phrases like “fubbed the girandoles” who doesn’t want to be taken as a bit of a dandy, an aesthete in yellow kid-gloves—but, unless he’s also a kook, he has something precise in mind. I’d quarrel with Blackmur that the words Stevens used in *Harmonium* (“diaphanes,” “pannicles,” “carked,” “ructive,” “cantilene,” “buffo,” “princox,” “funest”) were always the most exact or exacting available, but, even if so, words have an effect beyond their meaning.

After rattling off a score of such arcane terms, Blackmur claims that “not a word listed . . . is used preciously; not one was chosen as an elegant substitute for a plain term; each, in its context, was a word definitely meant.” (He doesn’t mention bizarre phrases like “Paphian caricatures,” “aspic nipples,” “scullion of fate,” “unburgherly apocalypse,” “musician of pears, principium/ And lex,” “nincompated pedagogue,” “kremlin of kermess,” and much else.) A word may be exact without being useful or expedient. Blackmur’s case is that the poet’s language was not precious, because used precisely—yet the language of Sir Thomas Browne was precise. If “diaphanes,”

“pannicles,” and “cantilene” aren’t precious, saved in their precision to be condemned by their perfume, no word can be. The difficulty is that Stevens thought the poem better if grown from such mannered phrases, or translated into them. Even were the words accurate, they lose more than they gain by their affectation. This is the problem Stevens suffered from the start—reaching after one good, he commits two bads.

Much of Stevens is tedious, refractory, pompous, or ponderous; even his masterpieces are full of bombast and puffery. As he got older, he fell into blank-verse philosophizing no less like boilerplate than the reams of legal documents that presumably issued from his office. He’s a poet whose words you want to get behind: the language is as much an obstacle as a pleasure. But, when you parse those phrases, when you go to the Palaz of Hoon and come back again, you’re often a little disappointed. The philosophy of his poems, the grand ones as well as the pleasingly trivial, are those of a freshman class in ontology, epistemology, or aesthetics. Stevens had a high opinion of his philosophical gifts—he was prickly and childish when a late lecture was rejected by the *Review of Metaphysics*. Eliot, who *was* a trained philosopher and possessed the subtlest mind among the moderns—perhaps the subtlest mind in all American poetry, if you exclude Melville—knew enough to leave the philosophy out, or to bury it deeply.

The best poems in Stevens don’t require the philosophy (if there’s an exception, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” proves that philosophy is rarely more honored in the observance than in the breach), and the worst are deformed by it. The long poems, those most drawn to Stevens’s metaphysical itch, those that feel it necessary to justify their length in terms of abstractions rendered and sustained (but rarely blooded), have made critics the most diagnostic. The critical response to Stevens has itself so often been abstract, so full of critic’s legalese, it has made him more a great cloud of being than a man who at times played with words.

I’m not a ready admirer of Stevens’s long poems, which permit too large a canvas for his vices, though I would except “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” and “Esthétique du Mal”—I hate myself for not loving a monolith like “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” which has been crushed by the burden of its ideas. The long poems are often drowsy, tropical, and hard to stay awake through (like vast stretches of Tennyson, in their way)—you have to like warmed-over Santanyana to tolerate them. They often seem the last gasp of Romantic tenor rather than the start of something new. Late Stevens, indeed, is sometimes composed as if early Stevens never existed: the *girandoles* have almost vanished, replaced by the metaphysical wallpaper. The long poems have been overrated, perhaps because they are so often about art. Critics love poems about poetry, and love even better poems about poetics, as if they took more wisdom to write.

Yet even in a poem as tedious as “Sunday Morning” Stevens rises to magnificence:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

Passages like this, and there are scores of them scattered through the work, justify the acres of dull philosophizing lacking the odor of a necessary world.

Stevens continues to cast a spell over readers, like that other architect of high Romantic nonsense, Hart Crane. The critics who soon talked evasively of “pure poetry” (as Stevens did himself, though nothing is more impure than his hobbledehoy language) were trying desperately to compare Stevens to what had been, which is irresistible and misleading. You need to read Mallarmé to understand him, perhaps, but Mallarmé doesn’t take you very far. For such a poet, the only accurate criticism must be

comparison to what is yet to come. Stevens is a poet not predictable from the poetry he borrowed from and was inspired by—he became something that could not yet be named, and at last became his heirs.

Like Swinburne, like Hart Crane, like Ashbery, Stevens is reduced by explanation. The incense of the words themselves can be so heady that readers swoon (you can see why, loving the effect, Blackmur was wary of the meaning). Such poets often seem translations of themselves—their poems might just as well be fanciful versions from Hungarian or Langue d’oc. If I prefer poems more complicated the more their effects are exposed (consider Eliot, or Lowell, or Hill—and think of Shakespeare), that is a preference armed as a prejudice. Stevens could write so well without recourse to his dress-up costumes and Masonic vestments (at times he seems decked out in the leavings of a theatrical trunk), it’s a pity that you have to wade through a great bog of minor work to get at poems that sharpen the responses of the imagination.

John N. Serio, the editor of Stevens’s *Selected Poems*, is one of those fond readers of Stevens who are a little too fond.¹ The poet did not publish his *Collected Poems* until the last months of his life. He long refused to draw a line under his career—and fortunately he abandoned the idea of calling the thing *The Whole of Harmonium*. What the editor has given us is perhaps *The Half of Harmonium*, but it is well judged, defined without being definitive. Few poems familiar to readers have been excluded (I’m tempted to say none at all), and, where there is an omission, it’s filled by something almost as interesting. With Stevens, you could take a lucky dip and get a selection that would spoil a lesser poet.

The table of contents might have identified, as did the fine Library of America *Collected Poems*, the poems added to *Harmonium* in 1931, and the editor might have noted the dates of the poems drawn from

¹ *Selected Poems*, by Wallace Stevens, edited by John N. Serio; Alfred A. Knopf, 328 pages, \$30.

Opus Posthumous. It is delightful, however, to see the poems surrounded by so much space (the Library of America edition is compactly printed, perfectly legible, but stuffed to the gills). *Harmonium* was a small, squat book, easy to hold in the palm—it’s important to return a poet to the eye, when we cannot return him to the ear.

In his rambling introduction, the editor is given to that mode of criticism halfway between a fan’s notes and a publisher’s blurb. He claims that Stevens “has the uncanny talent to evoke pure being,” but when Stevens falls into metaphysical guff, it’s almost always inimical to his gifts, just the place where he’s most given to fustian and empty emotion. The editor writes as if Stevens were an irrational mystic:

His poems often had sources beyond the rational and sometimes surpassed even his own cognitive understanding. . . . Stevens’s poetic gift to express humanity through his art, although it might have derived from his personal response to the world, his idiosyncratic sensibility, is never mere self-expression. . . . Like all genuine art, it is universal.

I wonder whether the poet or the editor has taken leave of his senses. Mathematics may be universal. Only when poetry fails to be universal does it become poetry.

The magnificence of Stevens comes at a cost, the same cost we pay for Whitman: logorrhea of an uncharming and embarrassing sort, absurd notions, passages too private with their own pleasure, tone-deafness, lofty ambitions insufficiently grounded, and gouts of gimcrack philosophy. The longer the poems, the more likely they were disfigured—even defeated—by these defects. Yet Stevens is our major poet of emotional extinction. There’s so little human warmth in his poems (occasionally, rarely, in the comic glimmer), you couldn’t toast a marshmallow with it, but the poetry seems the product of, and most terribly reveals, a damaged soul.

The moderns as a group appear, at this distance, far more crippled than the confessional poets who were their distant heirs

and rivals. Eliot suffered nervous collapse and desperate religiosity; Moore a withdrawn adulthood, like an adolescence from whose chrysalis she never emerged; Williams the bouts of goatish womanizing; Frost his egotistic and monstrous cruelties; and Stevens a frozen hauteur and morose unhappiness. Pound is the only one who emerges as a relatively complete man, full of broad loves and generousities, only to degenerate into *idées fixes*, fascist politics, fetid anti-Semitism, and quite possibly, in late middle-age, progressive dementia.

Unlike the Romantics, the American moderns lived to be old, not one dying before his seventy-fifth birthday, Pound and Frost almost reaching ninety. They survived long enough for time already to have winnowed taste (when we think of the might-have-beens, of Aiken and H. D., our grandfathers had already dismissed them, however much critics have tried to drag them back). After this long century, their classical notions—of the poet’s impersonality, of the high ambitions of art, of the sculptural shape of the poem—seem eaten up with romance, even the rot of romance, but what matters is less the way in which their modernity was tainted with a past than in how they reformed a poetry that, in 1909, still shared the timidity of English verse.

I wish that Stevens had developed the caustic humor his misanthropy permitted him, instead of the moonstruck fancies to which it drove him. Among the shorter verses added to the second edition of *Harmonium* are “Boston with a Note-book”:

Lean encyclopaedists, inscribe an Iliad.
There’s a weltanschauung of the penny pad.

and “Soupe Sans Perles”:

I crossed in ’38 in the *Western Head*.
It depends which way you crossed, the
tea-belle said.

Stevens’s affection for such ironies must have been limited. The editor misses these; but they have a tone—an antagonism to convention—brutal and unexpected. They come with a small electric shock. Unfortunately, they’re buried with verses that exhibit Stevens in all his vice, like “A perfect fruit in perfect atmosphere./ Nature as Pinakothek. Whist! Chanticleer. . . .”

Stevens requires the condition of taste merely to begin, because he’s not well served by his weaknesses, or by the time-serving poetry to which weakness gave way. There are wonderful poems that almost everyone likes, including “The Snow Man,” “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” “Anecdote of the Jar,” “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,” but there are poems nearly as lovely almost no one mentions: “From the Misery of Don Joost,” “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,” “Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz,” “Re-statement of Romance,” “Anglais Mort à Florence,” “Yellow Afternoon,” “Holiday in Reality,” “Burglers of Petty Death,” “This Solitude of Cataracts,” and “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight.” I would cheerfully trade “The Comedian as the Letter C,” “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” “The Auroras of Autumn,” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” for such poems, but Stevens is so capacious a poet, he has room for my obtuseness.

We don’t usually think of Stevens in terms of the opportunities missed—he remains one of our great poets despite his sins (not because of them), and a model of imaginative industry. Three-quarters of his poetry appeared after the age of fifty, and almost two-thirds after the age of sixty. Still, if he had held a job less demanding, or one that gratified him in different ways, or that didn’t require such rococo artifice and moony fantasies (as, all too soon, his marriage did as well), we might have had a poetry with more social observation and asperity. Or perhaps no poetry at all.

Sentimental journeys

by Pat Rogers

Imagine that you were alive precisely two hundred and fifty years ago. It's not too hard, as Peter De Vries pointed out in another context, so long as you are an average mixed-up person, uncertain about the way the world seems to be heading. In the opening words of *1759: The Year Britain Became Master of the World* (2004), Frank McLynn argues that the year "should be as well known in British history as 1066," and that "most of the other, better-known school history dates" like Magna Carta and the Spanish Armada "pale into insignificance."

This claim makes little secret of its own exaggerated formulation. But it cannot be denied that, after earlier reverses, things had begun to go well for the allies in the Seven Years War. The victory of James Wolfe over Montcalm at Quebec saw the climax of a run of success that resulted in the French loss of Canada and formed a major part of the first British empire—never mind the philosopher Martin's cynical view in *Candide* that the combatants were scrapping over a few acres of snow. Voltaire's great satire figured in the annual literary output for 1759, along with Johnson's *Rasselas*, Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and David Hume's *History of England Under the House of Tudor*. In December came a strange and surprising addition—the first installment of a new novel titled *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*—and it caused more of a stir in the public than anything else on the list.

Suppose now that you had somehow gained the acquaintance of its author, the suddenly famous Mr. Sterne. You would easily have learned that he was an Anglican clergyman of forty-six who held small curacies and livings near York. Among the in-crowd, it was common knowledge that his birthplace was Ireland, but he had spent only a few years there during his early childhood. Laurence was descended on his father's side from comfortable Yorkshire gentry, several of them prominent in the church. His great-grandfather had risen to become an archbishop under Charles II, while his ambitious uncle Jaques was an archdeacon and hoping for better. Some people could have told you that he was in the throes of a difficult marriage to a volatile wife, Elizabeth, with whom he shared little beyond a tubercular condition, and that, after miscarriages and stillbirths, the couple had produced a daughter named Lydia.

As a final assumption, you had reason to believe that Sterne had written you a letter. What kind of message would you be expecting? Were you a woman, preferably youngish, you might hope for, or as likely dread, a billet doux larded with expressions of hyperbolic feeling and suggestive wordplay. If you fancied yourself as a connoisseur of the still-evolving genre of the novel, you might be on the lookout for insights into the craft of fiction. If you struggled to make a living as a professional writer, however, you might go for tips on placing your work or serious chat

about sales and stingy publishers. If you were a gossip, you would anticipate glimpses of life among the celebrities in politics, literature, and the theater—public figures whom the novelist had already gotten to know. These included the Queen of the Bluestockings, Elizabeth Montagu, who was a cousin of Elizabeth Sterne and Lydia's godmother; the actor David Garrick; Lord Rockingham, patron of Edmund Burke and a future prime minister, who had recently erected a new grandstand for York races, an event Sterne and his friends relished; and William Warburton, the recently appointed Bishop of Gloucester and a controversial theologian in an age when theology actually generated controversy. If you were American, you might hope for insight into transatlantic relations, perhaps discussed with fellow-countrymen and women, like the poet Elizabeth Graeme from Philadelphia whom Sterne met at the races in 1764.

Some of these expectations would be met, some not. Around the date that *Shandy* appeared, Sterne embarked on a short-lived affair with a singer called Kitty Fourmantel. The letters he wrote her give few clues as to the exact nature of their relationship. They did, however, show him practicing the manner of dalliance he later used with female correspondents, most famously in those he wrote to Elizabeth Draper alongside the so-called *Journal to Eliza* (referred to by the Florida Edition as *The Brahmin's Journal*). Some of the joking insults derive from those Swift targeted at Stella: "If this Billet catches you in Bed, you are a lazy, sleepy little Slut" (though we should remember that the word "slut" was once more affectionate than it would become over time).

More generally, we can trace a style Margaret Doody neatly described as mock-erotic, a kind of literary embodiment of flirtation which opens up sexual possibilities without any intent of going through on the implied invitation. The focus regularly shifts from the addressee to the writer himself—as in this dialogue from a letter that quotes comments from an unknown lady in 1765:

"If *Tristram Shandy Was a Single Man*" — (o dear!) — "from the Attacks of Jack, Dick and Peter I am quite secure" — (this by the by Madam, requires proof) — But my dear Tristram! *If* thou wast a single Man — bless me, Mad^m, this is downright wishing for I swear it is in the *Optative Mood* & no other — well! But my dear T. Shandy wast thou a single Man, I should not know what to say — & may I be Tristram'd to death, if I should know what to do —

I have retained the long dashes, superscript and ampersand here, because they all make up part of the effect, just as with *Shandy* itself. The editors report in their note on the text, "We have tried to approximate Sterne's dash length, at least by providing 1 em, 2 em, and 3 em lengths—and in a few cases, an even longer dash." Their dash length in this sentence is at least an em's worth.

Discussions of novelistic techniques are conspicuous by their absence. Famously Sterne gave a few descriptions of what it was like to be composing the book: "I shall write as long as I live, 'tis, in fact, my hobby-horse: and so much am I delighted with my uncle Toby's imaginary character, that I am become an enthusiast. — My Lydia helps to copy for me — and my wife knits and listens as I read her chapters." He admits, "The truth is this — that my pen governs me — not me my pen." He has a scattering of comments on the style proper to letter-writing: he tells one woman in 1760, "I promise to send you a fine set essay in the Stile of y^r female Epistolizers cut & trim'd at all points — God defend me from such, who never yet knew what it was, to say or write one premeditated word in my whole Life"—a palpable lie. The most significant letter in this area appears early on, just as the first installment of the novel was coming out, and exists in three different states. As always, the editors handle the textual complexities in an exemplary way. In his message Sterne distinguishes his practice from that of Swift and Rabelais, while defending himself against the widely expressed belief that his "vein of humour" was "too light for the colour of [his] Cassock."

We have richer pickings when we come to finances. Sterne had borrowed £100 to pay for the printing of the first two volumes of *Tristram* at York, and then attempted to interest Robert Dodsley, a leading London publisher. This arrangement worked initially, but the novelist subsequently turned to a less prominent figure in the trade, Thomas Becket, who may have given his client more undivided attention. For the rest of his life Laurence haggled with the bookseller, and, after his death, Lydia, too, had to negotiate with Becket over the publication of unpublished sermons, by far the most valuable property her father had left behind him. Cannily, when he went away from home, he left behind a list of friends who might supply copies they kept to figure in an edition of his letters. Lydia duly brought one out (these volumes have caused difficulties ever since, for reasons we shall come to).

Like many authors, Sterne overestimated the size of his audience and went in quest of a better deal than the figures warranted. But he had special problems. He had to provide for his wife and daughter, who remained in France after he returned to England from his stay in Languedoc (the basis of *Tristram's* wanderings in Book 7 of the novel). They stayed in a number of towns before finally settling in Albi, where Elizabeth eventually died and Lydia married some years after her father had gone to his grave. Though Sterne had helpful agents in Becket and the banker Isaac Panchaud, he never got his monetary affairs on an even keel.

He made a lot from his books, especially the subscription edition of his sermons, to augment his slender emoluments in Yorkshire. When he died intestate, his assets proved sufficient to meet most of his debts, thanks to "his furniture a Cow, & some hay included £56[;] his Chaise, & horses 60. his Books 80." Unfortunately, trouble arose because he had failed to repair a vicarage destroyed by fire in 1765. His successor was entitled to claim the cost of restoring the property, as the Archbishop of York, a longtime supporter of Sterne, recognized when Elizabeth appealed for aid through

Mrs. Montagu. The problem lay in the fact that mother and daughter understandably wished to go on living in the style to which they had become accustomed. Lydia was described by her father as having come back (briefly) from France in 1767 as "an elegant accomplish'd little slut"—airs of elegance and accomplishment did not come cheap.

Unfortunately, Melvyn New's and Peter de Voogd's new version of the letters, impeccably edited as it is, tells us little about major issues surrounding Sterne's family relations.¹ He had a protracted quarrel over money with his hapless mother, Agnes, who "brought not one Sixpence into the Family," as he unkindly remarked. She ended up in prison in York, seemingly as a result of the intervention of mean old Jaques Sterne, but her last years are largely a mystery. Equally, it seems certain that Elizabeth suffered a breakdown around the crucial year of 1759. The unpleasant Uncle Jaques had died and left Laurence out of his will, preferring to bestow all his money on his mistress. Lydia had been ill, possibly suffering from epileptic fits. Sterne was even more distracted than usual, with his beloved brainchild now finally coming before the public, so that he got sucked into the London society that had always tempted him.

One tale has it that Elizabeth went into schizophrenic overdrive and had to undergo confinement in a madhouse. According to this story, she fancied herself the Queen of Bohemia, while her husband loyally bowed and scraped to her to humor this delusion. It seems unlikely. Maybe she was just reacting to Sterne's infidelities and adopting the weary pose of Dorothy Parker:

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Romania.

¹ *The Letters of Laurence Sterne*, edited by Melvyn New and Peter de Voogd; University Press of Florida, 2 volumes; Part 1, 400 pages, \$75; Part 2, 403 pages, \$75.

Difficult Elizabeth undoubtedly was—Mrs. Montagu said in 1768 that she had many virtues, “but they stand like quills upon the fretfull porcupine, ready to go forth in sharp arrows at ye least supposed offence.” But so was her husband, and both of them conceivably owed their mercurial temperament to the effects of the wretched palliatives that made up the only drug therapy offered to consumptives at this time.

As for gossip, we get disappointingly thin slices (and nothing at all about America). The main reason is that Sterne took more interest in the vicissitudes of his own life than in those of anybody else. He did show some concern for another fatal victim of consumption he met in Toulouse: George, the illegitimate son of Richard Oswald, a Scottish merchant who took part with Benjamin Franklin in the negotiations leading up to the Treaty of Paris in 1783. George had endured poor treatment from a doctor in Montpellier, according to the version of events Elizabeth Sterne gave to Tobias Smollett. Laurence reported back that “poor Oswald is no more—he breathed his last in my arms last night at eleven o'clock.” The event prompted the usual Yorick-like effusions, but, to his credit, Sterne supervised George's funeral and the disposal of his goods. He even resisted an attempt that tax collectors made to seize the dead man's possessions by bringing in a posse of musketeers to defend them and saw to the settlement of Oswald's debts, right down to a “Bill for Spaw Water” and a “Gratification to the Farmer's Wife.”

It kept happening like that: life for Sterne was always on the point of turning into a sentimental drama. The reason that he encountered so many people with tuberculosis may well be the direction of his travels, a route so often taken by weak-lunged valetudinarians. But why did he run into so many tear-jerking situations? Some have speculated that he was attracted to sickly women, particularly consumptives, because he could play on their need for sympathetic attention, but the present editors have little time for this diagnosis.

The new version replaces the only serious edition of Sterne's letters, which was prepared by Lewis Perry Curtis in 1935. Curtis was a professor of history at Yale, with a special interest in ecclesiastical byways of the eighteenth century. Naturally, he did a good job on the background of the letters, especially those concerning the Tammany politics of the diocese. But Curtis lived in a more innocent age textually, and he did not trouble himself unduly with annotating Sterne's myriad allusions and oblique references to proverbs and traditional lore; in his edition, it is hard to pick up on the fact that the letters are stuffed with scriptural quotations. Finally, Curtis seems to have thought it beyond his remit to explain rare or archaic words, or to indicate the presence of a joke—which he may have assumed any competent reader would automatically spot.

In all these respects, New and de Voogd's edition represents a dramatic improvement. It has a clear and explicit textual policy, the decisions made are carefully justified, and rejected alternatives are given a fair hearing. The commentary benefits from the large body of work that has grown up around Sterne in the last seventy-five years, most importantly the definitive biography, *Laurence Sterne*, by Arthur H. Cash, which appeared in two volumes: *The Early and Middle Years* (1975) and *The Later Years* (1986). On top of this, the editors have been able to enlist a wide range of modern scholarship, including the letters of Garrick, the journals of James Boswell, and the correspondence of Horace Walpole—all now available in much more complete and reliable forms than they were in the 1930s. Reference to political figures draws freely on the volumes in the History of Parliament series. Furthermore, online databases now exist which allow the editors to dig out every casual phrase that Sterne possibly borrowed from some forgotten poetaster. Curtis would have killed for some of these aids.

The edition comprises Volumes VII and VIII of *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne*, running since 1978. Each segment of this large enterprise has been the

work, singly or jointly, of the general editor, Melvyn New, and as co-editor of the letters he has now augmented the debt which every student of the novelist owes him. The three initial volumes devoted to *Tristram Shandy* remain the most substantial contribution to our understanding of Sterne. It has one or two mild eccentricities, notably the Shandean positioning of the introduction and prelims at the end of the text, but overall it stands as the edition of choice for anyone needing a definitive version.

By far the biggest problem facing any editor concerns the authenticity of many letters. Those putatively addressed to Eliza Draper first appeared in 1773, five years after Sterne's death, in a dubious text, and were followed by a forged volume of her replies. Most of the initial damage was done by William Combe, a hack remembered only for his satire on picturesque travel, *The Tour of Dr. Syntax*, with its illustrations by Rowlandson. Between 1775 and 1788, Combe produced two concoctions which may include some genuine items mixed in a larger group of forgeries. He practiced what is at once the best and worst kind of plagiarism, involving freely cutting and pasting actual phrases used by the author in his genuine works. Stolen words of this sort can prove easy to detect, but it is hard to nail a forger if he plants them in a text attributed to the same author. Nobody knows for sure precisely which bits are echt Sterne, but New and de Voogd have come nearer than anyone else to a comprehensive review of the evidence.

In 1775, Lydia also produced her *Letters of the Late Rev. Mr. Laurence Sterne, to His Most Intimate Friends*. It contains only a minor quotient of forgeries, but surviving manuscripts show that she edited the text ruthlessly, reordering her father's prose as it suited her. Less culpably, she wrote Eliza Draper out of the story, although she did not suppress all evidence of Laurence's sentimental womanizing. Again the editors handle the difficulties posed by Lydia's editorial conduct with tact and patience.

It is hard to fault any aspect of the present edition. A map of York, perhaps based on the one in Francis Drake's *Eboracum* (1736), might have helped—also one showing the villages in North Yorkshire where Sterne lived and worked with his family. On the plus side, the paired volumes, otherwise identical in format, are inventively bound in different colors, which makes it easy to keep one's bearings as one flips between the two.

Was Sterne a major letter-writer? The editors think not:

in an age of great letter-writers, [he] comes up a bit short . . . his letters are of interest almost solely for the biographical information they contain and for the glosses on the fictions they can afford. Without doubt there are some wonderful moments of insight into his writings, some touching moments of concern for Lydia (and perhaps even for Elizabeth), some honest affections and needs directed toward women not his wife (Kitty and Eliza), and some insightful moments about continental travel in the eighteenth century, but it also seems evident that as a letter writer . . . his spontaneity was often forced, his sincerity dubious, and his sentiments rather commonplace.

They conclude that we rarely encounter here "the level of stylistic genius" visible in *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*.

This errs on the harsh side if anything. The point about style can be met by the fact that Sterne's improvisatory word games came as a revolution in the novel, where readers had grown used to turgid prose, in the work of Samuel Richardson often enough. By contrast, the decorum of letter-writing had long allowed for more freedom and informality. But I wouldn't wish to end on a dissenting note. The letters of a considerable author are now available in the best state that can easily be imagined, which makes this volume a fitting tribute to Sterne's genius and a worthy culmination of the rise to fame that started in 1759.

New poems *by John Simon,*
J. Allyn Rosser & Ernest Hilbert

Small things

The thorn in Rilke's finger,
The boil on Scriabin's lip,
Were enough to wrest the singer
From his musicianship.

Airiest Isadora
Gave up her dancing breath
When motoring she wore a
Red scarf that caught on death.

Small things speed our departure:
A scarf, a boil, a thorn;
But were they any larger,
The things by which we are born?

—*John Simon*

Final invitation

Do come, the affair's in your honor—you *must*.
Our house is the last one; you can't miss the turn.
Hors d'oeuvres will be served in the parlor at dusk.
There won't be live music, just CD's we'll burn
with your taste in mind, from Coldplay to Liszt;
Some Beatles and Dylan, that Chopin nocturne . . .
No need to call friends—they're all on our list.
There'll be rakott krumpli from Budapest,
Olives from Puglia, that cheese from Lucerne,
and chocolate to die for. Don't try to resist.
Wear something simple but chic. We'd suggest
earthy tones. Think taupe, ash, amber, rust.
This will go till all hours, time's no concern.
Just come as you are, and bring your own dust.

—*J. Allyn Rosser*

Welcome to all the pleasures

My grandfather—German
With shoulders of granite,

Of beer and blue skies,
Blast furnaces—grew impatient

When he learned that, at four,
I still had not learned to swim.

He hoisted me in summer air,
Spun me out over

The sluggish murk and let go.
I swore the river had no bottom.

The wind was wasp and pollen,
Charred pork and dragonfly.

I smacked the sun-fierce surface
With a sharp cold crash,

Then silence and stunned slowness.
I finned and swung,

Hung between what glows above
And what pulls below.

—*Ernest Hilbert*

Dance

Blossom time at ABT

by *Laura Jacobs*

There is a fundamental difference between American Ballet Theatre and the New York City Ballet. Actually, there are a number of fundamental differences between ABT, launched in 1940, and NYCB, which took root in 1948 after many short-lived flowerings. These differences have been much explored through the decades: ABT's big, old, storybook ballets versus NYCB's swift and often experimental short stories; ABT's glittering necklace of international styles versus NYCB's pure pull from its own School of American Ballet; ABT's eclectic approach, ballets from everywhere, versus NYCB's auteur approach, George Balanchine's eye as everything. What strikes me this season, however, is a very particular difference. At ABT a fall is a sign of weakness, while at NYCB it's accepted as a measure of strength.

Dancers can fall—or falter—in many ways. They can slip on a too-slick floor. They can lose their center in a pirouette. For women, pointe work offers a whole other range of mishaps, including catches, sticks, skids, and turned ankles. A solo variation or a pas de deux requires dancers to be on, on, and on—a series of mind-body surges in a zone of synaptic transport, everything coming together at once, at once, at once. Think of Roger Federer on the tennis court, those leaps and vectors, angles and twirls—until his opponent misses. The elegance of impulse, the kinetic intuition, the body's deeply schooled responses, a wisdom of the reflexes. This is

dancing. Still, in tennis there is no shame in missing, though miss too often and you lose. In ballet, you must not miss. The dancer is creating a picture in a window. He or she is an element in the poetic weather of the piece. A trip or catch or fall reads as a smudge on the surface of the dance. That is, if you see the dance as an object, as ABT tends to do.

Balanchine did not see ballets as objects, material shaped and stamped, hard and fast. He did not see dancing as a game to be won. And so he valued falls. “He was interested in process, in becoming,” Bernard Taper writes in *Balanchine*, “more than in perfection. For him perfection, as a state of achievement, was admirable—but then what? His interest was in dancers who tried to go beyond themselves or who were willing to try what was asked of them, even if they had doubts and even if it went counter to their image of themselves. Balanchine's appreciation for risk-taking was one of the reasons Suzanne Farrell's dancing so pleased him. She never danced a role exactly the same way twice.”

This spring season at ABT we witnessed a rather fascinating development. Female talent was declaring itself all through the ranks, flowering at the soloist level, shining in the corps. Certainly the loosening stranglehold at the top of the roster had something to do with this. The aging Julie Kent was on maternity leave. Xiomara Reyes was injured. Nina Ananiashvili was retiring

(endlessly it seemed, with a slew of farewell performances, one for every ballet, that made you want to sing, “So long, farewell, *auf Wiedersehen*, GOODBYE ALREADY”). When young dancers see space opening above them, they stretch—they lunge—to fill it. But this year they saw something else, as well. The soloist Veronika Part—of all the women at ABT, the one most committed to process, to “becoming”—was finally promoted to principal dancer.

You have to hand it to artistic director Kevin McKenzie. Against all pressure and in-house politics, he has allowed Part her process within the ABT structure of better-safe-than-sorry. Indeed, her process has become part of the pleasure of watching her work. This is why if you only see her first performance in a role you haven’t really seen her, and it’s probably why she remained a soloist for so long. ABT is not a process-oriented company and it does not have a process-oriented audience (as Balanchine taught his audience at NYCB to be). ABT wants ship-shape, don’t-rock-the-boat first tries. If the bottom line precludes adequate stage rehearsal for every ballet (and it does), well, don’t do more and wobble, do less and do it perfectly. One can see the logic in this. It’s a classic managerial mindset, from widgets to what-have-you. Contrary to what one might think, most businesses—the arts included—*don’t* encourage imagination, because it’s too time-consuming, too hard to control.

But ballet isn’t about logic. The terms are mutually exclusive. It isn’t logical to stand in first position, heels together and toes headed east and west. It isn’t logical to balance on one leg and lift the other up behind you, parallel to the floor, and to temper this pose endlessly until it is an arabesque, the poetic equivalent of reach and flight—a transubstantiation. Young dancers understand the mystery of the arabesque instinctively, wordlessly. The attainment of an arabesque worth looking at is an achievement, a grail. Too many dancers, however, see this achievement as an end

when it is actually only a beginning. It is here that another kind of logic takes over—artistic fire, creative genius—the need to do something with that arabesque, to drink from the chalice.

Arabesques belong to adagio’s realm. We see them, of course, in allegro work—in classical dance we see arabesques everywhere. But the workroom in which they are shaped and hammered, the furnace in which they are fired: adagio. And adagio, don’t let anyone tell you differently, is existential. The word is derived from the Italian *adagio*, meaning “at leisure,” though it is anything but. Adagio is the equivalent of mountain climbing without the mountains. It is a slow-flowing linear landscape of narrow paths and high passes, a holistic sensitivity that hears the shudder under the snow blanket, the avalanche conceived, feels the ageless moon burning behind aubergine clouds. Dancers practice adage at the barre, where they all look brilliant. It’s when you let go and move to the center of the studio that you touch the void. Adagio combinations of *développé* and promenade, long balances and steep *penchées*, reveal every technical limitation, every step yet uncorrected or unmastered. You can glitter in allegro even with fluffs, but not in adagio, which is naked.

New York has never been a port of call for the adagio dancer. Manhattan is built on speed. The leap through the subway’s closing doors. Heads twisting toward the power at the party. Manhattan is Sidney Falco (for falcon) and Eve Harrington (for Bite into the Big Apple). Manhattan is allegro, which is social, loquacious, quick-witted; full of drive and aggression, ambition and exultation (much like the press room at the Met). Allegro will gloat. And it lends itself to fetish—fast, sharp, whippy, and repeatable bytes (or bites). Nailed it! Stuck it! Killed! Crass euphemisms speak to a triumph in allegro (and in the lobby, I’ve heard critics saying just such things into their cell phones). Adagio doesn’t know this language. Adagio is outside, other—a dawning knowledge, an isolating damna-

tion. She—adagio is a she, no matter how slowly a man might move—is on intimate terms with eternity, so there's huge room for wandering, for getting lost and never being found (a New Yorker's nightmare). The adagio dancer keeps another kind of time. She is something akin to lute music or countertenors, to sewing by hand or bird-watching in autumn, when spring song gives way to silent flight, winter in the breast. Adagio is a sensibility, a refinement, that many dancers and many balletomanes no longer understand. Yet it is the soul of this art form.

Which brings us back to Veronika Part. She began the 2009 spring season at the Metropolitan Opera House by returning to Balanchine's *Mozartiana*, a role she first danced with the company in 2004. At that time, her take on the ballet was voluptuous and scrupulous, the role shaped like a classical aria with dramatic high notes and dangerous plunges. Because Part is ever-evolving and unpredictable, I expected this season's interpretations to show growth, though in what direction was anyone's guess. Part's first *Mozartiana* of the season, however, was very strange. It was undressed. She was dancing on her usual large scale and with a much lighter touch than five years ago. But she was pulling from a very small and often insecure base—pointe work that was uncertain, sometimes pinched. Part, at five-feet-eight, is tall for ballet, and because she has such long feet, pointe gets her up quite high. In this peculiar performance, her upper body seemed a long way from her feet, which made things precarious. There was an interesting quiet in the theater, as if the audience wasn't sure what it was seeing, and an intense, tightrope quiet onstage as Part assayed the formidable challenges of this ballet. *Mozartiana* was Balanchine's last masterpiece, a creation that seems to float between this world and the next, a sort of transom. In fact, Balanchine floated this ballet between allegro and adagio, which is one of its difficulties. He made the role for

Suzanne Farrell, a dancer who was fully at home, and arguably most at home, in this odd in-between realm. It was an Olympian perch from which she could unleash effects without having to inhabit them.

Part inhabits her dancing, more than any other ABT ballerina of recent memory, because she is an adagio dancer. So while Part's first *Mozartiana* contained isolated beauties—pirouettes in attitude that brimmed like Saturn's rings; *développés* like magic wands—these were moated by silence, the atmosphere charged with too much of the nothingness in which this ballet traffics, and Part herself simultaneously too much there, too concentrated, and *not* there, because she had not found herself, her footing, in the ballet. Her second attempt three nights later? Transcendent. Possessed of everything the first night lacked: a bright sure-footedness, an impetuous off-centeredness in the big moves, and a girlish playfulness new to Part, as if flirting with the void. In the next day's matinee, her third performance was equally superb, but spontaneous in a different way, more imperious, with more sass and snap. What's amazing, in retrospect, is not the difference between Part's first performance and the two that followed, but the similarities in terms of texture, the intimate fit—present but not sensually achieved in the first performance—between small pieces of rhetoric and large bolts of it, between steps kept pointillist beneath the pelvis, delicate play under the shade of her tutu, and steps thrown suddenly, hugely to the heavens. This ballerina is teasing the Great Beyond, dancing in a vault of Rococo clouds and Russian Orthodox heights. We must feel these barometric, volumetric pressures buoyant in the ballet, the sense of event in her every reach and dive. In Part's first performance she was still in the process of finding these pressures, still opening space amidst them—an adagio imperative.

Wise colleagues had various thoughts about that first *Mozartiana*. One spoke of his fascination with the way Part was refitting the role to herself, how the performance showed the invention required to

take *Mozartiana's* in-betweenness—allegro slowed down like melting clockwork, legato feathered in flickers and trills—and recalibrate it for an adagio technique. It was a portrait of the artist working out a problem. Another, the Russian dancer Vadim Strukov, who like Part hails from the Mariinsky, placed this performance higher than the later triumphal two, and loved it not least for its sensation of *trepetno*, an almost untranslatable Russian word that is a combination of “tremulous, tentative, testing”—and in usage suggests “a fluttering or trembling heart.”

“There was a whole cosmos of ideas in that first performance,” Strukov explains, “and she was struggling with ideas, not with her body. The metaphysical essence of this ballet demands going into a trance of searching, and she was in this trance. It was genius at work, a rare privilege to see.”

And really, those zig-zag paths Balanchine laid out in *Mozartiana's* *Thème et Variations* do seem to ride some energized ley line or spiritual fault line, emptiness all around. One of the reasons I so admire Part's dancing is *because* she touches this emptiness. You feel it vast and close. She breathes it, tests it, sometimes pales before it, and then she blooms in it. She shows us that ballet is not a sport rewarded with scores, not an object you polish into impunity, not a fetish so self-contained and impermeable that no one has to care too much. Through the purity of her classical style, the size and clarity of the shapes she makes, and the integrity to see her artistic choices all the way to the end, whether she's all the way there or not, Part brings us back to ballet's basics, to the first things one loved about this illogical, all-or-nothing art: a pirouette, a passé, an arabesque. The ravishing, laughing largesse of those second and third *Mozartianas* was pure Lilac Fairy, alive and autonomous, her earthly duties done for the day. But that first *Mozartiana*—so vulnerable, nothing but muscle and mettle—was an “errand into the maze,” Part searching for the spell. This searching, after all, is what ballet is about.

Coming off her complicated success in *Mozartiana*, Part went right into *On the Dnieper*, a world premiere by ABT Artist in Residence Alexei Ratmansky. I can't say I loved her in it. *Dnieper* is frigid, dressed in cool grays and ice pinks. It's a narrative work that refuses to narrate, a concert version of Yuri Grigorovich's danced-through epics, wherein mime, gesture, and human-scaled pacing were cut so that everyone could dance, dance, dance. Now it's in double-time. Even Ratmansky's champions, fans who previously ignored the form-content problems of his Euro-derivative, abstract expressionist romps, couldn't ignore the problems here. Yet, given some tonal control and human warmth, Ratmansky might have made something wonderful, something worthy of Simon Pastukh's set designs, which had the savant poetry of Robert Wilson. Part, as the spurned but forgiving girlfriend, was too warm for the ballet, too much like just-risen bread, and in a way too big in her emotion (though one did see the Giselle she might be, nascent in the breaching, cascading phrases Ratmansky made for her). In the second cast, Hee Seo was too small. This old-fashioned role doesn't fit anyone. The only dancer who came off, who really burned in the ballet, was David Hallberg as an earnest peasant, also spurned. He's cold to the touch on a good day, and his freezing focus was laser-like, haunting. He went blue with heartbreak.

Part's *La Sylphide* was a delight. Adorably coquettish, historically refined, you could feel the gaslights warming her wings. Though the ABT repertory has yet to reveal it, Part is a natural comedienne and in Act One a bit of the screwball came through. When she stood on that high-backed chair and looked to James over her shoulder, she was Carole Lombard suppressing giggles. And the pleased expression she framed over the footlights was pure Constance Bennett, dreaming of love. Part, let's be frank, is a big sylph—sometimes too big, it seemed, for Desmond Heeley's manor-house of mulioned windows and beamed ceilings. Which made her all the more wonderful,

this selfish, selfless apparition in wings and pearls, bursting the seams of the real world. Part's mime was of a scale and clarity we almost never see anymore, and her death scene was Gish by Griffiths, innocent and morbid. "He should have picked up her wings," Strukov said of Cory Stearns, her James, "to save forever."

The footwork of *La Sylphide*—that bouncing-ball *petite batterie*—prepared Part for her single *Swan Lake* (no ballerina at ABT got more than one). It was a performance that crowned the season, an Odette-Odile that some of the 'manes thought the best they'd ever seen. I've been watching Part in *Swan Lake* since 2002, and she's never danced it the same way twice. For this reason alone, the cognoscenti compare Part to Farrell, who retired in 1989. Then again, both women are tall and beautiful. Both are artistically committed in a way that can annoy those around them. And both have overbites. (In Farrell's day, young dancers tried to imitate this overbite, sensing that Balanchine valued it, and maybe he did, maybe there's a monograph to be written about ballet and the overbite). But where Farrell was crisp and airy and elemental, Yeats's "long-legged fly upon the stream," Part is creamy and curvy, with more heat, and a touch of original sin. She is far more classically correct than Farrell ever was, but less sanguine about bobbles and misses. Farrell was like the bubble in a level—complete equanimity no matter which way she tipped, and she tipped and tilted a lot (lest we forget, Farrell was an acquired taste, and some of her greatest admirers acquired her late). In this *Swan Lake*, Part was the master of her universe—footwork on fire; balances blazing; pirouettes as tight as young tulips; legs like Blake's calipers; those *grands ronds de jambes en l'air* having a latitudinal arc and swell, stroking right through waves off-axis. And while most ballerinas locate Odette in a wing-like port de bras, this Swan Queen lived in Part's long spine, which she used like a swan's neck, alarm and ardency sweeping up from the tailbone in majestic curves and lashings.

Part was dancing with Roberto Bolle, the Italian hunk who modeled in *Vogue* last year. Bolle is as big on personal beauty as he is short on imagination. He often looks lost onstage, unsure of where to go emotionally (Narcissus without his pool) and sometimes choreographically (jet-set star that he is, he's probably forgotten what production he's in). Bolle's handsome face does not make up for the dead spots: he could use a season at The Actor's Studio. But he's a clean technician, a good partner, and tall. Ballerinas love him because he takes care of them, and he certainly took care of Part. Her technical liberation in this performance was stunning, and her black swan Odile was scary, colder than last year's rendering, which was lush in black velvet, like Verdi's Violetta, softly sexual. Here Part was something feral, nocturnal, an apparition all too eager to eat Siegfried alive.

So Part roared, despite powerful forces set against her, and younger dancers not only took notice, they took faith. The breadth, the torque, the *more* that we saw in the full-bodied attack and phrasing of ABT's younger women—an adagio resonance and depth—was unusual in a company that has for some time produced full-frontal, rectilinear workmanship. Kristi Boone in Paul Taylor's *Airs* was consummate, her assumption of the Taylor technique so complete she revealed a secret, a link I'd never noticed before: this woman is the female counterpart of the male lead in *Aureole*, carving a cathedral out of air, a solitary space cocooned in slow curves. Like Atlas's daughter, Boone held and lifted *Airs*, bearing the dance—its world—in her arms. Simone Messmer had a season. She gave us feather-quill flamboyance in James Kudelka's *Désir*, and was "C'est moi" as Myrtha in a matinee *Giselle*. Messmer's persona is strong. You feel her ambition burning, but it is channeled technically with a coloratura's attention to detail. As Myrtha, she was a frosty ball of bitterness, her lip-curling line inviolate—Myrtha by way of Medea! And she too was wonderful in *Airs*, though not as looming as Boone, not quite

as sustained. Isabella Boylston declared herself this season, robust and plummy with gleaming top notes, while Leann Underwood came on quietly, exquisitely, a bit of a Cinderella hanging back by the hearth, then out of nowhere, a fever breaking in *Giselle*, a dream wraith as Zulma.

The false note of the season was struck by Natalia Osipova, a guest artist from the Bolshoi Ballet who dropped in for one *Giselle* and two *La Sylphides*. Guest artists have always been a constant at ABT, and there are upsides to these visits (excitement, expanded stylistic horizons) and downsides (hysteria, stylistic disconnects). I did not see Osipova in the gala performances that won acclaim for her last year here in New York. After seeing her this spring, I'm still wondering what all the fuss is about. There's no question that her phenomenal ballon—the light, springing height she achieves in jumping moves like *assemblée*, *sissonne*, *jeté*—is a special gift. In a ballet like *Giselle*—where, in Act One, the heroine has a bounding spirit, and, in Act Two, she is weightless—such height and lightness go a long way. But ballet is not a trampoline. While the ABT audience and some of the press were thoroughly wowed by Osipova's aerodynamics, for me, she frequently bounced right out of the art form. If you were looking for a singing arabesque, a nuance in the shaping of phrases, you looked in vain.

Despite the rush of publicity, Osipova is still an unfinished dancer. She has a sickled right foot. She has scrunchy pointes that have very little power of articulation. More troubling is the lack of expression in her upper body. Though only twenty-three, Osipova has an old face. Please understand, offstage she looks twenty-three. But onstage, so little imaginative energy is resonant in the poitrine, the port de bras, that there's a lack of affect up there. Her dancing is un-crowned. Perhaps this is why

she had to pull faces to show us what *Giselle* was feeling, and why her mad scene was so disjointed it began to feel static, tedious, mindless in all the wrong ways. I must add, too, that she brought her Bolshoi bag of tricks to the role: bent-legged arabesques that tip the toe up higher; normally straight-legged *assemblés* that she pulls into pas de chat, knees bent under her skirt to give an illusion of greater height. This is fine at the Bolshoi, where everyone does it, but it seemed unfair to ABT's other *Giselles*, who were doing the steps without tricks. As in all athletic endeavors, tricks at some point become cheats.

How different, the debut *Giselle* of ABT soloist Maria Riccetto. No tricks, no cheats, simply the honesty and integrity this young classicist has shown us from the start. It was a debut on tenterhooks, Riccetto clearly nervous in Act One, the air taut around her. It's good to see nerves from time to time, good for the audience to experience palpably how much these roles matter to a dancer who is in the process of becoming. By the end of Act One, Riccetto had deepened. She gave her audience the most coherent mad scene I've seen in many years—a spider's skein of memories, a web that cannot hold. Act Two, again, contained some tentative, even terrified moments (*Giselle*'s first solos as a Wili are high-wire acts), but Riccetto let herself depend on David Hallberg, her Albrecht, who was touchingly attuned to her needs. This listening between them, their tenuous complicity, opened the stage to a tenderness from another time and place. I won't forget the pin-drop quiet and concentration of their *grands assemblés*, lifting like long sighs, and those silent, synchronized landings in plié, like kisses. "So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been," wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay in the poem "Dirge Without Music," "Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned/ With lilies and with laurel they go . . ."

Theater

Luck of the Irish

by Kevin D. Williamson

Much of Irish history and a great deal of Irish drama appear to have been cleverly constructed to substantiate the least plausible fancies of Sigmund Freud. All those raging sons of Cuchulainn, *The Playboy of the Western World*, endless contests of fathers and sons (including *Fathers and Sons*, as adapted by Brian Friel)—it's really something to discover anything fresh in that old sod, but happily that is the case with two recent plays at the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York City. *After Luke* is a fugue on the theme of the Prodigal Son, while *When I Was God* is an exploration of sports and the ways its ritualized combat provides an avenue of sublimation for complex, painful, and often unspoken father-son conflicts.

After Luke is as much about the real-estate boom as it is about ramshackle lives lived in contemporary Cork. Maneen (Michael Melamphy), the shiftless younger brother who has gone off to London to make his fortune, and failed badly in the attempt, returns home to his fractured family, which comprises the categorically named Dadda and Son, the elder brother. (The question of the missing Mama is addressed eventually.) In the absence of Maneen, the two had been living peacefully as a Celtic Sanford and Son, operating a junkyard and raising a few chickens, the rhythm of their days marked not by the liturgical calendar—this is *modern* Ireland, after all—but by ritual trips to the bingo hall and the general store, where Son carries on a chaste weekly flirtation with the

shopkeeper's daughter. Though a failure at business, Maneen returns speaking in cheap get-rich-book clichés: "There's two kinds of people in this world: Them that works for money, and them that makes money work for them." Seeing the tony new apartment buildings and cafés sprouting up around Cork, he begins conspiring, with the uneasy indulgence of his father, to sell off the family land, which he reckons to be worth a sweet sum.

Son, the much put-upon elder brother, resists. He is attached to the homestead and, particularly, to his chickens—about which he goes on and on at great comic length, praising the wit, intelligence, and beauty of particular birds. He makes a weekly gift of eggs to the shopkeeper's family, a sort of fragile reverse-dowry for their daughter, whom he is, unfortunately, too shy to approach forthrightly. (Maneen proves to have less scruple with both chickens and women.) The chicken coop, we learn, is also where his mother hanged herself, and it is suggested that Son's love for his fowl is in part displaced filial devotion.

Using the parable of the Prodigal Son, as relayed in the Gospel according to Luke, as a structuring device is tricky. One doesn't want to hew too closely to the original—the substitution of the Sunday sausages for the fatted calf is a clever reworking of the Scripture—but straying too far from the story has its challenges as well. The principal one, in this case, is that Maneen has not

returned penitently, but is scheming to squeeze the last bit of schmundo out of his family that he can. (Son, played by a bearded Gary Gregg, has a touch of Esau about him, too, though he's untempted by Maneen's mess of pottage.) And if the father in the original parable is a stand-in for God Himself, then Colin Lane's Dadda may very well personify the modern conception of God: Tyrannical in style but laissez-faire in deed; he is unable to judge or even to referee between his sons, capable only of fatalistically characterizing them as "chalk and cheese" or "a bag of cats," destined to duke it out, with or without paternal intercession. (He's also obsessed to distraction by bingo winnings, as sometimes is the case with the Almighty's present-day ministers.)

In the second play, *When I Was God*, Son gets his revenge as Gary Gregg is promoted to Father while Michael Mellamphy is demoted to the part of Dinny, a ten-year-old dreaming of glory on the soccer pitch. Father, a crotchety old Corker still seeing Black-and-Tans under every bed, will have no part of his son's playing the imperialists' game. He insists, instead, on hurling, and he waxes both poetic and homicidal on the virtues of that brutish sport. His exhortations to violence will not seem implausible to anybody who has attended a high-school football game in *Friday Night Lights* country. The contest, after all, isn't really between the two competing teams, but between the boys on the field and the sometimes murderous demands of their fathers.

Mr. Mellamphy has great fun with the fact that he is asked to play both the browbeaten boy and, in bits, his more resolute mother, with very little other than a strategic straightening of the spine and honk in the voice to suggest transition between the two roles. Mother eventually puts an insistent foot down after young Dinny is grievously injured on the hurling field. But, because of Father, soccer remains a foreclosed option, and so Dinny finds himself athletically born again as a table-tennis player. "Table tennis?" Father sneers. "Nobody plays table-tennis but girls and the Chinese." Eventually, Fa-

ther's grunting monologues deteriorate into comical, beautifully intoned variations on the word "grunt" itself—"grunt the grunting grunter, grunt it"—a sort of reverse onomatopoeia (aieopotamono?). But Dinny turns out to be something of a table-tennis prodigy, which brings Father around—and brings a return of the bloodlustful sporting rhetoric, along with Dinny's consequent anxiety. The playwright Cónal Creedon is not shy about deploying profanity, but he's far filthier and more disturbing in the relatively expletive-free sports rhetoric, which becomes, at times, truly worrisome, if only because it is so familiar. There is something about hearing familiar sentiments in foreign phrases and cadence that wrests them from their familiarity, inviting *de novo* psychological examination of their content. This is one Irish play that may actually be less interesting for the Irish.

The story is presented mostly as a recollection by the adult Dinny, "Dino" as a man, who came to soccer too late to be a competitive player but instead became a distinguished referee. Unlike the unhappy boys of *After Luke*, he has overcome the burdens placed on him by his father—and, on the soccer field, he is indeed godlike, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent. As gods are entitled to be, he is, in the end, wildly unpredictable, capping the final game of his refereeing career with a shocking and liberating breach of professional protocol. *When I Was God* isn't quite as compelling as *After Luke*, but its out-of-nowhere surprise ending is twice as satisfying as *Luke's* ultimate irresolution.

These two very fine productions aside, a question: Has any nation done more to bore the world with its grievances than Ireland? Yes. Ours. In *A Lifetime Burning* we get two daughters of privilege talking endlessly about the particulars of their problems, which include difficulties with household help and a trust fund that is being rapidly depleted. To stage such a play at 59e59—that's 59 East 59th Street, just off Park Avenue—is something akin to planting

a formal garden in the Amazon jungle: In the midst of so many diverse specimens thriving in their natural habitat, the artifice is a pale thing, a small creation overwhelmed by Creation. God spare us the problems of the tedious rich, but if one wants to study them up close, one might as easily skip *es9e* and stroll down Park Avenue, perhaps over to Fifth, to peer into the windows, past the Hellenic urns, and into sanctums of privilege. (I expect that is a good way to get arrested.)

Philip Larkin wrote that children may be forgiven much, because they are at the bottom of the learning curve: “Children are bound to be inferior to adults, or there is no incentive to grow up.” *A Lifetime Burning* is the story of women without that incentive. Set in an apartment whose pale blue walls suggest life inside a Tiffany’s box, *A Lifetime Burning* is itself no gem. It is a failure—and it may not even constitute a play, in truth. Despite its little self-conscious literary flourishes (the sisters are called Tess and Emma, and characters comment on how quaintly *literary* it is that they are called Tess and Emma, and the play’s title is filched from T. S. Eliot), *A Lifetime Burning* is not so much a work of drama as the theatrical presentation of a teary, tell-all confession session on Oprah’s couch. We get the usual mainstays of the American feminist middlebrow: adultery, abortion, prescription drugs. (You’d think a society half populated by unhinged nymphomaniacs would be more fun than it actually is.)

It should be noted that writing about a daughter of privilege with artistic ambitions is not an enormous stretch of the imagination for the playwright Cusi Cram. Her mother was Lady Jeanne Louise Campbell, granddaughter of Lord Beaverbrook and daughter of the Duke of Argyll, famous not for her writing career (as a correspondent for her grandfather’s newspaper, *The Evening Standard*) but for her brief marriage to Norman Mailer and for her legendary Cold War sexual trifecta, having slept with Nikita Khrushchev, John Kennedy, and Fidel Castro within a single year. Cram has gone a

little down-market for these plebian times, so her Tess and Emma did not inherit titles, only entitlements, though the family dog is named Marie Antoinette, and she is duly murdered by little Jacobins.

Tess and Emma lost their parents when they were young, though not quite children: Emma, the younger, was sixteen. The girls’ father, no doubt mindful that his elder daughter already was engaged to a Wall Street money man and that his younger daughter was a listless catastrophe of a woman suffering from manic depression (though not suffering nearly so much as those around her), provided a bit of extra life insurance money for Emma. Trust fund shenanigans and elder-daughter bitterness ensue: While Tess is only a writer for a lifestyle magazine called *Luxury Homes*—sniffily dismissed as “not quite *Architectural Digest*”—she has been sustained by her soon-to-be-ex-husband’s hedge-fund millions and is financially much better off than her sister. In truth, Emma’s trust fund is not that much money, and with Manhattanite expenses and no supplemental income to offset them, she knows that a day of financial reckoning awaits her. She catches a break when she is introduced to a celebrity book publisher, Lydia Freemantle, whose English accent and cheerful nihilism suggest that the role might have been given to Christopher Hitchens in drag. Or to Meryl Streep, if the budget were available: Isabel Keating’s performance as Freemantle is to Meryl Streep’s channeling of Anna Wintour in *The Devil Wears Prada* as those cheap knock-off bags sold on street corners are to the genuine Chanel and Louis Vuitton brands they imitate.

Emma sees herself as an artist and wishes to write a novel. Freemantle sees her as a pretty and malleable young woman with an of-the-moment sense of style and she persuades her to write a memoir instead. Emma does produce a memoir—of someone else’s life, the life of a part-Cherokee, part-Incan (no, not Quechua, *Incan*) woman who overcomes poverty, oppression, ad-

diction, violence, and the lack of a charge card at Barney's to become a blonde who natters about her Jimmy Choo pumps. (Seriously, Jimmy Choo? *Still?*) She immediately is outed and denounced as a fraud. What do you think are the chances that her journalist sister ratted her out?

It is, of course, an enormous challenge to make a play about the boring problems of boring people that is not, itself, boring. But the main intellectual problem of *A Lifetime Burning* is that it attempts to condescend to the rich twits it chronicles but is not actually in a position to do so. Which is to say, *A Lifetime Burning* is exactly the sort of play that a character like Emma might write about a character like Emma, and the range of its scope, its understanding, and its frame of reference is every bit as narrow as the vulgarly redecorated confines of Emma's Manhattan apartment. The play ends up caught in a kind of infinitely recursive loop, trying to comment on a world that it can never get quite far enough out of to achieve critical distance, a world which is the play's only social context. When it stretches beyond the Bergdorf blondes, *A Lifetime Burning* sputters.

Nowhere is that more painful to watch than in the character of Alejandro, a Latino GED student Emma tutors before beginning a sexual affair with him. Alejandro is played by Raúl Castillo who is in speech, mannerism, and swagger utterly unconvincing as a product of the East Harlem underclass. Part of this is the actor's fault, but much is the writer's: Alejandro is supposed to be unread—therefore the GED tutoring—but he is strangely articulate. He throws around jokes that hinge on the phrase “cerebral cortex” but has to have the meaning of “squander” explained to him, even in context. He ultimately is reduced to a shiftless man-child able to express himself only through force, including violent sexual force. Alejandro is only a brown prop in Emma's white liberal fantasy—but he's no less of a brown prop in Cusi Cram's white liberal fantasy, and nowhere does the play suggest that his character is a fully human

one rather than a conglomeration of social signifiers.

The sisters prattle, weep, and then bond over the memory of their parents, who were, we are to believe, about as remote in life as they are in death. In case the audience has missed the point, the two recite Philip Larkin's “This Be the Verse.” Subtle. “Do you think it's weird that that was Dad's favorite poem?” “No. But it was weird that he made us memorize it.” At that point, one begins to hope that the ghost of Larkin will spring forth among the Design Within Reach furniture and incinerate the place in a storm of phlogistic scorn.

The Bacchae, however, never lacks for drama. The Public Theater's recent presentation of Euripides' gory classic is almost an opera, with the bulk of the declamation on stage sung by the bacchan chorus to original music composed by the still-ubiquitous Philip Glass. I am not sure that this production is great theater, but it certainly is great literature wedded to great spectacle, and Mr. Glass's music is put to better use than it often is. His peculiar compositional style is, by its repetitive nature, propulsive, and it lends itself easily to a variety of line lengths, a great virtue in supporting Nicholas Rudall's sometimes eccentric translation of the Greek.

There is much to praise in this work, but one unpleasant item of business must first be dispatched. If there is a council somewhere that issues *fatwas* for the theater, we must prevail upon it to endorse this one: Dionysus is never again to be presented as a rock star. Never. It is so obvious, so gimmicky, so tired, and so very dated that it almost ruins what is an otherwise exuberant and enjoyable production. It does not help that this particular rock star, Jonathan Groff, sings with a quavering, wavering, uncertain voice. (And the wine stains around his mouth are rather obviously intended to recall Heath Ledger's cinematic Joker, in case you didn't get the message: He's a STAR, baby!) If you are going to give us a rock star as god on earth, for God's sake and ours find somebody who can do a

reasonable approximation of Jim Morrison—better yet, Glenn Danzig, who was born to play Dionysus-as-rock-star, if such we must have. It is possible that Mr. Glass is here to blame, too, with his great love of the thin high end of the vocal range. (His male lead in *Akhnaten* is written for countertenor, inspired by the voices of *castrati*.)

That significant protest aside, the Public is to be commended for letting Euripides be Euripides. The play was neither pedantic in its exactness nor given over to postmodern loosey-goosiness, which always ends in boredom. Anthony Mackie's Pentheus is a credible politician, determined not to let the peace of his kingdom be disturbed by the appearance of a new cult and of a charismatic young religious leader claiming to be divinity incarnate, and André de Shields's Teiresias (extra *e*, no breasts in this version) reminds us why sensible people should know better than to have anything to do with Teiresias—nothing good ever comes of it. Glass's music is serviceable throughout and at times inspired, particularly when he is writing for the chorus.

The play tells a familiar story: Dionysus, deigning to be born into human form, is enraged when the Thebans fail to recognize him as a god or his family as divine consorts and cousins. He therefore drives the women of Thebes into ecstasy, and they run for the hills to conduct bizarre rituals, drink to excess, engage in midnight orgies, wantonly slaughter livestock, descend upon the unwary, and otherwise conduct themselves like Australians on vacation. Pentheus' mother, Agave, is among those touched, and so the king is tempted to sneak out to the camp of the Bacchae, dressed as a woman (Geraldine! Wilhelmena! Pentheus!) and . . . things end very badly for everybody: Thebes gets a hangover for the ages.

What was perhaps most enjoyable about this particular performance was that the artificiality of production—Euripides sung to Philip Glass in Central Park with a chorus full of lovely young women in hybrid Hindustani-Korean costumes—combined with the formality of the language and a slight stiffness in the choreography, succeeded in touching something deep and old, that being theater's roots in religious ritual. We regard the ancient Greeks as our cultural forefathers, and it is right that we do so, but it is worth being reminded, every now and again, that theirs was a civilization deeply alien to our own, and one not very many generations removed from the darkness of utter barbarism. When Agave returns from the wilderness, proudly bearing the head of the king, her son, the bloody mess she's bringing to the audience isn't just a few pounds of human meat and bone—it's our past. (And in some unhappy corners of the world, our present.)

The Bacchae argues convincingly that something real and dangerous is at stake on the stage, that things can get a good deal worse than *Lord of the Flies* in a hurry, given the right time and place—say April 19, 1989, the day the Central Park Jogger was raped within a stone's throw of the Public Theater's stage in Central Park. And there is where we find the power in Euripides that we do not find in *A Lifetime Burning* or much else that is on the stage: a power that derives not from the immediacy of the morning's headlines but from a dramatic art that aims to achieve the same permanence, the same specificity and vigor of image of great poetry or painting. As T. S. Eliot wrote, "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know."

Art

Augustus Saint-Gaudens & the American monument

by *Eric Gibson*

The great drama of American culture has been its ongoing dialogue with Europe. Lacking a native fine-art tradition, early American artists were keenly aware that one measure of the new country's legitimacy would be to match the creative accomplishments of civilizations past. They and their successors looked to the forms and idioms of Europe as an armature upon which to erect their own modes of expression. At the same time, they were determined to match artistic with political independence with the creation of a uniquely, distinctively American art. There is, surely, no more prototypical actor upon this stage than the Gilded Age sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, currently the subject of a rich and spellbinding show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹

Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907) was born in Dublin to an Irish mother and a French father. The family emigrated to the United States when he was six months old, settling in Manhattan, where he got his start as a sculptor working for two cameo cutters—portraitists who carved miniature, low-relief likenesses in bone or shell. His primary apprenticeship, however, was in Europe. In 1867, he arrived in Paris, where he took academic instruction and was profoundly influenced by the work of artists such as François Rude (1784–1855), Emanuel Frémiet

(1824–1910), Paul Dubois (1829–1905), Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (1827–1875), and Jean-Alexandre-Joseph Falguière (1831–1900). Their newly complex compositions and animated surfaces signaled the waning of the icily remote neoclassical tradition and the rise of more naturalistic representation and emotional expansiveness. In 1870, Saint-Gaudens decamped to Rome, where he began earning his living as a sculptor by carving cameos and modeling portrait busts. He secured his first major commission, a life-size statue of the seated Hiawatha. He also looked at the art of the Old Masters, later telling friends that he had been particularly struck by the work of Verrocchio, Perugino, and Donatello.

In 1875 Saint-Gaudens returned to America to lobby for and secure the commission for a monument in Manhattan to the Civil War hero Admiral David Farragut, famous for his cry, “Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!” at the Battle of Mobile Bay. Because American bronze founding was still in its infancy, he traveled back to Paris in 1877 to work on his new commission. Thus began a nearly twenty-five year circuit during which Saint-Gaudens alternated between New York, Paris, and Rome, only settling permanently in this country toward the end of his life. Thus also began a career that saw the creation of several public sculptures that have since become American icons: *David Glasgow Farragut* (1881) and *William Tecumseh Sherman* (1892–1903) in New York; *The*

¹ “Augustus Saint-Gaudens in The Metropolitan Museum of Art” opened on June 30 and remains on view through November 15, 2009.

Puritan (1883–86) in Springfield, Massachusetts; *Standing Lincoln* (1884–87) in Chicago; the Adams Memorial (1886–91) in Washington, D.C.; and the Shaw Memorial (1884–97) in Boston, an equestrian portrait of the Civil War colonel Robert Gould Shaw accompanying his all-black regiment, the first to count any black soldiers in its ranks.

American artists in great numbers had previously journeyed to Europe; some had even taken up residence there. But for the most part they had limited themselves to one location. What gave Saint-Gaudens's art its distinctive character was his cosmopolitanism, his assimilation of multiple and very different strains of influence. The antique and Renaissance art of Italy endowed his art with gravitas: behind the resolute pose of Admiral Farragut stands Donatello's *Saint George* (1415), and, in the solemn march of Shaw's regiment, we can detect the stately rhythms of an Augustan procession on the Ara Pacis in Rome. The modern art of Carpeaux and others that he saw in France gave him a plastic language unlike that of any current or previous American artist. In particular, the continuously animated surfaces that keep the eye in restless motion over the form brought a new and unprecedented vitality to American sculpture. All this was put to the service of a new and very American subject matter: ordinary individuals who, like Saint-Gaudens himself, had risen to their present eminence solely by dint of their own drive and natural talent, and to whom his public could relate through broadly shared experience.

Saint-Gaudens's public sculptures redirected the course of American art and revolutionized the public monument in this country. They also made the sculptor an international celebrity. In 1900, he showed a plaster cast of the Shaw memorial at the Paris Exposition where, his biographer Burke Wilkinson tells us, "[Auguste] Rodin, in one of his extravagant gestures, doffed his hat before it and stood bareheaded in tribute." It was the triumph of the New World before the Old.

Organized by Associate Curator Thayer Tolles, "Augustus Saint-Gaudens in The Metropolitan Museum of Art" is the first show of the artist the Met has mounted since its 1985 retrospective. It consists of nearly fifty works by Saint-Gaudens (some acquired since 1985) ranging across his entire oeuvre: cameos, portrait reliefs, studies for the monuments, commemorative medallions, and currency. Highlights include busts of Farragut, Sherman, the Victory figure from the Sherman memorial, and Davida Clark, his model and mistress; relief portraits of Robert Louis Stevenson, William Merritt Chase; and three exceptional relief portraits of children: his seventeen-month-old son Homer Saint-Gaudens; the two-year-old Rodman de Kay Gilder, executed with a freedom of handling more characteristic of a monotype print than a sculpted relief; and *The Children of Jacob H. Schiff* (1884–85), where the thick, curly mane of the family dog lovingly fingered by young Frieda Fanny Schiff, vividly captured by the artist.

The exhibition is a revelation for what it tells us about the essential unity of Saint-Gaudens's art. At first glance, his work seems to evoke a paradox: How could an artist who spent so many of his formative years as a portraitist in shallow relief, his subjects shown in strict silhouette and by means of a quasi-pictorial illusionism achieved through the free handling of form and the deft manipulation of light and shade across the surface, demonstrate such a mastery of three-dimensional form? But, far from being incompatible with his monumental sculptures, many of these characteristics were indispensable to their realization and success. To be sure, Saint-Gaudens's monuments are less freely handled and more meticulously realistic than his reliefs. Indeed, he introduced an unprecedented degree of verism into sculpture, striving to get the details of clothing right. He even asked young black men to pose for the faces of the soldiers in the Shaw Memorial, an effort that resulted in one of the few sympathetic depictions of blacks in early American art.

Like his reliefs, Saint-Gaudens's monuments rely on the play of light and shade to articulate their forms. And while they read well from more than one angle, the silhouette profile remained the primary organizing principle of his art. In relief, it demanded a clarity of composition and careful orchestration of major and minor elements. Even without knowing who William Merritt Chase was, the viewer has no doubt what the statue's subject does for a living because of the image's essential attributes—the artist's palette, the loaded brush poised in the delicate hand—are each given appropriate visual weight and emphasis. The same applies to works such as the Shaw and General Sherman monuments. It is hard to imagine Saint-Gaudens surmounting their manifold compositional challenges without his experience as a relief sculptor to guide him.

Perhaps the most significant similarity between the two sculptural modes, however, lies in Saint-Gaudens's approach to his subjects. His memorials aren't "monuments" in the sense of simple likenesses of a revered individual. They are direct extensions of his reliefs into three-dimensions, portraits that reveal as much of the inner life as of the external appearance of the individuals they commemorate. Despite the challenge of accomplishing this with deceased subjects, Saint-Gaudens went to considerable lengths to establish the same kind of "rapport" with these subjects as he had with living ones. He borrowed Admiral Farragut's coat to drape over his model, and he supplemented his recollections of Lincoln by reading Lincoln's writings and speeches.

The results are not only highly individualized images of great power, they are works that transcend their particular subject to give Americans a national self-image. Nowhere is this truer than in the Shaw Memorial, which stands as the quintessential expression of the democratic ideal in sculpture—and possibly in all of American art up until that time. Saint-Gaudens gives us a leader among, rather than apart from, those he leads; he celebrates the individual within the group;

he grants the country's lowliest citizens full partnership in the business of the nation. Small wonder that Rodin, whose career was, in many respects, an ongoing struggle with the idea of the public monument, was moved to doff his hat.

In approaching these commissions as conventional portraits, Saint-Gaudens introduced an unprecedented inwardness to the public monument. At first, this seems to be incompatible with the heroic mode of commemorative art. But it not only deepens such artworks emotionally, it also ensures they will continue to speak to the viewer across the passage of years by placing him in the presence of an individual rather than a type. This inwardness also reflects the spirit of the time, which was marked by a new awareness of the human cost of war. For all the reckless abandon contained in Admiral Farragut's legendary cry, Saint-Gaudens depicts him with his mouth firmly closed, resolutely staring into the distance. And unlike the fired-up, clamoring figure of Rude's 1853 *Monument To Marshal Ney*—a work Saint-Gaudens admired—in which Napoleon's general charges into battle, the figures in the Shaw Memorial march quietly off to war, as if aware of their ultimate, grisly fate.

Another Saint-Gaudens innovation was his ability to create dramatic and psychological unity with the viewer. Thus, the Shaw Memorial is placed at or near the spot on Beacon Street along which the regiment actually marched as it departed for war. The hem of Farragut's coat is shown blown back, as if by the same wind that buffets us. The angel and victory figures in the Shaw and Sherman monuments are both calling to some unseen crowd in the distance. In the Adams Memorial, it is the figure's powerful inwardness and sense of mystery and the pervasive atmosphere of silence surrounding her that draws us in and makes us one with the sculpture's narrative.

Nowhere is this effect more powerfully achieved than in Saint-Gaudens's statue of Lincoln. The challenge here was, perhaps, greater than most, since Lincoln's assassina-

tion had transformed him from a man into a demigod. By the time Saint-Gaudens received the commission in 1884, there was already an abundance of representations of the sixteenth president. His task, therefore, was to cut through the carapace of myth, familiarity, and veneration and reconnect the viewer with Lincoln the man. His solution was to show Lincoln in a pose of, as Ms. Tolles puts it in her fine catalogue essay, “a transitional moment of action and imminence.” Lincoln is shown standing, in front of the presidential chair from which he has just risen to deliver an address. His left hand grasps the lapel of his frock coat as if to steady himself internally, his head is bowed, as if collecting his thoughts one final time before speaking, and the left knee is cocked, projecting through the perimeter of the frock coat, as if midway through taking one last step before beginning his address. The atmosphere is pregnant with anticipation.

The statue’s world and ours are further joined by the left toe of his shoe, which projects just slightly forward from the perimeter of the base so that it shares our space. One wonders if, as an avowed admirer of Verrocchio, Saint-Gaudens didn’t acquire this device from seeing the artist’s 1483 *Christ and St. Thomas*, on the exterior of the Church of Orsanmichele in Florence. Completing the effect of being in the presence of the real Lincoln is the broad, stepped exedra designed by Stanford White, a setting seemingly designed to accommodate the audience Lincoln is about to address.

There’s something both timely and bitersweet about a Saint-Gaudens celebration at this moment in our cultural life, when the idea of the public monument is so contentious and the offerings so dispiriting. Saint-Gaudens worked in an era when it was taken for granted that an artist could—and should—confidently celebrate great acts and individuals and conceive of a work of public

art as a thing to uplift and inspire. His art represents the twilight not just of the heroic mode but also of the idea that public art should serve as an instrument of civic engagement, even when, as in the case of the Civil War, the subject was one that had divided the nation.

Nowadays, so much of what passes for commemorative art is unaffffecting and hobbled by the need to play it safe. Today’s monument makers seem to be groping for the right language in which to express themselves and the proper “voice” in which to speak to their public—that is, when they are not settling for the facile satisfactions of bathos or irony. To understand this, one need only compare two monuments born of national crisis.

Saint-Gaudens’s Shaw Memorial commemorates one of the most poignant and tragic moments of the Civil War in a way that elevates its subject, making it vividly present to us. Michael Arad’s “Reflecting Absence,” his design for the September 11 World Trade Center memorial, likewise commemorates a tragic event that brought the nation together. But one looks in vain to find that concept expressed in the design, which consists of a grove of trees punctuated by two square, below-grade pools marking the footprints of the twin towers, each one bordered by a cascade of water. It is a bland, committee-driven affair that fails to fulfill the basic, most fundamental function of a monument: to prompt the viewer to think about the event it commemorates and to reflect on its larger meaning.

It’s probably too much to hope for, but one would like to think that architects, urban planners, elected officials, and other midwives of the nation’s monuments would take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the Met to visit the exhibition—and then fan out to study Saint-Gaudens’s public monuments *in situ*. Having taken it all in, they might ask themselves, “How can I do something that good?”

Vermeer & Monet at the Met & MOMA

by *Karen Wilkin*

Was it serendipity or a coordinated bid to attract art lovers to New York that caused the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art to open exhibitions of sure-fire hits on almost the same day? Whatever the reason for the overlap, local and visiting enthusiasts can indulge their appetites for celebrated works more or less simultaneously by visiting the temporarily concurrent “Vermeer’s Masterpiece: *The Milkmaid*” at the Met and “Monet’s Water Lilies” at MOMA.¹

Conceptually, the two exhibits are very similar, despite more than two and half centuries separating the works on view. Both are “mini-blockbusters”: rigorous studies that set a few iconic paintings among a small number of related works largely drawn from the organizing institution’s own collection. It’s not a new idea. The Met and MOMA have mounted sharply concentrated exhibitions quite regularly in the past, as have the Frick Collection and the National Gallery, Washington, DC. But these refreshing alternatives to larger enterprises are becoming increasingly common, and not only because of the troubled economy. In addition to reducing such daunting exhibition expenses as the

steadily rising costs of moving and insuring borrowed works of art, smaller “in-house” shows both simplify the high diplomacy and horse trading required for negotiating loans and assert the importance of the initiating museum’s own holdings. And for curators, art historians, and the museum public alike, the aesthetic and scholarly benefits of the focused attention permitted by these miniature exhibits are immeasurable.

The Metropolitan’s exhibition is introduced by a wall of reproductions of Vermeer’s thirty-six known surviving works that offers graphic information about the artist’s preferred subjects and habits of composition. It also reminds us of the many opportunities we’ve had to see an impressive number of the reproduced works on this side of the Atlantic. In addition to those regularly on view on the East Coast—five at the Metropolitan, two at the Frick, and four (or three and a half, according to some) at the National Gallery—“Johannes Vermeer,” the National Gallery’s 1995–96 exhibition, brought together nearly half of the painter’s surviving works, and, in 2001, the Metropolitan’s “Vermeer and the Delft School” assembled a large group of his paintings including several not seen in Washington. Yet *The Milkmaid* (c. 1657–58, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) has rarely been seen here. The acclaimed picture, painted at the beginning of Vermeer’s career when he was about twenty-five, has been in the United States only once before, in the

¹ “Vermeer’s Masterpiece: *The Milkmaid*” opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on September 10 and remains on view through November 29, 2009. “Monet’s Water Lilies” opened at the Museum of Modern Art on September 13, 2009 and remains on view through April 12, 2010.

1939–40 New York World’s Fair’s “masterpieces of art” exhibit. *The Milkmaid* has now come to New York as part of the Dutch-themed festivities organized to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Henry Hudson’s arrival at the future site of New Amsterdam and later New York.

The current show, organized by Walter Liedtke, the Met’s curator of European paintings and the author of the two volume *Dutch Paintings in the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* and *Vermeer: The Complete Paintings*, reunites *The Milkmaid* with her American cousins, the museum’s other Vermeers: three domestic interiors, *A Maid Asleep* (c. 1656–57), *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher* (c. 1662), and *Woman with a Lute* (c. 1662–3); a close-up head, *Study of a Young Woman* (c. 1665–67); and an elaborately staged *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* (c. 1670–72). Contemporary painters, including Gerard Ter Borch, Pieter de Hooch, Nicolaes Maes, Gabriel Metsu, Hendrick Sorgh, and Emanuel de Witte, who may have influenced the young Vermeer’s direction or are documented as colleagues with whom he was connected, are represented by works from the Met’s holdings. There is also a selection of its Dutch prints of the period, some rather equivocal and some with rude verses, which attest to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century attitudes towards milkmaids—an entertaining addition, although the Rijksmuseum’s picture, nicknamed “The Milkmaid” since the eighteenth century, clearly depicts a kitchen maid, not a young woman charged with milking cows.

However we describe her, the context provided for Vermeer’s sturdy woman bathed in cool light, as she pours milk from a pitcher into a cooking pot, at once reveals how much the painter belonged to his time and how individual his works are. His colleagues addressed similar themes of absorbed women in domestic interiors lit by large, multi-paned windows; like Vermeer, they itemized the textures of cloth, Turkish carpets, tiles, and kitchen vessels. But, as

The Milkmaid and the Met’s five canvases assert, no one achieved the structural lucidity, the sense of eternal immanence, or the luminosity of Vermeer’s paintings. While the silk of Ter Borch’s fashionable young woman’s skirt is gorgeously rendered, her relation to the dimly lit room in which she primps seems schematic; Sorgh’s and Maes’s kitchens are murky and “arty”; de Hooch’s convivial gathering seems anecdotal and slight. Only de Witte’s interiors of the Oude Kerk, Delft, paeans to the austere white walls of Gothic architecture adapted to Protestant severity, achieve qualities of light comparable to Vermeer’s without the psychological overtones.

At the same time, seeing *The Milkmaid* in proximity to the Met’s own Vermeers emphasizes how unusually economical and monumental the Rijksmuseum picture is, even for a painter known for economically rendered, telling forms. A single woman, in a deep blue apron and green “work sleeves,” focuses on her task. The scene of everyday labor using humble utensils—described as the preparation of “bread porridge”—in a room with a scarred plaster wall is reduced to the essentials required to suggest place, time, and space. The wall texts suggest that the painting’s naturalism verges on “the photographic,” yet we are always conscious of the deliberateness with which Vermeer placed his nuanced patches of paint, and we soon become aware of the brilliant artifice of *The Milkmaid*’s construction.

Apparently casual inclusions prove to be meaningfully placed. We notice carefully orchestrated internal echoes of form: the “still-life” of utensils and bread on the table inverts the massing of the woman’s head and torso, below the “hinge” of the pitcher’s mouth, with further equivalence suggested between the crisp definition of the table edge and her arms. Most dramatic is the weighting of the composition to one side of the painting and the elegantly calculated tonal shifts from light to dark, warm to cool, across the entire canvas, which simultaneously heighten the sense of mass and bulk and create an immediacy and fidelity to

perceived experience. The more time we spend with *The Milkmaid*, however, the more we note such contradictions between seeming verisimilitude and the fiction of painting. Vermeer's very materials are at odds with his modest subject matter. The saturated red and blue of the workaday skirt, table cloth, and apron could be achieved only with very expensive pigments. "Photographic," indeed.

A subtext of the show is the hidden erotic content of Vermeer's apparently neutral images, an idea explored by scholars of the period at least since a landmark exhibition in Amsterdam in the mid-1970s. Seventeenth-century Dutch audiences would have been alert to what we are told are references "encoded" in the details of pictures such as *The Milkmaid*. From the sometimes hilarious evidence of prints, popular poems, and other writings of the era, we learn that milkmaids were considered notoriously lascivious—even domestic servants, like Vermeer's maid, were considered fair game. Liedtke suggests that the solidly built young woman's introspective attitude embodies the common conceit in Dutch literature of the seventeenth century that thoughts of love can distract from necessary work. As indicators of *The Milkmaid's* state of mind, he points to a cupid on a baseboard tile, close to a corner of the foot warmer, a device that, at the time, symbolized other kinds of warmth.

In the catalogue essay, Liedtke stresses that Vermeer's erotic allusions are more subtle than those of his colleagues. He sees the maid's bare forearms, revealed by her pushed-back sleeves and conspicuously paler than her work-reddened hands, as seductive signals. Yet in the Met's Vermeers, the sleeping maid, the lute player, the elegantly dressed woman with a water pitcher, and even the allegorical woman symbolizing Catholic faith also have bare forearms—are there erotic subtexts here? Not all scholars, including the National Gallery's Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. and the Rijksmuseum's Taco Dibbits, author of a study of *The Milkmaid*, wholly agree with

Liedtke's interpretation. Whether or not we are convinced by Liedtke's well-documented, persuasively argued interpretation, it will make us look harder at *The Milkmaid* and the other images in this wonderful little show—undeniably a good thing.

The Metropolitan's Vermeer exhibition could also serve as an introduction to "Monet's Water Lilies" at MOMA. For Monet and his fellow Impressionists, Vermeer was a "new" old master, the focus of revived interest thanks to a pair of influential articles published by the critic Thoré-Burger in 1866. It's easy to see why Impressionists would respond to Vermeer's potent allusions to light, especially his spattered, dotted highlights, used to suggest everything from sunlight on a knotted carpet to the texture of bread. Monet might have retained an interest in Vermeer, even in the last decade of his long life—born in 1840, he died in 1926—when he concentrated on the "décorations" inspired by his lily pond that comprise MOMA's exhibition, since he made his experience of changing light on water the basis of his panoramic canvases. In every other way, of course, Monet's late work announces assumptions about what a painting can be entirely unlike those underlying Vermeer's works, not only in terms of the obvious—scale, degrees of finish, and degrees of reference—but also in terms of the painting's relation to actuality and the viewer's relation to both the artist and the picture.

"Monet's Water Lilies" centers on MOMA's lush triptych (like almost all works in the show, 1914–26), installed with the side panels angled to reinforce Monet's wish that we be surrounded by his visions of his lily pond—a desire realized in the galleries at the Orangerie dedicated to the great cycles of *Water Lilies* he donated to France. The paintings at MOMA, worked and reworked when Monet was in his seventies and eighties, embody Late Style: the liberated efforts of a long-lived artist unwilling to please anyone but himself. That they postdate the advent of Fauvism, Cubism, and even Surrealism is irrelevant. If Monet was

indifferent to the innovations of younger artists, he was equally indifferent to the self-imposed conventions of his own earlier work, pursuing, in his old age, a direction as unlike “orthodox” Impressionism as it was unlike anything else being made by anyone between 1914 and 1926.

The accompanying brochure, by Ann Temkin, briefly sketches the history of the reception of these radical paintings, noting that their adventurousness was not fully appreciated until the large scale, all-over expanses of Abstract Expressionist paintings, such as Jackson Pollock’s, with their knotted skeins of paint, taught viewers to grasp the daring of Monet’s late works. (MOMA’s legendary founding director, Alfred Barr, bought the museum’s first *Water Lilies* in the early 1950s. The canvases currently on view were selected by Barr in 1959, to replace his first acquisitions, tragically destroyed in a fire at the museum.)

MOMA’s triptych, with its ravishing blues and purples, suggests the long light of early evening in high summer. Opposite, a slightly smaller but no less sensuous horizontal panel, all crusty creams, pale blues, and delicate roses, also in MOMA’s collection, conjures up midday dazzle with color bleached by intense sunlight or muffled by the density of paint. As in all the late *Water Lilies* (and in contrast to the earlier “views” of his lily pond that Monet began in the 1890s), neither picture has a horizon; the limitless surface of the water is made congruent with the surface of the canvas and the viewer is denied a fixed vantage point within the painting. Instead, we confront a vast, layered accretion of vigorous loops, stabs, and whorls that makes the hand that traced them vividly present. While we are acutely aware of the flatness of the palimpsest of cursive touches, contemplating these energetic gestures is akin to the disorienting ambiguity of staring into depths of water and seeing reflections of trees and sky, laced by floating blossoms that themselves create more reflections. This double reading reinforces the essential con-

tradiction of the late *Water Lilies*: that frankly ravishing color and downright beautiful imagery coexist with gritty, uningratiating accumulations of paint.

MOMA’s panoramic paintings are accompanied by a pair of smaller, dark *Water Lilies*, one from the Metropolitan, remarkable for its rhythmic drawing in tinted whites, shimmering against purples and dull greens. A close companion, similar in palette and intensity, absent the animated drawing, comes from a private collection. Both include a narrow edge of unpainted canvas, sometimes toned-in, that intensifies the image’s independence from traditional representation. The vertical *Agapanthus* (1914–26, Museum of Modern Art), purple flower clusters floating above sword-like leaves, returns us to dry land, but the insistent rhythms of flowers and foliage, which dissolve into an all-over expanse of strokes—again held in from the edge—are as destabilizing as the shifting layers of the *Water Lilies*.

The most unforgettable painting in “Monet’s *Water Lilies*” is the small, fierce *Japanese Foot Bridge* (1920–22, Museum of Modern Art), a loosely knitted fabric of almost disassociated strokes of superheated maroons, rusts, and ochres set off by deep blues and greens and a flicker of cadmium red, inspired in its placement. The painting pulses in and out of reference. Powerful as the sensation of an idealized natural world is in this picture—and in the exhibition’s other works—the fact of paint and the dynamism of gesture ultimately dominate. For all the specificity of these canvases, we feel that we are teetering—not on the brink of Monet’s pond, but on the brink of abstractness. It’s worth remembering that it was seeing a Monet in 1895 that led Vassily Kandinsky to abandon figuration by 1912. The paintings in “Monet’s *Water Lilies*” feed so seamlessly into more recent abstractions based on the primacy of color and the expressive potency of gesture and expanse—Helen Frankenthaler, Jules Olitski, Joan Mitchell, to name only a few—that it’s difficult to believe they were made almost a century ago.

Exhibition note

“Time Will Tell: Ethics & Choices in Conservation”
Yale University Art Gallery.
May 22–September 6, 2009

A museum visit can be exhilarating, inspiring, but also, by turns, infuriating or just plain boring. This is particularly true when visiting one of the huge, all-encompassing institutions such as the Metropolitan or the Louvre. Smaller museums—such as the Frick or the Neue Galerie—demand less from us, intellectually and physically. The menu is more limited: the art on display often represents only one culture, one period, or even one medium. Indeed, who could deny the pleasure of a day spent at the Beyeler Foundation in Basel or the Clark Institute in Williamstown?

There are, however, museums created in yet another format: those that are of relatively limited size but are also encyclopedic in scope. Two of the best are about an hour’s train ride from Manhattan: the Princeton University Art Museum and the Yale University Art Gallery. Because they serve a primarily didactic purpose, their departments are equally as diverse and far-ranging as those of their much larger counterparts: from the Classical Antique to the Contemporary and from the African to the pre-Columbian, with plentiful detours in between. Didactic as well are the periodic special exhibitions that transform these smaller institutions into obligatory destinations for the dedicated scholar and connoisseur. One such was the memorable Olmec show at Princeton several years ago. “Time Will Tell: Ethics and Choices in Conservation,” recently on view at Yale, was mounted on a more modest scale, but was important nonetheless.

Organized by the gallery’s chief conservator Ian McClure and curators Laurence Kanter and Lisa Brody, “Time Will Tell” was neatly displayed in one large ground-floor space in the rather grim Louis Kahn–designed building recently renovated and

currently undergoing reinstallation. It was an exciting show that places an exceptionally wide range of artistic artifacts, each posing its own conservation problem, before the viewer. The concept was not to illustrate the *process* of conservation, nor even to present the more conventional and occasionally more spectacular glimpses of “before” and “after.” The exhibitors were concerned, rather, with the remarkable variety and complexity of conundrums that art objects pose: physical, conceptual, art-historical, and, of course, aesthetic—some of which can be resolved only one way, others in several ways, and others still, infuriatingly, may well remain irresolvable.

The viewer was led from ancient artifacts of glass and pottery, to classical marble sculpture and early Italian panel painting, and on to modernist sculpture and Impressionist painting, with side trips through tribal art and twentieth-century electro-mechanical constructions. Generally, the progression was chronological, but the theme of the exhibit would be lost or, at best, severely diluted were it not for the lucidly written wall panels, which organize and clarify the “choices” alluded to in the title as well as describe the problems that may (or may not) be resolved by those choices. As if setting the stage for the entire discourse, one found the following definition of conservation—one that has seldom, if ever, been better enunciated:

Conservation may be defined as those measures taken to stabilize or slow the deterioration of an object. *Restoration* is the attempt to make an object approach its original appearance, either by masking damage or by reconstructing lost parts.

That the Yale University Art Gallery should be the venue of this timely and innovative exhibition was, perhaps, no accident. Laurence Kanter is not only a recognized scholar in the field of earlier Italian painting but also a perceptive connoisseur—a rare combination. Ian McClure directed the Hamilton Kerr Institute, af-

filiated with Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum, for many years. Over the past two decades, the institute has emerged as a pre-eminent research and training center for art conservation. More importantly, however, the Yale Art Gallery claims a somewhat checkered history in the stewardship of its collections: it was the scene, in the mid-1960s, of a deplorable conservation campaign that is still remembered with a mixture of chagrin and remorse. Over several years the gallery's remarkable Jarves Collection of Italian "primitives" was subjected to pitiless "cleaning" procedures that reduced the paintings to scarred, ghostly shadows of themselves—all, of course, performed with the best, but misguided, intentions.

Yale was also the privileged recipient, in 1941, of a rich trove of early twentieth-century painting and sculpture. A number of these items were endowed with "inherent vice," a term denoting the presence of unstable or irreversibly deteriorating materials. Included in the exhibit is an iconic "portrait" of Marcel Duchamp by Antoine Pevsner. The sculpture has all but melted away due to its constituent elements, mostly strips of cellulose nitrate plastic, a precursor of plexiglas. Other important pieces of the same collection are only marginally better preserved, all emblematic of conservation issues that beg for answers, both technical and philosophical.

At each step in "Time Will Tell," the visitor was shown the damaged, mutilated, or otherwise ill-treated work of art and asked to consider the options: a daunting challenge even for the art professional. In some cases the labels or the works at hand hint at reasonable solutions. A very beautiful and rare early Sieneese *Virgin and Child*, a ravaged victim of the 1960s Jarves undertaking, is slowly being resuscitated, the losses and

abrasions carefully stitched together to recreate a viable image, certainly the right way to go. A large, late Edward Hopper will undoubtedly reclaim its vibrant colors once the discolored varnish is removed. There is little doubt about the legitimacy of the procedure, although we are told that the resin was applied by the artist himself.

But what to do about one of the most provocative presences in the show: a group of three *Lumia* constructions created in the 1920s by the Danish-American Thomas Wilfred? These amazing—and amazingly pioneering—"machines" were designed to project moving colored images generated by complex electrical and mechanical assemblies, decades before Dan Flavin and Nam June Paik. The only problem is that many of the original relays, bulbs, and other components of these fascinating Rube Goldberg-like contraptions have ceased to function and are no longer available. Should they be repaired with modern materials, even though the resulting "light paintings" would surely be different from those originally intended by the artist?

"Time Will Tell" was a "small" exhibition in a "small" museum, yet it offered many lessons, the most important being that modern conservation, despite its impressive arsenal of diagnostic and operative tools, remains an interpretative discipline. Compromise between what is philosophically desirable and what is, in reality, obtainable should be the guiding principle in conservation. Throw in a sizeable dose of perception, dexterity, and taste, and chances are that the work of art will be well served. It should be noted, however, that all this has little or nothing to do with *ethics*, a word so prominently—but dubiously—part of the title of this otherwise admirable undertaking.

—Marco Grassi

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

Many people have asked me how the art world is doing in the economic downturn. I am sorry to report that the art world died in early August. This tragic event was not unexpected, nor was it unwelcome. The previous several months had been rough. The end came as a blessing.

After the death of the art world comes its afterlife. The silly season that stretched for nearly a decade will give way to more sober reflection. Galleries will continue to close. But we also know that some galleries will survive, thanks to their intelligence and sensitivity to the emerging mood. Several are off to a good start.

One artist whose antennae were always attuned to changing situations was the German Expressionist George Grosz. The artist is now the subject of a museum-quality exhibition at David Nolan. The business of good gallery-making begins with the education of the eye. With twenty-nine Grosz paintings and drawings and a 280-page catalogue, David Nolan is now running his own class in Grosz anatomy.¹

In the 1920s Grosz lampooned the excesses of the Weimar Republic, corrupt and blind to Germany's darker forces. He singled out Adolf Hitler for ridicule when the Führer was little more than a failed artist. A one-time

member of the Communist Party, Grosz also repudiated his leftist allegiances after a visit to the Soviet Union. Hitler and Stalin came to appear to him as two sides of the same war machine. Rightly so. Yet perhaps most surprisingly, Grosz developed an unalloyed exuberance for the United States. This romanticism emerged first through his reading of popular American literature and developed in dialectical opposition to his pessimism towards the deteriorating European climate.

When an invitation came in 1932 to teach a summer course at the Art Students League, Grosz booked passage the next month on the ocean liner *New York*. He arrived to the fanfare of the American press. He wrote back to his wife: "I love you, America. I feel like this is my country, I belong here." He soon decided to emigrate with his family to New York and did so early the next year. Two weeks after his arrival, SA troops stormed his flat and studio in Berlin and declared him an enemy of the regime.

Anti-Hitler, anti-Stalin, pro-America—the trifecta of political astuteness, but a victory that has complicated Grosz's legacy. Anti-Hitler, good. Anti-Stalin, tolerable. Pro-America, beyond the pale. As Klaus Mann, an exile in Paris, complained in 1936: "He has changed; a very long, very passionate battle has left him tired. He has become apolitical—or is at least trying to be. . . . He no longer draws: he paints."

Grosz lived and worked in the United

¹ "George Grosz: The Years in America: 1933–1958" opened at David Nolan Gallery, New York, on September 16 and remains on view through October 31, 2009.

States for twenty-five years. He became one of the earliest high-profile refugees from Hitler. Yet while his audience expected the caustic illustrator to turn his pen against his new homeland, Grosz went about exploring other sides of his artistic vision. The nudes and landscapes that resulted are the revelations of the Nolan show, along with the dense allegorical work he developed in paint.

Grosz could apply his talents for drafting to many styles. The show ranges from black-and-white wartime illustrations to satirical send-ups of Hitler (*So Smells Defeat* [1937]). He worked his way through the Old Masters, Breugel in particular, by creating pressure-cooked paintings like the infernal *Retreat (Rückzug)* (1946) with swirling fires, twisted barbed wire, and a shot-up brick wall that has a three-dimensional texture in oil. In *Cain or Hitler in Hell* (1944), a pile of human skeletons climbs up Hitler's leg.

That Grosz had a flip side to his dark vision makes him a more complex and interesting artist. His "romantic" American landscapes are as true to their own time and place as are his dystopian images of Europe. Grosz lived on Long Island and vacationed on Cape Cod. He adored the beaches and often painted his wife, Eva, in nude and sometimes erotic scenes in the dunes. The rolling sand and wispy beach grass in Grosz's landscapes become fecund allegories for a land of milk and honey. As he wrote to his brother-in-law in 1950, "What do you have against the dune paintings and nature studies, they are part of the whole oeuvre—if I hadn't done them (with passion and love, too), I would not have been able to paint my imaginative pictures, because 'invention' is only derived from nature." He was right. Drawings like *Dunes at Wellfleet* (c. 1940) and *Dunes Cape Cod* (1939) are among the best works in the show, and to be blind to them is to be blind to Grosz's entire vision.

Several shows this month deserve far more attention than space allows, so here are the best of them, however briefly. When I last reviewed the sculptor Mel Kendrick, another David Nolan artist, I objected to the diminu-

tive scale of the work on view. Kendrick is a constructivist who carves an abstract shape from a wood block, then places the result on top of a base made of the leftover pieces. For an artist who likes to show his hand, sometimes the process gets the better of the product. Not so for a set of monumental sculptures now on view in Madison Square Park.² Derived from many of the same forms at his last Nolan show, these outdoor giants executed in poured black-and-white concrete are playful exceptions to the cloying piles that normally pass for public sculpture. To appreciate their power, just visit the park with children around. By climbing through every hole and jumping off every shape of Kendrick's work, they understand the fun of these structures without the need for further explanation.

The New York School artist Conrad Marca-Relli brought collage to Abstract Expressionism. Some of his best work is now on view at Knoedler.³ In 1967 the critic William Agee noted that Marca-Relli "accepted the potential risks inherent in collage and developed it as a complete pictorial system." Unlike earlier artists who used collage as fragmentary elements in larger paintings, Marca-Relli created entire collage abstractions. An untitled work at Knoedler from 1952 serves as an example of what he could do. With a white surface covering a black background, Marca-Relli cuts a swirling line across the canvas and pulls the gaps open exposing the black beneath, sometimes turning and re-pasting a white chad back onto the surface. "The limitations of the material acted two ways," the artist once said. "It confronted me with a problem of solving the shape and reducing it to the simple form that I was looking for. On the other hand, a collage has always been to me a kind of dis-

² "Mel Kendrick: Markers" opened in Madison Square Park, New York, on September 17 and remains on view through December 31, 2009.

³ "Conrad Marca-Relli: The New York Years 1945-1967" opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on September 12 and remains on view through November 14, 2009.

cipline.” It was a discipline that Marca-Relli perfected.

From Malevich to Albers, the square has long been a focus of abstract attention. Sometime in the 1960s, the circle began to receive its due. The simple drawings of Leon Polk Smith from 1968 now on view at Washburn—along with one much larger, shaped canvas—pay homage to the celestial.⁴ On a white background Smith collects a handful of colorful circles together in multiple iterations. These dots act as singular objects, but we can also read them as portholes onto larger circles beneath. Smith leaves these forms to be rounded out in our minds, a dynamic that never loses energy.

It is no secret that twentieth-century modernism had a bad body image, as everyone from Picasso to Giacometti beat a psychological reading into the classical form. Look at the healthy bodies of Augustus Saint-Gaudens and realize the beauty that was lost when art turned away from the idealized nude. The sculptor Carole Feuerman has been confronting this development for decades by reevaluating the classical nude in a contemporary way. Her work is now on view at Jim Kempner.⁵ Unlike other hyper-realist sculptures, Feuerman is not afraid of idealized form. She specializes in female swimmers. According to the modernist playbook she does everything wrong. Her work indulges in sentimentality. Her materials include hair and plastic resin, which she splashes on her figures like drips of pool water. Not to mention the fact that we haven’t seen bodies this fit since the Fascist summer-carnival sculpture in Zell am See. On the one hand, for all of her technique, I found some of the polychromy, especially in the faces, a little waxen. On the other, a work like *Tree* (2009), with its swimmer standing

on a tree trunk in nothing but a leafy bathing cap, seems like an art nude for the twenty-first century, real and of the moment.

Last June, I mentioned the upcoming exhibition of Tim Bavington’s hard-edged abstraction at Jack Shainman Gallery with some enthusiasm. Having now seen the show, I can say it was a disappointment.⁶ Bavington is out to revisit the optical art of the 1960s. Unfortunately, he approaches this task with the gauzy reserve of Gerhard Richter. Bavington’s optical effects are referential rather than internal to his painted form. He reinvestigates the synesthetic link between color and music, but the connections he draws are facile. For one painting, *Fell in Love with a Girl* (2009), Bavington informs us the work was “named for a White Stripes song” but “inspired by Missoni fabric.” Please, someone send this artist a Scriabin CD.

The abstract painters Joanne Freeman and Kim Uchiyama have organized an excellent group show over two galleries with eye-popping work by Jennifer Riley and Thornton Willis, among others.⁷ Allow me to single out my new favorite painting. It is *My Beautiful Laundrette* (2008) by Stephen Westfall. The colorful work is based on a grid design the artist has been developing for years. What separates Westfall from the old serialists is the way he fits his pieces together, with his square corners coming together slightly out of alignment. One’s darting eyes pick up the differences and animate the frames. Color, texture, and form all come together. It is a mesmerizing spectacle and a vision, I hope, of things to come.

New Yorkers came out by the thousands for the season’s gallery openings, and several galleries mounted strong exhibitions. The death of the art world may be the best thing to happen in years.

⁴ “Leon Polk Smith” opened at Washburn Gallery, New York, on September 10 and remains on view through October 31, 2009.

⁵ “Carole Feuerman: Swimmers, Bathers & Nudes” opened at Jim Kempner Fine Art, New York, on September 17 and remains on view through October 31, 2009.

⁶ “Tim Bavington: Up in Suze’s Room” opened at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, on September 11 and remains on view through October 10, 2009.

⁷ “Color-Time-Space” opened at Lohin Geduld and Janet Kurnatowski Galleries, New York on September 10 and remains on view through October 11, 2009.

Music

Salzburg chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

If it's "Festspielzeit," as the locals say—"festival time"—it's the Vienna Philharmonic. The VPO is the anchor of the Salzburg Festival: its resident orchestra, its spine. Opera productions may appall and soloists fall short: but the VPO should deliver, time after time. Like the Berlin Philharmonic, it has a very high reputation, and is the object of a lot of hype. But, like the BPO's, the VPO's reputation is pretty much deserved—and hype, though annoying, can be ignored.

One Saturday morning in the Grosses Festspielhaus this season, the VPO played a concert under Franz Welser-Möst, a local boy, almost—he's from Linz—and the music director of the Cleveland Orchestra. In 2010, he will assume a very big post in his native land: music director of the Vienna State Opera. The concert in Salzburg began with Schumann's Cello Concerto, a curious piece. Like the Violin Concerto, it is something of a neglected stepchild among Schumann's works. (How about the opera *Genoveva*?) The Cello Concerto has its champions, but, in my view, it is a weak piece by a great composer—but one with a lovely, songful little F-major slow movement. The soloist with the VPO was—guess what?—a local boy: Clemens Hagen, who comes from a musical family. These Salzburgers formed the Hagen Quartet, in kind of a stringy, smaller version of the von Trapps.

The Schumann Concerto began with disunity from Welser-Möst and the VPO, including a bad pizzicato. As for Hagen, he

proved himself dutiful, workmanlike. It is to his credit that he did not descend to bathos; but he was not particularly inspired. Nor did he make a particularly impressive sound: It tended toward whininess. But, when *piano*, it was far better, even beautiful. In any case, you could always turn your ears to the VPO.

The major piece on the program came after intermission, and that was Bruckner's Ninth Symphony. Welser-Möst led a sensible performance—but there was nothing really to distinguish it. It did not stumble, and it did not soar; it did not leave cold, and it did not overwhelm. It was a hard performance to criticize—it was just . . . there. The VPO, however, is an orchestra virtually made for Bruckner, particularly with those rich, glowing strings. And how strange to hear horns that do not flub. I must tell you, however, that the symphony ended rather like the concert began: with a series of bad pizzicatos.

And here is a footnote: It's a source of anguish to some people that the VPO has few women in it. And the violinist, on this occasion, in the concertmaster's chair? She was a concertmistress.

And now to opera (uh-oh): Over the years, readers have heard me describe, lament, and decry many productions at the Salzburg Festival. There is a futility or danger about doing this. You know what they say about wrestling with a pig? There's no percentage in it: You get dirty and the

pig likes it. Well, if you denounce Salzburg opera productions, they like it, thinking that your denunciations confirm them in their innovative excellence. You're a fuddy-duddy, you see, and they are fresh and daring, advancing the art of opera. Keeping it "up-to-date," you know; preventing it from "stagnating."

Directors are particularly violative of Mozart. By what they have his characters do, they change his operas around, making the librettos nonsensical, and often clashing with the music, too. (If you want to know how to direct Mozart, you will find it in the music.) Donna Anna actually likes and seeks out Don Giovanni. And, in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the Countess and Cherubino are actually getting it on—Susanna is getting it on with him, too. In fact, they have something of a three-way. Just the way Mozart and Da Ponte intended, huh?

When it comes to Salzburg opera productions, I have sometimes found it helpful simply to close my eyes and think of England.

A particular shame about this year's *Marriage of Figaro* is that Salzburg had a gold-plated Mozart cast—who did not deserve to show their wares in such a production, or mis-production. In the title role was Luca Pisaroni, who has a streamlined bass well suited to Mozart. He is a fine actor, too—looking, when goofing off, like Roberto Benigni. The Countess was Dorothea Röschmann, who was not at her best the evening I attended: The voice was more heavily draped than usual. But you will take Röschmann on her very worst night, because she is a Mozartean (and other things) for all time, or at least a long time.

The Count was Gerald Finley, who sang well and acted superbly: This was a klutzy and volatile Count, one it was hard to take your eyes off. Susanna, Marlis Petersen, was completely winsome: just as Susanna should be, or can be. You have seen and heard saucier and sassier Susannas, but there was something about Petersen's more demure approach that was irresistible. (She was as demure as the production allowed.) Cher-

ubino was Katija Dragojevic, from Sweden (yes), who not only sang well, but interestingly: An occasional lack of vibrato—a flattening out (but not of pitch)—was effective. Incidentally, the way they did her hair, she looked like Alfalfa, from *The Little Rascals*.

Best about this evening was the Vienna Philharmonic, led by Daniel Harding (the young Englishman). The orchestra was in its full glory, and I had never heard Harding more commanding. He let the score have its breadth, eschewing the fast-fast tempos that many conductors now favor in Mozart. Seldom has *The Marriage of Figaro* seemed so symphonic to me. Harding brought out the music's nobility and greatness, in addition to its sparkle, mischief, and so on.

I must tell you that, when an especially cherished moment came, I did close my eyes: What was onstage was asinine and wrong; I thought it might be in part a favor to Mozart to close my eyes, and simply savor what he had created.

I don't wish to dwell on productions—there is little percentage, as I've said—but let me add one word: The director, Claus Guth, has apples on the stage, symbolizing temptation. Characters toss them to one another. Apples! The oldest symbol in the book (literally)! Yeah, that's visionary, all right. These hip transgressive modernists are surely several steps ahead of us squares.

Gautier Capuçon and Gabriela Montero have paired up (professionally). He is a young French cellist, the brother of the violinist Renaud, of whom he is sometimes the duo partner; she is the youngish Venezuelan pianist known for her improvisations. In the Grosser Saal of the Mozarteum, they played an all-Russian recital. It began with the Sonata No. 1 of Schnittke: a work that is bleak, harrowing, and terrifying, like much of Schnittke's output—like the Soviet Union. Halfway through, you're liable to think, "Might as well die now." This is a very well-made sonata, whose materials are few but sufficient. Capuçon played in masterly fashion: with care and conviction. Montero supported him ably. (I

don't mean to slight her role, but this is a very soloistic piece for the cello.)

And I'll tell you something funny: The sonata contrasted weirdly—jarringly—with the perfect weather we were having in Salzburg that evening. In fact, the entire city was radiating well-being and contentment, as it so often does. Never have I perceived a greater incongruity between music and surroundings.

From Schnittke, our duo went on to two famous and beloved sonatas, the Prokofiev and the Rachmaninoff. The Prokofiev is an extraordinarily enjoyable work. In many quarters now, “enjoyable” is a putdown, but it need not be, and should not be: Prokofiev made this piece to be enjoyed. As for the Rachmaninoff, it is one of the great Romantic sonatas for any instrument, despite some structural unwieldiness. Playing the Prokofiev, the young French cellist sounded quite Russian, complete with growls in his sound. And the pianist was both playful and *marcato*, as this sonata demands—as so much of Prokofiev demands. In the Rachmaninoff, she was natural and freewheeling, rather like the music itself. Capuçon was much the same. These two approach music with gusto—with relish—which is probably why they feel themselves kindred spirits.

The audience in the Grosser Saal responded with great enthusiasm, and the pair laid on three encores—one of which was an arrangement of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*, very nicely breathed. And I will provide a footnote—just an observation, of a socio-cultural nature: In America at some point, presenting organizations started giving flowers to boys—to men—at the end of an evening. Before, it was just girls. I remember Bryn Terfel in Carnegie Hall one night, mocking this new practice beautifully, plucking out a flower from his bouquet for his accompanist (male). Well, in Europe—in Salzburg, at least—it's still girls only.

Salzburg staged Handel's *Theodora*—an oratorio, not necessarily to be staged. But

such stagings are the fashion now, or becoming so. We have entered a very visual and theatrical age. (There was even a staged song recital in Salzburg this season: by Patricia Petibon, a French soprano.) In Christof Loy's production of *Theodora*, “characters” do a lot of standing around while other people sing; they look at those singers with various dramatic expressions. It is all quite arty, artificial, to my mind. The soprano sings while being carried away (literally: in someone else's arms); the countertenor strips to his boxer shorts. And so on. To me, it's all unnecessary, and at times even a detraction, but others swear by what they regard as a “full realization.”

What is inarguable is that Salzburg had two of the finest singers in the world on that stage: Christine Schäfer and Bernarda Fink. (The latter is scandalously underfamous.) Was the Grosses Festspielhaus a little big—a little *gross*—for Schäfer's voice and technique? A little, maybe—but just a little. Bejun Mehta was the countertenor, and he sang with his usual intelligence and stylishness. Joseph Kaiser, a rising Canadian tenor, sang beautifully and earnestly. Not to be forgotten is Ivor Bolton, in the pit. He conducted the “Freiburgers”—the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra—and did so with clear expertise and commitment. Such leadership has the effect of making you, in the audience, committed too.

An evening of chamber music in the Mozarteum included a piano trio by Schumann—his first one, in D minor, Op. 63. The violinist onstage was Joshua Bell, the superstar from Indiana. He likes chamber music, and participates in it both skillfully and enthusiastically. I remember an all-Dvořák evening in Carnegie Hall in particular. And he was absolutely sparkling in the Grosser Saal, throughout this Schumann. He was completely alive, musically, and that made the whole performance sort of quiver. The second movement had its wonderful little gallop. The violinist's sheer lyrical sensitivity in the slow movement was amazing. In the last movement, when the music turned to D major, it was as though

the sun had come out. Again, this entire performance was fully alive.

I do not mean to suggest that the other two players were incidental—only that the violinist was key. The cellist, Steven Isserlis, did his part commendably, and so did the pianist, Dénes Várjon. He is from Hungary, and what a shocker: another good pianist from that country. They grow them there almost like they do goulash (if goulash could be grown).

The applause for the Schumann was not only robust but raucous, rowdy, and that is fairly rare for a chamber concert. The reaction was understandable, however. Of the dozen or so performances I heard in Salzburg this year, none was better than this.

A rarity occurred on the stage of the Grosses Festspielhaus: Anna Netrebko, the glamorous and excellent opera star, gave a recital. Her program was all-Russian, with Rimsky-Korsakov on the first half and Tchaikovsky on the second. These were “romances,” as we call Russian songs (not for entirely logical reasons). Netrebko performed very well. She was songful, rather than operatic, in her romances, but she was not in the least shy, and let out her sound when appropriate. Her native language and her timbre go together like a hand in a glove. I noticed a dog not barking: She never sharpened, as she frequently does in other languages, Italian in particular. Technically, she was very surefooted: She was confident, justifiably so, and that let you sit confidently in your seat. She sang very few bad notes. And she “sang clean”: that is, she traveled directly and accurately from note to note, rather than sliding, scooping, and so forth. Interpretively, she was very smart and, of course, personable. This is a very, very good native musician.

Accompanying her was Daniel Barenboim, the conductor-pianist (this night a pianist). He was at times tentative and awkward, but he was always attentive, caring, and creditable. He did some first-class playing in certain songs. Netrebko performed two encores, by the way—neither a

Russian romance. The first was Dvořák’s “Songs My Mother Taught Me” (in Czech) and the second was that standard encore, Strauss’s “Cécilie.” I had a memory, from years ago: In (New York’s) Alice Tully Hall, Olga Borodina, the Russian mezzo, sang a recital—all-Russian. She, too, offered two encores: “Ombra mai fu” and “Summertime.” Striking.

And here is a quick footnote, or second footnote: The Grosses during the Netrebko recital was sweltering and stifling, as on so many occasions. Everyone was fanning or mopping himself. Some years ago, in a public interview with me, the tenor Michael Schade said he was going to start a new political party in Austria: the Air-Conditioning Party.

Following Netrebko in the Grosses was Lang Lang, the young Chinese sensation. Let me say initially that he has the cockiest walk of anyone in music, or show business. He enters a stage as if owning not merely it and the hall, but all the world. Aprile Mollo’s walk is humble by comparison—and she’s a soprano. The pianist began his recital with Schubert’s late A-major sonata, D. 959. Lang Lang, a Schubertian? Oh, yes. With his talent, he can be anything he wants, as long as his head is on relatively straight. He did a number of “wrong” things in the sonata—and maybe the quotation marks should be taken off that word. But he was never stupid or blatantly unfaithful. And his playing at large was extraordinarily beautiful. For example, no one does limpidity better than he.

To the second movement he applied a spooky clinical quality that I had never heard—highly effective. In the Scherzo, he was admirably moderate in tempo, though he could play this music as fast as anyone. In his hands, the Scherzo was unusually *grazioso*. Only at the beginning of the last movement was his rubato really harmful—and he soon got on track, letting the music flow.

His gestures, while at the keyboard, can be off-putting: his gyrations, his flutterings, his self-conducting. What you might do is

remind yourself that music is an aural art: Close your eyes, and how does the music sound? That is how you must judge.

Later in the recital, Lang Lang played an assortment of preludes by Debussy. Some of them were absurd—absurdly interpreted (“La fille aux cheveux de lin”)—and some of them were exquisite and marvelous (“La cathédrale engloutie”). As we have long known, Lang Lang is a master colorist. And for him, a Steinway is a toy, an expensive and rewarding plaything. He ended his printed program with Chopin’s “Heroic” Polonaise. I have long written, and lamented, how changeable, how inconsistent, Lang Lang is: a mess one day (or moment), a world-beater the next. Late last season in New York, I heard him play this polonaise and wreck it. In Salzburg, he was thrilling in it: both suave and noble. And one thing could not be clearer: No one has ever had more fun playing the piano than Lang Lang.

Most musicians will play an encore or encores at the drop of a hat, almost without being asked—Lang Lang made his audience beg for one, and they finally got Liszt’s *Liebestraum* (the most famous of the three). It was breathtakingly beautiful, is all I can say.

To end, one more Mozart opera, and one more Salzburg production—this one also by Claus Guth. He has given his treatment to *Così fan tutte*. The former *Così* in Salzburg, directed by the Hermanns, Karl-Ernst and Ursel, featured badminton and a giant rock onstage (or was it an egg?). Also the continuo player: He, too, sat onstage, and interacted with the characters. Guth’s *Così* is slick, sleek, and “up-to-date,” reminding some patrons of *Sex in the City*. The girls live in that kind of apartment or home, and they are that kind of girl: boozing it up, etc. Mozart meets the hook-up culture. The maid Despina bops around listening to her iPod, and she does something vulgar with a bottle of liquid between her legs. I could go on.

In modern fashion, there is plenty of video in this production, which I think distracts, and detracts, from the opera: its mu-

sic and other old-fashioned, pre-Guth elements. You may feel you are watching television rather than experiencing an opera. A pander to the MTV generation? Also, Guth likes to have characters—he does this in *Figaro*, too—engage in coordinated gestures and movements, like the Pips behind Gladys Knight (only not as smooth). This is incredibly tedious and tacky.

As you might imagine, I could knock this production until the cows come home—but, but: However much I dislike this kind of production, and believe it does a disservice to Mozart, it is an excellent production of its type. Allow me a culinary analogy: You may dislike veal piccata—want nothing to do with it—but you would acknowledge a top-notch veal piccata made by a chef.

A word about the singers, a few of them? Salzburg’s cast was young, slim, and good-looking, reflecting the opera world’s new emphasis on the visual. Miah Persson was Fiordiligi, and she is a capable singer, but she did unfortunate things to “Come scoglio,” that great aria: It was oddly lax and irresolute from her throat. Isabel Leonard was Dorabella, and this young mezzo from New York continues her dazzling ascent. The aforementioned Patricia Petibon was smashing as Despina, both in her singing and in her acting (however much you may have objected to the direction). The veteran baritone Bo Skovhus was Don Alfonso: suave and cynical, yes—but also sinister. Seldom will you see such a sinister Alfonso, and Skovhus created chills.

I might mention, almost offhandedly, that there was no Italian in this cast—not a native Italian-speaker. Did it make a difference? A small one, yes. Sometimes you simply long to hear native Italian, especially in an extended and rather talky opera, such as a Mozart-Da Ponte one.

The Vienna Philharmonic, under Adam Fischer, did its job, and so did Fischer. Providing continuo was the impressive pianist and all-around musician Bradley Moore, a young American. He and his harpsichord were in the pit, not onstage. How conventional, almost fuddy-duddy, for Salzburg.

The media

Our diminished debate

by James Bowman

As I write, the media world continues to debate what Serena Williams said, since the noise of the crowd at the U.S. Open Tennis Tournament drowned out at least some of her words. By one account, those words included: “I swear to God I’m f— going to take this f— ball and shove it down your f— throat. You hear that? I swear to God.” Another subtracts one of these bits of improbable fornication and the double reference to the Almighty, making the threat only a hypothetical one: “If I could, I would take this f— ball and shove it down your f— throat.” A third account has it that this implied threat was unambiguously aspirational, in a detached and merely fanciful way: “I wish I could take this f— ball and shove it down your f— throat!”—as if to say that, in spite of the vehemence of the language, both Serena Williams and her interlocutor, a female linesman, both knew that this wasn’t going to happen. The linesman herself, however, who was presumably in a better position to hear the words than anyone else, apparently heard a threat against her life, which Miss Williams *was* overheard denying she had made.

Being “in the moment,” as she later put it, she claimed to be unable herself to remember what she had said, but whatever it was she had no regrets about it. “An apology? From me?” said the puzzled superstar in answer to a question from the press. “Well, how many people yell at linespeople? If you look at all the people that kind of yell at

linespeople, I think it kind of comes sometimes. Players, athletes get frustrated. I don’t know how many times I’ve seen that happen.” You’ve got to admit she has a point. Though she was later shamed into making an apology, she could not but have been aware that one of the privileges of celebrity is the right to have one’s sense of injustice against the world listened to by all—and be taken much more seriously than that of non-celebrities. One of my favorite “Dennis the Menace” cartoons, from (I think) back in the days when the late Hank Ketcham was still drawing it, shows Dennis and his little friend Joey alone together as Joey is howling with anger or pain. “What are you crying for, Joey?” a bemused Dennis asks him. “There aren’t any grownups around.” Being a celebrity means being a spoiled child with the right to assume that one is permanently in the presence of solicitous grownups.

Only one day after Miss Williams’s outburst, which cost her the semifinal match against the eventual Open champion, Kim Clijsters, another bona fide celebrity, the rapper Kanye West, marched onto the stage at the MTV Video Music Awards ceremony and interrupted the acceptance speech of the nineteen-year-old winner in the Best Female Video category, Taylor Swift, seizing the microphone from her in order to make his opinion known, both to his fellow celebrities there present and to the television audience at home, that another candidate, known as Beyoncé, had produced

the superior music video. It was a stunt he had performed at several previous awards ceremonies, though always before on his own behalf. Back in 2006, for example, he had stormed onto the stage at the MTV Europe Music Awards in Copenhagen to protest that the award for Best Video had gone to someone other than himself. At least on this latest occasion, his sense of cosmic justice was outraged on behalf of another, although he was said to have been drinking heavily beforehand and afterwards issued an apology to Miss Swift (and her mother) on his blog—which almost counts as an act of grace coming from someone who had said, after the Copenhagen incident, “If I don’t win, the awards show loses credibility.”

Mr. West’s own credibility, needless to say, has never appeared to be in any doubt, though he once appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* as Jesus with a crown of thorns on his head. Just a touch over the top? Not at all! Like Madonna’s staged crucifixion on a luminescent cross which formed the highlight of the show on her most recent American tour, the self-identification with the suffering Christ was only making explicit the monumental self-conceit and—the other side of the same coin—self-pity that are part of the contemporary celebrity’s birthright. So too, is the right to pronounce publicly on matters of political interest. Mr. West first caught the attention of the un-rapped public when, at another televised event, a benefit for the victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, he deviated from the script to aver that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” In the world of popular music, of course, that hardly even qualified as a controversial statement. Russell Brand, the British comedian who was the host of this year’s VMA ceremony for the second time in succession, got a headline or two out of last year’s ceremony by taking the occasion to call then-President Bush a “retard.”

Miss Williams’s and Mr. West’s celebrity crisis de coeur provided an interesting coda

to a week in which the ever-diminishing segment of the news *not* devoted to celebrity opinions or celebrity gossip had been dominated by President Obama’s televised address to a joint session of Congress on the subject of health care and the shouted comment, “You lie!”—which had rudely interrupted it—of Congressman Joe Wilson, who represents South Carolina in the Republican interest. Like Mr. West, Congressman Wilson swiftly apologized for his lapse of decorum; like Miss Williams, he pleaded in mitigation that his patience had been overtaxed. “I have respect for the President—I have respect for the office of the presidency. I would never do something like that again,” he said. “I just felt so provoked.” But his apology was deemed insufficient by some members of the other party determined to treat the humble Congressman’s self-arrogation of the celebrity’s privilege as a harbinger of the apocalypse. As I write, *Politico* is reporting that “a defiant Rep. Joe Wilson says he has no plans to make further apologies to President Barack Obama or House Democrats, setting up a showdown this week” with House Democratic leaders, who are “pushing a ‘resolution of disapproval’ against him.”

I predict that this one will run and run. Within a day or two, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*, among other media outlets, were bundling the two celebrity outbursts together with the Congressman’s as the latest evidence that, in the words of *USA Today*, “incivility is storming the gates.” I found it odd, however, that no one thought to ask which was the odd one out in this trio. Surely, it must be a matter of some public interest when a mere congressman starts behaving like a celebrity. President Obama as a celeb is one thing, but the representative from the second district of South Carolina? Perhaps he had learned the trick from the former governor Rod Blagojevich, whose book came out the same week, that if you’re not a celebrity already, bad behavior can make you one. We may all start to worry when the manners and mores of the celebrity culture figure in the ongoing political

“debate,” though that word is ever more inappropriate. As the thing that it once signified has almost died out, thanks in no small part to the celebrity culture, it might as well be used for this kind of competitive grievance-mongering—what Michael Kinsley calls “the Umbrage Wars”—which has so nearly taken its place.

Congressman Wilson himself must have been aware at the time of his boorish intervention that it could not have been a contribution to “debate,” in this old-fashioned sense, but instead signified debate’s obsolescence. So, for that matter, had the President’s speech. For a week or more before he gave it, the media were full of anticipations, pro and con, of what he would say. They treated his words, even before they were uttered, as being equivalent to deeds, and mighty ones at that, a further proof, if any were needed, that he, unlike some no-name Congressman, was entitled to the celebrities’ privilege.

That must be why his rhetorical reformation of the nation’s health care provision was treated by the media as being tantamount to the thing itself. And the thing itself glittered enticingly in the middle distance well before the President once more took it out of the garage to show it off. Who could not admire this dazzling utopian vision of universal and improved health care for less than we are now spending on nonuniversal, unimproved health care? Small wonder that the media’s reviews were all so positive (“a broad and forward thinking speech” with “a touch of greatness”—Keith Olbermann; “Obama came across like Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*: a bright-eyed young idealist up against entrenched power, old ideas, and obstructionism”—Tom Shales) that no one thought to warn of that annoying residual difference between politics and performance, close as the two so often are these days. It was easy to share Congressman Wilson’s sense of frustration, if not the method he chose for expressing it.

Not that that was any excuse for him. I

am very far from approving of such an outburst—so far, indeed, that I would eschew the word “lie” even if it had come during the Republicans’ turn to talk. It’s an old-fashioned prejudice, I know, and no one ever took any notice of it when I protested in these pages (see “The Scandal Lobby” in *The New Criterion* of November 2002) against the frequent accusations by Democrats of bad faith on the part of the late, unlamented Bush administration. Indeed, during the Bush years, the charge which was once considered to be—as it still is in Britain—censurable as “unparliamentary language” had become so routine as to have become a rhetorical tic on the part of that President’s many detractors, of whom this President was one. That their bad habit has yet to be broken was demonstrated by Mr. Bush’s successor when, only moments before Representative Wilson’s unfortunate intervention, he accused his Republican opponents of uttering “a lie, plain and simple.” It should be unnecessary to add that the parliamentary stricture against the use of the words “lie” and “liar” applies also to the executive, which was why (according to legend, anyway) Winston Churchill had to invent the euphemism of “terminological inexactitude.” Oddly, however, none of the many who criticized Representative Wilson so trenchantly (or none that I read) seemed to have noticed the President’s own lapse from civility and decorum.

This had come in reference to the now-famous “death panels” introduced into the health care debate by the former governor (and vice-presidential nominee) Sarah Palin, whom he did not mention by name. The words preceding those quoted above referred to “the claim, made not just by radio and cable talk show hosts, but prominent politicians, that we plan to set up panels of bureaucrats with the power to kill off senior citizens. Such a charge,” he added, “would be laughable if it weren’t so cynical and irresponsible.” Well, yes. “Cynical” implies that this false claim by unnamed “prominent politicians” was made in the knowledge that it was false. But its falsity

depended on his use of the word “plan.” It was true that there was no such plan *qua* plan; it was not true, however, that the plans there were and (at the time of writing) still are—to make the government, in effect, a major provider of health care—do not imply the rationing, at some point, of health provisions, or that this rationing does not, in turn, imply bureaucrats with the power to deny care on any grounds they choose, or that among those grounds there are highly likely to be considerations of the “quality of life” of senior citizens in decline.

The President himself said as much in an interview last spring with David Leonhardt of *The New York Times Magazine*. Therefore, if Mrs. Palin’s claim was a lie, it was so only in a technical sense, at most, and hardly “a lie plain and simple.” Yet the President’s incendiary charge against her—at least, it would once have been incendiary—of bad faith *in the same speech* was not even noticed by the media who were so eager to proclaim “the end of civility” upon the intervention of Congressman Wilson a few minutes later. As the media had themselves been calling the “death panel” claim a lie at one remove (it had, they said, been “widely discredited”) for some weeks past at that point, it was hardly surprising that they should not have found any fault with the President for calling it one.

But by the logic of their own cries of incivility against the Congressman, the shame of his charge lay not in its truth or falsity but in his having made it at all. By that logic, the media have been giving a pass to the Democrats for the same sin against our national comity for nearly a decade now. What did they think was going to be the consequence for the civility of discourse under a Democratic president? Yet Maureen Dowd was far from being the only commentator who saw in Mr. Wilson’s challenge evidence that “some people just can’t believe a black man is president and will never accept it.”

“No Democrat,” she insisted with a straight face, “ever shouted ‘liar’ at W. when he was hawking a fake case for war in Iraq.” No! They shouted it behind his back. Con-

stantly and tediously and, it must be said, without the slightest shred of proof for eight years—for had not Jonathan Chait called President Bush a liar on the cover of *The New Republic* even before September 11?—yet it was Congressman Wilson whom she labeled, with her finely honed feminine instinct for the jugular of masculine *amour propre*, as a “milquetoast” for saying it, once, to this President’s face. It might appear astonishing to a foreigner that she thought she could get away with such rhetorical double-dealing, but long familiarity with the ways of the media teaches us that it is not unusual. She could not have hoped to pass off her own weaselly evasiveness unnoticed without the presumption, shared by everyone she knows or is ever likely to read, that both mendacity and bad manners are things of which only one side of the political divide can conceivably be guilty.

Moreover, ill-advised though the Congressman’s shout may have been, the frustration which it expressed cannot have been unconnected with the media’s willingness to take everything the President said at face value. His claims on behalf of the various reforms under consideration and, in particular, on behalf of their fiscal responsibility (“I will not sign a plan that adds one dime to our deficits, either now or in the future. Period.”) would never have been allowed to lie unexamined and unchallenged if they had come from a Republican president. It could only have been on the assumption that Mr. Obama’s allegedly bewitching oratory was itself an earnest of the reforms he professed in it to seek that the speech had been treated with so much excitement and expectation in the first place, even before he had given it. “Lie” is an ugly word, inevitably inappropriate in all but the most extreme cases—at least it used to be so before it became so common during the previous administration—but there are many degrees of disappointment at the gap between word and deed that would be better described by other words, and that still remain as yet utterly unexplored by the media, through whose mer-

cilessly skeptical filters we once expected to receive our news.

As is so often the case, “media bias” proves a less-than-satisfactory description of a process that goes well beyond mere matters of bias and partisanship. The ever-expanding moralization of politics is a feature not just of the media culture but also of the culture generally: it is both cause and consequence of the celebrity culture. Rational differences between men and women of goodwill seem to diminish in number all the time, along with the debate (properly so-called) between them, so great is the enthusiasm in all quarters, on the right almost as much as on the left, for finding questions of right and wrong, good and evil, behind every political division. This increase in demand for moral purity places a premium on Obama-like avowals of good intentions while discounting the sordid calculation of those intentions’ practical consequences, should anyone of less than perfect intentions be bold enough to calculate them. Of politicians, as of everyone else, the only consideration that counts is that of *attitude*, and the attitude that counts is one of universal benevolence with taxpayers’ money.

One could not but have been struck by this same indubitable fact of political life when reading, watching, or listening to the effusions of respect and admiration that blanketed the public space on the death of Senator Ted Kennedy in August. Yet those of us who remembered the Senator’s viciously effective slanders against Judge Robert Bork in 1987, words that made Congressman Wilson’s untimely interjection look like a valen-

tine to President Obama, could hardly have been surprised that the media praised him for (of all things) his civility. “In these bitter times when anger and contempt seem to become the language of our politics, maybe it’s the old-fashioned joy Ted Kennedy brought to politics that we miss the most and need now,” said Terry Moran of ABC news.

Yet even one long inured to the inanity of the media’s Kennedy-sentimentality must confess to being gobsmacked at the following, written by Melissa Lafsky for the *Huffington Post* about Mary Jo Kopechne. “We don’t know how much Kennedy was affected by her death”—by the way, that’s not quite true, since he was reported to have broken the ice at parties by asking people if they had heard any new Chappaquiddick jokes—“or what she’d have thought about arguably being a catalyst for the most successful Senate career in history. . . . [One wonders what] Mary Jo Kopechne would have had to say about Ted’s death, and what she’d have thought of the life and career that are being (rightfully) heralded: Who knows—maybe she’d feel it was worth it.” Anyone capable of such moral imbecility as this can only be lacking in the self-knowledge that comes from the expectation of dialogue with those of different views. Like Maureen Dowd, Kanye West, Serena Williams, and Barack Obama, Ms. Lafsky is presumably able to live her life well-packed with insulation from any contact with the ghetto of the right-wing media, which is the only place she would normally have any chance of having to hear for herself the note of doubt and healthy skepticism that was amplified and distorted in Congressman Wilson’s desperate shout.

Books

Abandon all hope

by Andrew Klavan

Like many leftist nostrums, the doctrine sometimes known as political correctness accomplishes almost exactly the opposite of what it intends. The general P.C. idea is that there is some effective virtue in believing that what is fair is also true. If it seems good to us that all races should be of equal gifts and capabilities or that any disparity in competencies between the sexes is the result of societal influences rather than genetics, well, then we have only to close our lying eyes and think it so, and so it will someday be. Anyone who allows any expression of doubt or disagreement to cross his mind or pass his lips must be shamed into silence—the shame and silence themselves becoming instruments of the social change that will ultimately make the wished-for truth the truth indeed.

Yet rather than make the world less racist or sexist, political correctness only really serves to lend to both racism and sexism a glamour of individualism and honesty. So thrilled are we when P.C.'s tyrannical authority over our consciences is challenged by some direct expression of observation, common sense, or just good old-fashioned prejudice that we are startled into laughter. It's as delightful as watching a nun sit on a fifth grader's tack. Thus, I started laughing when I read the title of John Derbyshire's new book and continued laughing straight through to the end. This in spite of the book's thesis, which is its title: *We Are Doomed*.¹

The “we” is Western civilization, and the reason we're doomed, according to Derbyshire, has, in fact, a lot to do with political correctness or, at least, with its underlying assumption that the more unpleasant facts of life and human nature are culturally determined and therefore subject to change. Seduced by the false hope implicit in that assumption—or fearing the social ostracism that attends *not* being seduced—the best of us (we conservatives, of course) have lost our commitment to philosophical pessimism. In other words, if only we believed we were doomed, we might not be. Despair is our only hope.¹

Readers of *National Review* will recognize Derbyshire's name, and perhaps even shorten it to a friendly Derb. He's the mordantly witty former computer programmer who writes a regular *National Review* column, using his life as a British-American *paterfamilias* in suburban Long Island as a jumping-off point for disquisitions both learned and cranky on politics, science, and pretty much everything else. What distinguishes him from the rest of the distinguished *National Review* crowd is the ferociously non-doctrinal nature of his beliefs. He favors abortion rights and euthanasia. He opposed the last president's wars and expansive foreign policies. And though he expresses a well-reasoned disdain for dis-

¹ *We Are Doomed: Reclaiming Conservative Pessimism*, by John Derbyshire; Crown Forum, 261 pages, \$26.

missive atheism, he himself has lost his faith.

Plus, he's racist and sexist—and I mean that in the nicest possible way. That is, he believes that race and sex (or *gender*, as he so very rightly refuses to call it) play substantially determinative roles in many important human characteristics, including kinds and quantities of intelligence. Whites and Asians have evolved with higher I.Q.s than blacks and Hispanics. Men have evolved to be better at math than women. And so on. To believe otherwise, Derbyshire says, is to be guilty of a left-wing version of creationism, the idea that “the ordinary rules of biological evolution ceased to apply to *homo sapiens* when our species emerged from Africa.”

In *We Are Doomed*, Derbyshire's complaint—the big complaint into which he folds all his many smaller complaints—is that conservatives have not only forsaken such hard-boiled realism about the human condition but also its practical corollaries:

the recognition that there is little hope for improvement in this world; that such small hope as there is should be directed toward the actions of one, or a few; and that most of what governments do is wicked, when not merely pointless and counterproductive.

Instead, conservatives have bitten into the smiley-faced apple of optimistic delusion—the delusion that we can somehow improve the lot of mankind either through large-scale social engineering or simply by pretending very loudly that things are other than the way they are. Derbyshire's response: “Happy talk and wishful thinking are for children, fools and leftists. We are conservatives. We know better.”

From this starting point, he goes on to detail what exactly he thinks we do know: that the joys of “diversity” are largely nonexistent; that illegal immigration will destroy our country if not curtailed; that the federal government has become over-powerful and its arrogant, dishonest politicians immovably entrenched; that our

economy has been overspent into ruin, that our culture is exhausted; that men are becoming powerless and redundant, even while women remain particularly susceptible to unrealistic and authoritarian ideas of governance; that our educational system is a racket run by corrupt unions and nutso ideologues; that our religion is dying in the face of science; and that science offers precious little consolation for the tragedy of life. And that's just the good news. The bad news is that it's pretty much too late to do anything about any of it, except notice it, which, as Derbyshire points out, has its own compensations: “We pessimists . . . are not only wiser than the smiley-face crowd; we are *better people* . . . because we know that most of the improvements that can be made in human affairs must be made by us ourselves.”

Now, it might seem that this whole end-of-western-civilization business is poor material from which to fashion an amusing read. Yet even at its we-are-doomiest, *We Are Doomed* possesses a droll buoyancy that makes pessimism seem, in Derbyshire's *mot juste*, “bracing.” His glum British humor, his unswervingly scientific approach, and his pure fearlessness in expressing his opinions made this reader burst out laughing every couple of disconsolate pages. The best moments—and they pervade the book—are when Derbyshire dissects clearly mendacious leftist academic studies, social theories, and journalistic practices meant not to inform but to hide or disguise uncomfortable facts. Pointing out that both educational authorities and news agencies have conspired to suppress information about the racial make-up of the criminal classes, for instance, Derbyshire remarks, “The assumption is that if not told these things, the great slack-jawed, dimwitted, unwashed mass of Americans will make no assumptions of their own.” Exactly. It's at moments like this that *We Are Doomed* feels like a barbecue of sacred cows: meaty, with an iconoclastic wickedness that adds a certain spice.

It does seem possible, however, that in the dark night of happy horse manure that is American public discourse, Derbyshire's politically incorrect responses shine with a greater brightness than they inherently deserve. Derbyshire's pessimism is radiant by comparison to P.C. malarkey—but is it only by comparison? Hard to say; impossible, at this point, to know. I do know that I frequently found myself accepting Derbyshire's premises only to balk at his conclusions. While the hysterical social crucifixion of those who notice differences in intelligence and talents among ethnic groups can only create a world of lies and a breeding ground for disastrous social policy, that doesn't necessarily mean that such differences are either intractable or decisive. Derbyshire clearly believes they are, or at least that it's "not an unreasonable assumption, given the great effort we have invested in erasing those differences, with such meager results."

Yet the dysfunction in poor black communities, for example, seems to me the *product* of precisely those wrong-headed efforts—so much so that I can't help thinking a change might do some good. A true meritocracy, with educational rigor across the board and no special allowances for race or sex, might lead to more surprising results than Derbyshire predicts. Seems worth a try anyway, in the understanding that there are many different pathways to many different kinds of success, and perhaps also in the simple faith that there's a place in the world for us all. Which, by the way, is another thing. Lying somewhere between gloomy apocalypticism and brainless optimism, a faith well-grounded in the tragic sensibility does seem to me to be a reasonable third option: faith, if not in the beneficent purposes of God, at least in the eternally recurring resurgence of man's better wisdom.

But never mind. Such rebuttals are in no way meant as criticism of this delightfully morose frolic down the yellow-brick road to hell. Inspiring inner argument is one of the things good books do. On this, at any rate, Derbyshire and I are in complete agreement: the mendacity of hope is poison to

intelligent discourse. Whether one ultimately finds his way to faith or despair, pessimism—that is to say, realism—is the only reasonable starting point.

The eternal incognito

Thornton Wilder

The Bridge of San Luis Rey
& Other Novels, 1926–1948.
Library of America, 750 pages, \$35

reviewed by Eric Ormsby

Of all the characteristics which set Thornton Wilder apart from the other great American writers of his generation and which make him something of an odd man out, it is his unexpected serenity which most unsettles. Even when dealing with tragic events, he is possessed of a decided equanimity. The shock of such events—a collapsing bridge in eighteenth-century Peru or (no less harrowing) a young girl's twelfth birthday revisited from beyond the grave in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire—is always captured from a vastly wider, indeed, a cosmic, perspective. The effect, curiously enough, is to bring those calamitous moments closer, to make them painfully familiar, as though they formed part of our own experience.

Such serenity has nothing to do with mere cheerfulness (though Wilder seems to have been a bracingly cheerful man), nor with aloofness (Wilder loved life with enormous gusto), nor with some specious, peculiarly American "optimism" (which he lampooned with mischievous affection). Nor is Wilder's serenity a matter of bland indifference. It is a tragic stance. It represents an acceptance of the ultimate dismantling of all our dreams, expectations, and most fervent longings; at the same time, it holds these up close, cherishing them as momentary flickerings of significance, the way children cup fireflies in delighted hands. It is a stance which brings with it the recognition that, though we lose

everything, the lives lived, the love given and received, confer a value beyond loss.

In the famous closing sentences of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, his early masterpiece, Wilder wrote, “Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.” In a lesser writer, this could have been a pat ending. As so often in Wilder’s plays and novels, the message, the moral, teeters on the brink of banality, comes dangerously close to the embroidered motto on the crocheted tea-cozy: “Home Sweet Home” or (even more sick-making) “Love Conquers All.”

Wilder had been a schoolmaster at the Lawrenceville School, and, as a writer, he remained a moralist as well as fabulist; for all his sophistication, he was a wry Aesop, much given to cautionary nudges. The tendency—no doubt reinforced by Amos Parker Wilder, his overbearing, “octopus-like” father (as he described him, with typical misspelling, in an early letter)—was in him from the start. In another letter, he owned up to “an ignoble passion to be didactic that I have to fight with.” Still, it may be in just such adroit tightrope treading between homespun maxim and harsh fact that Wilder’s singular distinction lies. He refuses to puncture the time-worn “verities.” Quite the opposite: he defiantly scours them until they shine again.

Serenity isn’t a conspicuously American trait; our authors seldom aspire to the Olympian. (Whitman comes closest but is too clamorous.) Nor is serenity fashionable: it lacks the requisite edginess as much in vogue in Wilder’s day as in ours. It has a stodgy, rather mildewed sheen. Serenity is the sort of trait we associate with such pedestaled behemoths as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (the full name says it all). And, in his serenity, as well as in several other respects, Thornton Wilder may be the most like him of all our writers. Not that this is really so odd: Emerson, Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and the Transcendentalists were ardent Goetheans—in those days every manse

housed a would-be Faust. Wilder’s take was different; less systematic, more instinctive. Though he knew German and German literature remarkably well, the attraction went deeper. After participating in the 1949 Goethe Bicentennial Festival in Aspen, Wilder wrote to his older brother Amos, “most of all I love Goethe. Nobody ever loved anybody like I love Goethe.” It’s typical of Wilder that that last impish sentence could be a line from a Broadway musical; it virtually hums itself.

In the new Library of America edition of Wilder’s early novels, stories, and essays (which appears two years after his *Collected Plays and Writings on Theater* of 2007, also edited by J. D. McClatchy), these traits are everywhere much in evidence. In addition to *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, the volume includes his amazingly accomplished first novel *The Cabala* (1926), *The Woman of Andros* (1930), *Heaven’s My Destination* (1935), and *The Ides of March* (1948), together with six short stories (including the previously unpublished “Précautions Inutiles,” written in 1922–23) and four essays on fiction: “On Reading the Great Letter Writers,” an essay on Gertrude Stein’s *Four in America*, and two essays on James Joyce.

McClatchy’s notes are spare but informative, though some of Wilder’s own errors remain uncorrected, such as when he refers in an essay on Joyce to “the Sutras of the Koran” instead of “the suras.” The chronology of Wilder’s life and career is a marvel of concision, as lively as it is detailed. I hope that a third Wilder volume is in the works which will include his last two novels, *The Eighth Day* (1967) and *Theophilus North* (1973), along with some of his many essays and lectures, as well as selections from his voluminous, and quite wonderful, correspondence. (It would be interesting, too, to have some of his unpublished work available, particularly excerpts from his extensive commentaries on Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and on the Spanish playwright Lope de Vega, subjects he pursued obsessively for decades.)

If I press the comparison with Goethe, it isn't only because Wilder was equally versatile in both drama and fiction (though, of course, he wrote no poetry), nor is it because he seems to have cultivated a notion of *Weltliteratur* not so different from Goethe's, drawing on French and Spanish and German literature for his plots and characters with complete aplomb. Among many possible examples, I might cite the compelling character of Doña María, Marquesa de Montemayor, in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, modeled on that of Madame de Sévigné, whose letters Wilder knew well, and *The Matchmaker*, his 1954 comedy (later transformed into *Hello, Dolly!* on Broadway) was based on the nineteenth-century Austrian playwright Johann Nestroy's farce *Einen Jux will er sich machen*. Almost all Wilder's plays and novels depend upon such genial marauding of the past. But the affinity goes deeper than these incidentals might suggest.

Like Goethe, Wilder was both profound and frolicsome. This is a note he struck from the outset. In *The Cabala*, his first novel, he tells us that the Princess Alix d'Espoli displayed, as the consequence of all her sufferings, "a pure well of heartbroken frivolity." This is a keynote of Wilderian serenity. It goes beyond facile paradox, but, at the same time, it depends upon the oldest of artistic conventions. The frivolous but heartbroken princess is a type. In all his novels and plays, Wilder reveals himself as a typecaster of genius: The Merchant, the Friar, the Marquesa, the Salesman, the Woman of Andros, and many others are distinct types, stock figures.

Wilder's acuity in spotting the eternal type under a character's idiosyncratic lineaments is on display throughout his work, and it extends to his letters. Of his friend Ernest Hemingway, he could write, in a 1926 letter from Paris to his mother and sisters, "Ernest is just a Middle Western kid whose genius and health and good looks and success have gone to his head a little." This isn't the impression of the young Hemingway we expect, and, yet, by strip-

ping him of all his usual traits—the swagger, the machismo, the ruthless ambition, the highly mannered prose style—Wilder captures something fundamental, something vulnerable and forgivable, about him. He has been reduced to a type ("a Middle Western kid"), but the reduction has made him somehow larger; it has set him squarely in the scheme of things. Wilder's palpable sympathy for his fictional characters has little to do with their individuality; it is what is universal in them that moves him.

When he turned his sharp eye on individual foibles, he did so within a wider compass. Consider his treatment of the undeflectable George Brush, the evangelical traveling textbook salesman of *Heaven's My Destination* of 1935. Brush, whose name echoes both "Fuller Brush" and "brash," is keen on self-improvement:

He got up and began to shave. It was his custom while shaving to prop up before him a ten-cent copy of *King Lear* for memorization. His teacher at college had once remarked that *King Lear* was the greatest work in English literature, and the Encyclopaedia Britannica seemed to be of the same opinion. Brush had read the play ten times without discovering a trace of talent in it, and was greatly worried about the matter. He persevered, however, and was engaged in committing the whole work to memory. Now while shaving he boomed away at it.

What's amusing in this passage isn't so much Brush's opinion of Shakespeare's "talent" as his sheer doggedness in reading, declaiming, and learning the play by heart because he believes that his perseverance will improve him. It is trivial, a passing moment which nevertheless lays bare a deep and universal aspiration. By such means, Brush believes, he will succeed in remaking himself, in learning finally "to be happy." He will become, at last, the man he believes himself to be. Brush is not portrayed as either ridiculous or pathetic; we recognize the impulse that propels him. The joke is

gentle, but it's on us too. Haven't we all entertained such edifying projects for self-betterment, propped up beside the toothbrush and the safety razor? In his preface to *Our Town*, Wilder described his own greatest play as "an attempt to find a value above all price for the smallest events in our daily life." This is one such "event," almost too ephemeral to be noticed, and, yet, like so many others throughout Wilder's work, it opens onto larger vistas.

In a breezy letter from Milan of February 12, 1970, some eight years before his death, Thornton Wilder advised the younger writer James Leo Herlihy to "see to it that in every novel you write . . . you touch all bases: death and despair and also the ever-renewing life-force, sex, courage, food, the family." And he reinforced the message by concluding, "Touch all bases to make a home run." Though this might seem like a slick formula for the concoction of potboilers, it describes Wilder's own artistic agenda quite accurately. He adhered to it during his long career and it brought him more than a few home runs. Still, it came at a cost. After his death on December 7, 1978, his friend Malcolm Cowley wrote that Wilder was "the most neglected author of a brilliant generation." Neglected? Almost everything he wrote, from his first prizewinning short story to his final bestselling novel, was acclaimed; he received the Pulitzer Prize three times, along with any number of fellowships, honorary degrees, residences, and prestigious lectureships, all of this crowned by the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963. Nevertheless, one knows what Cowley meant. Though he fully deserves it, Wilder doesn't yet enjoy the critical esteem of a Hemingway, a Fitzgerald, a Faulkner.

Perhaps this too has something to do with that sly serenity. In his wonderful essay "On Reading the Great Letter Writers," Wilder wrote that "Art is confession; art is the secret told" (Again, shades of Goethe who claimed that his work formed "a great confession.") A few sentences later, quite characteristically, he qualified the dictum by adding,

But art is not only the desire to tell one's secret; it is the desire to tell it and to hide it at the same time. And the secret is nothing more than the whole drama of the inner life.

Wilder, you might say, hid the secret of his art in plain sight, concealed within "the smallest events in our daily life."

"I long to be ordinary as Elinor Wylie longs to be respectable," he quipped in a barbed letter of 1925, but being "ordinary" while a splendid camouflage, isn't the surest way of attracting "critical esteem." Wilder couldn't have cared less; he once wrote to a friend, "How good for me to be always tangential to someone else's whirlwind," and he meant it. In "Spiritus Valet," his first short story, which he wrote in 1918, when he was not quite twenty-two years old, Wilder described his elusive protagonist Sebastian Torr as "the great self-concealing poet, the eternal incognito." It was his own most prescient epithet.

Kingdom of iron & rust

Adrian Goldsworthy

How Rome Fell: Death
of a Superpower.

Yale University Press, 531 pages, \$32.50

reviewed by Bruce S. Thornton

Empires have been a hot scholarly commodity of late. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States in a position of global military, economic, and cultural dominance similar to that possessed by England from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, and in antiquity by Rome for half a millennium. Even before the terrorist attacks on September 11 compelled the United States to increase its global presence even further, friends and foes alike were fretting over the existence of what a French Foreign Affairs minister called a *hyperpuissance*, a "hyperpower" certain to overreach and meet the fate of other arrogant imperial powers, an estimation

typically delivered with a heavy dose of proleptic schadenfreude.

Given this topicality, the last several years have seen numerous volumes on the British and Roman empires and how their histories and fates can illuminate America's global dominance. The subtitle of Adrian Goldsworthy's *How Rome Fell*, "Death of a Superpower," suggests another entry in this flourishing sub-genre. Goldsworthy is an ancient historian with an emphasis on military history, and he has written several books on the Roman empire and army, including the well-received *Caesar: The Life of a Colossus*. Despite, however, the promise of lessons for the present hinted at by the subtitle, the greater value of *How Rome Fell* comes from its being a reliable, reader-friendly survey of Rome's decline and fall, "one of the great mysteries of history," as Goldsworthy styles it. That is achievement enough, given the complexity, chronological reach, and numerous sources one must master to understand the collapse of what Edward Gibbon called the "stupendous fabric" of Rome.

Goldsworthy first offers a brisk survey of the various theories—over two hundred, by one scholar's count—attempting to explain the reasons for Rome's collapse. The ancients saw moral decline as the key to Rome's fall, whether they were pagans blaming Christians or Christians like St. Augustine blaming idolatrous pagans. Like the ancients, Gibbon looked to a moral decline abetted by a Christianity that weakened the ideals of public service: as Goldsworthy summarizes, "The Romans failed in the end because they no longer deserved to succeed." After Gibbon, modern scholars variously concentrated on uncontrolled immigration, or "social problems and class tension" worsened by economic problems such as an "over-taxed peasantry being squeezed to pay for the spiraling costs of maintaining the army." Usually reflecting the concerns of the historian and his time, other proposed factors have included climate change and demo-

graphic decline. Still other historians dismiss the very idea of "decline" and focus instead on continuity, concentrating more on society, culture, religion, government, and law than on arms and men. For them, "decline" has given way to "transformation."

Goldsworthy, in contrast, surveys the larger canvas of Rome and its decline, including the early empire as well as the later stages that interest most modern scholars. Like Gibbon, he begins with the "golden age" of the Roman Empire, the reign of Marcus Aurelius in the second century A.D., but, unlike Gibbon, who carried his story up to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Goldsworthy stops in the sixth century with the reign of Justinian. Along the way, he discusses the history, politics, culture, wars, and the great men and women of this half a millennium, also examining external and internal problems with which Rome had to deal.

One of the most troubling issues was succession. The death of Aurelius returned Rome to the chaos of the early empire with its collection of imperial psychopaths and incompetents. His son Commodus's character was as vicious as Nero's, more interested in playing gladiator than in running the empire. This task fell to "court favourites," some "capable, others utterly corrupt and many somewhere in between"—all were eventually executed. The result was disorder, paranoia, intrigue, and conspiracy, which distracted the emperor from tending to the complex business of a far-flung empire beset by enemies. Thus Rome passed, in the words of the historian Dio, "from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust" at the death of Aurelius, and a pattern was set for the next five centuries.

Other problems followed the chaotic process of succession. Warmongering was a good way for emperors, particularly insecure ones, to acquire prestige and win the favor of the army. Dependence on the army, however, created in its turn numerous sources of conflict and disorder, as well as new claimants to the purple. The great scale of the empire meant that emperors had to delegate

military power, but the success that often followed a governor's or commander's campaign became a spur to usurpation. Hence the constant civil wars between the various pretenders and the paranoia and violence that haunted emperors, who were trapped in "a vicious circle, as each new assassination or rebellion by a usurper, no matter how quickly it collapsed, made a renewal of civil war more likely." This "vicious circle" persisted through the late empire's history, albeit broken, at times, by exceptional leaders like Diocletian or Constantine.

Another constant problem was the presence of "barbarians" on the empire's borders. In the east, a resurgent Persian empire intermittently nibbled at Rome's border provinces. To the northwest, various Germanic tribes incessantly raided Roman territory. Neither enemy threatened Rome's existence at first, but the frequency of their incursions meant they had to be dealt with, further solidifying the need for large armies that fed dynastic struggles. Eventually, the intensity of such raiding increased and finally led to the large-scale invasions of the fifth century, which culminated in the sack of Rome by Alaric's Goths in 410.

At the mundane level, life in Rome after the sack went on much as before. As Goldsworthy notes, overthrowing the empire was not the ambition of the Goths, who were too few for such a task. What Alaric wanted was "to win rank, position, and as much security as possible within the Roman system." He also realized "that Roman laws were necessary to run a peaceful state." In short, Alaric did not want to destroy Rome but to exploit its higher civilization. Despite the continuity of business as usual, however, Rome's sack had enormous symbolic power and psychological impact, simply because "the imperial government had been incapable of preventing the sack happening in the first place." Along with the many semi-independent tribal communities allowed to settle within the western provinces, this loss of prestige and the exposure of the emperor's inability to deal definitively with the bar-

barian incursions hastened the western emperor's loss of power.

The remarkable reign of Justinian in the sixth century, which saw a brief recovery of the western provinces that had been taken over by migrant Germanic tribes, was, in the end, merely the final act of Rome's imperial dominance. Corruption in the imperial bureaucracy and in the army, constant conflict with Persia, and a devastating plague spelled the end of the dream "to take back the lost Roman territories in the west and recreate the grandeur of the old, united empire." The western empire was on its way to becoming the kingdoms of Medieval Christendom, while in the east a merchant named Muhammad would create a faith whose adherents would destroy Persia and absorb much of the Byzantine empire.

So why did Rome, the colossus dominating the Mediterranean both east and west, eventually collapse? The causes mentioned earlier, such as economic and demographic decline, suffer from a lack of evidence. But much evidence does exist to suggest that endemic civil wars caused by the difficulty of legitimate succession, along with the marginalization of the senatorial class of soldiers and administrators who had helped run the early empire, fatally weakened the empire in the West, thus inviting further encroachment by external enemies:

Each civil war cost the empire. Anything gained by the winning side inevitably had to be taken from other Romans and a prolonged campaign was likely to involve widespread destruction within the provinces where fighting occurred.

In addition, this chronic disorder put a high premium on personal survival rather than on service to the state or the ideal of "what Rome was for." The government "became first and foremost about keeping the emperor in power—and at lower levels, about the individual advantage of bureaucrats and officers."

Goldsworthy is cautious about what Rome's decline and fall can mean for con-

temporary America. The differences he notes, particularly the absence of any problems with the transference of power in modern America, justify such prudence. Yet Rome's fate does offer some suggestive observations. The creation of a "short-sighted and selfish culture," along with large, ever-expanding bureaucratic institutions, can lead to an emphasis on personal success and wellbeing rather than on what is good for the state as a whole, a good arising from the knowledge of and belief in what the legitimate purpose of a state is. Despite these caveats, Goldsworthy ends his masterful survey with two cheers for America: "Nothing suggests that the United States must inevitably decline and cease to be a superpower in the near future. We ought to be glad of that, since none of the likely alternatives to this situation are very appealing. This certainly does not mean that America can afford to be complacent."

Doubt wisely

Robin Robbins, editor

The Poems of John Donne.

Longman, Volume One, 460 pages, \$208

Longman, Volume Two, 529 pages, \$208

reviewed by Paul Dean

The continued existence of the Longman Annotated English Poets series, begun in the more expansive publishing climate of the 1960s, is a miracle, although the cost of these volumes puts them beyond the reach of many who would benefit from them most. The aim of the series remains fullness of annotation, and in this Robin Robbins proves himself a worthy addition to a line of editors of Donne going back almost a century to Sir Herbert Grierson. He even achieves the commentator's Holy Grail, a page filled entirely by notes with no text at all. Now that editing is so often a collaborative enterprise, as in the Variorum edition of Donne which is still in progress—part of which I reviewed in *The New*

Criterion of March 2001—it is good to have the whole of a poet's output scrutinized by a single mind.

Robbins's is the best edition of Donne by an individual scholar since A. J. Smith's, back in 1971. Like Smith, and unlike some other previous editors, who took the earliest printed texts as their starting-point and collated them with manuscripts, Robbins starts from the manuscripts, the most important of which was copied, possibly direct from Donne's own written version, by his close friend Rowland Woodward. The justifications for his choice of base text are carefully argued and, as far as I can judge, generally convincing. The dating of Donne's poems is notoriously vague—only the two "Anniversaries" in memory of Elizabeth Drury, his patron's daughter, were printed in his lifetime—but Robbins does his best, citing parallels with other works whose dating is more secure, such as Donne's prose letters and sermons or assigning topical allusions with proper caution.

Given the impossibility of a chronological arrangement, the edition is organized by genre. Volume One includes epigrams, verse-epistles to friends, love lyrics, love elegies, and satires; Volume Two, the awkwardly named "religion poems," epithalamia (wedding-poems), verse-epistles to patronesses, commemorations, and the Anniversaries.

Most people know Donne only through a score of anthology pieces, usually lyrics and a few religious poems. Such an acquaintance slights the formal variety of his work and gives too much weight to his poetry as urgent personal utterance. To read through all the poems is to become aware how often his motive in writing was practical, whether to flatter a patron, please a friend, or simply practice a convention—and to realize the problem of taking sincerity as a criterion of success. For example, two of Donne's most moving love poems, "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day" and "Twickenham Garden," are probably written with Lucy, Countess of Bedford (to whom Donne also addressed seven verse-epistles), in mind. The "Noc-

turnal” may date from 1612, when she was seriously ill. Donne’s hopes of advancement, Robbins points out, might have died with her, but it does not follow that the poems are simply further exercises in flattery. Their tone is apparently more personal and engaged than in the rather stiff epistles. Yet tone is in the ear of the hearer, and gauging the speaker’s stance is tricky; Donne often had an almost Wildean sense of the protean nature of the self and, again like Wilde, resorted to paradox to do justice to the complexity of his insights:

O, to vex me contraries meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot
A constant habit, that when I would not
I change in vows and in devotion.
As humorous is my contrition
As my profane love, and as soon forgot.

That is not to say, however, that no coherent personality is detectable behind the poems. Donne himself could be misleading. He liked to emphasize the division between his licentious youth and his pious maturity, as in the poem just quoted, which has encouraged a facile polarization of his poetry into “early” love poems and “late” religious ones. A more helpful approach comes from a sermon he preached in 1617, in which he argued that anyone turning from a worldly life to a religious one will retain something of his former cast of mind: a covetous person will be eager for the riches of Heaven, a voluptuary will ardently desire God, and so on. Thus Solomon, “whose disposition was amorous, and excessive in the love of women,” redirected his metaphors in the *Song of Solomon*, “having put a new, and a spiritual tincture, and form and habit in all his thoughts, and words,” and wrote love poetry to God.

Perhaps we should take this hint and look in Donne’s poetry for its unity and continuity, rather than insisting upon an artificial divide. It is, after all, one of the so-called Holy Sonnets which ends with this startling apostrophe to the Almighty:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.

What connects the amorous and religious poems is their concern with the difficulty of keeping faith. There are some routine exercises in misogyny such as “The Curse” or “Go and catch a falling star” (which appears in forty-six manuscripts, making it one of Donne’s most popular poems among contemporaries), but the poems which present love as a kind of religion display an exquisite balance of playfulness and wonder, as in “The Relic” where Donne imagines the disinterment of his and his mistress’s bodies, which shall be received as relics of saints, and accordingly outlines the miracles they performed, beginning with “First, we loved well and faithfully,” and concluding:

These miracles we did; but now, alas,
All measure and all language I should pass,
Should I tell what a miracle she was.

The sudden tenderness of the last line, with its more colloquial use of “miracle,” is a world away from the earlier smart ingenuity.

Among other poems, this love-religion also occurs in “The Canonization,” which begins with rueful expostulation—“For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love!” but moves to a higher plane altogether:

The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us: we two, being one, are it.
So to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

I think Robbins mistakes the tone here in speaking of the poem’s “religious parody.” As he points out, the phoenix’s rising from its ashes was a traditional symbol of the resurrection of Christ. Donne’s lines remind me rather of Shakespeare’s “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” published in 1601; Robbins tentatively dates “The Canonization” 1604.

I am not insisting that Donne read Shakespeare's poem, although he does seem to remember some of the plays in his poems, as Robbins notes (the elegy "To his Mistress on Going Abroad" is an example); the image was common enough. What links them is their depth of feeling. The total oneness of the lovers is more than just a bright idea.

My reservation about the tone Robbins hears in "The Canonization" is a reminder that it is almost impossible for an annotator to attend purely to textual matters, without becoming a literary critic. To choose among variants is to change the color of the poem. In Holy Sonnet VII ("Spit in my face"), did Donne write "For I have sinned and sinned, and only he/ Who could do no iniquity hath died," or "and humbly he"? Woodward's manuscript says "humbly"; this, Robbins comments, "may preserve D's own thought" and "is unlikely to have been invented by a scribe." Quite so: but the note continues, "The whole poem is about the amazing reversal of roles in the Christian legend." (It was not a "legend" to Donne: this tendentious word exceeds an editor's brief.)

Did Donne, in the elegy "To his Mistress Going to Bed," write "cast all, yea, this white linen, hence:/ There is no penance, much less innocence!" or "There is no penance due to innocence"? The late William Empson argued tirelessly for the latter. Robbins's note simply asserts that the manuscript evidence "is overwhelmingly in favour of 'much less,' whatever readers may prefer to read." The refusal ever to mention Empson by name is a baffling feature of the edition. I can't believe Robbins hasn't read the first volume of Empson's *Essays on Renaissance Literature* (1993), which is devoted almost entirely to Donne (yet it is not in his bibliography); if he rejects its arguments, as he clearly does, he ought to give his reasons.

As a matter of courtesy, so major a figure cannot simply be ignored. Moreover, Robbins's Donne is quite different from

Empson's. The modern-minded radical, interested in contemporary science and astronomy and embracing heretical theological views, is transformed into a markedly old-fashioned, even purblind, character, happy to cling to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Galen; too ignorant of mathematics to understand Kepler or Galileo; and "not seriously affected by astronomical theories or observations." Robbins's notes (too many to cite) convince me that there is a case to answer here: that, whatever cognizance Donne took from contemporary learning, he remained in many ways medieval in outlook.

In keeping with this, Donne's theological views in the poems oscillate fascinatingly between Catholicism and Protestantism. The scholarly consensus is that he had rejected the Catholicism of his upbringing once and for all by the time he entered the service of Sir Thomas Egerton in 1598 (that is, when he was in his late twenties). His satires, written in the years leading up to this, record some of his struggles of conscience; they were admired by Pope, who rewrote two of them, and deserve to be much better known than they are. Satire 3 responds to the admonition to "Seek true religion" with "Oh where?" and dramatizes the unappealing choice between Rome, where the truth may have been located "a thousand years ago" but now only shows its "rags," and Geneva, where religion is "plain, simple, sullen, young,/ Contemptuous."

Donne rejects various compromise positions—passive acceptance of the status quo or the lazy view that all brands of Christianity are equally true. It will be no good on Judgment Day to say "a Harry [Henry VIII] or a Martin [Luther] taught thee this." The conclusion is as strenuous as it is subtle:

Be busy to seek her [Truth]; believe me this;
He's not of none, nor worst, that seeks the best.
Tadore or scorn an image, or protest,
May be all bad: doubt wisely.

At about this time, Robbins suggests, Donne wrote the sonnet beginning, somewhat ironically, "Show me, dear Christ, thy

they can have immediate access to the Beatific Vision in this world. Carefully read, the lines simply warn us against thinking that knowledge for its own sake is all the truth we need. The world is God's text, and we are like editors faced with the diversity and inconsistency of its variants. Despite my reservations, I have to say that not many of us would make as good a job of interpretation as Robin Robbins does, in nearly a thousand pages.

Living classicism

Rosanna Warren

Fables of the Self.

Norton, 343 pages, \$27.95

reviewed by Peter Filkins

Though Rosanna Warren bills her new collection of essays as “an occult autobiography,” the reader picking up *Fables of the Self* should not expect a self-indulgent tour through the author's life and legacy. Instead, her “investigation into the nature of literary selfhood” is just that: literary and investigative in true scholarly manner. In sleuthing through the complexities of how the self is depicted in poetry, Warren provides an adumbrated walking tour of poetry from Sappho to the present day. This itinerary also maps the landscape of the author's own self and sensibility, for Warren's pursuit of her various subjects is more personal than programmatic. Were the book intended as an exhaustive, academic study of the self in poetry, whole chunks would seem missing, whether the Romantics, the Metaphysicals, or even Shakespeare. Considered as a collection of essays, however, culled from twenty-five years of work, *Fables of the Self* is a sustained set of linked preoccupations, the fertile residue of a literary mind worrying its subject over time's jagged course.

That said, one wishes that the collection had a more coherent structure. Warren attempts an overall organization by collecting the essays in three sections that move in a

vague chronological order that aligns them under the rubrics “Antiquity at Present” (which ranges from the Greeks and Romans to Louise Glück, Frank Bidart, and Mark Strand), the “I as Another” in French poetry, and the relationship of “Poetry and Conscience” in Dante, Melville, Hardy, H.D., and Geoffrey Hill. The eclectic nature of this last set illustrates the collection's wide-ranging sensibility, but also how the author sometimes overshoots her mark. After a learned discussion of the pastoral in Theocritus, for instance, Warren links the “negative idylls” found in Strand's use of landscape as an “allegory for poetic creation [that] reenacts obsessively the sacrifice of the self,” only to admit that “I'm not trying to prove that Strand is imitating Theocritus; for all I know he has never read him.” Hence, as illuminating as the connection may be regarding to Strand's poetry, one wonders about the need to reach for Theocritus to make it. In contrast, the observation in the same essay that “the elevation of self, the poetry of me, me, me and Mom and Dad, stands in direct opposition to the sacrificial poetry we have been considering [in Theocritus and Strand],” seems more genuine in its tone and address, as well as more purely originating from a critical triage of the contemporary, rather than a somewhat rickety bridge to the past.

Warren is at her best, however, when most squarely planted in the past. She is not only immersed in Greek, Roman, and Symbolist poetry, but also able to bring their words to life before the reader's eyes. She continually lives up to her challenge to “feel the ancient poems as present, dangerous, and at work in us” in her effort to promote “a living classicism.” In practice, this supplies her writing with a liveliness that is as rigorous as it is refreshing, such as when she points out how a Sappho poem “runs from stanza to stanza like water pouring from basin to basin down a trout stream,” or when she observes that “it is one of the weird brilliances of Virgil . . . to have used the same verb for *founding* the city of Rome in the opening lines . . . and for Aeneas *planting* (or *founding*) his sword in

Turnus's chest at the poem's conclusion." While one might pick at the slight awkwardness of "weird brilliances," the point is a trenchant one that speaks to the thrust of the entire poem. Similarly, in assessing the poetry of H.D., Warren's suggestion that her "old Imagist elegance . . . should have been dipped in corrosive sublimate" shows her as ready to lower the boom of frank assessment as she is to open the door of critical illumination.

"My subject is knowledge," announces Warren at the start of her essay on Melville's poetry, and the theme holds for the entire collection. Though this differs from an exclusive focus on the self *per se*, the knowledge she is most interested in lies in the alchemic extraction of poetic value from the dross of quotidian subjectivity. "I think of a poem as a structure of weights and balances," she says in her essay on Hardy, "and of a fine poem as one whose resources—syntax, meter, rhythm, etymology, soundplay—work as carefully placed fulcrums to hoist statement to figurative height." It's an admirable sentence and sentiment, particularly for its focus on the poem itself. Her concern with the "self" does not indulge in the vagaries of the poet,

choosing instead to explore "the mystery by which brute life experience is transmuted into poetic figuration and patterned language."

The refutation of the personal is not the same as an arid depersonalization. Warren underscores this by including a brief memoir of the year she discovered her love of poetry while living in France as a young adolescent, as well as a "Coda" comprised of notebook entries from recent years. While the latter at times seems a bit too "occult" ("My spine a braid of pain" reads one entry; "Personality is born out of pain" she quotes from John Butler Yeats in another), such private musings work as bookends to Warren's more critical investigation, reminding us that we are, after all, in the hands of a thinking and feeling poet. All the learning, all the knowledge to be gained from these pages is not there for mere show. "To read is to take possession," Warren reminds us. "But it is also to give oneself completely, if temporarily, to the keeping of another mind." In the depth of the reading that informs it and the vigor which shapes its writing, *Fables of the Self* provides us with the opportunity for such keeping throughout.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion*:

The fall of the Berlin Wall at 20: a special section in November

with essays by Jonathan Brent, Anthony Daniels,

Donald Kagan, Roger Kimball, & Henry A. Kissinger

Virginia Woolf's essays *by Joseph Epstein*

The anti-Communist manifestos *by David Pryce-Jones*

Philip Larkin unmasked *by Denis Donoghue*

Watteau at the Met *by Karen Wilkin*

Fiction chronicle *by Stefan Beck*

New poems *by Morri Creech & Karl Kirckwey*

Letters

Yale's cartoon problem

To the Editors:

With reference to "Yale & the Danish Cartoons" ("Notes & Comments," September 2009), I believe that some expression of solidarity on the part of other Yale Press authors like myself is essential. It was just too outrageous that the Yale and Yale University Press administrations cut the images from Jytte Klausen's book *The Cartoons That Shook the World*—a book about images and a dispassionate, useful book that could be objectionable only to radical Islam.

For my own part, I have already banned the Press from bidding on further books of mine. This is, first of all, a self-protective move. I don't think there's any coffee good enough that I'd enjoy being told over it that my finished, fully edited manuscript is going to be neutered because of a report I'm not allowed to see without swearing secrecy. Since I write about politics and religion, such a scene is a likely danger for me. But I would urge all authors who are even considering a relationship with the Press to stay away from this non-publisher. A doctor who prostitutes a patient, selling her body, shouldn't be called a doctor anymore but a pimp. Yale Press, after breaking a crucial relationship of trust with an author's mind and work, should be called a lickspittle of fanatics and forfeit any respect or consideration from other authors.

Perhaps those of us already under contract with the Press should follow its own example to show the full implications of its decision. My translation of the *Aeneid*, which has been out for over a year, is doing well, but shouldn't this alarm me? This epic poem is arrogantly pro-Western, advocating the Roman conquest of the world in the interest of peace and justice and denigrating Middle Eastern cultures. Shouldn't I, in the "prudential" interest of "preventing

violence," stop promoting this book that could offend Muslims? Shouldn't I form my own confidential team of advisers and demand the removal of the inflammatory passage? And what about my book in progress, a translation of a Roman novel (*The Golden Ass* of Apuleius) that includes a scene of sexual congress with a donkey? How could I in good conscience do the work I contracted to and hand Yale Press an unexpurgated manuscript?

Sarah Ruden
New Haven, CT

A case of murder?

To the Editors:

Pat Rogers criticizes Jeffrey Meyers for his description of the Earl of Stafford as the "murdered Thomas Wentworth" ("Cheerfulness Breaks In," June 2009). According to Rogers, the Earl was not murdered but the subject of "parliamentary impeachment." But it is Rogers and not Meyers who is mistaken. In point of fact, the parliamentary impeachment failed when the House of Lords refused to convict and the Earl was executed under a Bill of Attainder without proof of any wrongdoing. Meyers was reasonably accurate when he characterized this as murder.

Aldan Markson
Union, NJ

Pat Rogers replies:

Aldan Markson is right of course that the impeachment of Stafford failed in the Lords, but to describe a parliamentary bill of attainder as "murder" is an extreme use of words, unless the term is taken to mean "judicial" (i.e. legal but morally unwarranted) killing. Normally, a murder is defined as an unlawful killing, but parliament had the right to pass a bill of attainder, with the royal assent, whether or not this was the proper course to take. As it happens, I agree with Markson that Stafford was treated in an extremely cruel and unjust way, but it's not clear that we can call such things murder as ordinarily understood.