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March 2009

A monthly review
edited by Hilton Kramer & Roger Kimball

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Notes & Comments: March 2009

Christophobia on the march?

Writing in these pages a few years ago, the philosopher Kenneth Minogue discussed the rise of "Christophobia," that species of politically correct prejudice against Western civilization that focuses its animus on the doctrines and traditions of Christian civilization. Has Christophobia come to Wiley-Blackwell, the distinguished English academic publisher? Therein lies a still-unfolding tale.

Some background: In 2006, Wiley contracted with George Thomas Kurian to produce a multivolume *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*. We presume Kurian was a known quantity. He is an industrious encyclopedist who has edited or co-edited dozens of reference works on divers subjects. A look at his bibliography shows that he has a particular interest in Christianity. His new edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, for example, was published by Oxford University Press in 2001.

Kurian and nearly four hundred contributors beavered away for two years and, in June 2008, presented the publisher with a compendious manuscript that dilated on everything from "Apologetic World Views" to "Worship, Services and Settings." According to the editor's foreword, the encyclopedia endeavored to be "panoptic," exploring not just theology and history but delving into the influence of Christianity on civilization broadly construed: "music, art, literature, architecture, law, visual arts, performing arts, society." Accordingly, among its 4000 entries there are as many articles about figures such as "Bach," "Copernicus," "Poussin," and "Christopher Wren" as there are on "Abelard," "Mysticism," and "Medieval Christian Legends." Interested in a primer on "Albanian Christianity"? You've come to the right place. Ditto "Mormonism," "Bacon (Francis)," "Bacon (Roger)," not to mention "Gregory the Illuminator," "Martyrdom," "Forgiveness of Sins," "Pelagianism," "Rapture of the Saints," and "Transubstantiation."

On June 3, 2008, Rebecca Harkin, Wiley-Blackwell's religion editor, emailed an enthusiastic response to Kurian, congratulating him on the "tremendous undertaking" and looking forward to the "very exciting" prospect of seeing the book in print in both a paper and online version. She also mentioned that the final part of his advance would be forthcoming, publisher-speak for "You've done your bit to our satisfaction, now here's the rest of your dough." *Nunc*, that is to say, *dimittis*.

In the following weeks and months Wiley-Blackwell did what publishers do: they digested the manuscript. It was copy-edited, proofread, fact-checked, and corrected. The whole four-volume work was set in type, printed, and bound. According to Kurian, although the book was not scheduled for publication until 2009, it was

launched at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion in November in a celebration presided over by Ms. Harkin. Early reviews, posted on Amazon.com, commended the Encyclopedia's "authoritative articles, sensible bibliographies, and consistently illuminating treatments" (Mark A. Noll, University of Notre Dame), its "nearly exhaustive . . . scope, including a wide range of authoritative essays" (Edwin Yamauchi, Miami University). Happiness and bonhomie in evidence everywhere.

Then, on November 28, four contributors, all editorial board members, detonated a bomb. They wrote to Kurian and Harkin to register their outrage at the "inaccuracies" and "highly negative, even racist characterization of Islam" in Kurian's long general introduction to the encyclopedia. His "aggressive rhetoric and malignant assumptions," they charged, "do nothing to advance scholarly understanding." Indeed, they complained that the introduction was more "propaganda" than scholarship, and that it failed to "observe the international protocols of professional scholarship." They concluded by demanding that the introduction be modified "to remove the offense thrust at Islam and other religions and to moderate the tone of confrontation and polemic."

Oh dear. On December 3, Harkin wrote to Kurian, following up on a conversation about the objections. There were no congratulations in this communication. Rather, there was a list of "contentious" and "problematic" passages. Bottom line: "Throughout the introduction," she concluded, "the shortcomings of other religions are highlighted but there is no corresponding criticism of Christianity (or it is very rare)."

According to Kurian, the criticism was metastasizing. What began as an objection to various passages in the introduction (which he claims he would have been happy to have answered had the criticism come earlier) broadened to encompass the encyclopedia as a whole. In a memo sent to contributors, Kurian said that the criticisms were meant to sabotage the project and strip it of its Christian content. Among the words or passages they want deleted are "Antichrist," "Enemy" (as referring to Satan), BC/AD (as chronological markers), "Beloved Disciple," "Gates of Hell," "Witness," "Virgin Birth," "Resurrection," "Evangelism" "Harvest," and any reference with an "evangelical tone" or citing the "Uniqueness of Christ and Christianity." They also object to historical references to the persecution and massacres of Christians by Muslims, but at the same time want references favorable to Islam.

Kurian has instituted two lawsuits against Wiley-Blackwell, one for breach of contract, one on behalf of the contributors. For its part, Wiley-Blackwell has halted distribution of the encyclopedia and has, according to Kurian, endeavored to retrieve copies already shipped with an eye to pulping the edition. Wiley-Blackwell has wavered on the pulping issue. Their official response is now coalescing around the charge that Kurian neglected to have his editorial board review the encyclopedia for scholarly adequacy. Wiley-Blackwell says it "entered into a series of written contracts under which a number of scholars in the field agreed to provide Advisory Editor services" for the encyclopedia. But there is no mention of that under the heading "Editor's Responsibilities" in Kurian's contract, which places the "sole responsibilty" for the accuracy and "high quality" of the encyclopedia with "The Editor," i.e., Kurian.

It is difficult to untangle all the threads of this episode. Certainly, there is plenty of egg to spread about the collective countenance of Wiley-Blackwell. As Kurian noted in an interview for the Catholic News Agency, when you publish a book "you edit the book and then publish. You don't publish a book and then edit." Wiley-Blackwell seems to be deploying what Edward Feser, in a piece on the controversy for National Review Online, identified as the John Kerry gambit: they were for publication before they were against it. Wiley-Blackwell trum-

pets the criticism of a handful of contributors and advisory board members. They neglect to mention the contributors and board members who side with Kurian. The sociologist Alvin Schmidt, for example, who contributed some seventy articles to the encyclopedia, told us that never before in his long career had he "run into this kind of politically correct nonsense."

So what do we have here? Another example of Christophobia? Was the *Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization* put on ice because, as Kurian charges, it turned out to be "too Christian, too orthodox, too anti-secular and too anti-Muslim and not politically correct enough"? Or is it merely a somewhat belated effort on the part of Wiley-Blackwell to live up to high-minded scholarly ideals? Part of the problem may be in that dichotomy—scholarly vs. Christian. As Kurian puts it, much of the criticism levelled against the encyclopedia assumes that "anything that is orthodox is not scholarly." But according to him the aim of the work was not to provide a critical, dispassionate survey of Christian civilization but rather to provide a sympathetic conspectus of its achievements. In today's elite academic culture, that may be enough to render a work suspect. Which is, as Kenneth Minogue pointed out, part of the corrosive legacy of multiculturalism now undermining the existential confidence of the West.

The dangers of "safety"

Of course, you needn't complain that a book is unfair to Muslims to prevent it getting around. The house of political correctness has many mansions. Consider, for example, the lunatic provisions of something called the "Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008." Never heard of it? You will. As the Manhattan Institute's Walter Olson points out in "The New Book Banning" (available on the *City Journal* website), this latest effort to protect us from ourselves stipulates that

> children's books published before 1985 should not be considered safe and may in many cases be unlawful to sell or distribute. Merchants, thrift stores, and booksellers may be at risk if they sell older volumes, or even give them away, without first subjecting them to testing—at prohibitive expense. Many used-book sellers, consignment stores, Goodwill outlets, and the like have accordingly begun to refuse new donations of pre-1985 volumes, yank existing ones off their shelves, and in some cases discard them en masse.

Really, you cannot make it up.

> Among its other provisions, CPSIA imposed tough new limits on lead in any products intended for use by children aged 12 or under, and made those limits retroactive: that is, goods manufactured before the law passed cannot be sold on the used market (even in garage sales or on eBay) if they don't conform. The law has hit thrift stores particularly hard, since many children's products have long included lead-containing (if harmless) components: zippers, snaps, and clasps on garments and backpacks; skateboards, bicycles, and countless other products containing metal alloy; rhinestones and beads in decorations; and so forth. Combine this measure with a new ban (also retroactive) on playthings and child-care articles that contain plastic-softening chemicals known as phthalates, and suddenly tens of millions of commonly encountered children's items have become unlawful to resell. . . . Penalties under the law are strict and can include $100,000 fines and prison time, regardless of whether any child is harmed.

Tocqueville, who warned that democracy was particularly susceptible to this sort of regulatory frenzy, would be shaking his head sadly were he here to witness this piece of legislative insanity. That fact is, as Olson points out, that "no one seems to have been able to produce a single instance in which an American child has been made ill by the lead in old book illustrations." The question is: how much more of this nonsense will we stand for?

Wolfe in sheep's clothing

by William D. Gairdner

A political ideology may usefully be defined as a structure of interdependent ideas. It is like a building: if you can falsify the foundational notions in critiquing it, the whole structure will collapse. Readers already comfortable with the political leanings and beliefs of Alan Wolfe, a political scientist at Boston College, will enjoy *The Future of Liberalism* because it will make them feel—especially since the election of Barack Obama—that they are safely ensconced on the cozy side of history.[1] His critics—I am one—will appreciate the book because it is rare to find quite so much earnest and contestable special-pleading for modern "liberalism" between two covers. It is a book that calls to mind the droll complaint that to do things like physics, or mathematics, or chemistry, you need a pencil, some paper, and a wastebasket. But to do political science, you don't need the wastebasket.

A reviewer's first duty to potential purchasers of a book, however, is to give them a clear sense of what it is about—and for that I am definitely going to need the wastebasket. Professor Wolfe has written a book interesting as much for its occasional nuggets of wisdom as for his display of polemical energy. From cover to cover he is galloping as hard as he can on what Laurence Sterne in his rollicking novel *Tristram Shandy* would certainly have described as his "hobby-horse."

With respect to topic, tone, balance, and what Wolfe repeatedly calls "fairness," he has done his evangelical best. He begins by defining and defending his terms by pigeonholing his mostly conservative enemies with humorless caricature, and throughout the book, he tries hard to distinguish and promote his personal and often heartfelt understanding of "liberalism" as the salvation of Western civilization. To his credit, what helps a reader stay the course until the end is Wolfe's awareness of the objections he may be stimulating. He curtseys to them in a timely way, just as the reader has mentally lined them up. He also makes a point of frequently scolding liberals, not for being wrong, but for not being sufficiently Wolfian in their liberalism.

One of my main objections to the book as a whole, however, is that with the exception of a few of the better chapters that manage to stay on topic, page after page of this book feels like a rambling lecture from someone who has launched himself into the field of debate like a steel ball into a pinball machine of ideas. The ideas light up when the ball happens to hit them, but there is no hint of where it will head next. So I think the best way forward is to follow the ball and react to some of his core ideas.

Wolfe writes that *liberalism* should be championed "as a reminder of Americans' connection to basic values that stretch back

1 *The Future of Liberalism*, by Alan Wolfe; Knopf, 335 pages, $25.95.

centuries." The two core liberal values, he insists, are "freedom and equality," and he locates them principally in the thinking of John Locke. The first objection to this statement is historical and moral. Locke himself and almost all the American Founders had a conception of virtue and the common good that was as clearly distinguished as can be imagined from the merely individual good and that, as President Clap of Yale asserted in 1765, demanded "conformity to the moral perfection of God." The most important "basic value" back then was that anyone uttering Wolfe's brand of hyper-individual, modern secular "tolerant" liberalism would have been considered an anti-social abominator out to destroy the bonds of community. The second objection is philosophical and was voiced in 1850 by Frédéric Bastiat when his philosophy of *liberty* was attacked by Alphonse de Lamartine because it did not include *equality*, and so, Lamartine argued, could not proceed to *fraternity*. Bastiat replied that the second part of such a program would always destroy the first, making the third impossible.

I have always told my children that liberty and equality (in the substantive sense of the latter that Wolfe says distinguishes liberals from conservatives today) are joined like a teeter-totter. As one goes up, the other must go down. This doesn't seem to bother Wolfe, who in discussing the rights conceived by the French and American Revolutions claims that "there is a direct line from the ideals of those revolutions to the welfare states of the contemporary world."

There is insufficient space here to demonstrate adequately the profoundly erroneous nature of this assertion. Suffice it to say that the American founding principle of equality had nothing to do with equalizing outcomes, and the French meaning of equality (spelled out in Article VI of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*) specifically stated that equality meant *before the law* only, and that all citizens are admissible to "dignities, positions, and employments, according to their ability, and on the basis of no other distinctions than that of their virtues and talents." Not a scrap of affirmative action there (which did not, however, prevent the French from trying it).

Wolfe's brand of liberalism is something else. He asserts that "as many people as possible should have as much say as is feasible over the direction their lives will take," and that "if this requires an active role for government, then modern liberals are prepared to accept state intervention" (in the economy, moral life, sexual life, family life, regulation of speech, education, hiring, affirmative action, and many more domains). So there is the plain and simple —very simple—and quite contradictory, equation: government direction (that is, coercion) will make you free. Wolfe justifies this pro-state position with repetitive litanies of the fears and horrors consequent upon the folly of conservatism: unemployment, low pay, disease, old age, ignorance, hunger, poverty, war, prejudice, and so on. For good measure (just to show more "fairness"), he does offer plenty of policy directives by which even liberals "ought" to abide. ("Ought" is the most frequent word in his polemic). There is some honest insight, too. With respect to the "direct line" to the welfare state he imagines, Wolfe does mention the real reason for it, and it has to do with crass opportunism, and not with theory: "Once people get the idea into their heads that they deserve dignity and respect, they will see no reason to stop with procedure and [will] go all the way to substance." But he has no objection to this.

Hence, two conclusions. As Harvard's Professor Harvey Mansfield has put it:

> From having been the aggressive doctrine of vigorous, spirited men, liberalism has become hardly more than a trembling in the presence of illiberalism. Who today is called a liberal for strength and confidence in defense of liberty?

Just so, by this standard, Wolfe is a modern anti-liberal, with a touch of the old Marxist nonsense thrown in about how free markets

always keep wages in "a vicious spiral" of low earning. By now he is so lost in theories, he deplores the "dependencies" created by markets (the yearning for higher wages) and by charities (that cause us to "beg for more") and says the welfare state is "an exercise in self-governance" (he really did say this) that seeks to bypass such dependencies.

But it is when he states that "the welfare state is an institutionalization of the moral idea of empathy" that I realize we are just thinking past each other, because for me the welfare state is the institutionalization, not of empathy but of political power in the wily *guise* of empathy. Its real operation—aimed at capturing the allegiance of all citizens—is to substitute progressively its own programs and functions for those voluntarily created by the people themselves in their civil associations, thereby to so weaken and atomize the myriad little platoons of a once-free society that individuals will be bribed into gradually letting go of the real ties that bind and will switch allegiance to the coercive humanitarianism of the state, the supposedly all-providing benefactor of their lives. Just so, modern politics, Wolfe admits,

> is all about dividing up and relying upon what the state has to offer, not about cutting back what it provides.

At this point, some understanding of how the original heroic anti-statist liberalism became Wolfe's groveling statist type is essential, for he seems unbothered by sacrificing the freedom of some, who ought to have "as much say as is feasible over the direction their lives will take" for the "equality" of others. The answer is that the modern liberal Director General will always decide what is "feasible," and Wolfe is unfazed by the fact that this is largely a zero-sum game in which governments that have no money of their own must first take it from taxpayers (or print it or borrow it to create deficits, which are just deferred taxes) and then distribute it to those they deem worthy. In other words, to get modern liberalism you always have first to rob a Peter to pay a Paul. A true classical liberal was someone who began by protesting just this sort of legal plunder and would have despised Wolfe's program. So what happened? How did classical liberalism mutate into its triumphalist modern form?

Partly it was because there was afloat at the time a corollary anti-Christian idea, a belief that all humans are born pure and without sin. Rousseau had famously argued in his *Social Contract* that we are born free and naturally good but soon a rotten society corrupts and enchains us, such that we must create a better world by bonding together in a unanimous General Will. In his novel *Emile*, he urged all free individuals to

> transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole.

Wolfe seems blind to the terrible consequences of this idea. Indeed, he mocks Edmund Burke's prescient warning of the time that Rousseau was "an insane Socrates" and accuses conservatives of believing that *The Social Contract* "contained a plot outline for the French Revolution." More careful historians such as Robert Nisbet have indeed concluded that Rousseau's theories supplied the foundation for the plot:

> It is in Rousseau's absorption of all forms of society into the unitary mould of the state that we may observe the first unmistakable appearance of the totalitarian theory of society.

Rousseau wanted to unify the people in a democracy of the One, and the French Revolution and the Terror were its predictable consequences, a historical demonstration awash in blood of the impossibility of producing fraternity by conflating liberty and equality.

John Stuart Mill, another of Wolfe's heroes, also argued in his famous if self-contradictory, tract *On Liberty* against a host of

tangled social and moral "oppressions." But he was aware of the horrors of the Terror and so took an alternative approach (even as he turned increasingly socialist). He opted for a democracy of the Many. Not for him any common moral bond or mystical General Will. Instead, he insisted that morality is entirely a private matter unless we harm someone else and initiated the modern doctrinal erosion of the ancient notion that morality is a public good held in common. Mill's revolutionary notion has proved so attractive that we no longer expect to have, nor can we any longer identify, a unified communal, or national, moral ground—except Mill's private moral relativism.

Just as this privatization of morality was taking place, those original freedom-fighting liberals saw that the human flourishing they expected to arise from more freedom was a resounding disappointment. With more freedom came more inequality of condition. As many people got poor as got rich. Most galling of all, they saw that many freely preferred the luxuries of laziness, ignorance, and charity to the sacrifices and demands of work and education. So embarrassed and ashamed were they by this result, this insult to their theory of freedom, that they turned to the state for support. They were still convinced we are free, but that for the creation of their earthly paradise some prodding or social engineering would be necessary.

Hence, our Wolfian "libertarian socialism," by now a condition in which most moral and sexual issues are considered under a libertarian standard of total privacy and freedom, while matters such as social security, medical care, income distribution, welfare, material standards of living, and the like are considered public objectives to be secured by the state. Another way of putting this is to say that we now have a polity in which citizens are assumed to have all the rights and governments, all of the duties. This is, alas, our world, and in defending the indefensible Wolfe amply illustrates its moral and political confusion. Let us turn to just a few examples from the hundreds in his book.

The first irony arises when Wolfe asks us to remove our individual rights and to

> imagine a world in which religion (or irreligion) is coerced, freedom of speech curtailed, economic activity directed and controlled by the state, and no one [he means unions] allowed to organize and bargain collectively to improve their economic condition—and you have a political system that can only be called illiberal . . .

Well, I took his suggestion and did try to imagine it, and, with the exception of the bit about unions, I recognized illiberal Canada, where I live, and much of the United States, which, for decades, has been trying to catch up with Canada's headlong embrace of libertarian socialism.

To wit: Christianity, the religious and moral foundation of both nations, has been all but forced from the public square, and secular humanism is mandated by law and edict in its place (irreligion is coerced). All Canadian provinces and the federal government now have "Human Rights Commissions" that specifically, and with considerable zeal, curtail all speech that is not deemed sufficiently "liberal." The embarrassing, illiberal public prosecutions of the well-known author Mark Steyn for his critiques of Islam and of Ezra Levant for republishing the Danish cartoons are cases in point. Most American jurisdictions have versions of these same extra-legal tribunals, and the universities in both countries—once bastions of free speech—are now among the most illiberal purveyors of political correctness imaginable: mini-Star Chambers dotted all across our once-free lands, everywhere fining people and mandating liberal "re-education" as a cure. In Canada, not a few mayors have been fined thousands of dollars for refusing to stage gay-pride parades in their towns, and one woman has spent a total of six years in prison for peacefully and repeatedly protesting abortion on

the public sidewalk in front of a clinic. Some curtailment.

As for economic activity, the history of both nations over the past century has been unidirectional: increasing control over enterprise by way of massive centralization and regulation of economic policy and law—over states/provinces, municipalities, individuals, and corporations—combined with tax regimes (and public debt) so onerous and punitive that neither country can be said to be economically free in any original sense of the word. I sold my first business because the government was telling me whom I had to hire (under policies of affirmative action, feminism, and multiculturalism), what wages I had to pay (under "pay equity"); it was even dictating the maximum allowable price of my product. I surrendered and got out. In terms of total tax burden (all forms of tax, obvious and hidden, from all levels of government), the citizens of both countries are now working for their governments almost six months of the year. I don't have to "imagine" Wolfe's illiberal world, because millions of us have been living in it for some time, and it is structurally and morally dangerous to true liberal values.

Structurally, we are endangered because many of the Western democracies are becoming tripartite states in which one-third of all taxpayers are employed by government at some level, one-third of the people are crucially dependent in some way on government support (welfare, Medicare, Medicaid, farm subsidies, and a gazillion other untrackable support programs), and one-third produces the income (the tax base) paid out in supports for the first two-thirds. Anyone can see that, as this develops in a mass "democratic" system, the first two-thirds will always gang up on the last.

The grievous moral hazard of so many modern welfare states that now carry so-called structural debt (because no political leader will risk demanding cuts in state services or that the people start sacrificing and working harder to pay it off) is that the cost of much of our current consumption will have to be paid by future generations of citizens who are not here to defend themselves against our appetites. In short, as a direct consequence of what Wolfe calls "liberalism's commitment to improving who we are," liberals are willing to treat the children of tomorrow as a means to his "liberal" ends today. Shame on them.

Wolfe then proceeds to argue we ought to improve who we are by eschewing, where possible, the "nature" arguments of many conservative biologists and sociobiologists (he rightly exposes Darwinists such as the intemperate Richard Dawkins as flounderers in their own philosophical contradictions). Instead, we must rely on the nurture of "artifice"—on man-made social, moral, and political improvements. To his credit, he is aware that in this area there are "profound questions for which there are no easy answers," and he even scolds the left for having fallen for biological schemes of improving nature via the artifice of "liberal eugenics." He does not mention that about 36 percent of all U.S. abortions are of black children, nor does he complain of abortion being used everywhere for sex selection against females.

At this point, he ought to be squirming, because although he supports a woman's "choice" in abortion—"under liberalism women must be allowed to control their own bodies"—he fails to explain why his own moral standard ought not to apply just as surely to an unborn child's body. Now modern liberals must be pushed to drill down here. They froth in outrage that slavery was/is a perniciously anti-liberal institution. And yet the fundamental legal device that makes slavery possible is the formal declaration in law of the non-personhood of the slave. But this is exactly, in every last detail, the same legal device liberals such as Wolfe rely upon to justify abortion. Beyond the sole distinction of the existence of the victim either inside or outside the womb, there is no effective difference between a declaration of non-personhood that creates a class of born-alive

victims that enables, sustains, and makes invisible to its perpetrators a regime of chattel slavery and a declaration of non-personhood that creates a class of alive, but not-yet-born imminent victims, and thereby enables, sustains, and makes invisible to its perpetrators the abortion regimes currently defended in the name of liberal democracy.

I have dwelt mostly on the first part of Wolfe's book, because his theoretical understandings and misunderstandings condition all his later policy prescriptions. In successive chapters that are not without interest, he zeroes in on the nationalistic militarism inspired by Romantic poetry and art to which he feels too many neoconservatives and even liberals have fallen prey. His chapter "Mr. Schmitt Goes to Washington" was the most engaging for me, because Carl Schmitt's ideas about the faults of liberal democracy are so interesting to thinkers both left and right. We can only guess, however, what Wolfe would say about "liberal democracies" such as the United States and Canada, where so much legislative authority has passed from the elected representatives of the people to judges, that is—What would he say is "self-directed" about our passage from parliamentary (or congressional) sovereignty, to judicial sovereignty? He also argues extensively that conservatives cannot govern because they don't want as much government as liberals do. But that is because they prefer what used to be liberal principles of self-reliance, local control, and personal responsibility to a controlling central government that sweeps in to solve all their problems, thus to rob them of the ability to direct their own lives toward their own ends.

I close by saying that in the shameless—or rather, in the proud—guise of political and moral neutrality and openness, Mr. Wolfe's *The Future of Liberalism*, though claiming to follow a venerable individualist liberal tradition, instead augurs for the soft-socialist and oppressive statism that is its badly deformed child. Those who welcome this state of affairs will find all the usual saccharine justifications between these covers, and those who deplore it will find that Wolfe offers plenty of material with which to criticize it.

The lingering stench: airing Stalin's archives

by Gary Saul Morson

As he wanders through the streets of St. Petersburg contemplating murder, the hero of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* notices "that special Petersburg stench" which seems to be everywhere. Somehow, that stench constitutes the atmosphere in which lethal and repulsive ideas arise.

When Jonathan Brent arrived in Moscow, he detected the same stench. It was 1992, just after the fall of the Soviet Union, and Brent seized a unique opportunity that, if not for him, would doubtless have been missed. He came to negotiate a deal to publish sensitive and secret documents from the Central Party Archives.[1] But despite the new openness, the old Russian smell, or spirit—the Russian word *dukh* means both—persisted. Brent noticed "the smell of Moscow—flat, unwashed, sour—an accumulation of fifty years without sunlight or cleansing breeze, as if inhering in the things themselves." The odor differed from the stink of garbage or stale apartment-building air in New York because it had no specific source. On the contrary, it seemed to be there all on its own, not like the smell of rotting objects in the refrigerator, but, rather, the smell of the refrigerator itself.

Brent describes how he learned to negotiate the bureaucratic obstacles, slovenly work habits, anti-Semitism, and lawlessness that make Russia enduringly Russian as he pursued what has turned out to be the most significant publishing venture of the past fifty years: Yale University Press's Annals of Communism series. About two dozen volumes already published reveal documents, never seen before in Russia or the West, of the greatest importance in understanding world Communism. Though invented by Lenin in Russia, totalitarian Communism has, after all, ruled nearly twenty countries and about 40 percent of the world's people at one time or another, and it has inspired true believers almost everywhere, including the United States. The documents show that, if anything, the ideology was more pervasive and dangerous than we thought.

The first volume in the series, *The Secret World of American Communism*, caused shock waves by demonstrating that the American Communist Party was not a group of home-grown idealists, as so many apologists claimed, but, from the start, conducted espionage and took orders directly from Moscow. Despite decades of leftist mockery and vilification, the basic picture provided by Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley of Alger Hiss and many others was correct. The Comintern, too, was from day one directed by Moscow as a tool of Russian foreign policy.

And despite the desperate strategy of throwing all blame on Stalin so as to excuse Lenin, *The Unknown Lenin*, which reproduces a selection from some six thousand

1 *Inside the Stalin Archives: Discovering the New Russia*, by Jonathan Brent; Atlas & Co., 304 pages, $26.

Lenin documents never before released, reveals bloodthirstiness that surprised even anti-Communists. During a famine, Lenin ordered his followers not to alleviate but to take advantage of mass starvation:

> It is precisely now and only now when in the starving regions people are eating human flesh, and hundreds if not thousands of corpses are littering the roads, that we can (and therefore must) carry out the confiscation of church valuables with the most savage and merciless energy.

"Can (and therefore must)": Leninist and Soviet ideology held not just that the end justifies any means, but also that it was immoral *not* to use the utmost cruelty if that would help. And it was bound to help in at least one way—intimidating the population. From the beginning, terror was not just an expedient but a defining feature of Soviet Communism. In *Terrorism and Communism*, Trotsky was simply voicing a Bolshevik truism when he rejected "the bourgeois theory of the sanctity of human life." In fact, Soviet ethics utterly rejected human rights, universal justice, or even basic human decency, for all concepts that apply to everyone might lead one to show mercy to a class enemy. In Bolshevism, there is no abstract justice, only "proletarian justice," as defined by the Party.

The series also published the last diary of the Tsaritsa, a volume on the Great Terror, and a documentation of the bloody war on the peasantry. One might imagine that, by now, there would be little of such importance to reveal, or, if there were, that the Putin regime, which has returned to praising Stalin, would call a halt. But the most important volumes are now in preparation: papers from Stalin's personal archives. Soon to appear is one documenting his rise to power. It will be possible to see how *strakh*—terror or fear—became the guiding feature of Soviet life. Even Bukharin, the Bolshevik leader whom Stalin executed, wrote from prison that the Purges were a brilliant stroke that would, by creating "*everlasting* distrust," allow the regime to achieve "a *full guarantee* for itself."

How did Brent manage to get these documents, arrange for their editing and publication, and negotiate with the FSB (formerly the KGB)? After all, signing a contract with the secret police is not exactly like sealing a deal with Wal-Mart. Brent had to learn how things work in Russia, and his book shows us the conditions—moral, personal, and material—that Russians take for granted but which are utterly unlike anything Americans have ever experienced. Describing the author's growing understanding of Russia, this long essay puts most conventional scholarship to shame.

Brent gradually realized that even though the Soviet Union had disintegrated, the Russian army had become a shadow of itself, and the Russian Orthodox Church had returned to official favor, the very feel of life—that smell of Russia—remained. He had to negotiate contracts in a land where contracts were still not binding. The process taught him

> how ostensibly obsolete cultural structures or expectations can replicate themselves in radically changed conditions of daily life, how culture persists longer than ideas and regimes.

If only American economists who presume a culture-free agent calculating his best advantage would grasp the point. Culture matters, and culture, above all, consists of habits we do not even notice because they shape the very possibilities of action, or even thought.

While supposedly living in a market economy, today's Russians understand making money by stealing, but not by producing. Efficiency remains a foreign concept. One scholar remarked that Russian spirituality allows people to deal with abstractions but leaves them unable to repair an elevator or television. Brent stayed in an apartment where "it seemed as if none of the objects . . . had ever been new but had come into the world already used and broken."

Going to one meeting, Brent became perplexed by an elevator showing two second floors—the sequence went 2, 2, 3—and at last found himself in a room still equipped with manual typewriters. He instantly recognized that his host, the head of publications of the Comintern archive, was wearing "a Soviet suit":

> What made such a suit "Soviet" I could never precisely identify, but it was a combination of cheap fabric, washed-out colors, old-fashioned, wide lapels, and a cut that was always slightly too big or too small.

Russia has progressed from totalitarian terror to Mafia-like thuggery, but, except for pockets of obscene wealth, it remains, as Herzen and Dostoevsky had feared, the land of eternal shabbiness.

Even the vulgarity is shabby. My favorite moment occurs when, in pursuit of the correspondence between Stalin and the sycophantic Bulgarian leader Dimitrov, Brent checked into a Bulgarian hotel. The most striking feature in his room, he muses,

> was not the paper-thin walls and the paper-thin blanket and the paper-thin mattress, and the sliver of soap in its silky wrapper on the washbasin, but rather that in place of the mint one might have found on one's pillow in an American hotel, there was a cellophane packet containing a single condom.

Brent worked with Alexander Yakovlev, the key liberal aide to Gorbachev and Yeltsin. In return for an important favor, Yakovlev got Yeltsin to allow him to have Stalin's private archives published. Yakovlev emphasized a point made by a handful of pre-revolutionary Russian liberals: that what Russia needs most is the concept of law. Without an understanding of legality as opposed to sheer arbitrary power, one of these liberals explained, democracy is impossible. On the right, the Slavophiles rejected law as contrary to the national spirit, and, on the left, radicals saw it as a surreptitious attempt to limit state power. In his copy of Lenin's works, Stalin underlined his predecessor's descriptions of the dictatorship of the proletariat:

> The dictatorship is power depending directly on force, not bound by any laws. The revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat is power won and supported by the force of the proletariat over the bourgeoisie, power not bound by any laws.

The Great Purges have puzzled scholars because they seemed to be directed at no particular group; local officials were given arrest quotas to fill as they saw fit. But precisely because of their senselessness, the Purges served the function of letting everyone know that no law would ever protect them. One usually thinks of a repressive regime as one that deals ruthlessly with dissenters, but in Soviet Russia no one was ever safe.

During his last years, Stalin invented the "doctors' plot." Supposedly, a group of Jewish doctors had conspired to murder Kremlin officials. When the doctors did not confess, Stalin threatened the investigators with torture if they did not get the doctors to say what was wanted. Of course, they could have just shot the doctors and made up confessions, but the regime needed constantly to prove to itself that its enemies acknowledged their wrongdoing and that lawlessness was all-powerful. Recalling the Cheka, the first Bolshevik secret police force, Stalin told the investigators: "You work like waiters in white gloves. If you want to be Chekists, take off your gloves. Chekist work—this is for peasants and not for barons." You must beat the doctors "with death blows."

Brent agrees with Yakovlev that, today, corruption serves the role that terror played for Stalin. It is not, as Westerners presume, a threat to the state but

> the very means by which the central government further destroys the rule of law and thereby can gain indisputable power for itself. The rule of law is a much greater enemy than [the oligarchs] Khodorovsky and Berezovsky.

In twenty-first-century Russia, corruption comes not from the breaking of law but from the absence of law.

No less than other Stalinist practices, the use of arbitrary power is not so much a choice as a habit, an intrinsic part of the culture, like Moscow's ineradicable smell. The fundamental structures of Stalinist power have never disappeared:

> They are rooted in social, political, and psychological traditions and habits. And because they are habitual they are all the more dangerous—because they are invisible and normal.

Also normal is extreme anti-Semitism. If Stalin had not suddenly died, and the doctors' plot had gone forward, the Jews of Russia would have undergone another Holocaust. Camps had already been prepared, and the chief interrogator voiced the regime's opinion that all but "a handful" of Jews were "potential enemies of the state." It is often forgotten that Russia produced the most widely disseminated anti-Semitic document ever written, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. A forgery concocted by the tsarist secret police, the *Protocols* purports to transcribe a meeting of the international Jewish conspirators planning to take over the world. When Nicholas II was informed the document was a forgery, he forbade its further use because, as he explained, bad means are not acceptable even in a good cause (i.e., persecuting the Jews).

The *Protocols* became the central text of Nazi propaganda, and it currently circulates widely in the Arab world, taught in schools and explicitly mentioned in the charter of Hamas. It still sells briskly in Russia, can be bought right outside the Kremlin, and is disseminated by extremist groups that have allied themselves with the Orthodox church. Believe it or not, few Russians have heard about the Holocaust and among those who have, many deny it. Yakovlev informed Brent that over two hundred openly anti-Semitic newspapers circulate in Russia. The Russian Nationalist Socialist Party has fifty to seventy thousand active members, mostly in Moscow. Any Russian Jew who does not consider emigrating from Russia needs counseling.

Among Brent's saddest discoveries is the fate of the Russian Jewish writer Isaac Babel. Brent lists several pages of writers, artists, and scholars who were executed, imprisoned, or otherwise repressed, but Babel's case is special because he was such a brilliant writer. I would venture that only three Russian prose works written since 1917 will be read a hundred years from now: Bulgakov's fantastic satire, *The Master and Margarita*, Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, and Babel's cycle of closely linked short stories about a sensitive Jewish commissar in a regiment of violent Cossacks, *Red Cavalry*. Babel's arrest and shooting in the great purges have long been known, but what Brent has discovered is that, during the course of the horrible interrogations, Babel ceased to be Babel at all. They took his soul. The documents reveal how "the system attacked his essence—his consciousness and self-identity. . . . Isaac Babel no longer existed as Isaac Babel." He loved Big Brother.

Babel's fate illustrates a key tenet of Soviet ideology, perhaps the single most important one. I have in mind the doctrine that there is no such thing as human nature or individual selfhood. As thinkers from John Locke to Margaret Mead and today's many "social constructionists" like to say, people are simply whatever they are conditioned to be. In his 1921 treatise, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*, Bukharin claimed that

> if we examine each individual . . . we shall find that at bottom he is filled with the influences of his environment, as the skin of a sausage is filled with sausage meat. . . . The individual himself is a collection of concentrated social influences, united in a small unit.

And that is *all* he is.

It follows that selfhood cannot be violated. Individual rights do not exist because

individuals do not exist. Human nature places no limit on social engineering because human nature does not exist in the first place. Brent concludes:

> The endpoint of Bukharin's logic is that everyone is a nonperson. . . . Inwardness and all that comes with it, selfhood, consciousness and conscience were nothing but the illusions of a long history of Western metaphysics. What remains after the illusions of the bourgeois sausage, such as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," universal justice, or truth are scraped away? Power alone and its terror, a fury that in Lenin's words can express itself and "therefore must." . . . The physical destruction of individuals had long been preceded by their philosophical negation.

Marxism-Leninism claims to be materialist, but, in fact, it is governed by ideas. It is the *idea* of social constructionism—certainly not empirical reality—that led Stalin and so many since to treat people as the wholly redesignable products of their environment, as so much sausage.

Stalinism was idealist in another, even more terrifying sense: it aimed at controlling from within the very thoughts we think. In a toast delivered on November 7, 1937, at the height of the Terror, the Great Helmsman swore to destroy every enemy:

> Even if he was an old Bolshevik, we will destroy all his kin, his family. We will mercilessly destroy anyone who, by his deeds or his thoughts—yes, his thoughts—threatens the unity of the socialist state. To the complete destruction of all enemies, themselves and their kin!

Even the worst of the tsars never thought of punishing relatives for a criminal's acts. But what is truly remarkable about this toast is the promise to murder people and their kin for thoughts. One must live in continual fear of one's own mind.

Brent begins his book with a memorandum written by Andrei Vishinsky, Stalin's chief prosecutor, to Nikolai Yezhov, the secret-police chief, about what he had seen in a tour of the Gulag. There were prisoners, Vishinsky explained, who had "deteriorated to the point of losing any resemblance to human beings." An interrogator during the doctors' plot wrote that, after one torture session, the elderly Dr. Vasilenko "lost his entire human aspect." Perhaps the most important lesson to come from the Stalin archives is that any ideology that does not admit the existence of human nature winds up destroying not only countless lives but also the human soul.

Under Putin, Russia has turned away from a fleeting opportunity to embrace legality. A sort of mafia rules without breaking the law—because there is no real law. And yet, by comparison with the Soviet period, Russia is free and humane. To be sure, any journalist or businessman who displeases the regime is likely to be imprisoned, maimed, or killed. But millions are not arrested at random.

Solzhenitsyn once asked why the bloodthirsty Macbeth killed only a few people while Lenin and Stalin murdered millions. He answered: Macbeth had no ideology. So far as we can tell, neither does Putin. Today no one tries to remake human nature. For the time being, and however precariously, the human spirit survives.

Sacred furor: Riccio & antiquity

by Andrew Butterfield

This past winter, the Frick Collection in New York held a small but captivating exhibition about the Renaissance sculptor Andrea Riccio. The show was a revelation, not only because it presented the works of a celebrated but little-studied artist. More importantly, the exhibition raised fundamental questions about the nature of the classical revival during the Renaissance. Active in Venice and Padua at the beginning of the sixteenth century, Riccio chiefly represented subjects drawn from ancient literature, and he worked almost exclusively for a group of erudite scholars, writers, and intellectuals who were at the forefront of the creation and dissemination of humanist learning. Riccio personifies the period's intense regard for Greco-Roman antiquity, and yet, for the modern viewer, what he treasured about classical art is completely unexpected.

According to standard art-historical opinion, Renaissance classicism is typified by its esteem for reason, restraint, order, and clarity. But Riccio's sculpture, made for the greatest authorities on classical culture of the time, is of a wholly different character. He emphasized intensity of emotion in the depiction of expression; he felt a keen fascination for representing moments of poetic or religious inspiration; and he often made sculptures that entailed the promise of magical or miraculous power. To be sure, Riccio, on occasion, portrayed classical civilization as a preserve of great learning and rational discourse, but he also depicted it as a time of mystery cults and blood sacrifice, ecstasy and rapture. Dionysus as well as Apollo beckoned to Riccio and his clientele.

Another surprise lies in his attitude to classical models. Art historians often imagine Renaissance painters and sculptors seeking the perfect imitation of the forms of ancient art, but Riccio displays a free and inventive approach to classical sources and antique subject matter. He sought to recapture the energy and pathos of classical art rather than merely to imitate its surfaces and shapes. In Riccio's view, the classical world was a realm of the mind and the imagination; he turned to it as a fount of inspiration, a source of creativity, not merely as an assemblage of rules to be followed. The revival of antiquity was liberating, not enslaving.

Riccio was based in Padua throughout his life, from his birth in 1470 until his death in 1532. Initially trained by his father as a goldsmith, he became a sculptor in the 1490s and practiced this art for the remainder of his career. He made several large public commissions, such as the Easter Candlestick in the basilica of Saint Anthony of Padua, but he is best remembered today for the small bronze statuettes he made for private collectors. In the fifteenth century, statuettes had been exceptionally rare, and it was only around 1500—and only in Padua and Venice—that sculptors began to make bronze statuettes in larger numbers. Riccio

was one of the first artists to do so; he was also one of the first for whom it represented a central rather than secondary part of his artistic production.

This change in production was related to a change in patronage. In the fifteenth century, only a few princely rulers such as the Gonzaga and the Medici collected small bronzes. But in Padua, Venice, and elsewhere in the Veneto in the sixteenth century, bronze statuettes were popular with a wider spectrum of the wealthy, and especially with the professional classes, such as lawyers, doctors, and professors. The audience for Riccio's statuary was not composed of educated rulers, such as Lorenzo de' Medici and Isabella d'Este, for whom art and learning were inevitably concerns of secondary importance. Instead, Riccio's clients were people whose success, status, and self-worth were based on their professional involvement with what they called the *studia humanitatis* and what modern scholars call humanism.

Padua and Venice are only twenty-some miles apart, and, in terms of their intellectual life in the Renaissance, they formed essentially one community. Around 1500, this community of scholars and intellectuals was fundamental for turning the new learning and new methods of humanism into an international movement. The University of Padua was one of the leading centers in the world for humanist scholarship in Greek and Latin literature, rhetoric, and philosophy; young men from all over Europe went there to be trained. Humanism was exported from Italy to England, France, and Germany in no small part by the professors at the University of Padua. Moreover, Venice was the European capital of book publishing, which was, at that point, still a new technology. About one-seventh of all the books in print around 1500 were issued there. Venice was especially distinguished as a site of humanist printing, most notably by Aldus Manutius, who published complete editions of the Greek and Latin classics as well as works by the modern masters of humanist learning such as Erasmus and Angelo Poliziano.

All of which is to say, Riccio made his art in the midst of an extremely sophisticated community, one composed of some of the most learned men and women in the world. The humanists of Padua and Venice were profoundly knowledgeable about Greek and Roman literature, art and culture, and they were actively engaged in the attempt to recover, restore, and transmit the wisdom and beauty of ancient civilization. Furthermore, Riccio's friends, associates, and patrons were among the key figures of this group. They included Giovambattista de Leone, the author of the symbolic program of the Easter Candlestick and a professor of philosophy in Padua; Niccolò Leonico Tomeo, the leading expert on Aristotle and the first in Italy to teach the works of the philosopher on the basis of the original Greek texts; and Raffaello Reggio, a world authority on Ovid and on Quintilian, the Latin author whose book *The Orator's Education* was a fundamental text for the humanist movement. In addition, Riccio was good friends with Pomponius Gauricus, the author of one of the first Renaissance commentaries on Horace. Gauricus also wrote *On Sculpture*, published in Latin in 1504. We have no proof that Riccio himself was friends with a scholar of Erasmus's renown, but there is no doubt that Riccio's patrons were closely associated with all the greatest humanists and writers of the time, including Erasmus, Aldus, and Poliziano.

One of the most striking features of Riccio as an artist is his concentration on the vivid expression of heightened states of feeling or being. He frequently sought to depict the satyrs, soldiers, shepherds, poets, and nymphs that populate his sculpture as figures captivated by the intensity of their needs or emotions. While other Renaissance artists often used used characters from antique myth and literature to represent ideal types and paragons of virtue, Riccio instead wanted his bronzes to show the breadth of human life. For example, his sculpture of a satyr caressing a satyress quivers with lust; and his statuette of a shouting soldier on

horseback radiates anger and fear. Riccio shows *Saint Jerome*, kneeling in prayer, to burn with spiritual thirst; and he depicts a *Drinking Satyr*, greedily sucking at a cup, glowing with physical thirst. Such images are portraits of expression, studies in sentiment and affect, where the investigation of experience, rather than the specific subject depicted, seems to be the main interest.

Riccio's great concern for strong expressivity was exceptional in the sculpture and painting of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century. In much of early Renaissance art, there was considerable restraint in the depiction of emotion. In general, only two kinds of scenes permitted the representation of vivid feelings: images from the Passion of Christ and narratives of mortals imploring or receiving the miraculous intercession of saints. Other subjects were treated primarily as exempla of moral or spiritual virtue; saints and heros were valued as figures beyond the passions and vicissitudes of daily life. Riccio's interest in sentiment and affect was so unusual that there are almost no points of comparison at all for some of the states he depicts. For example, so far as I am aware, no other sculptor of the time sought to characterize the experience of thirst. Similarly, Riccio's small bronze *Orpheus* conveys the ecstasy of poetic inspiration, whereas in most other images of Orpheus or the Art of Poetry the act of composing seems dull and earthbound.

Riccio was also deeply fascinated by inspiration as a subject. A surprising number of his sculptures show figures seeking or receiving either poetic inspiration, such as Orpheus and Pan, or religious inspiration, such as St. Jerome and Moses. In the exhibition at the Frick, perhaps the most telling expression of this fascination was a bronze relief from the tomb of Girolamo and Marcantonio della Torre, showing the victory of Fame over mortality. At the left in this allegorical image, we see Pegasus pawing the earth with his hoof to discover and reveal the fountain of the Muses on Mount Helicon. It is from the banks of this spring that the Muses first arose, and it is from its shores that the Muses plucked a reed to serve as a channel of inspiration to Hesiod, one of the earliest poets. At the beginning of the *Theogony*, first printed by Aldus in Venice around 1500, Hesiod says,

> The Muses plucked and gave me a shoot of sturdy laurel and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were aforetime; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally.

For Riccio as for Hesiod, inspiration was a kind of visitation of the soul or transformation of the self by an outside power—god or the muses—and it drew forth from within the recipient the higher mental and spiritual faculties of mankind. Such inspiration, too, represented a model of communication between man and god, poet and the muses, and scholar and antiquity, and, thus, it allowed for a more perfect understanding between the artist and his audience.

It is impossible to understand Riccio's art without recognizing that it comes from a world where belief in magic was common, even among the most educated and enlightened. Indeed, everyone in Renaissance Europe believed that sculptures, paintings, and other sacred things had the potential to be infused with a spiritual presence or a divine force capable of healing the sick, saving the imperiled, or performing other miracles. The desire to harness such power was fundamental to several of the most important projects in Riccio's career. For example, one of his earliest commissions was to make a tabernacle for a relic of the True Cross, and this was clad with reliefs celebrating the Cross's superhuman efficacy, such as its capacity to win battles and raise the dead. Another of his early reliefs depicts the Ark of the Covenant, an object of extraordinary vitality, capable of vanquishing enemies and bringing down the walls of hostile cities. Riccio also made an unexecuted design for the miracle-working

burial chapel of St. Anthony of Padua, a place so holy that it was then among the most popular pilgrimage sites in Europe and, even now, every day continues to draws thousands of believers seeking help or giving thanks for aid already granted. For the basilica of St. Anthony, Riccio also made his masterpiece, a thirteen-foot-tall bronze Easter Candlestick, covered with a great many figures and reliefs. This candlestick was made to be used only once a year, during Holy Week, when at the end of the ceremony of *Tenebrae*, it was lit to celebrate the inextinguishable sacred fire and the miracle of the victory of life over death.

On some of the reliefs on the candlestick, Riccio depicts living statues. The sense that sculptures might be alive with mysterious power is found in all of Riccio's works, and it is this aura of force and energy that gives them their enduring and enigmatic allure. In the opening chapter of *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville refers to the "ungraspable phantom of life." When I look at Riccio's statues, this phrase often comes to mind, for I feel it is the specter of living presence that—in sculpture after sculpture—Riccio offers us to consider. There was one bronze in the exhibition, a *Strigil Bearer* from a New York private collection, which I have had the pleasure to hold in my hands on many occasions during the last twenty years. The pose of this striding male nude is somewhat stiff, the expression is enigmatic, and the detailing of the musculature is inexact, yet the sculpture vibrates with the magical pulse of life, so much so that when you touch it you think it might even move in response to your hand.

The interests of Riccio's fellow humanists help elucidate key features of his art, especially his fascination with expressivity and inspiration. For example, Pomponius Gauricus makes emotional force a central topic of his book *On Sculpture*. He says that the fact both literature and sculpture aspire to graphic vividness in description is proof that they are sister arts. He states that an indispensable characteristic of a good sculptor is to be *euphantasiotos*, a Greek word that he defines to mean capable of "imagining in the mind an infinite range [of states], such as suffering, laughing, anguish, dying, looking ill, and so on." Furthermore, Gauricus says that the modeling of sculpture consists of two fundamental parts: one is design and the other is animation or expression. One of Gauricus's term for this latter quality is interesting, for he uses a Greek word seemingly of his own invention, *psychike*, based on the Greek word "psyche," which means life, soul, or heart. For Gauricus, it is the manifest display of feeling that gives sculpture its vitality and makes it both compelling and credible.

The emphasis in Gauricus's book on expressivity was new in writing about visual arts. No earlier theoretical text had ever presented such a lengthy and detailed discussion of the topic. For example, in *On Painting*, written around 1435, Leon Battista Alberti gives only one paragraph to the subject, and he does not discuss the depiction of emotion at all in his book *On Sculpture*, from about 1450. Among Renaissance theorists, the most important precedent for Gauricus is Leonardo da Vinci, who had praised the representation of the "motions of the mind" as a goal in art. Yet for all their pithy brilliance, Leonardo's comments on this subject are brief and scattered through his unpublished notebooks; they do not have the sustained focus, the structured argument, or the range of references of Gauricus's *On Sculpture*.

Gauricus's book was a new departure in writing about the visual arts. Nonetheless, his arguments, terminology, and evidence would have been instantly recognizable to humanist readers. His discussion of vividness in art is based on Quintilian's laudatory account of the same quality in rhetoric and poetry, and Gauricus's technical vocabulary consists of classical Greek terms, such as *euphantasiotos*, *enargeia* (vividness), and mimesis, that he borrowed from Quintilian. Gauricus, who structured *On Sculpture* as a dialogue, even makes Raffaelle Reggio, the Quintilian authority, appear as one of the

speakers in the book. Moroever, nearly every example of artistic excellence and ideal expressiveness that Gauricus gives is not taken from sculpture and painting, but instead from Greek and Latin literature, and especially Homer and Virgil. Gauricus thought sculpture should aspire to the power of classical poetry and that vividness would help it reach this goal.

The point is not that Gauricus influenced Riccio. In fact, we can be fairly certain that he did not, since Gauricus was ten years junior to the sculptor and only about twenty years old when he wrote the book. Rather, *On Sculpture* shows how Riccio's achievement might have been understood, described, and valued by humanists in the artist's circle, and perhaps even by the sculptor himself.

Humanist ideas also cast light on Riccio's fascination with inspiration as a subject for his statuary. Renaissance intellectuals believed that there were set rules for eloquence that had to be studied and imitated. Indeed, a chief goal of humanism was the promulgation of these rules. But they also thought that the greatest works of artistic genius were beyond rational explanation; they could only be produced through a flash of divine insight. To quote Shakespeare, it was only "a Muse of fire, that would ascend/ the brightest heaven of invention." The masters of ancient literature, such as Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, were thought to have composed their works in a state of sacred furor, an ecstatic rapture that came from an eternal source such as god or the muses. In his poem "Nutricia," Poliziano describes this experience in ecstatic terms:

> In a surge of frenzy the mind [of a poet] is first overwhelmed; then the god, shut up in the depths of his heart, seethes, arousing frenzied feelings in his breast . . . and instills his song in the human heart.

The greatest art and poetry was inspired, vivid, exalted, and magical. To write like these oracles of wisdom and beauty, the modern author too had to enter into an elevated state of the soul and the mind. Indeed, part of the appeal of antiquity was the hope that, as the muses once did, the ancient masters would serve as a channel to the sacred fount of inspiration at the heart of classical civilization.

The classicism of Renaissance art was originally inspired by a literary dream, one that esteemed vivid expression and divine inspiration as well as the learned imitation of ideal models from a golden past. It combined ever greater knowledge about the details of ancient culture with ever greater freedom in the use of this knowledge. The scenes and figures from classical literature lived on in the mind, and they did so through acts of imagination as well as memory.

Living and working among the humanists, Riccio shared these attitudes. In his sculptures, he displays his knowledge of Greco-Roman culture in countless ways, such as by draping Moses in a toga or showing an equestrian soldier riding in the ancient manner without spurs. Yet the classicism of Riccio is not derivative or pedantic, for it also gave him the license to imagine and to dream. He felt free to adapt and invent as he borrowed: In its loose rhythms and exaggerated forms, the toga Moses wears is nothing like those in Roman art; the equestrian soldier's armor is covered with all manner of fanciful decoration. What makes Riccio's sculpture so compelling is not his ability to copy exterior forms, but rather the search for vitality and the mystery that, in the beginning, had animated classical art. It is this vigor that gave his sculptures their value in the sixteenth century, and it is this energy that continues to excite us five hundred years later.

Cheever vs. Cheever

by Stefan Beck

In 1958 John Cheever, in his formidably detailed journal, turned his skeptical eyes to Jack Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans*:

> My life is very different from what he describes. There is almost no point where our emotions and affairs correspond. I am most deeply and continuously involved in the love of my wife and children. It is my passion to present to my children the opportunity of life. That this love, this passion, has not reformed my nature is well known. But there is some wonderful seriousness to the business of living, and one is not exempted by being a poet.

That Cheever's life was very different from Kerouac's is well known. There are some similarities, worth noting for the light they shed on what makes Cheever singular. Both were born into drab if not entirely humble surroundings: Cheever in Quincy and Kerouac in Lowell, Massachusetts. Both showed early promise, were sexually conflicted (Cheever to a much greater degree), and came to see the bottle as muse and armor, anesthetic and slipknot. Both relied on autobiography, albeit in very different ways. Cheever climbed grudgingly onto the wagon and died surrounded by a family that, although it struggled with pain and resentment, could only be described as constant. Kerouac, a grown man living with his aged mother, succumbed to a blown-out liver.

Pondering the vastly different work they produced, one thinks of the titular character of Cheever's 1960 story "Clementina," who "wondered why the good God had opened up so many choices and made life so strange and diverse." There is in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* a sneering appeal to

> take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after house on both sides of the street each with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of the television, each living family riveting its attention on probably one show.

This is Main Street in Cheever Country, but Cheever saw it as an object not of scorn or disappointment but of love and fascination, a place to be understood and protected.

Cheever's terrain—Manhattan, Connecticut, Westchester, and New England—is frequently and rather tediously compared to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. (We could complicate things and include Italy in that list.) Cheever is called the "Chekhov of the suburbs," as though the suburbs are so forgettable that we should be amazed they ever found their chronicler. People live in the suburbs, too, and wherever two or more are gathered under Cheever's byline, one finds the whole panoply of human feelings and failures. The surprising thing is how nearly unique he was in giving this landscape the attention it deserves.

The 1950s and 1960s are clearly enjoying a resurgence in the popular imagination. Blake

Bailey's massive biography arrives in tandem with a two-volume edition of Cheever's novels (five in all) and stories, edited by Bailey, from the Library of America.[1] It is a time when America is still gripped by the popularity of television's "Mad Men," and Sam Mendes's adaptation of *Revolutionary Road*. An Everyman's Library omnibus of the works of Richard Yates, of whom Bailey has also written a biography, *A Tragic Honesty* (2003), has been published.

Why this sudden interest in a time that used to be a byword for convention and conformity? Is it, as Mark Greif wrote of "Mad Men" in the *London Review of Books*, the seductive appeal of "Now We Know Better"? "We watch," Greif wrote, "and know better about male chauvinism, homophobia, anti-semitism, workplace harassment, housewives' depression, nutrition and smoking." All these are found in Cheever's work, but it belongs nevertheless to a different genre: We Will Never Know Better. The particulars and the geography are mostly incidental. What one carries away is Cheever's penetrating appreciation of the individual's fight against his own nature and desires—the lonely struggle, conducted in one's head—that persists no matter how scenery and mores are altered.

Not that Cheever had much of a problem with the scenery or the mores. One of the most telling stories about him, recounted by Bailey, concerns his working habits in 1945, living with his wife, Mary Winternitz, in an apartment on East Fifty-ninth Street in Manhattan:

> Cheever even had an office of sorts. Almost every morning for the next five years, he'd put on his only suit and ride the elevator with other men leaving for work; Cheever, however, would proceed all the way down to a storage room in the basement, where he'd doff his suit and write in his boxers until noon, then dress again and ascend for lunch.

Sometimes he "resented having to keep up with his dapper fellow tenants," Bailey notes, "but they reminded him, too, that a writer was just as entitled to middle-class comforts as a lawyer or stockbroker." Here is that "wonderful seriousness" of providing for a family that he mentioned in his journal years later. Being a writer was not, as it had been in his younger days, an excuse to live in squalor. (In 1934, Walker Evans photographed his Greenwich Village room—in Bailey's words, "a quintessential Depression tableau.") He had little time for the usual romantic or bohemian notions about his vocation.

What complicated this life for him was his insatiable and omnivorous sexual appetite. Cheever had homosexual encounters from childhood to very old age, and plenty of heterosexual dalliances; not even alcoholism or profound illness could dampen his ardor. There is no exaggerating the importance he placed on this condition, both in his life and in his art. The words "lewd" and "lewdness," in reference to his erotic charge, appear with almost irritating frequency in his journals and writings. He seems to have regarded his desire as both a blessing and a curse, sacred and alarming—or revolting—in equal measure. But it is important to stress that he was not "faking" his marriage or family life. He was an abysmal husband and father, but he grasped the value of marriage and its responsibilities.

Cheever was born in 1912 to a family that was both average and, as filtered through his heightened sensitivities, deeply strange, even embarrassing. His father, Frederick, was a traveling shoe salesman. His mother, Mary, occupied herself with social-service work; Cheever would satirize her charitable impulses in stories like "Christmas Is a Sad Season for the Poor" (1949). His brother, Frederick, Jr., had been born in 1905, and by the time John arrived, the parents' marriage was failing. Resentments rooted in his ear-

1 *Collected Stories and Other Writings*, by John Cheever; The Library of America, 1056 pages, $35. *Complete Novels*, by John Cheever; The Library of America, 960 pages, $35. *Cheever: A Life*, by Blake Bailey; Knopf, 736 pages, $35. *The Journals of John Cheever*, by John Cheever; Vintage, 416 pages, $20.

liest years haunted Cheever's writing forever. His most disturbing memories were of being told that he'd been conceived by accident and that his parents had dined with his prospective abortionist. (These were not so disturbing that he showed any reluctance to use them.)

His father nearly went broke in 1927 and his mother opened a gift shop to support the family, including her increasingly alcoholic husband. This humiliated John, who made it a centerpiece of his novel *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), in which it is relocated to an unseaworthy boat, the *Topaze*: "New England's Only Floating Gift Shoppe." Even armed with Bailey's exhaustive biography, it is difficult to understand what so rankled Cheever about this minor indignity. Aesthetic horror? His father's wounded pride? It is in any case a potent early example of the trouble Cheever would have squaring his reality with the way he wished to be seen.

Cheever was an unsuccessful student but a brilliant boy, who read *everything* and published his first story, "Expelled," in *The New Republic*, at age eighteen. Comprising impressions of his time at Thayer Academy, the story reveals a precocity rarely encountered today. In a portrait of one of his teachers, he wrote:

> When she asked me for tea I sat in a walnut armchair with grapes carved on the head and traced and retraced the arms on the tea caddy. One time I read her one of my plays. She thought it was wonderful. She thought it was wonderful because she did not understand it and because it took two hours to read.

The story prickles with restrained frustration. It's Holden Caulfield, were he capable of maturing into a forgiving and broad-minded adult.

That teacher, we must remind ourselves, was a real person, one who had done quite a bit to mentor young John, and there was vocal outrage at her fictional mistreatment ("She was slightly bald and pulled her pressed hair down across her forehead . . ."). But learning that his gift could be an instrument of torture, so to speak, did nothing to deter him in the future—thank God. He found his fictional wealth all about him, and he used people, places, and incidents indiscriminately, as though they would be lost to history if not preserved in the amber (or, in fairness to the times, aspic) of his stories. His parents, relatives, friends, neighbors, lovers, and wife—no one was safe. His beloved brother Frederick only escaped by being too far gone in alcoholism to recognize himself.

One may well ask: What writer doesn't beg, borrow, and steal from life? For Cheever it was a compulsion or ritual. His journals are so thorough that one wonders where he found the time to do the things described therein; in published form they cover 1952 to 1982 and represent only a fraction of his Pepysian labors, which are estimated at around four million words. Reading them and Bailey's biography side-by-side with his work invites a disorienting déjà vu: Haven't I already read about that hit-and-run accident in Italy? Where have I seen that phrase "patent-leather hair"? When Neddy Merrill in "The Swimmer" (1964) slides down the banister and gives "the bronze backside of Aphrodite on the hall table a smack"—isn't that Cheever himself whooping it up at Yaddo? In how many different stories or novels now has Cheever revisited the—let's be honest, not exactly unique or earth-shattering—facts of his tipsy conception at a sales banquet?

Bailey has done an outstanding job of chronicling Cheever's life—both in his prose and in his almost maniacal attention to detail. ("X-rays revealed that the cancer had now metastasized to his left ilium and femur, right ninth rib, and bladder.") But it must be said that the work is best enjoyed, at least the first time around, without the seeming skeleton key Bailey has provided. One could come away from this biography feeling tempted or obligated to treat Cheever's oeuvre as a sort of vast, therapeutic or demon-exorcising *roman à clef*. To give Bailey his due, his book is a serious piece of research, reconstruction, and criticism, and a

(grim) pleasure to read. But it is best left to scholars and other obsessive devotees. It gets in the way of the words.

Among the few complaints one might level against Cheever's work, the most serious is that, though quite a lot of it stands the test of time, it doesn't stand being read all at once. "A page of good prose remains invincible," Cheever famously said, and though his finest stories, taken separately, do remain invincible, reading them in this comprehensive edition can be deadening. Alcoholism, adultery, poverty, boredom, alienation, anomie, humiliation, and failure are all there, in copious amounts. Cheever is capable of great humor, but it is very rarely cheerful. In "O City of Broken Dreams" (1948), a first-time playwright and his wife, Alice, leave the Midwest to make it in New York. At a party full of movie stars, Alice is facetiously asked to sing with the piano player. Alas, "Alice's mother had taught her to sing whenever her host asked, and Alice had never violated any of her mother's teachings":

> Years ago, when Mrs. Bachman had taught Alice the song, she had taught her to close it with a piece of business that brought her success as a child, as a girl, as a high school senior, but that, even in the stuffy living room in Wentworth, with its inexorable smells of poverty and cooking, had begun to tire and worry her family. She had been taught on the closing line, "Lay me doun and dee," to fall in a heap on the floor. She fell less precipitously now that she had got older, but she still fell, and Evarts could see that night, by her serene face, that a fall was in her plans.

Cheever was both a pioneer and a master of this kind of cringe-making, tragicomic scenario. Though his authorial gaze means to be benevolent, sympathetic, and even mournful, it sometimes surrenders to a darker impulse to say: "I've suffered enough in my own life. Your turn." Often the humor and pathos rely on the fact that what is amusing or distressing to the reader—say, an aging former track star's habit of hurdling furniture while drunk ("O Youth and Beauty!" [1953])—is perfectly ordinary to the characters. This is an invitation not to be smug but to wonder how one's own habits of behavior and mind would look to a detached observer. We don't need to find the seedy underbelly. Despite our most valiant efforts, our most cherished self-delusions, we *are* the seedy underbelly.

"The Enormous Radio" (1947) captures this fact most vividly—not coincidentally, it is one of Cheever's most famous stories. It was first published, like so much of his work, in *The New Yorker*, but it couldn't be more different from what readers and critics, some of them derisively, called a *New Yorker* story. Despite being set in a Manhattan apartment building, it was a serious departure for Cheever. It has often been called Kafkaesque, but its conceit is more reminiscent of *The Outer Limits*, right down to the mysterious radio's first appearance:

> The dials flooded with a malevolent green light, and in the distance she heard the music of a piano quintet. The quintet was in the distance only for an instant; it bore down upon her with a speed greater than light and filled the apartment with the noise of music amplified so mightily that it knocked a china ornament from a table to the floor. The violent forces that were snared in the ugly gumwood cabinet made her uneasy.

The "violent forces" in the radio turn out to be the sounds of the neighbors, their fights and secret shames; the protagonist, Irene Westcott, becomes addicted to this infernal "music." At last her husband intervenes angrily—in a scene that reveals many of the couple's own problems—and we are left with Irene's plaintive cry, again mixing black humor with real pathos: "Please. They'll hear us." It couldn't have ended any other way, and yet it retains the full force of surprise. The gimmickry of the concept is nowhere to be found in the execution.

"The Enormous Radio," though perfect in its own way, does not match the emotional potency of Cheever's best stories. "Goodbye,

My Brother" (1951) is, among the stories, his greatest achievement, and Lawrence, the black sheep and black cloud of the Pommeroy family, is Cheever's most palpable and compelling character. He seems to be Cheever, the miserable fatalist shrinking from the light that Cheever sought, with varying success, all his life:

> The sea, at our other side, was the open sea. We always tell guests that there, to the east, lies the coast of Portugal, and for Lawrence it would be an easy step from the coast of Portugal to the tyranny in Spain. The waves broke with a noise like a "hurrah, hurrah, hurrah," but to Lawrence they would say "*Vale, vale*." I suppose it would have occurred to his baleful and incisive mind that the coast was terminal moraine, the edge of the prehistoric world, and it must have occurred to him that we walked along the edge of the known world in spirit as much as in fact.

This passage alone is a feast. There is the grim humor, the organic and beautiful echo of Catullus's fraternal farewell ("*ave atque vale*"), the commingling of rhetorical grandiosity and cold, hard, geologic fact. There is, needless to say, the prose. But above all, there is the slyness of putting the whole of Lawrence's pessimism in the mind of his brother, the narrator, reminding us that he is just as capable as Lawrence of this bleak outlook. This is worth every mediocre story Cheever ever wrote to turn a buck.

There are far too many excellent stories to give each the attention it deserves. "The Swimmer" is well-known, from a 1968 movie starring Burt Lancaster. A handful of others must be mentioned for the unusual effects they achieve. "The Five Forty-Eight" (1954), in which a man is tailed by his deranged former secretary, with whom he had a one-night stand, has the pacing and suspense of hard-boiled crime fiction, but is a deeply discomfiting piece of psychological portraiture. "Torch Song" (1947) and "The Music Teacher" (1959) are two of the most sophisticated horror stories ever written. And the surreal comedy of "The Death of Justina" (1960), published in *Esquire*, out-Barthelmes the writer who came to replace Cheever, stylistically, as the darling of *The New Yorker*.

Cheever began his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, in 1940, calling it *The Holly Tree*, and took nearly two decades to finish it. It depicted a seaside New England hamlet, partly as he remembered such places and partly as he wished them to be. "The impulse to construct such a village as St. Botolphs," he once confessed, "occurred to me late one night in a third-string hotel on the Hollywood Strip where the world from my window seemed so dangerously barbarous and nomadic that the attractions of a provincial and a traditional way of life were irresistible."

It was not only the world but the past that Cheever hoped to reorder in this work. The chaos and disappointment of his youth become, in the *Chronicle*, quaint eccentricity and cheerful *Bildungsroman* adventure. The Wapshot (that's "warpshart") family consists of the slightly cracked seaman patriarch Leander; his wife, Sarah; a bizarre and imperious elderly cousin, Honora; an older son, Moses; and Coverly, who is Cheever himself. We see much of St. Botolphs, then follow the two young men as they make their ways in the great Northeastern cities. Interspersed in the narrative are the journal entries of Leander, a man summed up nicely enough by Bailey as "a larger-than-life character given to shouting 'Tie me to the mast, Perimedes!' whenever he hears the merry-go-round at Nangasakit." The book ends with Leander's drowning, and the page of deathless advice he leaves to his sons:

> Never put whisky into hot water bottle crossing borders of dry states or countries. Rubber will spoil taste. Never make love with pants on. . . . Never sleep in moonlight. Known by scientists to induce madness. Should bed stand beside window on clear night draw shades before retiring. . . . Eat fresh fish for breakfast once a week. Avoid kneeling in unheated stone churches. Ecclesiastical dampness causes prematurely gray hair. Fear tastes like a rusty knife

> and do not let her into your house. Courage tastes of blood. Stand up straight. Admire the world. Relish the love of a gentle woman. Trust in the Lord.

Some critics thought the book disjointed and plotless, and indeed the form it takes was—is—unusual. But others saw no cause for complaint. The *Washington Post* called it "exuberantly, cantankerously, absurdly, audaciously alive," and between hardcover and one paperback edition, it sold nearly 200,000 copies. His idealized family, luminous and fascinating, gave Cheever the pleasure of escape. As Bailey writes:

> Abandoning naturalism—in this case a literal and all-too-painful evocation of the past—was akin to walking out the "door" that had stood open for Cheever all those years he spent trying to dig his way out of jail "with a teaspoon," as he'd once put it.

Cheever returned to his imaginary family in a sequel, *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964), which pits the small-town warmth and love of the Wapshots against the corrupting and terrorizing forces of the larger world. Coverly is now a computer programmer at a missile installation; Moses's wife, Melissa, is brutally cuckolding him with a grocery delivery boy. The humor and humanity remain, but the mood is apocalyptic, and loneliness and fear permeate the lives of the characters. It is a painful book, but not nearly as painful as the two that were to follow. (Cheever's final novel, *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, was published in 1982, the year of his death. It is a slight, forgettable work, included only for the sake of completeness.)

It might suffice to say of books as strange as *Bullet Park* (1969) and *Falconer* (1977) that they should be read and taught. Apart from being dark and violent, and tremendous pleasures to read, they reveal the two hemispheres of Cheever's imagination. *Bullet Park* takes us to the suburbs, but they are suburbs that represent comfort, purity, and familial love, and must be fought for against malevolent encroachments. That the novel ends as preposterously as any action movie is, like *The Wapshot Chronicle*'s "disjointedness," a problem the reader may not even notice. Cheever considered *Bullet Park* a simple tale of a father's love for his son. It is much more: a brick-and-mortar manifestation of the world Cheever valued and the intensity of his faith in it.

Falconer describes a very different brick-and-mortar world: a penitentiary, modeled on Sing Sing, where Cheever taught creative writing classes for a time. This is an apology—in the *mea culpa* and the doctrinal sense—for the sordid or "lewd" side of Cheever's nature, ever threatening to undo him. The protagonist, Ezekial Farragut, is a heroin addict and fratricide who finds his only spiritual escape in a homosexual romance. He emerges from a crucible of addiction, brutality, and humiliation a truly saved man. Despite Cheever's familiarity with Sing Sing, *Falconer* is undeniably the work of an imagination firing on all cylinders. There is, it seems, no better metaphor for Cheever's battles than a prison, and *Falconer* is a harrowing and triumphant escape.

Cheever's novels, like his journals, belong to his lewdness and his pain, and it is easy to see why they have never been as popular as his stories. They are blunter instruments than the polished scalpels of his short fiction; they can be sloppy, challenging, even inscrutable, but they hit the reader with great force. In his stories, Cheever tried to make sense of the world and of other people; in his novels, he mostly tried to make sense of himself. Naturally, the world was more interested in reading about itself, but it would do well to revisit John Cheever's patient, determined attempt to understand and make peace with John Cheever.

After all, it worked. The late John Updike recalled the moment when Cheever, dying of cancer, accepted the National Medal for Literature at Carnegie Hall and made his remark about the power and durability of a page of good prose: "All the literary acolytes assembled there fell quite silent," Updike wrote, "astonished by such faith." One certainly hopes they were taking notes.

“On the veranda”
by Robert Conquest

“The girl-losing experience . . .”
His voice stirred up the soft silence
Where, sundowners in hand, the men’s

Attention—mutual, serene, content—
Was over the warm, quiescent
Sea, under a dark blue firmament,

With brush-stroke mistiness out westerly,
As the good sunglow resumed slowly
Into the waters. A touch of melancholy

Imbued the ambience like a dash
Of angostura. “A longish
Time since that sort of anguish

Hit me. She was my very first.
She left me for one older, more self-possessed,
Richer—sure!—better-dressed.

I was only a scruffy, last-term
Student. Much later she told me what scum,
What a swine, he’d been. Well, some

Consolation. Not enough to reverse
The long loss, the intolerable years
Of . . . I expect much the same as yours."

"Mine perhaps worse, since all my own fault.
Divorced, I thought I'd play the field
With two girls, often three. I felt

Safe from the love-trap. Then one day
No. 1 switched to a fiancé.
Part of the deal, you'll rightly say,

A miscalculation—I've learned better since.
The nights! I'd take four or five aspirins
With large shots of bourbon in half pints

Of milk, drunk quick to stop curdling, slept,
If at all, with my right big and second toes kept
(With no erotic feeling) round my left

Achilles tendon. I mention this
So that we wouldn't perhaps miss
Any pointer to full diagnosis."

"Sleep, yes. And drink. This smooth rum
Recalls how, when her bad letter came,
Stationed in Orkney, I couldn't get warm.

Before, I'd not minded the scything cold,
But now four blankets—and rum—left me chilled.
Another symptom of getting ungirled?"

"Well, here's a memory I'd quite long striven
To repress. We'd been married more than eleven
Years. All was dull—was depressing, even.

No adultery on either side.
Wanting more operas, cruises, she'd
Left from a boredom I thought I'd shared.

But in the event, the parting tore
As jagged, as barbed as any before,
When young. A wound that for long stayed raw . . .”

Turning now from the sea and sun,
A drier voice: “Well, my contribution
To, I suppose, this panel discussion:

Since I imagine that between you
You’ve covered every important issue . . .”
He paused for a sip, “Here’s a minor clue:

I had made love to her just twice.
The bond hadn’t clamped down like a vice.
Then she went back to her rather nice

Chap. At the wheel on the Brompton Road,
My tear-ducts all of a sudden flowed.
The traffic light was luckily red.

Yes, a close escape, which may illustrate
The problems posed.” “What we still await
Is how, and why, can our psyches get

Gripped till almost as fused as steel?
There’s surely no good biological
Reason?” “An unfavorable

Mutation?” . . .
“What have we exorcised?
In each mind-vault now perhaps a weaker ghost
Walled up, but not quite put to rest?”

A last strongish drink then, toasting the bronze
Sunset and the warm, gentle ocean’s
Uneasy effacement of demons.

Reconsiderations

Oriental Jones in India

by Jeremy Bernstein

In the fall of 1988, I found myself in Calcutta for a few days. Put that way, it sounds as if I just wandered there, but in fact I was meeting a group that was going trekking in Bhutan and our flight left from Calcutta. I took advantage of the stopover to visit various monuments to the British Raj of which Calcutta had been the capital. One of the places I especially wanted to visit was the South Park Street Cemetery, whose memorial tombs are practically an encapsulated history of the Raj, although it is somewhat off the usual tourist route. It was opened in 1767. People like Charles Dickens's second son, Walter Landor Dickens and William Thackeray's father, Richmond, are buried there. Most of the people who are buried there died young, and if I had to list the cause of death I would write "India"—India was too much for many of them.

My immediate problem was how to find it. I decided that the only thing to do was to hire a taxi. There was one in front of the hotel and a brief conversation with the driver convinced me that he was an intelligent man with an excellent command of English. When I mentioned the South Park Cemetery, he had no idea what I was talking about; he thought that I wanted to visit Mother Teresa. It finally dawned on me that Hindus do not have cemeteries. The bodies are cremated and the remains deposited in the nearest river. I explained that I wanted to go to the place where English people go to worship their ancestors, and we headed at once for the cemetery. It was a lovely, tranquil place in which the *chowkidar*—the watchman—lived. It was raining—the monsoon—but he and the taxi driver guided me around. I had come to see the tomb of an extraordinary linguist and man of letters, William Jones.

The death of Jones, in 1794, was considered a communal tragedy and he is commemorated by a veritable monument. Jones's father, another William, was a Welsh mathematics tutor. One of his jobs was to teach the mathematics of navigation on board a British man-of-war. He wrote a text on the subject and later a sort of general mathematics primer. In it he introduced the notation π—"pie"—for the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of a circle. It has been with us ever since. When Jones *père* died, Jones was three; he left enough of an estate so that Jones, his mother, and his sister were reasonably settled. Indeed, Jones was able to matriculate to Harrow. His athletic activities there were limited because of some childhood accidents, one of which seriously affected his vision, but he threw himself into academics. It was at Harrow where he first demonstrated the eidetic memory which helped him to become one of the greatest, if not the greatest, linguist of his age. The boys at Harrow decided that they wanted to do a performance of *The Tempest* but they could not find a copy of the play. Jones obligingly wrote the whole thing down for them from memory. Much later in his life Jones, who

was always making lists of things he had done or needed to do, wrote out a list of his languages. It reads:

> Eight languages studied critically: English, Latin, French, Italian, Greek, Arabic, Persian, Sanscrit [sic].
>
> Eight studied less perfectly, but all intelligible with a dictionary. Spanish, Portuguese, German, Runick [This may refer to Old Norse, one of the Runic languages], Hebrew, Bengali, Hindi, Turkish.
>
> Twelve studied least perfectly, but all attainable: Tibetian [sic], Pali [an early Indian dialect in which the Buddhist canon is preserved], Phalavi [usually called Phelavi or Middle Persian], Deri [a Persian dialect spoken in Afghanistan], Russian, Syriac [Aramaic], Ethiopic, Coptic, Welsh, Swedish, Dutch, Chinese.[1]

In 1764, Jones joined University College in Oxford. A year later he accepted a position that changed his life. The Spencers of Althorp were a very wealthy aristocratic British family. The title "Earl Spencer" had just been created in 1765 and the eldest son of the earl had the courtesy title of Viscount Althorp. In 1765, the title was held by the seven-year-old George John Spencer. The Spencers were looking for a tutor for George John and a man named Jonathan Shipley (who would much later become Jones's father-in-law) recommended him. Even though Jones had never met the Spencers, he was hired for the job. In addition to George John, there was his sister Georgiana—many children of both sexes were named after the king—who was a year younger. Jones taught Georgiana her "letters." She grew into a very beautiful and accomplished woman whose unhappy, disordered marriage to the Duke of Devonshire dominated the gossip of the day. She gambled and lost fortunes and took part in politics. Her affair with Charles Grey, a future prime minister, produced a daughter. This ménage apparently inspired Sheridan's play *The School for Scandal*.

Throughout his life, Jones exchanged letters with George John, who became one of his closest friends. They are some of the most beautiful and fascinating letters in the English language, one commentator going so far as to remark that they are the letters that Chesterfield *should* have sent to his son. After functioning as a tutor for a couple of years, Jones decided that he should continue to act *in loco parentis* and direct George John's entire life. The Spencers vehemently objected, and it took some years before his relationship with them was restored. In the meanwhile he began to build a career as a linguist.

He started with a commission from the King of Denmark to translate from Persian. This led, in 1771, to his publication of *A Grammar of the Persian Language* which was modeled after Samuel Johnson's dictionary. Persian was the official language of the East India Company—its contracts and treaties were written in it—so Jones thought he might get a commission from them. He sent a copy to Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, but nothing came of if. In 1773, however, Jones was elected to Johnson's Club, which met at the Turk's Head Inn, as the youngest member. Boswell was elected four weeks later. A few years later Jones proposed George John as a member. In a letter he described the membership. Here is a partial accounting:

> *Burke*, the pleasantest companion in the world, his eloquence all the kingdom knows. *Fox,* of great talents both natural and acquired. *Gibbon*, an elegant writer, not without wit in conversation. *Garrick*, whom all Europe knows. *Sheridan*, a sprightly young fellow with a fine comick genius, very little older than yourself. *Johnson*, the best scholar of his age. *Reynolds*: a great artist and fine writer on

1 Unless otherwise indicated, the Jones quotations, including this one, are taken from an unpublished annotated collection of Jones's letters and related matters which I have done in collaboration with the linguist Rosane Rocher.

his art. *Boswell* of Corsica, a good natured odd fellow.

Each of the members had a sobriquet. Johnson was of course "Dictionary Johnson." Jones was either "Oriental Jones" or "Persian Jones." (George John joined the Club.)

Jones might have become an Oxford don, which would have suited his intellectual propensities, but, instead, he opted for law. For several years, he practiced by traveling the circuit—several hundred miles—on horseback. At one point, he made an unsuccessful run as the Whig representative from Oxford. Georgiana helped in his campaign. By this time Jones was already trying to get an appointment as a puisne judge in the Bengal Supreme Court of Judicature. This was a court whose judges were appointed by parliament with the approval of the king to preside over legal matters in British India. The pay was a staggering 6,000 pounds a year. Jones figured he could live on 2,000 and, in a few years, save enough to return to Britain and retire in comfort, if not luxury. But the prospects of the judgeship kept waxing and waning with various changes of government.

At one point Jones even thought of emigrating to America. But, in 1782, with a new change of government his chances improved, and on the basis of his prospects he proposed to Anna Maria Shipley. The proposal was accepted with the understanding that the marriage would have to wait until Jones actually became a judge. He felt that he could not support her properly on his lawyer's earnings and would not take money from her family. Anna Maria wrote to her good friend Georgiana:

> How can I describe to you half the Joy & happiness my heart feels in the idea of the affection & friendship you express for my Mr. J — but how should it be otherwise you who have known his merits so long & who have a heart that is form'd to love everything that is good and wise. He absolutely Idolizes [you].

One wonders if either she or Jones had any real idea of the disorder of Georgiana's life.

In the beginning of March of 1783, Jones's nomination for the judgeship was sent to the king, who approved it. Jones was knighted, and he could, at last, marry Anna Maria. The wedding was in April. Soon after, he and his bride began the six-month passage to India on the frigate *Crocodile*. Almost immediately, he began the practice of writing full accounts of his activities to George John. Since it took something like a full year to receive a response they served almost as annual reports. George John was now looking after Jones's financial interests in Britain. It is interesting to note that, the long history of their friendship notwithstanding, Jones always addressed George John as "my lord." One wonders if Jones ever called him by his first name.The first of the letters is from aboard ship. It reads, in part:

> Lat. 43°. 37'. Long. 12°. 50'. I seize the first paper that I can find, my dear lord, to write my first letter from the Atlantick, and to promise you longer letters from remoter seas. We are at this instant sailing between cape Ortegal and a black spot marked on the charts as a rock, of which however we have seen nothing and may justly doubt the existence. The breeze is fresh and fair, but the sea unusually high; and the rolling of the ship impedes the swiftness of our sailing. . . . All circumstances considered, we have no reason to complain of our accommodations. The Crocodile is almost new, and, though small, an excellent sea boat: the captain intelligent and experienced, eager to oblige, desirous and capable of entertaining; the officers, men of agreeable manners and good sense. My daily studies are now, what they will be for six years to come, Persian and Law, and whatever relates to India; my recreation, chess; my exercise, walking on deck an hour before dinner; but my great delight is the sweet society and conversation of Anna Maria, whose health and spirits are really wonderful in a situation so new to her and by no means pleasing in itself. The motion of the ship obliges me to lay down my pen. Farewell, my dear lord . . . Adieu!

Shortly after arriving in Calcutta he writes:

> 14 Oct. 1783. My dear friend, I write a few lines this morning, merely because I have resolved to lose no opportunity of writing to you, and a packet, I hear, will sail hence to morrow. A detail of our voyage . . . must be the [subject] of letters written a few weeks hence, when I am a little settled in a house of my own, and a little master (as I am not at all now) of my own time. This only I may say in general: that we have gathered roses mixed with thorns, have had pleasures and pains, hours of amusement and hours of dullness, some few of sickness, and some minutes even of alarm. The situation of the house, where we now are, is beautiful: I am sitting near the bank of a fine river, on the opposite side of which are some elegant houses and gardens with trees of a fine verdure: ships of any size may come up to the town: numbers are now at anchor before me, and the sweet little Crocodile is riding almost under my window. The town is large and well peopled, yet airy and commodious; the houses are in general well built and some of them equal to palaces.

On their arrival in Calcutta, the Joneses first made the acquaintance of Warren Hastings, who had taken up his position as the first Governor-General of Bengal in 1773. Hastings had been forced, for financial reasons, to drop out of his public school, Westminster, where he had been a brilliant student. But he became a ferocious autodidact. India, for him, was not only a commercial opportunity but a vast terrain for study. The first British expedition to Tibet, on which he sent his young aide George Bogle, was typical. He saw a new avenue for trade and also a completely unknown field of study. Now here on his doorstep was dropped, in the person of Jones, one of the foremost intellects of his age. The two became friends. Here is a letter from Anna Maria to Georgiana:

> Octr. 27 Yesterday we pass'd at Alipoor. Mrs. Hastings desir'd us to come to breakfast at 7 o'clock but I did not feel stout enough for that. . . . Mr. Hastings has two garden houses within a hundred yards of each other in a very pleasant lawn, as pretty as an entire flat can be — we found Zophani [Zoffany] drawing one of the elephants pictures & Mr. Hastings standing by him;— a magnificent palankeen was waiting to carry me to the other house, where Mrs. Hastings was sitting in her bed chamber in a very elegant eastern dress & a turban, she had been very ill, & is in so bad a state of health that she goes to England in Decr. as the last resource — we look'd over some drawings of views in India till dinner; we sat down 20 in one room which was so large & airy that tho' we had a great dinner, I have not din'd so cool since I came here. Sr. Thoms. Mills sat next to me, & from his knowing every lady in England I had a very pleasant chat with him. . . . I like Mr. Hastings better & better every time I see him; he has great natural politeness & attention with much agreable knowledge & a thousand little anecdotes & stories which he relates vastly well — after dinner the whole party broke up, & I was shewn into an elegant apartment — a little dressing room with every possible convenience for washing &c. &c, a bed chamber with a silver bedstead & very fine muslin furniture where I slept for an hour — when we made our appearance again we saw three large elephants richly caparison'd, Mr. Hastings desir'd I would go with him upon one, Sr. Wm. & Captn. Williamson on another, Mr. Smolt & Zophani on the 3d.; thus mounted & escorted by a troop of horse & a little thousand of foot with chasse mouches set out & took an airing of 4 or 5 miles & found Mrs. Hastings & tea ready for us in the other house, where there was tea, chess, chat, & cards till supper at nine, soon after ten, we return'd home lighted by our six masaulgies, four carrying flambeaux & two large branches with night lights in each.

Jones, as was typical of him, had made a long list of things he intended to learn about. This included the history of chess. At age seventeen, Jones had written a poem, in Latin, about chess—"Caissa or the Game of Chess"—which one can find in most anthologies of chess literature. Curiously, one of the things he does not mention is the

study of Sanskrit. He had, it seems, no intention of studying the language until his professional obligations more or less forced him into it. The supreme court heard cases not only involving British colonials but also Indians, who were governed by different laws. In particular, Hindus were governed by what was called "Gentoo law," which was codified in Sanskrit. To deal with this the court employed *pandits* as interpreters.

What troubled Jones was that he could not be sure that the *pandits* were adding their own version of the laws, thereby skewing some of the cases. He decided that he needed to learn Sanskrit to make sure that this was not happening. After considerable difficulty, he managed to hire his own *pandit* to teach him at least an hour a day. And, being Jones, he acquired a mastery over the language that no foreigner had ever managed. By 1787, he could write to George John:

> To what shall I compare my literary pursuits in India? Suppose Greek literature to be known in modern Greece only, and there to be in the hands of priests and philosophers; and suppose them to be still worshippers of Jupiter and Apollo: suppose Greece to have been conquered successively by Goths, Huns, Vandals, Tartars, and lastly by the English; then suppose a court of judicature to be established by the British parliament, at Athens, and an inquisitive Englishman to be one of the judges; suppose him to learn Greek there, which none of his countrymen knew, and to read Homer, Pindar, Plato, which no other Europeans had even heard of. Such am I in this country; substituting Sanscrit for Greek, the *Brahmans*, for the priests of *Jupiter*, and *Valid*, *Vaasa*, *Caldas*, for Homer, Plato, Pindar. Need I say what exquisite pleasure I receive from conversing easily with that class of men, who conversed with Pythagoras, Thales and Solon, but with this advantage over the Grecian travellers, that I have no need of an interpreter? Farewell!

There are two reasons for the fame Jones's mastery of Sanskrit enjoys today. The first is his translations of some of the masterpieces of Sanskrit literature which had been entirely unknown in Europe—above all, *The Recognition of Sakuntula*, a seven-act play written by the fourth- or fifth-century Sanskrit poet and playwright Kalidasa. The play is a kind of fairy-tale based on the Sanskrit epic the *Mahabharata*. It was originally written in both high-caste Sanskrit and Prakrit—a vernacular spoken by common people. Jones translated from both. The translated play made a very considerable impact on Europeans, including Goethe. The second source of Jones's fame comes from a single paragraph in his Third Annual Discourse to the Asiatic Society in Calcutta which he delivered on February 2, 1786. In this single paragraph, Jones founded the entire subject of modern historical linguistics.

As soon as Jones had taken root in Calcutta, he found a few like-minded colonials who were also interested in the culture of the Indian subcontinent and Asia in general. He created a place where they could meet and exchange views which he called the Asiatic Society. His first choice as president was Hastings, but Hastings was too busy so Jones became president. Some of the meetings had a handful of attendees and some nearly thirty. Jones gave a series of lectures which were published in a journal for which he edited and did most of the writing. In the Third Annual Discourse, the following paragraph appears with no commentary:

> The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists; there is a similar reason, though not quite so forcible, for supposing that both the *Gothic* and the *Celtic*, though blended with a very different idiom, had the same origin with the *Sanscrit*; and the old *Persian* might be added to the same family.

Although there was already some discussion here and there in the literature about common features of seemingly unrelated languages, no one had ever suggested that there was a "family" of languages that had sprung from a common source that might no longer exist—a lost proto-language. Jones does not spell out his evidence in this paragraph nor does he say why he thinks the structure of Sanskrit is more "perfect" than that of Greek, and I have not found anything pertaining to these matters in his letters—at least the ones that I have read. But here are a few things he might have had in mind. In both Sanskrit and Greek there is a special form for two of anything as opposed to one or three. Speaking of numbers, the Sanskrit for three is "tri" and for six is "sas." The number 100 is an especially interesting case. In Sanskrit it is "satam." Here is what it is in a few of the so-called "satam langauges":

> Welsh: *cant*; Italic: *centum*; Baltic: *simtas*; Bulgarian: *sto*; Avestan: (Old Iranian) *sata*.

The Greek is *hekaton* which requires some discussion of Sanskrit pronunciation, and to get to our "hundred" requires an application of the laws of phonetic change. But when we compare this to the south Indian language Tamil where the word is *nooru*, it is clear that we are in another linguistic space. If we think of the north Indian languages as an advancing tide, it is clear that the tide stopped somewhere in the middle of India.

Jones did not give a name or homeland to his ur language. We call it "proto-Indo-European"—PIE—and it is fairly recently that the body of evidence, archeological and otherwise, seems to fix the homeland at the steppes—the grass prairies in the general region of the Black Sea. The PIE people who flourished, it seems, in the third and fourth millennia BC were herders who rode horses and had chariots and knew how to use copper. Why they migrated from their homeland with their horses and language we do not know for sure. This is a huge subject with a vast literature. A very nice summary is given in *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language* by David W. Anthony. I must leave it here.

Hastings left India in February of 1785. He was under a cloud and he returned to an impeachment trial at which he was ultimately acquitted. Burke was his principle prosecutor, and, when Jones found out, he ended his friendship with Burke. The Joneses had a very happy if childless marriage. At one point, Anna Maria wrote to Georgiana about babies, "You will have just one dozen & a half to make amends for starting it so late.—I shall never set about it at all." They led a very tempered life—they went to bed early and avoided much of the social whirl of Calcutta. Jones read to her for an hour every evening. He tried to walk at least five miles a day in the early morning. But she was never entirely well, and he was frequently sick.

Jones was determined to spend ten years in India so that he could retire with at least 30,000 pounds and a life of independence. But by November of 1783, it was clear that Anna Maria had to go back to England for her survival. Jones was to follow as soon as he could. But on April 27, 1794, after a brief illness, Jones died at the age of forty-seven. The people in the colony regarded this as a disastrous loss. Their grief resulted in the large memorial tomb that I found in the South Park Cemetery. It must have taken something like six months for the news to have gotten back to Anna Maria. What she must have felt can only be imagined. Georgiana, who had been taught her "letters" by Jones wrote a poem:

> Admir'd and valued in a distant land,
> His gentle manners all affection won:
> The prostrate Hindu own'd his fostering hand,
> And Science mark'd him for her fav'rite son.
> Regret and praise the general voice bestows,
> And public sorrows with domestic blend;
> But deeper yet must be the grief of those,
> Who, while the sage they honor'd, lov'd the friend.

Theater

Tough love

by Brooke Allen

Finally, finally! A really good new play that I can recommend without reservation. It has been such a long dry spell that I had begun to despair of the whole season, both on- and off-Broadway, until seeing Gina Gionfriddo's *Becky Shaw* at the Second Stage. The play is full of surprises, both aesthetic and thematic, and Gionfriddo produces the kind of sharp, high-speed, and high-potency dialogue that so many playwrights aspire to and so few achieve. She writes in a peculiarly masculine style, more akin to Mamet than to any other contemporary author I can think of (though her work is in no way imitative of his). Consulting the program at intermission, I was actually shocked to discover that this rather hard play, as bracing as a cold wind, which resolutely works against the grain of contemporary ideals of sensitivity, had been written by a woman.

The action begins a few months after the death of the beloved father of Suzanna (Emily Bergl), who is still devastated by the loss. She is confronted by Max (David Wilson Barnes), who was adopted by Suzanna's parents at the age of ten and has grown up more or less as a member of the family. Max, a successful businessman, is now the family's money manager, and he has the unenviable task of informing Suzanna and her tough, acidic mother Susan (Kelly Bishop) that the old man had badly mismanaged his business and that now the two women are not nearly as financially secure as they had always assumed. He also, rather crudely and forcefully, tells Suzanna that her father was gay, and advises her to cut short her extended mourning and get on with her life.

Max is a marvelously dramatic character, played by Barnes with full-speed brio: we are simultaneously amused by his take-no-prisoners frankness and appalled by what appears to be his gratuitous cruelty, while sensing that he has a streak of decency struggling to get out. The polar opposite to his tough love approach is Andrew (Thomas Sadoski), the granola-crunching aspiring novelist whom Suzanna suddenly marries in an effort to find someone loving and nurturing. Gentle, supportive, and healing, he empathizes with her loss and encourages her to lean on him for support.

It doesn't take too much intelligence (despite Charles Isherwood's words about the play's supposed ambiguities in the *Times*) to realize that whatever the appearances might be, Max is actually our hero and Andrew is our villain—also that Max truly loves Suzanna, while Andrew is only attracted to her vulnerability, which affords him emotional power over her. This becomes obvious when the disruptive Becky Shaw (Annie Parisse) comes onto the scene, a lonely-girl colleague of Andrew's that the couple tries to match up with Max. Their first date is a disaster: of the group, only Max has the wit to recognize the pretty, apparently awkward girl for the succubus she really is. He loathes Becky on sight, while

Andrew is pulled into her orbit—for she plays his favorite role, the victim, to perfection. Andrew persuades Suzanna, too, to take on Becky as a sort of charity project. How will this end? Which of the two men will prevail over the other to win the uncertain, impressionable Suzanna?

I'd like to think that *Becky Shaw* is a sign of changing times—that the politically correct stereotypes that have held for the last twenty years or so are being turned on their heads, or at least intelligently questioned. It seems clear that the fact that a man shops at an organic food co-op, or writes poetry, or deplores pornography, like Andrew, doesn't necessarily mean that he's going to be a better husband or a better man, and tough love is often kinder, in the long run, than oozing empathy. (A typical exchange between the two men—Andrew: "It's not emasculating to open yourself up to someone's experience." Max: "I don't know, it sounds pretty womanly to me.") Suzanna points out, triumphantly, that Max openly enjoys watching porn while the very idea of it makes Andrew cry. "Does it make *you* cry?" Max asks her pointedly. "No," she admits, "but I do feel guilty that it doesn't."

The production, crisply directed by Peter DuBois, is equal to the material. Barnes, reminiscent of the young Kevin Spacey, gives a charged, star-making performance as Max, while, as Andrew, Sadoski skillfully walks a fine line between schlubby, indie-rock cuteness and slimy manipulativeness. The fresh-faced Bergl is appealing as the credulous Suzanna, and Annie Panisse is terrifically creepy. Kelly Bishop's timing and comedic skills have been apparent since her Tony-winning breakthrough performance in *A Chorus Line* more than thirty years ago; here, they are displayed to great advantage.

As big a disappointment as *Becky Shaw* was a joy, the revival of Richard Greenberg's 1990 play *The American Plan* (Manhattan Theater Club) is a stylish production with an intriguing cast, that includes the admirable Mercedes Ruehl and the current ingénue-with-a-brain, Lily Rabe. In the end, though, it delivers nothing but stale, familiar melodrama, its plot very much indebted to Henry James's *Washington Square* and the play and film it inspired, *The Heiress*.

The scene is set in 1960 by a lake in the Catskills, at the summer home of Eva Adler (Ruehl), a rich German-Jewish widow, and her lovely but eccentric daughter Lili (Rabe). The first question that arises is why this *grande dame*, whom her daughter has nicknamed "the Tsarina," has chosen to summer in the relatively downscale Catskills; the answer is that she likes to have people nearby that she can look down upon. These include the denizens of the resort next door, upon whom Lili, held in enchanted, Sleeping Beauty–style isolation by her dragon of a mother, looks longingly.

One day a handsome stranger, Nick Lockridge (Kieran Campion) escapes from the resort and his possessive fiancée to swim up to Lili's dock. Can he be the prince that will rescue her? Or has she actually come to depend on her mother's protection? Is she mentally unbalanced, unfit to cope with the outside world, or the victim of a controlling, neurotic parent? Since she poses as a fanciful *enfant terrible* and has been given artificial dialogue in the outdated style of Philip Barry, it is hard to tell at first. The arch repartee between her, Eva, and the equally affected family retainer, Olivia (Brenda Pressley), gives us few clues.

It's a little too consciously mystifying; but the mysteries are soon cleared up. Nick turns out to be a complicated, ambivalent character, himself far too much in need of help to be able to do much for Lili. Lili and Eva are deeply enmeshed in what would nowadays be called a co-dependent relationship; there is no easy happy ending. As Eva says, "The best that can be hoped? An intricately unhappy life, lived out in compensatory splendor."

The first act is portentously inscrutable, while the second develops into effective melodrama. Effective melodrama, though, does not necessarily make for satisfying art. Personifying the confusion of both play and production is Mercedes Ruehl, usually such

a strong and dependable performer. Here she seems quite at sea, and it doesn't help that the director David Grindley has given her crippling affectations to work with, including an overdone German accent and the perennial challenge of "playing old." Eva Adler is probably about sixty. Ruehl herself is exactly that age—so why does she hammily indicate decrepitude, hobbling theatrically along with a cane like a twelve-year-old made up for a school play? Interestingly enough, the first time I can recall seeing Ms. Ruehl was in the 1991 Neil Simon play *Lost in Yonkers*, in which *she* played the put-upon daughter of a sadistic and controlling Jewish mother (Irene Worth). Worth achieved an air of menace through physical immobility, and it worked; Ruehl now makes the mistake of dispelling menace with too much fussy motion, too much "acting."

The designer Jonathan Fensom, who has created elegant scenery here, has not done well by Ruehl's character. Plenty of audience members will remember what that type of German-Jewish matron, in that period, looked like: coiffed, well-shod, impeccably turned out. Why then has he put Eva in mules and cheesy summer dresses? More egregiously, why does she sport a mop of unruly curls rather than the sprayed and beauty-parlored helmet that any self-respecting woman of her class and type would inevitably have had?

In any case, the artificiality of Ruehl's performance and "look" only reflects the larger artificiality of the play itself—an exercise in stylization trying to cover up the thinness of the author's central idea. Lack of heart, as so often, makes for dullness: my companion actually dozed off during the first act, something she swore had never happened to her before. *The American Plan* has not improved the Manhattan Theater Club's poor batting average for the season.

I approached *Sleepwalk with Me*, Mike Birbiglia's one-man show at the Bleecker Street Theater, with a certain amount of trepidation since I have always been uncomfortable with stand-up comics. They seem so abject, so pathetic, so desperate for attention and approval, and as an audience member one so often feels morally obligated to laugh whether the material is funny or not—it would just be so sad for the poor comedian if you didn't! But these worries are dispelled almost the moment Birbiglia appears, for he is so entirely comfortable on stage and in his skin that the audience visibly relaxes.

Sleepwalk with Me is a play rather than a comedy act, but it seems clear from the way Birbiglia interacts with the audience that he feels free to make the occasional change and improvisation in the material, referring to currently topical material—the night I was there, for instance, he had something to say about *Benjamin Button*. ("It's about this old man and he turns into Brad Pitt and then he turns into a baby and he dies. Now you owe me eleven dollars.") But however eccentrically meandering, the narrative eventually reverts to its primary course, which is Birbiglia's description of the long struggles he has had with sleeping and sleepwalking.

As you listen, you hardly realize that in recounting the bizarre tale the pudgy, innocuous-looking Birbiglia is sketching a self-portrait. There is the Catholic childhood ("I was an altar boy as a kid—and the answer is NO") and the sexual awakening ("Sex is like tennis—you have to find someone of your own ability"). There are the hang-ups, perhaps a result of the Catholic upbringing: "Some people are very confident about sex, they even film themselves having sex. After *I* have sex, I always think, well, at least no one saw me." And there is the awkward and rather touching relationship with the father, a doctor and intellectual who "knows lots of *stuff*." (Birbiglia himself, he says, knows no stuff.) He is good when talking about the challenges facing a novice comedian, the college gigs when he had to do his act at the center of a walkathon for lupus, or a lip-sync competition, or in front of a deli line at the cafeteria. Studding the straightforward tale of his sleep disorder with surreal images from his nightly dreams (in one memorable nightmare he finds he has won a silver

medal in the Olympic sport of dustbusting), Birbiglia almost incidentally puts across a good deal about his relationships with the two central women in his life.

The production, directed by Seth Barrish, is simple but effective, and the lighting designer Jason Lyons deserves almost as much credit as Birbiglia himself for focusing the narrative and shifting the mood. The presence of Nathan Lane's name among the billed producers will ensure that Birbiglia continues to get attention, with a possible future production in a larger off-Broadway house.

Sleepwalk with Me was not the only comedy show I attended this month; I was also taken to a weird and wonderful event, called for some obscure reason *Gravid Water*, that has been taking place on the last Monday of every month at the Upright Citizens' Brigade Theater in Manhattan's Chelsea. It has been going on for five years now, and is so wonderful that I plan to go every month I possibly can for as long as it continues to run.

The brainchild of the director Stephen Ruddy, *Gravid Water* pairs straight actors with comic improvisers in a series of five scenes per evening. This is the format: the actor has been given a scene from a real play—let's say it is *The Glass Menagerie*, though Ruddy usually picks rather more obscure works—and his job is simply to memorize the lines and prepare the scene much as he would do for an audition or scene work in class. Once on stage in front of the audience, he will be joined by an improviser who has not been told what the play is and probably has no knowledge of it: in fact he will be seeing and hearing the scene for the first time, just like the audience. The actor speaks the lines and speeches from the play; the improviser has to improvise his responses, which generally takes the scene into startling and unforeseeable directions.

I had had the process described to me, but had no idea how funny it would turn out in practice. The night I was there the five scenes were from plays by Nicky Silver, Paula Vogel, Arthur Miller, Anna Ziegler, and Marsha Norman: the scene from *How I Learned to Drive* by Paula Vogel turned out to be the most amusing, probably due to the really superior comedic skills and improvisational flair of Tara Copeland, a *Gravid Water* regular, who provided a series of absurd plot twists to unsettle the actor Jonathan Kaplan, who had a very hard time keeping his face straight enough to deliver his serious lines. Thomas Middleditch, looking and performing like a Jewish version of Hugh Grant (if you can imagine such a thing), was almost equally adept in a scene from Marsha Norman's *Trudy Blue*. Sometimes, though, it was the actor rather than the improviser who took charge: in Miller's *After the Fall*, the actress Sandy Rustin played her role with such impassioned seriousness that the improviser unexpectedly did not have an easy time matching her intensity.

The entire audience was helpless with laughter from beginning to end, and one can see that the possibilities here are endless: Ruddy says he has never repeated a scene yet and has no plans to do so in the future. Scheduling is tight at the UCB Theater, and *Gravid Water* is allowed only an hour to perform, so there is time for dinner after the show; my friends and I repaired to El Quijote, a time-warp of a Spanish restaurant on 23rd Street whose décor and menu have not changed in sixty years, with walls adorned with high-kitsch frescoes of Quijote's adventures. The whole thing was as fun an evening out as I've had in years, and cheaper than Broadway, too.

Art

Pierre Bonnard's late interiors

by Karen Wilkin

"I dream of seeking the absolute," Pierre Bonnard wrote to Henri Matisse early in November 1940. The phrase leaps off the page—for many reasons. First, there is the context. The letter dates from the years of the Second World War, when shortages and deprivations, even in the unoccupied South of France where both artists lived, made travel all but impossible. Unable to exchange their usual visits, deprived of their tête-à-tête studio conversations, Bonnard and Matisse wrote to each other more often and more fully during the wartime years than at any time in their long friendship. Yet the great bulk of their correspondence from this difficult period has little to do with painting; instead, there are reports on how each of these elderly men was feeling and inquiries into the other's condition. (Both were feeling mortal in the 1940s. Bonnard, born in 1867, died at the beginning of 1947, aged seventy-nine; Matisse, two years younger, died in 1954, just short of his eighty-fifth birthday.)

The pair exchanged comments on the weather, news of how friends and acquaintances were surviving the war, and helpful suggestions for preserving well-being. "I advise you as well as your wife to take every precaution to avoid the flu, which is everywhere at the moment," Matisse wrote. "About ten days ago I caught it quite thoughtlessly: I stayed in a draft I should have avoided." Bonnard replied that he was "careful not to try to act like a young man": no irresponsible sitting in drafts for him.

Amid these day-to-day banalities, comments about art emerge with particular intensity. Reading the November 1940 letter, we follow patiently as Bonnard thanks Matisse for sending some canvas and asks what he owes for some paint. We're pleased when he recounts "a rather reassuring tip about Nice, supposedly from the prefect, that the city will remain French"—obviously good news for Matisse, living at the Hotel Régina, Nice-Cimiez, when, in occupied France, the Vichy government was collaborating with the Germans. We're glad to know that warm weather has restored Bonnard's health and his wife's. But despite the obvious charm of these revelations, which are all the more delightful for their formality—as men of a certain generation and class, Matisse and Bonnard always address each other as "vous" even after knowing each other for decades—it's hard to feel that such letters provide much insight into the aesthetic concerns of these giants of modernism. And then, in the last line, Bonnard mentions, casually, "My work isn't going too badly, and I dream of seeking the absolute." We are jolted into rapt attention and some perplexity.

It's surprising to learn that this frequently quoted, apparently deeply considered, declaration of Bonnard's aspirations was, in fact, tossed off at the end of a brief note, yet even in another context this remarkable ob-

servation would seem just as anomalous. Bonnard, the virtuoso of the elusive and the ambiguous, sought "the absolute"? The phrase seems more apt in relation to—say—Giorgio Morandi, preoccupied by the elegant relationships of lucid planes, nuances of close-valued, chalky hues, and barely discernable differences. Piet Mondrian could have written the sentence—it seems to summarize his pursuit of an intuitive Platonic archetype, expressed in terms of a geometry that resists mathematical analysis, a quest to make ideal harmony visible without relying on an easily penetrated system of proportion. "Seeing the absolute" implies a sense of inevitability, stasis, and finality; it suggests both the existence and the desirability of a ne plus ultra.

Yet Bonnard seems to be, above all, a painter of contingency and instability. His palpitating expanses of unnamable colors threaten to elude sight. Noonday light dazzles. Twilight blurs the distinctions between objects. Half-seen figures and vague incidents, dogs and cats, tug at our peripheral vision. Far from dealing in the inevitable, the immutable, or the final, Bonnard presents us with tantalizing glimpses of a world in flux. On occasion, we venture out of doors, or nature penetrates through a window; mirrors disrupt our spatial certainties and make us question the evidence of our senses. But for the most part, we are locked into an endless, rather claustrophobic, sun-dappled domesticity, an eternal now. Are we to interpret that as an absolute?

Bonnard's paintings bear witness to his love of the ephemeral and the evasive; they depend on his ability to conjure ambiguity and unexpectedness out of the familiar and the thoroughly understood. Forms and shapes dissolve into patches and planes of broken hues and slowly reassemble themselves as we watch. The interrupted touch and the staccato divisions of color that contribute to these fluctuations have led to Bonnard's being classified as a "late Impressionist," a timid conservative who ignored the formal upheavals of twentieth-century art and remained faithful to reactionary nineteenth-century ideas. Even more damning, the frank sensuality and sheer beauty of Bonnard's color, coupled with his domestic, quotidian themes, have caused him to be dismissed—as Matisse often was—as a bourgeois who celebrated hedonism and the status quo. It's worth pointing out, however, that such assessments have almost always come from critics.

Painters (even notably adventurous painters) tend to love Bonnard, responding with enthusiasm to his complex, full-voiced orchestrations of vibrating hues and the complicated games he plays not only with color but also with space and perception. Picasso famously disliked Bonnard's work, accusing him of, among other things, indecisiveness, but Matisse valued Bonnard's work very highly. The letters they exchanged make clear their admiration for each other's art, the emphasis on health and the weather notwithstanding; tantalizing, oblique references hint at what must have been intense studio conversations. When the two artists exchanged works, they noted their pleasure in living with them; "I am still cohabiting with your mysterious and alluring canvas," Matisse wrote in his last letter to Bonnard.

We can draw our own conclusions about the accuracy of these various assessments as we move through "Pierre Bonnard: The Late Still Lifes and Interiors," a mysterious and alluring exhibition organized by the curator Dita Amory in the Lehman Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[1] (Amory has also contributed an illuminating overview, "The Presence of Objects: Still Life in Bonnard's Late Paintings," to the catalogue.) Picture after picture seduces us with delectable color, engages us with a vision of ordinary pleasures, and, finally, disconcerts us with radical structure. We are drawn into a

1 "Pierre Bonnard: The Late Still Lifes and Interiors" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on January 27 and remains on view through April 19, 2009.

light-struck world that is intimate and thoroughly known through long habitation, a universe of familiar rooms in which the transient rituals and routines of daily life are enacted: tables are set, meals are eaten, books read, animals caressed, ablutions performed.

Despite the familiarity of this world, however, nothing is predictable or literal in the way Bonnard evokes it. Space tips; architecture folds, leans, and pleats under the pressure of color and shifting viewpoints. We are unbalanced by Bonnard's deliberate, knowing reversals of pictorial logic. Elements which our ordinary experience tells us must be in the distance can be the most intensely colored, substantially painted elements on the canvas. They demand our attention, while objects in the foreground, apparently more important, dissolve into generous strokes. Figures merge with furniture or walls, sliding towards the boundaries of the canvas, moving past the limits of peripheral vision to hint at expanses beyond the edges of the picture.

We are further destabilized by the tension between the warped, tilted space, and the way the fabric of colored strokes forms a dense continuum. Hues interpenetrate hues, loose touches of the brush knit together to form an intensely worked surface that denies us the possibility of imagining ourselves within this impenetrable space, silted up with color. This sense of dislocation makes us acutely aware of the painting as an autonomous, fictive object and reinforces, too, our appreciation of Bonnard's bravery and inventiveness. Far from being a late Impressionist or a conservative, he holds his own among the most audacious artists of the twentieth century. Mysterious and alluring, indeed.

The show concentrates on the last twenty-five years of the painter's life. Beginning with a moody, dark painting of a greyhound in a larder, painted about 1923, when Bonnard and his companion, muse, wife, and—some said—jailer, Marthe, started spending much of their time near Cannes, in Le Cannet, where they bought a small villa, Le Bosquet, in 1926. The dramatic grays, mahogany-browns, and shimmering whites of this painting suggest that the brilliant light of the Midi had not yet fully replaced the more subdued hues of works made in Bonnard's studios in Paris and northern France; the high contrast of snowy linen, white crockery, and dark shelves makes clear Bonnard's interest in that paradigmatic French master of still life, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, a connection discussed persuasively in Amory's catalogue essay. The exhibition ends with a couple of the wrenching self-portraits from the painter's last years, when he contemplated himself, bare-chested and frail, in the bathroom mirror; they qualify as still lifes and interiors because of the importance given to the objects arrayed on the bathroom shelf, across the bottom of the canvas, and the implicit space behind the depicted reflection. The show includes none of the celebrated bathers, understandably, since their presence would have tipped the balance of the exhibition, shifting the emphasis from images of settings and their accoutrements to the inhabitants of those settings.

There's no shortage of iconic pictures in "The Late Still Lifes and Interiors," from the Museum of Modern Art's seductive *Dining Room Overlooking the Garden (The Breakfast Room)* (1930–31) with its moist, lush garden just beyond the balustrade, to the Tate's magnificent *The Table* (1925), all tipped space and white tablecloth; a miscellany of scattered plates, compotes, and baskets of food is coaxed into an eloquent pattern by luminous, mauve-blue shadows, as present as any of the objects themselves. At once gorgeous and ominous, the moody painting plays off-purples and radiant blues against the white of the cloth, punctuating this somber harmony with sparse hits of yellow and orange. A woman seated at the far corner of the table, her white sweater all but merging with the tabletop, turns away from us, while the purple-black door in the "background"—a barrier, rather than a

means of escape—presses everything forward; only a loosely brushed band of violet at the bottom keeps the loaded tabletop from sliding out of the canvas.

The Metropolitan's own loosely brushed *Before Dinner* (1924, Robert Lehman Collection) gives us another version of the same motif, expanded horizontally. Here the geometry of the dishes dominates, reinforced by the staccato flicker of neatly aligned cutlery. The ruptured "grid" of knives and spoons sets up a rhythm that somehow influences the shapes of the spaces between the furnishings, as well as of the female figures who bracket the dramatic center of the painting: an enigmatically empty, boldly stippled purple-blue plane that functions simultaneously as wallpaper, exterior view, and infinity.

Even more impressive is the selection of little-known paintings, assembled from private collections and less frequently visited European museums. It includes a stunning canvas from the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, *Flowers on a Mantelpiece at Le Cannet* (1927), which announces a Bonnard who, far from being a conservative, is poised on the brink of abstraction. We can unravel the generating image without much effort, but everything is so tightly cropped, the planes from which it is constructed so generous and so aggressively frontal, that the nominal subject all but disappears. The painting is a textile of warm peaches, golds, and mauves, woven together with urgent strokes, lapped and dragged. A strict geometry of parallel bands disciplines the interlocked, patchy hues. A figure, sliced by the edge of the canvas, becomes yet another vertical band of pattern. Against this classically ordered, flattened structure, a swelling bowl of exuberant anemones defines a chunk of comprehensible space with twining stems and silky petals, sharpening our awareness of the painting's essential two-dimensionality.

Both the confrontational quality and near-abstraction of this arresting picture recur in some of the last works in the exhibition, a selection of modestly sized interiors painted in the years just before Bonnard's death; here the geometric shapes of windows and doors restate the proportions of the support, and insistent color relationships across the surface cancel the architectural allusions.

If the painting from Lyon should, improbably, fail to convince us of Bonnard's pictorial daring, the case is definitively made by two spectacular canvases, *The White Tablecloth* (1925, Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal) and *White Interior* (1932 Musée de Grenoble). In *The White Tablecloth*, space tilts, expands, and contracts. We levitate above the tabletop—a pale, luminous rectangle framed by deep, liquid reds—only to discover that space and forms become more rational as we move into the painting's illusory depths. A figure seated in the foreground, almost pushed out of the canvas by the table edge, turns to confront us, her head shockingly dark and volumetric against the plates "mapped" on the expanse of cloth, her body a tapering wisp. The unexpected bulk of the head makes us realize that the standing figure of Marthe, bending over the table, is similarly substantial—until she dissolves into the riotous patterning of her sweater. The foregrounded head enters into a conversation about shape, color, and density with a bowl of plums in the center of the table: The benign vision of the quotidian shatters into a fierce disquisition on the instability of perception.

White Interior is no less powerful. We recognize, from other paintings, the corner of the room with the fireplace in Le Bosquet, a small space in which everything seems uncomfortably close. The door, a radiator, the mantelpiece, and the French windows to the terrace zigzag across the canvas at slightly improbable angles, pressed together and slicing the space. In the foreground, tabletops and a chair do the same. We are first caught up in the jagged symphony of whites played by these disjunctive planes, but we suddenly realize that the space between them is inhabited by a

crouching woman who reaches for a kitten and everything shifts once again. A weird counterpoint of parallel lines at a great variety of scales—paneling, the radiator, a chair back, a balustrade, the woman's striped garment—further animates the painting.

As we move through "The Late Still Lifes and Interiors," we repeatedly confront works in which Bonnard convinces us of the accuracy of his vision, delights us with the lushness of his color, and sandbags us with his defiance of pictorial conventions. Sometimes he achieves this by pushing pictorial structure to the edge of incoherence—shifting and tilting space, dissolving things into color patches, pushing incidents to the periphery—and then creating visual order through chromatic orchestrations that transcend literal relationships to create new harmonies. Sometimes, he does just the reverse, using bold chromatic structures to disrupt fairly conventional images. A small, economical painting of cherries in a Provençal bowl is at once a tribute to ripeness and abundance, an investigation of how reds and blues can interpenetrate to evoke different surfaces, and a paean to the drama of richly modulated zones of crimson and blue, nailed by an arc of golden yellow. Things are stretched and warped by the apparent pressure of the edges of the canvas and the forward thrust of the surface. Notions of near and far, logical relationships between still-life objects or furniture or figures become irrelevant. The kaleidoscopic play of color and the dense fabric of marks even transform Bonnard's most apparently "truthful" images into testimonials to the artifice of painting and the painter's ability to invent. Familiar, even banal subject matter is reinvented in terms of sheer pictorial intelligence and daring.

Given these radical reinventions, it's not surprising that Bonnard's paintings were not done from life. Instead, he recorded his observations freely in black and white drawings, inventing a kind of metaphorical language of line that stood for color and texture, and made color studies in watercolor or gouache. At the Met, we are given a glimpse of these preparations through drawings, watercolors, and gouaches, plus four of the tiny books that Bonnard filled with sketches and a daily record of the weather. These intimate responses to perception are engaging, yet they can seem a little cautious in relation to the fearless paintings. The increasingly audacious transformations visible as we move from the rapid pencil notations to the rather minimal color studies to the fully developed canvases underscore some of Bonnard's diary entries in his later years: "One always speaks of submitting to the demands of nature," he wrote, in 1939. "There is also submitting to the demands of the picture." The painter's "principal subject," he noted, "is the surface, which has its color, its laws, over and above those of objects." The visual experience of daily life was only a beginning.

Spend enough time in the Lehman Wing and it becomes impossible to believe that Bonnard could ever have been called a "conservative" painter. But as Jack Flam points out in his incisive catalogue essay, "Bonnard in the History of Twentieth-Century Painting," the extraordinary chromatic expanses, the sense of deliberate "unresolvedness," and the mood of slightly melancholy immanence that—among other things—distinguish Bonnard's paintings "propose a different kind of modernity from the main movements of the early twentieth century." If Picasso's graphic certainties and calculated negations of inherited pictorial tradition stand for one end of the modernist spectrum, Bonnard is located at the extreme opposite. For all the apparent specificity of their subjects—moments without significance, endlessly prolonged—the works in "The Late Still Lifes and Interiors" threaten to dissolve into pure painting incident. The ordinary experiences that provoked these images recede and we begin to meditate on the ephemeral mysteries of perception itself and, by extension, on the visual intelligence of a particular, rather self-effacing, individual. Is that the absolute Bonnard dreamed of seeking?

Exhibition notes

"Grand Scale: Monumental Prints in the Age of Dürer and Titian"
Philadelphia Museum of Art.
January 31–April 26, 2009

Printmaking has had a checkered history. Overshadowed by the spectacular effects of painting and the grandeur of sculpture, prints have often been considered works of mere craftsmanship and mechanical reproduction. While scholars and curators know better, there are still plenty of print collectors who find themselves defending their holdings against skeptics.

No skeptic, however, could resist the artistry of "Grand Scale: Monumental Prints in the Age of Dürer and Titian." These large-scale Renaissance woodcuts and engravings changed the rules of a game that was still in its infancy. The earliest works in the exhibition date from the 1480s, just decades after the appearance of the Gutenberg Bible. Woodcuts were made in Europe as early as the 1400s, and etchings appeared around the 1480s. Daniel Hopfer, a German armorer, is generally considered the first to have used acid to etch on iron plates at the end of the fifteenth century (the Italians later introduced copper plates).

Artists mastered printmaking relatively quickly. This is not surprising, since a print designed by a master such as Titian or Mantegna and rendered by an expert woodcutter or engraver could reach a great many people, some of whom might become patrons. Printmaking also appealed to civic leaders, who exploited its potential as propaganda for emphasizing the size and sophistication of their cities. What's more, the "paper grandeur" of the large print offered cash-poor emperors a more affordable and portable means of commemorating their achievements.

The *Submersion of Pharaoh's Army in the Red Sea* (*c*. 1513–16), a woodcut from twelve blocks, demonstrates the wall power of the composite print. It also offers an idea of the complexity of the task that fell to Titian, the (unknown) woodcutter, and the publisher as they set out to make an image measuring roughly four by seven feet. The catalogue essayist Suzanne Boorsch refers to this print, with good reason, as "audacious." One would expect the drama of this well-known scene to be heightened in a large format, but it is the composition and technique that surprises. Pharaoh's army and the astonished Israelites are relegated to two corners while almost two-thirds of the image is sea and sky. Wave after tresslike wave rushes forward below the swaths of line and white space that make up the sky. The effect is impressionistic, even abstract.

The Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I (1459–1519) capitalized on the wall-mounted print to celebrate his ancestry and achievements. Albrecht Dürer's *The Great Triumphal Chariot of Maximilian I* (1523), a woodcut almost eight feet long, shows the emperor in an elaborate carriage pulled by six pairs of horses and attended by a host of allegorical figures. Once he approved Dürer's drawing, Maximilian became so interested in the project that he drove almost daily to the Nuremberg studio of the *Formschneider* (or cutter). The lavish design is a marvel of fluidity and control and proves that nothing succeeds like excess. Dürer adds many charming details such as the bell at the rear of the carriage, which undoubtedly sounds just the right kind of imperial grace note.

The triumphal procession could also be rendered vertically, adding the effect of architectural weight to its symbolism. The colossal *Triumphal Arch of Maximilian I* (1515), printed from nearly two hundred blocks, comes in at a little more than eleven feet tall. A collaboration between Dürer and four other artists, this print was intended as a gift to members of the privileged class in whom the emperor hoped to cultivate a sense of national pride. An unforgettable sight, the *Arch* is spectacle in every sense of the word; it is also a testament to Maximilian's commitment to printmaking as an art form.

Sebald Beham, the so-called Bad Boy of

Nuremberg, depicts the bawdy on a monumental scale. The hilarious *Large Village Kermis* (1535) is a visual encyclopedia of peasant life (and religious rebellion), while *The Fountain of Youth* (*c*. 1531) employs an academic, Italian style to similar ends. Alison Stewart devotes her catalogue essay to Sebald's *Wallpaper with Nymphs and Satyrs* (*c*. 1520–25). The single sheet of this print is a glorious riot of birds, vines, and pagan figures. It is only through modern technology, however, that we can appreciate the full impact of this woodcut as wallpaper. Stewart's reconstruction of this image in multiples reveals that it would take at least eight pairs of sheets to show how the vines form a repeating pattern of male and female genitalia.

For sheer temerity, though, it is difficult to top Erhard Schön's anamorphic wonder *What Do You See?* (*c*. 1531–35). It is easy enough to recognize the allegorical motifs and the skewed title along a ribbon at the bottom. However, the answer to *Was Sichst Du?* materializes only when the viewer squats at the print's lower left corner and discovers a defecating peasant in much the same posture.

Diana Mantuana, the first female Italian printmaker to sign her work, is represented by *Procession of Roman Horsemen* and *The Feast of the Gods* (*c*. 1575). The daughter of a Mantuan engraver, Diana learned printmaking and the arguably more valuable skill of cultivating patronage. Vasari wrote about her in his *Lives*, praising her engraving and her feminine virtue. Her first action when she moved to Rome was to obtain a papal privilege to protect and commend her engravings. Mantuana worked not for her own gain, but to garner architectural commissions for her husband, Francesco da Volterra.

More than technical wonders from a low-tech age, these rare prints also serve as valuable historical documents. For those who lived far away from Europe's cultural centers, prints broadened visual culture in a way that our media-saturated age can scarcely imagine. The role of printmaking in literacy, visual and textual, cannot be overstated—it served to spread the word about fine art on, so to speak, a grand scale.

—Leann Davis Alspaugh

"The Thaw Collection of Master Drawings: Acquisitions Since 2002" The Morgan Library, New York. January 23, 2009–May 3, 2009

Whatever else you can say about it, "The Thaw Collection of Master Drawings: Acquisitions Since 2002" offers instructive examples of how artists have dealt with the challenge of drawing foliage. Do they depict it en masse or one leaf at a time? As impressionistic mélange or botanical artifacts? The forest or the trees? The nineteenth-century German engraver Heinrich Reinhold bridged the gap by honing in on the specificities of this leaf or that vine within a broader orchestration of tangled branches. Adrian Zingg, Reinhold's Swiss contemporary, codified nature by transforming it into jagged shards of patterning. In a spare and scratchy ink drawing circa 1790, Jakob Philipp Hackert rendered foliage as an electrical current. One hundred years later, Edgar Degas elicited the natural world through frantic areas of smudged pastel.

There's more to "Acquisitions Since 2002" than a sterling array of stylistic how-tos, not least the generosity of the former art dealer Eugene V. Thaw and his wife Clare. The current exhibition is the fifth at the Morgan devoted to the Thaw Collection. (A concurrent show at the museum, "Studying Nature: Oil Sketches from the Thaw Collection," highlights another aspect of the couple's artistic interests.) Since 1975, the Thaws have donated over four hundred drawings to the Morgan, often with the intent of filling gaps in the museum's holdings. That feels like the case here: Any exhibition that traverses an ink study for a Renaissance temple and The Factory—or, at least, Jamie Wyeth's *Andy Warhol—Facing Left (Study #2)* (1976)—is, by definition, a grab-bag.

But, so what? Complaints are niggling

given the quality of the couple's gift to posterity. "Acquisitions Since 2002" spans five centuries and includes reputations great, small, and unknown. Consistency is maintained by force of purpose and vision. Eugene and Clare's eyes—keenly informed, stringent, and attuned to exquisite minutiae—are readily discernible, as are their idiosyncratic enthusiasms: the couple's devotion to nineteenth-century German drawing, for example. The exhibition includes a number of curiosities. There's the aforementioned Warhol portrait—Wyeth's expert use of white gouache does justice to the Pop artist's sickly pallor—but also a silvery depiction of the Bay of Naples by Goethe, an engaging zoological study of a brown bear, and a contour drawing of the Virgin and Child by a brother of the Brothers Grimm.

Drawings of architecture are in ample supply; all of them are accomplished, many are more than that. *View from Chiaia to Pizzofalcone, Naples* (1783), the only extant watercolor by the Welsh artist Thomas Jones, is an immaculate sorting of geometry keyed to a startling, antiseptic light. Conjecture has it that Josephus Augustus Knip's *The Temple of Minerva Medica, Rome* (*c.* 1810) is unfinished, but the stark areas of uninflected paper surrounding the title edifice are part and parcel of the artist's exacting linearity. In several pieces, draftsmen combine perspective and light to engender moody dioramas of solitude and spiritual yearning. The dramatic chiaroscuro of François-Marius Granet's *Two Monks in a Cloister* would have made Rembrandt smile. The vertiginous space and encompassing quietude in Carl Gustav Carus's *A Monk in a Cloister* presage de Chirico, while his *Fountain Before a Temple* (1854–57) is as ripe a Romantic image as you could hope for.

French artists are handsomely represented here. Ingres, that prince of the draftsman's art, is represented by three drawings—finds, really: a recently discovered equestrian study and fetching portraits of a young aristocratic couple that haven't been exhibited in close to a hundred years. Odilon Redon's *Reading Centaur* is a superb example of this otherworldly artist's gift for charcoal—its density, tactility, and flexibility. Gauguin's mixed-media study for The National Gallery's *Breton Girls Dancing, Pont Aven* is airy and roughhewn, its play of greens and grays at once soft and astringent. The graphic sensibilities of Félix Vallotton and Pierre Bonnard are seen to winning effect, as is Matisse's calligraphic élan: *Grande Visage I (Lydia)* (1952) displays the great artist at his punchiest.

The modernist selections hop-scotch through different aesthetics—Dada, Cubism, Expressionism, The New York School, Minimalism, and, with Georgia O'Keeffe's dusky graphite on manila paper of antelope horns, the American sublime. Intransigent loners like Alberto Giacometti and Joseph Cornell are accounted for. Duchamp's big brother Jacques Villon's brusquely crosshatched drawing of a skull is out-of-left-field and welcome because of it. David Hockney rounds out the show with a charming picture of his pet dachsunds, but it's Jackson Pollock you'll remember best. *Untitled (Abstract Ram)* (*c.* 1944) may be a transitional work of scrabbled totems and Jungian portent, but its velvety patina, keyed to mint green, is unlike any Pollock I've encountered. There are greater drawings at the Morgan, but the Pollock's unique character speaks to the acuity, independence, and, yes, the love that are the hallmarks of a great collection.

—Mario Naves

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

The sculptor Louise Nevelson was the idol of art's own silent screen, the creator of evocative, cinematic work who also lived like the sirens of early film. An excellent selection of nearly twenty of her large wall sculptures from the 1950s through the 1980s is now on view at Pace Wildenstein in Chelsea.[1]

Nevelson used the syntax of Constructivism to plumb the depths of Romanticism and Symbolism. Hilton Kramer rightly praised her work as a "realm of enchantment." Now Pace further reminds us how Nevelson refined allusion and mystery to make her own powerful contributions to twentieth-century modernism.

She was born Louise Berliawsky in Kiev, Russia in 1899, the daughter of Jewish parents. At four she moved to the United States and grew up in Rockland, Maine. Her father worked in the timber business; her mother dressed like a Park Avenue grande dame; Louise, meanwhile, developed a persona best suited for her sense of artistic destiny. "I've always had to overcompensate for my opinion of myself," she said. "I had to run like hell to catch up with what I thought of myself." Her grandiose pronouncements went hand-in-hand with her particular artistic achievement.

"I knew I was a creative person from the first minute I opened my eyes," she claimed. "I knew it, and they treated me like an artist all of my early life. And I knew I was coming to New York when I was a baby." She maintained the aura of a successful artist even before she was one. In her life and demeanor she rejected down-and-out bohemianism in favor of celluloid glamor. In 1920 she came to New York and married a shipping magnate named Charles Nevelson. "My husband's family was terribly refined," she complained. "Within their circle you could know Beethoven, but God forbid if you *were* Beethoven." She had a son two years later. In 1931 she divorced, refusing to accept the complications of marriage. "I learned that marriage wasn't the romance that I sought but a partnership, and I didn't need a partner." For many years she managed to live well, but also as an art world outsider. Over time she filled her palazzo-like homes with her large sculptures—first at a Murray Hill townhouse in Manhattan, and later spread through multiple buildings on Spring Street in Soho. She even discarded her home furnishings and other distractions to focus on making art.

She spent a quarter-century in the artistic wilderness. In the early 1930s, she went off to Munich to study with Hans Hofmann. She worked as an extra in films in Berlin and Vienna. She then became an assistant to Diego Rivera, whose sense of scale and technique of storytelling through sequential frames would make a lasting impression on her art. She also developed a lifelong fas-

1 "Louise Nevelson: Dawns and Dusks" opened at Pace Wildenstein, New York, on February 13 and remains on view through March 14, 2009.

cination with modern dance and drew from Martha Graham a sensibility for movement: "Dance made me realize that air is a solid through which I pass, not a void in which I exist."

Nevelson did not emerge onto the public stage until 1958, when the Museum of Modern Art acquired and exhibited *Sky Cathedral*, a wall-sized object of open wooden boxes containing recovered bits of architectural molding, dowels, and spindles, all painted a uniform black. *Sky Cathedral,* constructed on a system of box frames she had developed a year before, brought Abstract Expressionist scale and Cubist space into sculptural high relief. It also represented but a fraction of the work lining the walls of her home. Nevelson always exhibited the confidence of someone who was expecting the artistic spotlight. She was fifty-nine years old when it started shining on her.

It wasn't long before Nevelson became a public eminence in the mode of Salvador Dalí and Andy Warhol. She wore gypsy bandanas and jockey helmets, sporting inch-long eyelashes and a riot of Incan and Persian jewelry. "I am what you call an atmospheric dresser. When I meet someone, I want people to enjoy something, not just an old hag," she said. She smoked cigars. She appeared on magazine covers wrapped in furs. She rolled off one-liners and maintained the absolute position of her own artistic greatness. "In Maine, and at the Art Students League in New York, and then in Munich with Hofmann, they all give me 100 plus," she said, often referring to herself as the builder of an artistic empire. "I am not very modest," she admitted. She remained prolific up to her death in 1988. In the 1970s and 1980s, particularly after Alexander Calder's death in 1976, she began receiving numerous commissions for public sculpture.

Most of us, regrettably, now first encounter Nevelson's work through this public art. She was never at her best sculpting monumental stand-alone objects, nor does her work show well outdoors. "The very basis of Nevelson's environments is enveloping rather than object-delineated," wrote Arnold Glimcher. Gather her wooden sculptures in the right room, however, and the experience is altogether different. For the exhibition, Pace Wildenstein smartly displays some of Nevelson's sculptures on blackened walls. Upon entering the show, I felt like the writer Joe Gillis when he meets Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. "You used to be in pictures. You used to be big," says Gillis. "I am big," replies Desmond. "It's the pictures that got small."

Nevelson's own larger-than-life persona would be of little interest were it not so tied to her sculptural practice. Her theatricality helps define her use of form. Hilton Kramer, in his introduction to a 1983 Nevelson catalogue, recalls a studio visit he made to her Murray Hill townhouse in the 1950s: "the most extraordinary of all my encounters with artists and works of art."

> Here one entered a world of shadows, and it required a certain adjustment in one's vision simply to see even a part of what there was to see. . . . It was also, as one came afterward to realize, intensely theatrical. Emerging from that house on this first occasion, I felt very much as I had felt as a child emerging from a Saturday-afternoon movie. The feeling of shock and surprise upon discovering that the daylight world was still there, going about its business in the usual way, was similarly acute.

Nevelson arrived at a sculptural form that conveyed the darkness of the movie house by way of Richard Wagner's "total work of art." "Theater, dance, music, films—the whole world of theatricality had long been one of Nevelson's passionate interests," Kramer remarked. Nevelson never drew formal boundaries between the arts. Everything became absorbed into her sense of overall creativity. Like the movies, which are a vulgar descendant of Wagnerian opera, Nevelson's dark, musical work has more in common with advanced nineteenth-century art than the distilled classicism of twentieth-century high modernism.

Nevelson's lush persona seemed far removed from the existential angst of the Abstract Expressionists at mid-century and the chilly serialism of the Minimalists a decade and a half later, even as her career took her through both worlds. In assembling her sculpture from wooden cast-offs, Nevelson became a spiritual actor. Her creative process had as much to do with nineteenth-century occult practices as twentieth-century formal concerns: "I feel that what people call by the word scavenger is really a resurrection. When you do things this way, you're really bringing them to life. You know that you nursed them and you enhance them, you tap them and you hammer them, and you know you have given them an ultimate life, a spiritual life that surpasses the life they were created for."

At Pace, the division of staked crates that make up *Untitled* (1964), turned open on their side, forms the frames of a larger moving image. Taken alone, each box displays an inanimate still life: table legs, pieces of shoes, all perfectly blackened and plunged in a bath of darkness. When read sequentially, though, the box frames become animated. The objects and the black spaces between them start to dance, one box to the next.

Nevelson refined this animating practice in her work in the 1970s, when she ceased relying on found-object crates and began contracting out for more uniform boxes. The result was an orderly constructivist grid, one that reflected the art world's new measure of Minimalism but without a loss of animated action. For *End of Day Nightscape* (1973), the best work in the show, Nevelson further divided her grids into smaller and smaller units to arrive at a result so overwhelming it seems to become that total work of art, no longer the product of a single artist. The sculpture can be read differently at multiple distances. From up close it looks like the topography of a city; from farther away, one hears the tones of a contrapuntal fantasia. "The eye is fed such a rich diet that it can never quite take everything in at once," Kramer remarked in a review of Nevelson's work in 1976. The divisions have to be "read as a series of sequences, and as we give ourselves over to it, we are enclosed in its magic spell."

Cascade VII (1979) zooms in on the action, with multiple lines of hinged box doors that open and close as you read down. *Cascade VIII* (1979) is a perfect open grid of six-by-five boxes where sticks of wood further divide the space and reflect frame to frame. The "Mirror-Shadow" series from the mid-1980s explodes the grid, using it now as open armatures for free-floating objects in suspended space. Here one sees the box-like forms of earlier work mixed in with the allusive stand-alone elements of carved bed frames and musical instruments.

Nevelson's handful of unpainted assemblages of mixed media from the 1980s at Pace, academic exercises in synthetic Cubist collage, come off as interesting counter-examples to her painted work but in the end fail as experiments in colorization. A few stand-alone sculptures from the same period, which resemble oversized golf bags containing loose strips of wood, also convey little of the evocative authority of her black wall sculptures. Nevelson is best in black and white with wall screens that are halfway between picture windows and stand-alone sculptures. Like much of her outdoor sculpture, the failed works at Pace risked variations that became too object-specific.

Louise Nevelson should be remembered for her artistic tenacity in lean times as well as her prolific output in flush. She understood the world in cinematic form, one that spoke in the silent stop-action of a flickering screen. "I feel in love with black; it contained all color," Nevelson remarked in her best Norma Desmond imitation. "It wasn't a negation of color. It was an acceptance. Black is the most aristocratic color of all, the only aristocratic color. For me this is the ultimate. You can be quiet, and it contains the whole thing." Fortunately for us, late in life, Nevelson was able to see herself become the star of her own spectacular in black and white.

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

City Opera performed *Antony and Cleopatra*, Samuel Barber's opera from 1966. But it did not perform the opera on the City Opera stage. We had this opera in Carnegie Hall, in concert form. City Opera has pretty much canceled its 2008–09 season, as it rebuilds and regroups. Recent times have been dicey for the company, but the company, it seems now, will live on.

And *Antony and Cleopatra* lives on, despite a famously rocky beginning. Barber wrote the opera for the opening of the "new Met," as we used to call it, in Lincoln Center. (The previous location was Broadway between Thirty-ninth and Fortieth streets.) He penned the role of Cleopatra with Leontyne Price in mind, and it was she, of course, who sang it when the new Met bowed. Antony was the Puerto Rican baritone—or bass (it depended)—Justino Diaz. A lot went wrong on opening night: Mainly, the elaborate scenery and costumes caused problems for the singers. And critics were unkind. Later, Barber revised the piece, probably improving it.

And it contains much wonderful music. Price sang excerpts from it all over the world, causing a sensation with, for example, "Give me my robe, put on my crown." To me, the opera is lush, exotic, often rapturous, and finally persuasive. Others find it kitschy and tedious. Put it this way: If you like Barber, you like *Antony and Cleopatra*. But the opera is still probably less popular than Barber's other biggie, *Vanessa*.

Singing the title roles of *A & C* in Carnegie Hall were Lauren Flanigan, the American soprano who has long been City Opera's prima donna, and Teddy Tahu Rhodes, the baritone from New Zealand. (He owns the best triple-decker name in opera, and perhaps anywhere.) Flanigan is known as a "singing actress," and so she is. On this night, she sounded frayed—battle-scarred—but was also game. Gameness counts for a lot in singing. As for Rhodes, he was smooth and virile, as he can be expected to be. But he also sounded tight.

Doing the conducting was City Opera's music director, George Manahan. As usual, he was competent and adept, clearly knowing the score. He is never unprepared. But he, and the opera, could have used more flavor and oomph. Over this entire performance hung a grayness: a mediocrity, an okayness—a sense of "Good enough for government work." *Antony and Cleopatra*, given its troubled existence, could have used a better sell.

Gustavo Dudamel has now reached the grand age of twenty-eight, and he is about to take over the reins of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. But first he guest-conducted the New York Philharmonic. The main work on the program was Mahler's Fifth Symphony—but the program began with a recent violin concerto. This was the work written by Oliver Knussen for Pinchas Zukerman in 2002. And Zukerman was on hand to play the work on this occasion, with the Philharmonic.

The concerto is in three movements, to which Knussen has given nice, old-fashioned names: Recitative, Aria, and Gigue. The Recitative features some musical doodling, some fiddling around (perhaps appropriate for a violin concerto). In modern fashion, the music is nervous, edgy. The Aria is spooky and bleak—again in the modern fashion. You may also give this movement credit for expressing a "haunting beauty." And there comes a rocking that resembles a lullaby. The final movement, Gigue, is one of those angry, afraid deals we so often hear: the soundtrack to a horror movie.

Zukerman gave us helpings of his prize-winning sweet sound. And he was relaxed and casual—he almost always is. This can be a virtue—there is too much tightness in music—but it can also bleed over into complacency.

Dudamel made a recording of the Mahler Fifth, with his Venezuelan youth orchestra. I praised it highly when it was released. His Fifth with the Philharmonic was less praiseworthy. There were extremes of tempo: slows that were too slow, fasts that were too fast. This might be chalked up to immaturity. Moreover, the opening funeral march is marked "with measured step," and the conductor did not step that way: He was frustratingly halting. Parts of the Adagietto were beautifully breathed; other parts were cruelly and unnaturally manipulated. (And they complain about Lorin Maazel!) More broadly, the symphony sometimes came off as episodic, rather than as a single piece.

But Dudamel is a talented guy, and he displayed much of this talent. He is always called "kinetic"—same way Valery Gergiev is called "mercurial"—and kinetic is the word. He unquestionably knows how to inject excitement. He did this, for example, at the end of the symphony, where the music courses joyously in D major. Of course, Mahler knows how to inject excitement, too: Sometimes all you have to do is conduct—or play or sing—him.

Vladimir Feltsman is another talented guy. Indeed, he is a pianist of staggering gifts. But he is uneven. One night he is world-beating—a pianist of the first rank; another night he is—okay. In his recent recital at the Metropolitan Museum, he was okay.

He began with Bach's Partita No. 1 in B flat, and he seemed very, very nervous. His fingers had a hard time staying on the keyboard. And this caused problems with tone, rhythm, phrasing, and other essential elements. One cringed in one's seat, hoping like mad that Feltsman would find his groove. He did some admirable things in the partita: The second minuet was stylish. But he never really found that groove. The closing Gigue was jarringly coarse, vulgar.

He then turned to Schubert's Four Impromptus, Op. 90, and here some of his rightful authority showed up. His fingers were able to do what his judgment dictated, more or less. But he was still not himself: in his sound, for example, which was unusually brittle. Too often he was on top of the keys rather than into them. And he closed his program with Schumann's *Carnaval*. This piece is full of whimsy, which is not necessarily Feltsman's leading quality at the piano. Throughout the work, he was mechanical and bangy, and also colorless. That is not *Carnaval*, and that is not really Feltsman, either.

I recall a recital in Carnegie Hall: Feltsman's program included the "Pathétique" Sonata and *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I have never heard anyone better in either. Piano playing takes nerve, and sometimes you got it, and sometimes you don't. May Feltsman have plenty of it on nights to come.

Marilyn Horne, the immortal mezzo, turned seventy-five, and she celebrated with a gala in Carnegie Hall. This was a cavalcade of stars. On the bill were seventeen singers, including some of—many of, actually—the best in the world. They sang music, or at least composers, closely associated with Horne. The afternoon had a pair of hosts: the bass Samuel Ramey and the mezzo Frederica von Stade, both veterans. Indeed, Ramey said one of the most poignant

things I have ever heard from a singer: "I'm Samuel Ramey—or at least I used to be." It can be hard to fade from the stage.

The first half of this concert featured young singers, who have benefited from the Marilyn Horne Foundation. (The foundation is what the first President Bush called a "point of light," in the music world.) I was especially pleased to hear Bruce Sledge, a tenor previously unknown to me. He sang a Bellini song in a remarkably easy way, and with a beautiful, fresh sound. I remember something Leontyne Price once said—to a tenor, in fact—in a master class: "It's so easy for you. It's like falling off a log." There was also Meredith Arwady, a contralto: and it was nice to see a contralto on the bill, any contralto. They have not gone the way of the dodo bird after all.

After intermission, the stars came out to shine. Dolora Zajick did not sing her best "Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix"—but she floated an amazing high B flat at the end. No one does that, ever. And Warren Jones—one of four accompanists on the afternoon—played very, very well. This accompaniment is not especially pianistic, but Jones made it so: It was liquid, shimmering. Piotr Beczala, the fabulous Polish tenor, was not up to his snuff: He sang "Una furtiva lagrima" in a slidey, swoony, sloppy way. But Susan Graham was exquisitely tasteful in "Connais-tu le pays."

James Morris sang a stretch of *The Rake's Progress*—with theatrical and musical savvy, as expected. Then David Daniels, the countertenor, sang a Handel aria—"Cara sposa" from *Rinaldo*. He shaped it, spun it, stunningly well. One can forget—amid the hype and leather-jacketed PR about him—what a good singer he is. Dmitri Hvorostovsky sang "O Carlo, ascolta," slashingly and dashingly. He always sounds a little contained for Verdi—one would like to bring his sound forward, and Italianize it. But he has hardly been stopped, huh?

In an interview last fall with me, Horne said she had become "so partial to Brahms." That music "makes me feel good," she said. And that is an excellent observation. Thomas Quasthoff sang "Wie bist du, meine Könige," and he was a little wan of voice—but he brought out the composer's characteristic kindness. Karita Mattila sang "Songs My Mother Taught Me," winningly. Thomas Hampson sang "Wo die schönen Trompeten blasen," from Mahler's *Knaben Wunderhorn*. He judged the song superbly, and so did Jones. Von Stade and Ramey smiled their way through "I Bought Me a Cat."

And finally we get to Joyce DiDonato—who closed the show with "Tanti affetti" from Rossini's *Donna del lago*. Oh, my goodness. I once heard Barbara Bonney say of a singer—a soprano—"She sang perfectly. *Perfectly*." DiDonato sang perfectly—*perfectly*—too, is all I can tell you. It was one of those performances about which, afterward, you simply stammer.

Horne herself did not sing, though she gave remarks at the end—full of gratitude. You can go many, many a year without hearing an afternoon of singing so fine and enriching. And I was reminded of a pet point of mine (if I may): If you seek a golden age of singing, look about you. Not all golden singers are dead and buried, or retired.

Riccardo Muti is headed to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, in 2010. And he guest-conducted the New York Philharmonic in a program heavy on the Haydn. We began with a symphony, No. 89 in F major—a symphony without a nickname (such as "l'Ours"). Muti and the Philharmonic were not a model of crispness or togetherness, but they were adequate. Haydn's syncopations came through. Overall, this performance was a little subdued, a little conventional. Haydn is a merry, spirited fellow, and Muti can be on the stolid side. But he gets the job done. And the closing movement had a tasteful earthiness, just right.

There was a soloist, Thomas Quasthoff, who sang four Haydn arias—opera arias. Quasthoff seems to like Haydn a lot, having recorded him frequently, and sung him onstage frequently. He sings Haydn in an appropriately robust and undainty manner.

He does not handle his Haydn with sugar tongs. On this evening, he was smart and capable in almost everything he did. Do I have a criticism? Sure: At least one trill was faked, rather than genuine—simulated rather than truly executed. A German bass-baritone should not be expected to be Beverly Sills, but Quasthoff can do better.

The Miró Quartet is a fine, valuable ensemble, founded at Oberlin College in the mid-1990s. They played a concert in Weill Recital Hall, the upstairs jewel in the Carnegie building. And they told us they were presenting an all-American program: Ives, Kevin Puts (b. 1972), and Dvořák. Dvořák? Yes, the String Quartet No. 12, nicknamed "the American." Is that cheating, saying you're doing an all-American program and including Dvořák, no matter what the character of the piece? Yes, but such cheating is understandable.

The group began with Ives's hymn-soaked String Quartet No. 1, which is designated "From the Salvation Army." Actually, they began with talking. The violist gave a little lecture on the piece, deadening the concert from the start. Nothing kills a musical experience like talking—and unnecessary talking: The violist said nothing that could not be found in the evening's program notes, for those who desired to read. In any case, the Miró played the Ives well: with richness, passion, and conviction. They showed obvious respect for the music, which is prerequisite. And each player evinced a soloistic quality, while cocking an ear to the whole.

The third movement—Offertory: Adagio cantabile—had this problem: It was overly rich, overly lush, when some spareness was due. And the final movement—Postlude: Allegro marziale—had this problem: The players' rhapsody spilled over into sloppiness and carelessness. Nonetheless, their abandon was to be appreciated.

You should count Kevin Puts as a courageous composer, and I will tell you why: He is willing to write beautifully, even when critics and other killjoys sneer "neo-Romanticism." To Puts, a major third is not a major crime, or even a minor one. He is somewhat like William Bolcom, in that he is eclectic. Detractors might call him kitschy or sentimental—same as they do Bolcom. For the Miró Quartet, Puts wrote *Credo*, a work in five movements. It has some lovely things in it, including a stretch that sounds like pop music. I do not mean that as a knock. And *Credo* has a sense of play, a quality too seldom found in today's music.

I did not hear the Dvořák quartet—why? Because I popped downstairs to Zankel Hall, in the "basement" of the Carnegie building. There, Joyce DiDonato was singing with a French original-instruments band called Les Talens Lyriques. And she was singing Handel—arias from operas such as *Teseo*, *Ariodante*, and *Hercules*. Most of these are on her recent CD called *Furore*. And furious the singing was. DiDonato was extraordinarily bold, juicy, and hot.

Needless to say, she sang well, because she is scarcely capable of doing otherwise. All the bedrock requirements were fulfilled; the fundamentals were in place. But once those things are taken care of, we are in the realm of taste. And, to me, DiDonato was too hot, too mad—too furious. Musical sense should have pride of place. DiDonato rather chewed the scenery, even though there was no scenery on this concert stage. In my view, she was in danger of becoming an opera cartoon. Then again, life, people may claim, is like that.

A *Rigoletto* at the Metropolitan Opera was not too hot, not too mad—indeed, it could have used some additional drama. As with the *Antony and Cleopatra* discussed earlier, a mediocrity hung over this performance (although maybe it is better to say a so-so-ness). The title role was sung by Roberto Frontali, who was sturdy, rugged—a little rough. He had some terrible vocal struggles, but then Rigoletto struggles too, so . . .

The Duke of Mantua was Giuseppe Filianoti, a worthy tenor. He was warm, virile, and Italianate. But he was also full of effort. Like Frontali, he struggled, vocally, and the voice pinched badly "under pres-

sure," to borrow a phrase from my colleague Martin Bernheimer. Gilda was sung by a Polish soprano, Aleksandra Kurzak. She had some uncertain vocal moments, but she was endearing—a lovable person onstage, as Gilda should be. And the conductor was making his Met debut. He was Riccardo Frizza, and he was all right—serviceable. So was this entire *Rigoletto*.

As I was leaving the house, an adjective occurred to me: "B-listy." I also wondered whether the ticket-buyer—whom the critic (who is a freeloader) should always bear in mind—got his money's worth. Well, he certainly got *Rigoletto*, that splendid work of art. And he got that serviceable performance. I think of a favorite expression from golf: "It's not how you hit the good shots, it's how you hit the bad shots." A great house should have off nights that are not abominable but adequate. And the Met generally succeeds on this score. Perhaps that's how we should judge houses: on their worst performances, not their best.

The ticket-buyer on a particular Sunday afternoon in Carnegie Hall definitely, definitely got his money's worth. The Met Orchestra was conducted by its leader, James Levine. And the concert included two soloists. The first was DiDonato—she was everywhere—who sang Mozart's concert aria "Ch'io mi scordi di te? . . . Non temer, amato bene." They say that, if you can perform Mozart, you can perform anything: He is the ultimate test. Whether this is true or not—and I lean toward yes—DiDonato passed with flying colors. She was a model Mozartean, and so, of course, was Levine—who took the piano part, as well as the conductor's. He played with notable purity (though he might have "sung out" a speck more). Madame Lhévinne, his long-ago teacher, would have been pleased.

It should also be said in DiDonato's favor that she comes ready to sing: She needed no warm-up—no onstage warm-up—either in the Met Orchestra concert or in the Horne gala. "But don't they all come ready to sing? Isn't that a professional must?" Oh, what a sweet, naïve question.

Also on the program was a new work by Charles Wuorinen, called *Time Regained*, a Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra. If you did not see the name in the program, you could probably not have guessed that this was a piece by Wuorinen. He is normally the "thorniest" of modernists. But this piece is rather simple, tuneful, "accessible." It has an innocence about it, and dollops of charm. I hate to tell you, but I was reminded of Dmitri Kabalevsky. I'm not sure that the material can bear the work's length: thirty minutes. But I would like to hear *Time Regained* again, which, as you know, is high praise.

Serving as piano soloist was Peter Serkin, who was intelligent and committed. He has long suffered some stiffness of hands and arms—but this caused little trouble in the Wuorinen.

After intermission, DiDonato returned to sing some of her friend Rossini. She sang *La regata veneziana* with tremendous flair, as well as technical soundness. You should have seen Levine: Rarely has a conductor had so much fun. He was eating up every second of it. When La DiDonato positioned herself for an encore, you knew it was going to be one Rossini aria or the other: either "Una voce poco fa" or "Non più mesta." It was the latter, and DiDonato dazzled in it, as usual.

Levine closed out the program with a Mendelssohn symphony, the fourth one, called the "Italian." He was very Germanic in it—but the symphony is "German" too, of course. Levine combined merriment and strength, just as the symphony does. The Andante was a clinic in lyrical sensitivity. The Saltarello was not too fast—Levine is too shrewd for that. Yes, the ticket-buyer got his money's worth, even if he paid a scalper's price.

The media

The death of politics

by James Bowman

There's something rather touching about the public service announcement I often hear on the radio for a multiple sclerosis charity that invites us to imagine "a world without MS." The progress of science and medicine has, after all, given us a world pretty nearly free from smallpox and polio. Where there are reasonable public health facilities—not, alas, in Zimbabwe at the moment—the world is also without cholera and typhus. Sooner or later, we look forward to the "cure for cancer" and all other diseases. Some starry-eyed futurologists even dare to imagine the eventual death of death.

Yet one of the drawbacks of this kind of easy faith in progress—a young workmate of mine used to dismiss the risk of cancer from his incessant smoking on the grounds that, by the time he got it, they were bound to have discovered a cure—is that it too often leads to a simple-minded progressivism toward things about which it is neither reasonable nor harmless to buck ourselves up in troubled times by imagining an end to. Among them are those perennial utopian favorites for outlawry: war and poverty.

A few weeks ago, former Senator George McGovern, America's own undisillusionable Candide, took to the pages of the *Washington Post* to call on our new President to declare a moratorium, "a five-year time-out," on war:

> During that interval, we could work with the U.N. World Food Program, plus the overseas arms of the churches, synagogues, mosques and other volunteer agencies to provide a nutritious lunch every day for every school-age child in Afghanistan and other poor countries. . . . There will always be time for another war. But hunger can't wait.

Odd, isn't it, how these quasi-pacifists seem to see war as a kind of sporting event, a bit of self-indulgence that we ought to have the decency to postpone, at the very least, when there are hungry children needing to be fed? But why stop at five years? If it is as simple a matter as this to call "time-out on war," why not just, well, neglect to call "time-in" again? Why not do away with war altogether and put the whole of the defense budget into nutritious lunches? Senator McGovern does add the stipulation, "unless, of course, there is a genuine threat to the nation," but this merely begs the question about the particular wars he deprecates, Iraq and Afghanistan, which certainly seemed to those who took us into them, as well as—at the time—majorities of the American people, to involve genuine threats to the nation. When has a war *not* been able plausibly so to represent itself to pluralities of the public?

"I'm aware that some of my fellow Americans regard me as too idealistic," notes the 1972 Democratic standard-bearer against Richard Nixon. (Well, that's one thing they regard him as being.) "But sometimes," he adds, "idealism is the best

realism." There is no answer to that. Sometimes almost anything can be the best form of almost anything else, but as a statement about the world it is as perfectly empty of content as Bobby Kennedy's dictum, borrowed from another famous innocent, Bernard Shaw, about how "some men look at things as they are and ask, 'why?' I dream of things that never were and ask, 'why not?'"

I've always wondered if either Shaw or Kennedy ever actually *did* ask "why not?"—in a non-rhetorical fashion, I mean. If so, why had there been no one standing by to supply them with any of the many excellent answers to the question of why things that had never been had not been? Not that that would have stopped either from dreaming any more than it did George McGovern, who took up the leadership of the anti-war Democrats after Kennedy was assassinated. There are, after all, plenty more such dreamers today, most of them sporting "war is not the answer" bumper stickers.

The utopians, like the poor I suppose, we have always with us, but I don't think we have ever elected one to the presidency before. It is not fanciful, I fancy, to say that a good part of the reason why Mr. McGovern was buried under Nixon's electoral landslide was that people—including many of his fellow veterans of World War II who were then alive and now are not—could see even then something of the man's naïveté and otherworldliness now so clearly on display in this bizarre idea for a "time-out" to war, as if the world were some kind of macrocosmic kindergarten class of which he had found himself inexplicably placed in charge. At the time of his candidacy, I seem to remember, this same naïveté expressed itself not only in his anti-war unilateralism but also in an equally bizarre scheme to end poverty—another of those "why nots?" I suppose—by having the federal government send a check for $1,000 to everybody.

Of course, one thousand dollars was a lot more money in 1972 than it is today, and a family of four in many parts of the country might actually have been able to live on $4,000 per year. The inflation since then is mainly the result of policies wished upon the country by another gang of crypto-utopians who treated money as the creation of the government rather than as a measure of the economy's productivity. But at least the debasement of the currency took place off the political stage, among the technocracy. No one ever went to the American people and asked them to vote to create massive amounts of fiat money, and my confidence in the people's good sense, circa 1972, leads me to think that I know the reason why not.

Now, President Obama has come before the children and grandchildren of the voters of 1972, making the sort of promises—free universal health care, millions of "good" jobs—that Mr. McGovern himself might once have blushed at making, and they have elected him for it. Actually, I think it not quite true that he was elected for his utopian promises, about which there must be at least as much popular skepticism as there is about non-utopian promises from politicians. He was elected, rather, because he seemed like something more, something better than a politician—as, in the words of *Entertainment Weekly*'s cover story for the week after the inauguration, "President Rock Star."

I think it no derogation from the new President's undoubted charisma that this was not just because of who he is. It was also partly because of who he isn't: George W. Bush, for one. As I pointed out last month in this space (see "The Club of Cool" in *The New Criterion* of February 2008), the extravagant hopes placed in Mr. Obama are merely the corollary of the equally extravagant loathing for his predecessor felt by so many of those who harbored such hopes. But there is good reason for thinking that it was politicians in general and not just President Bush that people thought they were rejecting when they voted for Barack Obama.

Readers with memories that stretch back as far as November of 2007 may recall that, as I reported at the time (see "Clooney

Tunes" in *The New Criterion* of December 2007), the self-same epithet of "rock star" was bestowed on Hillary (and Bill) Clinton when the lately concluded presidential campaign was just getting underway and it looked to many as if she would be her party's nominee. I wondered then why it should have been thought a good thing for a potential major-party nominee to be a rock star, assuming it to be true that Mrs. Clinton was one. (Once.) Have we not rock stars enough who are, well, rock stars to have elected one as our president by now if we had thought that being a rock star was any sort of qualification for the office? But, I suppose, the media hysteria surrounding, first, Mrs. Clinton and, later, Mr. Obama, must have corresponded to some genuine desire among a large segment of the population for a rejection not just of "politics as usual" but of politics itself. For that is what seems to me to be the implication of this welcoming of a mere celebrity into the White House.

It's probably true to say that the overwhelmingly Democratic sympathies of other celebrities would have made any nominee of that party less charismatically challenged than John Kerry into a rock star, but there can be no doubt that Barack Obama fit the desired mold better than most. Noting that he figures as Spidey's superheroical partner in the latest number (583) of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Benjamin Svetkey wrote in *Entertainment Weekly*:

> He's barely been in office long enough to figure out where they keep the cappuccino machine, yet the new president is already a superhero-size pop icon. . . . He's covered with gusto by both *The New Republic* and the celebrity media, and has even inspired a London musical: *Obama on My Mind* opens in Islington this March. A Lifetime TV movie can't be far behind. He's bigger than Britney. Bigger than Beyoncé. Bigger even than Brangelina. Looks like John McCain was right, after all. Obama truly is the biggest celebrity in the world.

Yes, but the more interesting point to make is that it looks like Senator McCain was wrong in supposing that this would be a disrecommendation if not a disqualification for the presidency, which was the point of his saying it. After all, we have had celebrities in the sense that the term is used today for at least a century, but we've never before thought to put one of them into the highest office in the land, however celebrified some have become on leaving it. Could our having done so now have anything to do with the fact that, as *Entertainment Weekly* went on to note, Mr. Obama "is the most pop culturally clued-in president in the history of the republic"?

Once I would have agreed with Senator McCain, in thinking (or at least hoping) that being too pop culturally clued in, like being a celebrity, would have hurt a man's chances of being elected to anything, let alone the presidency. Who, I might have asked myself, could possibly want to put a rock star in charge of the nuclear football? Even rock stars might once have hesitated. But now, the answer seems to be, just about everybody. As Mr. Svetkey concluded his article:

> We're hungry for a new leading man to refresh the American franchise (you know, the way Daniel Craig did with Bond). And maybe that's the best explanation for the Obama-mania leading up to the inauguration. The guy we swore in as president last Tuesday can't squirt webs from his wrists, but he's already shown he can do some pretty amazing things. He can alter history with a single bound up the Capitol steps. He can bend the Zeitgeist with his bare hands (and a good speech). He can't change the course of mighty rivers, but who knows, maybe he'll be able to change the discourse of a mighty nation.

As for the discourse part, he seems to have done that already. It's not always noticed how much of the prevailing mode of approach to celebrity in that same pop culture the new president is allegedly so clued in about is ironical. Elsewhere, *Entertainment*

Weekly itself can be remarkably snarky about the celebrities it idolizes as if, before its writers can get on with their breathless adoration, they had to remind their readers—and perhaps themselves as well—that they really know better. At some level, they must recognize the absurdity of worshiping at the shrines of such nonentities as most celebrities are in, if the term can mean anything anymore, "real life." But not in the case of President Obama. At least not yet. He is a completely irony-free zone, as much in *The New Republic* as in *Entertainment Weekly*. The former's cover story the same week was titled "The New Man" and began: "Of all the contradictions embodied by Barack Obama, none is more fascinating than the tension between his clear instinct toward idealism and his equally apparent devotion to pragmatism."

That's the highbrow way of saying he's "a superhero-size pop icon." In other words, he's got it all, and there's nothing we have to give up to get it. Like being a celebrity, being all things to all men used to be thought a criticism of a political leader, but that too has gone by the board. So it should not be surprising that when, in his inaugural address, the superhero icon, using the royal "we," said that "we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals," there was no one among the throng of his admirers to point out that he was simply wrong. There are numerous examples from the last eight years of cases where there was, indeed, a very clear choice between our safety and our ideals. As Alasdair Palmer wrote in the (London) *Sunday Telegraph*:

> One example is the plot in the summer of 2006 to blow up five passenger jets leaving Britain over the Atlantic. That plot was foiled by the British police. It was foiled on the basis of information provided by the Pakistani intelligence service, who acquired it by torturing Rashid Rauf, the alleged leader of the plot. I doubt that anyone who believes that it is right to protect our security would say that it was wrong to use that information to prevent the attack. But doing so involves seriously compromising our ideals, for it means abandoning our ideal of an absolute prohibition, not just on torture, but on its fruits. Inevitably, it provides an incentive for countries that are not allowed to use torture, such as the U.S. and the U.K., to hand terrorist suspects over to countries that do. And that, of course, is what has happened. Obama's insistence on banning all forms of coercive interrogation by American officials means it is likely to happen more frequently in the future.

In other words, the previous administration, in at least some of these cases, chose our safety over our ideals. That may have been a wrong choice. Perhaps the new administration will even make the other one—at some cost to its reputation for "pragmatism." But that doesn't mean it was or will be a *false* choice. Though Mr. Obama attributed the country's economic problems to a "failure to make hard choices," he himself failed to mention even one such choice that he might make. On the contrary, like so many of his admirers, he seems to have a stake in trying to make us believe that there are no hard choices, just as he himself doesn't have to choose between being idealistic and pragmatic. He's two, two, two mints in one! The language of advertising, brought to us by postmodern irony and an infatuation with celebrity, has also dropped its irony to captivate a whole political class which once would have damned it utterly.

The politics of celebrity is, first and foremost, moralistic. Though celebrities love to think of themselves as "controversial," the point of their intervention in politics is always to abolish controversy. About that favorite celebrity cause, global warming, for instance, Al Gore and the other celebrities keep telling us there *is* no controversy. It is not a political but a moral issue. Those who oppose their position on what is to be done about "climate change"—assuming they have such a position and not just a posture—are not politi-

cal opponents but wicked and immoral people. And—what do you know?—they are often the same wicked and immoral people who lied in order to engage in an immoral war or pursued terrorists by immoral means. Or who brought about economic crisis by failing to make "hard choices." Or, as the new President said in another part of his inaugural address, gave way to "petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics."

On the contrary, say I, these things *are* our politics and always have been. And those politics are, in fact, being strangled by the moralists and practitioners of celebrity politics like Messrs. Gore and Obama. The latter's first order of business on being inaugurated was to adopt a massive spending plan proposed by the long-frustrated big spenders on Capitol Hill under the name of "stimulus" for the anemic economy and then to accuse those who opposed so obviously moral a course of action of engaging in "politics"! "In the past few days," the President said,

> I've heard criticisms of this plan that echo the very same failed theories that helped lead us into this crisis—the notion that tax cuts alone will solve all our problems; that we can ignore fundamental challenges like energy independence and the high cost of health care and still expect our economy and our country to thrive. I reject these theories, and by the way so did the American people when they went to the polls in November and voted resoundingly for change.

Pace the President, I doubt that the "change" the American people voted for was away from these or any other "failed theories." In any case, the first of them is one that nobody believes or ever has believed—a projection, perhaps, of his own utopianism onto the opposition; the second is not a "fundamental challenge" but, in most economists' view, an impossibility. The third is something that couldn't be ignored even if we wanted to, though how vastly increasing federal spending on health care is supposed to lower the cost of it is anyone's guess.

Meanwhile, the real objection to the "stimulus bill" was ignored. There are many things that "helped lead us into this crisis" but the "theory" that the government shouldn't be spending money wildly in excess of its income, no matter how good the cause, was emphatically not one of them. It can hardly be said to have "failed." But celebrity politics can cast the advocates of fiscal prudence in the role of villain as easily as it can anyone else who would gainsay the wish of our celebrity, our superheroical, pop-culturally clued-in president.

Once again, as it did in the media throughout the Bush years, the theater of public life is presenting only morality plays—with Republican "partisans" and the wicked practitioners of "politics" as the heavy now that George W. Bush has gone back to Texas. This is presumably what the celebrity culture demands. But moralized politics is no politics at all. The governance of the country cannot simply be turned over to morality without any need for politics. That is an even more utopian notion than a "time-out" for war or the abolition of poverty. And yet the media, for once in tune with the mood of the country, seem to have slipped into it as into a warm bath and breathed a sigh of relief. At last! No more politics!

Books

Citizen Hearst

by Conrad Black

Current disclosure practices require me to mention that the author of *The Uncrowned King*, Kenneth Whyte, is a friend of many years and that we happily worked together on several publications.[1] He is a brilliant editor and publisher, as is abundantly clear from his many insights in this groundbreaking book about William Randolph Hearst. If it were not an excellent book, I would have declined to review it.

The picture of Hearst that emerges here is far more credible and nuanced than any that has been seriously advanced before. The Hearst legend preceded any serious consultation of primary sources by many years, and Ken Whyte has very assiduously gone through thousands of editions of all the New York titles in the first several years of Hearst's ownership of the *New York Journal* and an enterprising breadth of relevant correspondence. The long-accepted take on Hearst relied on Orson Welles's "fine but scurrilous film" *Citizen Kane*, W. A. Swanberg's 1961 biography, *Citizen Hearst* (evidently a sequel to the film though somewhat more favorable in its conclusions), and David Nasaw's *The Chief* (2000).

Previously, the conventional wisdom was that Hearst raised up the circulation of the *Journal* to over a million and sometimes higher in three years, simply by digging lower, defaming more vituperatively, and stirring base mass passions more shamelessly than his competitors, as well as by throwing his parents' money out of the windows in herniating packets, and that it all came easily.

Hearst bought the *Journal* for $150,000 borrowed from his mother, in October 1895. His father, Senator George Hearst, had died in 1891, four years after he had given his son the money to buy the *San Francisco Examiner* at age twenty-four. The elder Hearst had been an extraordinarily successful prospector and miner, developing, among others, the Anaconda (copper) and Homestake (gold) Mines.

Ken Whyte meticulously, but without pedantry or tedious repetition, compares the principal newspapers in the crowded New York field of the 1890s, all led by strong publishers, each of them still almost as legendary as Hearst. The *Journal*'s circulation was a little over 50,000—and nearly 40,000 for its German edition—with a cover price of just one cent. There was the stylishly dissolute but editorially astute James Gordon Bennett Jr. at the *Herald* (circulation 175,000 at two pennies per copy); the conservative and intellectual former vice-presidential candidate Whitelaw Reid at the *Tribune* (120,000, three cents); the brilliant and acidulous Edwin L. Godkin at the *Post* (20,000, three cents); Adolph S. Ochs, the extremely successful builder of the *Times* (well below 50,000 and about to enter receivership when Ochs

1 *The Uncrowned King: The Sensational Rise of William Randolph Hearst*, by Kenneth White; Counterpoint, 546 pages, $30.

bought it); and Hearst's two immediate precursors in broadening the appeal of American newspapers, Charles A. Dana at the *Sun* (120,000, two cents), and the immensely successful Joseph E. Pulitzer at the *World* (250,000, two cents). These seven men, including Hearst, among the most famous publishers in newspaper history.

Dana had been a transcendentalist and a friend of Emerson and Hawthorne; he had worked for Horace Greeley at the *Tribune*, where he engaged Dickens, the Brontës, and his friendly acquaintance Karl Marx, as contributors. He was the assistant secretary of war in the Lincoln administration, a biographer of U. S. Grant, and a successful encyclopedia editor who spoke twelve languages. He bought the distressed *Sun* in 1868, and produced an elegantly written, witty newspaper that surpassed Greeley's *Tribune*, in a pattern that would become familiar. He tripled the *Sun*'s circulation to 150,000. (Greeley died after running unsuccessfully against Grant for the presidency in 1872, even before the electoral votes were counted.)

Joseph E. Pulitzer was born in 1847 into a prosperous Hungarian Jewish family. He emigrated to the United States via recruitment into the U.S. Army in 1864 by one of the commissioned recruit hunters the Union sent around Europe and moved to St. Louis at the end of the Civil War. He had a great success with a St. Louis German-language newspaper, moved to New York and worked for Dana for a couple of years, bought the *St. Louis Dispatch* in 1878, and, after conspicuous success with it, bought the *New York World* from the financier Jay Gould in 1883.

Pulitzer introduced enticing and prominent headlines, front-page illustrations, and a broader and more daring version of human interest stories. Relations with Dana quickly degenerated into nasty ethnic and other slurs. The *Sun*, despite Dana's exalted Emersonian scruples, called Pulitzer "Joey the Jew," "Judas Pulitzer," and the "Jew who does not want to be a Jew." Pulitzer claimed that Dana had Greek ancestry (he didn't): that he came from "a treacherous and drunken" race. The *World* called Dana a "mendacious blackguard" who had stolen a life preserver from a drowning woman to save himself when a ship foundered (a complete fiction). This was the rough and tumble arena Hearst entered when he directly challenged the mighty *New York World* in 1895.

Swanberg and Nassaw and almost all others have claimed that Hearst gained ground by coarsening the craft, inventing and sensationalizing stories, and dispensing huge sums in order to poach from Pulitzer's best staff. Ken Whyte demolishes this theory with a careful analysis of the different newspapers, almost day by day, and the exact dates of significant migrations between the mastheads. Hearst was more imaginative in finding and promoting causes and in front-page design, but he was not markedly more irresponsible than Pulitzer and some of the others. He hired more newsboys, ran more editions, and engaged in more audacious promotions. He was more astute than anyone at identifying stories that would seize the public's interest.

Hearst stayed away from ethnic slurs, (and was admirably free of such prejudices, even lecturing Hitler forty years later on the virtues of Jews). While he spent liberally, he had a budget from his mother, who carefully doled out her son's equal share (as an only child) of Senator Hearst's estate. Hearst started by importing some of his best writers and editors from his *Examiner*, and many of those who came from Pulitzer were not raided but voluntarily defected, seeing the rise of Hearst and affronted by Pulitzer's tendency to terrible rages as the pressures on him rose.

The author opens this section of his history by writing that Swanberg, Nasaw, and others ascribed Hearst's success to "shallow and lurid" journalism, and that it is "one of the curiosities of the Hearst literature that their treatment of Hearst tends toward the shallow and lurid." His case is unanswerable.

Similarly, after a thorough canvass of the main New York newspapers, Whyte states that it is not clear that Hearst was more addicted to sensationalism than Pulitzer and some others. His competitors' attacks on the *Journal* as a "chamber of horrors, a procuress, a brothel, a criminal, a moral disease, a rattlesnake, and a licentious vulgarian without example in the history of journalism" were, he writes, at least as sensational and exaggerated as anything to be found in the *Journal* itself.

In the great presidential election of 1896, when the Democrat William Jennings Bryan carried the standard of silver coinage, bimetallism, against the conservative Republican William McKinley, Hearst pulled out all the populist stops for Bryan. The *Sun* saw Bryan as "the advance of the skirmish line of communism and anarchy." The *Times* called Bryan "an ignorant, pathetically enthusiastic crank" leading a "freaky aggregation of aliens." The *Tribune* called the Democratic candidate "a rattle-pated, vapid, mouther of rottenness . . . [and] champion of the right to pillage, riot, and train-wrecking." Pulitzer accused Hearst of serving his family's silver interests by helping to assemble a colossal conspiracy of the "temple of the Silver Knights of America" to rape the country of billions through the scam of bimetallism.

Hearst fired back effectively, but with comparative restraint. On the day after the election, November 4, 1896, all editions of the *Journal*, which had been selling barely 50,000 copies a year before, sold 1,394,000 copies, plus 112,000 copies of the German edition. This amazing achievement cannot be explained in the simplistic and often false terms that have hitherto been applied. Through most of 1897, the *Journal* and Pulitzer's *World* ran neck-and-neck at a little over 750,000 daily sale, before ramping up to unheard-of circulations on the back of the Cuban crisis.

Cuba had been in a state of revolt for decades and had not been very gently governed by the Spanish. About 200,000 people had perished in the Ten Years' War (1868–1878), and the conflict had sputtered on unresolved into the 1890s. This was a natural subject for American sympathy. Anti-imperialist sentiment was strong in the United States, but generally not as strong as pacifist sentiment. Swanberg described Hearst's beating of the Cuban war drums as "the most disgraceful example of journalistic falsehood ever seen."

In fact, as Whyte points out, this campaign began eight months before Hearst bought the *Journal*, and his competitors were the worst offenders, producing such gems as "Amazon-like Beauties Overwhelming Columns of Spanish Soldiers," and "Insurgent Cannons Fashioned From Tree Trunks." One of Hearst's more notorious headlines, about the Spanish "Feeding Prisoners to Sharks," was true, though the men had been executed prior to their immersion.

What really stoked up American outrage was the escalation of provocations, from the heroic death by firing squad of the dashing revolutionary Adolfo Rodríguez to the rescue of the beautiful revolutionary maiden Evangelina Cisneros to the destruction of the U.S. warship *Maine*. The *Journal* ran a beautifully written account of Rodríguez's execution by the distinguished writer Richard Harding Davis that presaged Hemingway at his best, accompanied by a brilliant sketch of the execution, taking almost all of the front page, by the renowned Frederic Remington (February 2, 1897).

Hearst contributed his yacht and hired a fleet of dispatch boats to cover the Cuban story and take copy to Jamaica for uncensored transmission to New York. He sent "Special Commissioners" to Cuba, including the Dickensianly named U.S. Senator Hernando De Soto Money.

A few days after the Rodríguez execution, the *Journal* ran a front-page illustration of raffish Spanish officers examining a naked, shapely young lady, whose well-sculpted back, posterior, and legs were depicted for the readers, accompanied by another graphic description by Davis of this outrage

inflicted on three unoffending American women. It turned out that the inspection had actually been by female Spanish officials. In the prurient and agitated atmosphere of its time, this story had quite an impact, but was a mere sorbet compared to the saga of Evangelina Cisneros that unfolded eight months later.

Apparently the Spanish were going to send this seventeen-year-old girl to an equatorial African prison for twenty years because of her unrepentant participation in the insurgency. Hearst saw the potential of this story immediately and organized an immense petition of American women, including President McKinley's mother and George Washington's grand-niece, asking the Spanish queen-regent, Maria Christina, for clemency. At Hearst's behest, Julia Ward Howe, the author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, wrote in the same manner to Pope Leo XIII, who summoned the Spanish ambassador to the Holy See to discuss the issue.

In October 1897, after milking the story for eight months, the *Journal* bribed guards and rescued the pretty señorita from her prison. Hearst brought her to the United States to a huge reception that included McKinley. Hearst was Sir Galahad, if not D'Artagnan, rescuing the damsel in distress. Miss Cisneros departed from the Hearst script somewhat by applying for American citizenship in her first full day in the United States, but she assured reporters that she intended to take to the convent in thankfulness for her deliverance and pray full-time for her native land. In fact, "the blameless flower of Cuba" (as the *Journal* styled her) succumbed to more earthly distractions and married a Cuban-American businessman a few months later.

As Pulitzer tried to debunk the damsel story, the *Journal* ran cartoons of General Weyler (the ham-fisted Spanish commander in Cuba by now familiar to New York newspaper readers) leading serried ranks of grotesque little Pulitzer lookalikes in a quasi-goose step parade.

Historians have taken some extreme psychological liberties with Hearst over this incident. Swanberg wrote of the Cisneros affair that Hearst became

> a creature of pure fantasy. . . . He could enter into a dreamworld and, like a child, live out a heroic role in it, brushing aside humdrum reality.

Again, it is much more accurate to claim that Swanberg's fatuous mind-reading takes place in a fantasy world. There is no evidence that Hearst thought of this episode as other than a rather humorous promotional opportunity.

The most famous line of Hearst's life—"You furnish the pictures and I will furnish the war"—was probably never uttered. There is no record of such a telegram. Remington, the supposed recipient of it, never mentioned it, and Hearst himself called the story, written by another journalist, James Creelman, who did not claim to have seen such an exchange, "clotted nonsense."

Of course, the Cuban crisis cracked open with the destruction of the USS *Maine* in Havana harbor on February 15, 1898. The cause has never been discovered, but modern forensic studies indicate that it was most likely an internal explosion caused by a coal fire igniting a magazine. At 319 feet and 6,682 tons, the *Maine* was a cruiser, not a battleship, and was not "one of the most imposing things afloat," as described. But it was a shocking incident that killed 266 American sailors.

Hearst went to Cuba in person, reported very professionally himself, went right into combat zones, produced daily English and Spanish newspapers in Cuba, and was given the flag that flew over Santiago in the decisive battle of the war by the rebel commanders in gratitude for his support of the insurrection.

By this time, all the New York newspapers were war-mongering. While Godkin in the *Post* suggested that Hearst had blown up the *Maine* himself, the *Sun* and the *Times* complimented him on his courage, pres-

cience, and on his own reportage. The *World* carped and the *Journal* responded by running a brief story on the death in the field of the "renowned Austrian artillerist, Reflipe W. Thenuz." The *World* cribbed the item and ran it, and the *Journal* delightedly trumpeted that the item was a canard, and an anagram for "We pilfer the nuz [news]."

The Spanish war was not an unjust one, and Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines did much better with the United States than as colonies of Spain. Spanish misrule, especially the suppurating sore in Cuba, had to end. Ken Whyte makes the very interesting point that the death of approximately 300,000 Cubans in the last thirty years of Spanish rule qualifies as an act of genocide, and was the only such act which the United States has intervened to stop, unlike the twentieth-century massacres of the Armenians by the Turks, European Jews by the Germans, Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge, Bosnian non-Serbs by the Bosnian Serbs, or Rwandan Tutsis by the Hutus.

At the supreme height of the Cuba story, as Hearst was dodging bullets and Teddy Roosevelt was climbing San Juan Hill, the New York *Journal* sold the astonishing total of 2.7 million copies, the highest daily circulation in the history of the world up to that time, and fifty times its circulation just three years before. Despite his colossal success, Hearst wrote to his mother shortly after the Spanish-American War that he thought himself a "failure." Ken Whyte treads cautiously close to Swanbergian mind-reading by speculating that the reason for this was that, despite his influence, the politicians—the McKinleys and Roosevelts—ruled; his dreams of what newspapers could do to govern America were frustrated. This is at least just a tentative view, and it is probably as good a guess as any, though Hearst's negative self-evaluation does not seem to have lasted long.

This is an excellent if perhaps narrowly focused book. At a time when the newspaper industry is in extremis, and even the greatest titles, like the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, are imperiled, it is refreshing to read of the industry at its most imaginative and effervescent. Readers, as they finish this book, may wish—as I do—that Ken Whyte would produce a second volume to do justice to the balance of Hearst's very long career.

Freak party

D. J. Taylor
Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 361 pages, $27

reviewed by Ben Downing

Who were they, the Bright Young People? Nobody, it turns out. To be sure, there were large talents and personalities among them, and each had flair of one kind or another. As a group, however, they present an image of unredeemed triviality. Less than the sum of their parts, they brought out the worst in each other, or at least the most superficial. They left behind few significant monuments and exerted little lasting influence. So why do they continue to fascinate? Why does their name still have about it a certain legendary ring? D. J. Taylor's impressive yet numbing study simultaneously accounts for the lingering magic and kills it once and for all; while Taylor comes neither to praise nor to bury the Bright Young People, his book has the distinct effect of making them seem, in the end, dull, old, and scarcely human.

The term "Bright Young People," as defined by those within the clique and the journalists who covered their every frivolous move, refers to perhaps a few score partygoers and -throwers who amused themselves at a series of festivities during the second half of the 1920s, most often in London, especially Mayfair, but sometimes in country houses. (Though often used synonymously, "Bright Young Things" is a much broader term, Taylor explains, "as imprecise in its way as 'flapper.' A Bright Young Person may have been a Bright

Young Thing, but not all Bright Young Things were Bright Young People.") The White Party, the Impersonation Party, the Hermaphrodite Party: these and others were fabled, for both their bacchanalian excess—mild by later standards—and their extravagant themes; at the Circus Party,

> guests discovered that the premises had been decorated in the style of a fairground. The booths displayed live animals, including a dancing bear, a seal, and a Siberian wolf.

To these parties were added such diversions as "treasure hunts" (for random objects hidden all over town) and practical jokes like the Bruno Hat hoax, which involved a gallery opening for a bogus German artist, played by Tom Mitford.

Except for several Mitfords—Tom, Nancy, and Diana—the only Bright Young People still widely known today are Evelyn Waugh, Cecil Beaton, and, to a lesser degree, Robert Byron. (Anthony Powell and Henry Green, though they knew much of the group and wrote novels partially inspired by it, were really on the circumference.) Several others retain a scrap or two of fame or notoriety, whether for their books (Beverley Nichols), their sterile flamboyance (Stephen Tennant and Brian Howard), or their wealth and high-level cuckoldry (Bryan Guinness, dumped by Diana Mitford for Oswald Mosley). The remainder are now mere names, setting off only the faintest of bells even for those steeped in the period.

Yet it is precisely one of these forgotten sybarites that Taylor has cast as his emblematic figure of the set. Elizabeth Ponsonby, "a bright, capering spirit with a weekly berth in every gossip column in Fleet Street," did absolutely nothing of note, which makes her an ideal Bright Young Everywoman. Her family did, however, leave behind an extensive archive, including diaries by both her parents, who agonized over their daughter's waywardness. Taylor skillfully mines this material, extracting a story—Elizabeth's, that is—of youthful frolic and glamour swiftly followed by divorce, impecuniousness, and premature death (in 1940) from chronic alcoholism. It's a sad, sordid, Lily Bart-like tale, somehow made even more depressing by the delicate way Taylor weaves it episodically into the main narrative.

That narrative is very much of the rise-and-fall variety. In his early chapters, Taylor traces the origin of Bright Young allegiances—largely forged at Eton and Oxford—and the crystallization of the party scene in 1924. Then, for the majority of the book, he considers the scene and its participants from a series of thematic angles. The Bright Young "compact with the press" is thoroughly examined. ("More so than any youth cult that preceded them," Taylor asserts, "the Bright Young People were a creation of the media.") So is the pronounced homosexual flavor of the group, and its fraught relationship with the older generation, which Taylor sees as reflecting "the antagonism between youth and seniority that characterized the 1920s." Bright Young style and argot also come in for sustained exploration. We learn, for instance, that Waugh's repeated use of the adjective "sheepish" in *Vile Bodies*, which briefly made it a buzzword, "arose from a conversation between Waugh and the twelve-year-old Jessica Mitford, whose pet lamb he had promised to include somewhere in the novel."

The decline, in Taylor's view, began around 1930 and was inevitable for internal reasons:

> What fatally injured the Bright Young People in the end was the thing that had helped create them: publicity. Bohemianism . . . can only stay true to its authenticating spirit by not trying too hard. Here, spontaneity had become a series of stunts.

Yet the People were, of course, doomed by history as well, for when the carefree effervescence of the 1920s gave way to the troubled 1930s, their antics had no place.

Some desperately clung to childish things, such as Elizabeth Ponsonby:

> [Her] career in the 1930s is an object lesson in the futility of thinking that you can go on living the life of your gilded youth in a world of marching armies and three million unemployed.

Others, however, willingly traded "freak parties"—as their gimmicky fêtes were known—for political ones at both extremities. "Nothing could be more narrowly symbolic of the fracturing of the Bright Young People's world," Taylor writes, "than the breakup of the Guinness marriage," and several of Diana's friends followed her lead in lining up behind Mosley and his blackshirts. Unsurprisingly, a larger portion went left. There were some unexpected transformations. Robert Byron, for example, put aside his aestheticism to become a brave and tireless anti-Nazi. Taylor doesn't mention the fact, but Beverley Nichols, whose *Crazy Pavements* was the very first Bright Young novel (it influenced *Vile Bodies*), and who is now best remembered for his gardening books, in 1944 published a polemic called *Verdict on India* that passionately advocated an independent Pakistan and made a strong impression on Churchill; it's odd to think of a gardener and Mayfair trifler having had a hand in anything so deadly serious as the partition of India.

Certain members of the group also went on to artistic and commercial success, most notably Waugh and Beaton, for whom Bright Young shenanigans were not just fun and games but vivid subject matter, and as such a springboard into fiction and photography; as Taylor wryly observes, "it was the middle-class meritocrats . . . who would have the last laugh" (both men were from atypically modest backgrounds). Yet it is the failures who stand out and set the tone, none more so than Brian Howard, whose name has become a byword for preening nonachievement. "Expected, not least by himself, to write novels that would out-Firbank Firbank in their orchidaceous subtleties," Taylor remarks, "he ended up a tragicomic turn in novels by other people" (especially ones by Waugh, who first used Howard in *Vile Bodies* and then reupholstered him for *Brideshead Revisited* and *Helena*). A suicide at fifty-two, Howard squandered all his chances, but he at least makes for good reading, and Taylor has dug up some wonderful anecdotes about him, such as this:

> Brian Howard, invited to inspect Diana Guinness's son Jonathan as he lay in his cradle, is supposed to have remarked, "My dear, it is so *modern* looking."

Bright Young People is, in fact, studded—if not quite stuffed—with memorable nuggets and pleasing formulations. Of one Lady Burghclere, Taylor writes:

> Her daughter specialized in lightning engagements to wildly unsuitable young men: Her nine previous fiancés included the purser of a cruise ship on which she had been exiled to get over a previous attachment.

Or consider this sentence on the novels of Nancy Mitford:

> To spend very much time in the company of Nancy Mitford is to encounter a sensibility preserved in the amber of 1928, which has observed the world passing, the horrors of war and their personal consequences—a sister and brother dead, another sister interned—but whose response is largely a matter of shrieks and teases.

How perfectly put, and how damning. Though he doesn't permit himself quite as many swipes of this nature as one might wish, Taylor is a cool, shrewd judge of character. He is also a taut, often elegant stylist, a penetrating critic, and a demon researcher with the discipline to shine his flashlight in obscure corners without getting lost in the labyrinth. (If nothing else,

I'm grateful to him for pointing me toward *Ruling Passions*, a delectably salty memoir by Tom Driberg, once tagged "the most disreputable M.P. in the House," who began as a journalist on the Bright Young beat.) Finally, Taylor has a kind of genius for structure. Shifting smoothly between narrative and exposition, punctuated with freestanding vignettes and thumbnail sketches, *Bright Young People* is as ingeniously engineered as any of the "freak parties" it documents.

All of which goes toward making the book a gleaming and formidable piece of social-cum-literary history. And yet I must admit finding it a hard book to love, or even to enjoy. This has nothing to do with Taylor, only with his subjects. The problem isn't so much that many of them were, as Taylor puts it, "the silliest people in London." It has rather to do with the closed, self-congratulatory, brittle quality of their silliness; and, again, with the way they had of cheapening each other. Waugh, for instance, was an infinitely more layered and compelling person than the wafer-thin Stephen Tennant, but in the context of the Bright Young People he gets pulled down to Tennant's level. For all their interconnections, the People seem rarely to have been true friends to one another, and I miss, in their collective biography, the unfoldings, deepenings, painful twists, and moving turns that such webs of friendship usually disclose.

Then again, maybe you just had to be there. Being regaled about the gilded youth of any place or period tends to breed more annoyance than nostalgia—*la jeunesse* quickly comes to seem less *dorée* than boring. The same holds true for high meridians of decadence and hedonism: sure, it might have been a blast to be around for Haight-Ashbury, or Warhol's Factory, or Studio 54, or the Swinging Sixties in London itself—in most respects far wilder than the 1920s, which were merely (to quote Taylor's favored epithet) rackety—but this sort of experience does not lend itself to vicarious pleasure-taking. Taylor mentions, as an example of Bright Young "horseplay," an unnamed aristocrat

> who revenged herself on a hostess who had been slandering her by rubbing a lobster mayonnaise into her hair as she lay comatose on a divan and trussing her up beneath the supper table.

One smiles or even cackles to learn of the incident, but eventually, after long immersion in Bright Young harlequinades, one also starts to feel a bit like that hostess: paralyzed, sticky, and in urgent need of a shower.

Following the code

Geraldine Brooks
People of the Book: A Novel.
Penguin Books, 380 pages, $15

reviewed by Stephen Schwartz

People of the Book, a work of fiction which deals with a series of real and documented human tragedies, spanning a half-millennium across the Mediterranean, comes to us with a blurb from USA *Today*, favorably equating it with *The Da Vinci Code* of 2003, that despicable libel against the Catholic church based entirely on absurd speculation. What are we to make of this? Has the genre of the historical novel really declined so precipitately that any fantasy about the past, once committed to print, is considered respectable literature?

A less favorable parallel between the two books was drawn by the London *Jewish Chronicle* in its issue of February 22, 2008. Readers were warned of the possibility that the invented and nonsensical details in Geraldine Brooks's production would become accepted as veridical: "people remember things like this, like with *The Da Vinci Code*," said Helen Walasek, a British art editor and expert on cultural heritage.

The Australian-born Brooks is best known as the author of the 1995 volume

Nine Parts of Desire: The Hidden World of Islamic Women, a travelogue through the Middle East. *People of the Book* has been a success, if on a scale somewhat less massive than Dan Brown's *Da Vinci* contrivance. Its impact was of the sort that guarantees the inclusion of a clueless "Readers' Guide," with risible book club questions, bound at its end. (Sample: "There is an amazing array of 'people of the book'—both base and noble—whose lifetimes span some remarkable periods in human history. Who is your favorite and why?") Given the situation, a review of authentic events and scrutiny of Brooks's work seem necessary.

People of the Book is a declared work of imagination centered around the *Sarajevo Haggadah*, a Hebrew illuminated manuscript considered by many to be the most beautiful and valuable Jewish book in the world. The *Sarajevo Haggadah* is, like any *haggadah* (a Hebrew word meaning "the telling"), a relatively short text to be read aloud during a Passover seder. *Haggadot* (the plural form) are among the commonest Jewish books in the world, but the *Sarajevo Haggadah* stands alone. It was discovered in Habsburg-occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1894, rescued from the Nazis by a Muslim librarian in 1941, and saved a second time, by yet another Muslim librarian, in 1992, when Serbian rockets were fired at its home, the National Museum in Sarajevo.

That much is presented correctly in *People of the Book*, but much more is told in a deliberately errant fashion. Geraldine Brooks has done something worse than merely exploit the still vivid horrors of the late Bosnian war, the epic of Sephardic survival, and the jewel of all Jewish book art in concocting a tale about invented protagonists. Her use, or, more accurately, misuse, of the *Sarajevo Haggadah* and its history places her book almost in the "counter-factual" category, alongside chronicles in which the Confederacy won the American Civil War, but with a repellently factitious aspect. The untruths found in this book are *willful* misrepresentations of historical fact, presented in a work of fiction to achieve obscure ends of the author, beyond legitimate narrative invention. Brooks may appeal to poetic license, but a kind of vandalism against history remains visible. Given that she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2006 for her novel, *March*, this irresponsibility appears even more shameful.

The real *Sarajevo Haggadah*, on its appearance in the Balkans at the end of the nineteenth century, revolutionized the understanding of Jewish art, for it includes more than thirty lovely likenesses, in a notable palette of colors and gold leaf, of Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, and other biblical figures. Such portraiture was a violation of the ban embodied in the Mosaic commandments and long observed by Jews: "Thou shalt not make any image, whether in the form of that which is in heaven, or on the earth, or in the waters." The *Sarajevo Haggadah* does not, however, depict the Creator—represented only as emanations of light and, in one place, a hand extended from a cloud—and, since Islam also bars anthropomorphic conceptions of God, the Jewish scholar Cecil Roth detected a Spanish Muslim influence on it. The *Sarajevo Haggadah* was most certainly not created either in the Balkans or in any other Muslim land. Rather, scholars agree that it was probably calligraphed and painted in Catalonia or Provence, under Christian rule, around 1350. Presumably, some time after the expulsion of believing Jews from Spain in 1492, it was taken to Italy, where a Catholic censor inserted a hand-inscribed guarantee that it was inoffensive to Christian order, in 1609. Its original creators, owners, and possessors are unknown.

Geraldine Brooks fictionalizes this slender corpus of knowledge, most notably by inventing an identity for the artist responsible for the manuscript's magnificent illustrations: a black female slave of a Jewish family—and a Muslim, no less—based on a single depiction of an African female in the manuscript's image of a seder. It is not enough that, in real life, virtuous Muslims

preserved the book; they must also be credited with its creation!

That is not the sole item of bizarre invention to be found in *People of the Book*. The novel begins and ends with outrageous lies. At its outset, when we are introduced to the protagonist Hanna Heath, a tedious, narcissistic, and ethically deficient Australian expert on manuscript restoration, Hanna is informed that the priceless Jewish book had "turned up" after "four years" of the Sarajevo siege. Brooks thus legitimizes wild wartime rumors that the manuscript had been destroyed, lost, or sold.

In reality, the Jewish Community of Bosnia-Herzegovina and those in contact with them during the Bosnian war (myself included) were informed after the conflict began in 1992 that the *Sarajevo Haggadah* had been preserved and was under protection in the vault of the country's National Bank. The exquisite volume was exhibited to the Bosnian and international public during a seder, at Sarajevo's working synagogue, in April 1995, *three*, not four years after war commenced in that country. (The chronological error is reminiscent of Hillary Clinton's ludicrous claim that she faced sniping in the Bosnian city of Tuzla in 1996, a year after the Bosnian war ended, but also four years from its outbreak.) The Muslim Bosnian leader, president Alija Izetbegović, was present at the 1995 wartime seder, as were Muslim, Catholic, and Orthodox Christian religious representatives. Izetbegović appealed to Sarajevo's surviving Jews —numbering a thousand—to "stay in this country, because this is your country."

Brooks skips over the historic showing of the manuscript by the city's Jewish community, and devotes little attention to today's Bosnian Jews, who feature prominently in the life of contemporary Sarajevo. She is far more eager to dwell on the double conservation of the *Sarajevo Haggadah*, in 1941 and 1992, by Muslims, as if that alone were something spectacularly unusual. To Western minds accustomed to Islamist defiance of the rest of the world, such acts might seem odd, but the Sephardic Jews transplanted to the Balkans by the Turkish sultans after their expulsion from Spain had been a small but significant element in the local landscape for centuries. The *Sarajevo Haggadah* was and remains prized as a symbol of Bosnia's past, in which a long, if occasionally resentful, coexistence has been maintained between Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, Croats, and the Sephardic Jews, who are considered "the fourth Bosnian nation."

The manuscript, as an emblem of Bosnian pluralism, is now on permanent view in a special facility at the National Museum in Sarajevo, but on this point *People of the Book* concludes with another lie. It is bad enough Brooks got it in her head to describe an invented inscription in the *Haggadah*, claiming the manuscript as the handiwork of the black woman portrayed at the seder table. But much worse, she ascribes to Israelis, with the complicity of an ex-Nazi and a fictional, pathologically embittered Bosnian Muslim museum director, the theft of the original manuscript and its transportation to the Jewish state.

The *Sarajevo Haggadah* has indeed been the object of covetousness by others aside from the Nazis. At one point after the Bosnian war concluded, Serbian politicians, asserted that it was a tri-national, Serbian/Bosnian/Croatian treasure. With no mention of Jewish wishes about its fate, they demanded that it be displayed in a museum in Bosnia's Serbian occupation zone for a third of each year. But nobody had ever before Brooks suggested that the manuscript in Sarajevo today was counterfeited or spirited abroad. Such an eventuality would create a devastating scandal. As Helen Walasek told the *Jewish Chronicle* with exceptional understatement:

> Having the head of the national museum steal books is a bit offensive to Bosnians who are trying to keep their heritage. Bosnia is a country desperately trying to preserve itself, and to take this important, real object and

> make up a fictional account . . . I don't think it's a good thing.

Brooks's novel, supposedly celebrating Muslims saving a Jewish artifact, becomes a smear against Muslims and Jews alike, as alleged looters of cultural patrimony. To emphasize: what the Nazis and terrorist Serbs could not do, thanks to conscientious Muslims and Jews, is fictionally achieved by an avaricious Jew in league with a Nazi and a self-loathing Muslim—what is the message here?

People of the Book is a novel that, under the cover of being a work of fiction, begins and ends with gross lies, includes many more falsehoods—really, too many to catalogue in a review—and also embodies other bad qualities ubiquitous in contemporary writing. Although she sets her narrative in three of the most picturesque and intact historic environments in Mediterranean Europe—Spain, Italy, and the Balkans—she appears incapable of evoking any of their compelling features. Further, Brooks perhaps imagines that even well-informed readers will have forgotten the real events of the Bosnian war and have no idea that her knowledge of Spanish Jewish, Muslim, and Christian cultures, as well as of Ottoman, Bosnian, and Italian history and society over the past five hundred years, is superficial and askew.

Geraldine Brooks does not even bother to capably describe the illustrations and illuminated Hebrew letters that make the *Sarajevo Haggadah* the wonder that it is and that cause visitors in Bosnia to imagine a past of nearly unknown but great cultural achievements. Perhaps, to her, the horrors of the expulsions from Spain and the Bosnian war are significant only as backdrops for subcerebral meanderings by an Australian woman, mostly in an irritatingly impenetrable local slang, about herself and her professional ambitions. Perhaps, unfortunately, she was correct to imagine these things, given the depths to which the ways of study, reading, and the appreciation of art have fallen in today's world.

A despot's verse

Willis Barnstone, editor & translator
The Poems of Mao Zedong.
University of California Press,
168 pages, $24.95

reviewed by John Derbyshire

The Belgian sinologist Pierre Ryckmans (pen-name "Simon Leys") was once asked for his opinion of Mao Tse-tung's poetry. He replied: "Well, if poetry were painting, I would say that Mao was better than Hitler . . . but not as good as Churchill."

Ryckmans' quip suggests the moral dilemma in confronting Mao's poetry. Imagine yourself at an art show featuring numerous obscure painters. You spot a piece you rather like. On enquiry, you find that the price is acceptable but then, on the point of buying it, you learn that it is one of Hitler's Vienna pieces. Do you withdraw from the purchase? Most of us would, I think.

What, then, of a poem by Mao Tse-tung, whose sinified version of Marxist-Leninism brought about the untimely deaths of tens of millions of his own countrymen, stifled all literary and intellectual activity in China for forty years, and established a terroristic police state that still, though with techniques of repression somewhat modified, monopolizes political power and prohibits the rise of rational, consensual government today, not only in metropolitan China but also in the old non-Chinese Manchu suzerainties?

You could argue that even to glance at one of these poems is a small act of disloyalty to the unknown, unnumbered thousands of far better poets who were terrorized to silence under Mao's brutish tyranny, or who went unpublished because their work was judged insufficiently "correct" by brainless Party hacks, or who were murdered without pity by the Maoist goon squads as counter-revolutionary "enemies of the people."

A counter-argument would be that anything we can learn about human nature,

even in its furthest aberrations of depravity and megalomania, is worth knowing, so that a perusal of Mao's verse might leave us a tad wiser about humanity at large. And then there is the "compartmentalization" defense. Plenty of good poets have been deplorable human beings—think of Shelley. Perhaps it was mere happenstance "their crimes confined;/ Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,/ And shut the gates of mercy on mankind." Why shun only the poet whose anti-human malignity, by the random operations of fate, attained fulfillment? Why not condemn the creator while calmly evaluating his creations?

The latter arguments are the only ones available to me, since I compromised myself by owning, and reading, a volume of Mao's poems thirty years ago. I shall therefore proceed with my review, only pausing once again to acknowledge those better Chinese poets intimidated, silenced, or killed by Mao and his thugs, and to offer my apologies to them, their shades, and their surviving kin.

That earlier volume I owned was in fact this one, very nearly. Willis Barnstone published his translation of these thirty-five poems, with notes and introduction, in 1972. The book under review here is a re-issue, lightly worked over, though I am going from memory here, as I no longer own the earlier book. The older method of transcribing Chinese names, for example, has been replaced by the newer *pinyin* method, "Mao Tse-tung" becoming "Mao Zedong," "Nanking" becoming "Nanjing" (that latter one surely a grave loss to the writers of limericks), and so on.

Well, what of the poems? There is not much insight to be gleaned from them about the poet. That is probably just as well. If the recollections of Mao's doctor can be relied on—the general agreement is that they can, and that they offer our closest look at Mao's personality, at any rate in his later years—the dictator was boastful, cynical, callous, ruthless, slovenly, sensual, and self-indulgent.

Little of that shows here. The sensuality can be glimpsed in "Snow," at least in the Chinese. "Only today are we men of feeling," Barnstone gives for the poem's last line, but the Chinese *feng-liu* has more bohemian carnality in it than this conveys. Ruthlessness breaks through the surface in "Capture of Nanjing":

> The sky is spinning and the earth upside down
> We are elated
> yet we must use our courage to chase the
> hopeless enemy.

Where's the courage in *that?* one finds oneself thinking; and turns to the Chinese, where the words translated "hopeless enemy" are *qiong kou*, from Sun Tzu's maxim urging mercy in victory: *qiong kou wu zhui*—"do not pursue a beaten foe." Mao is, of course, mocking that maxim. He loved to boast of how much more pitiless he was than the tyrants of antiquity.

For the most part, however, the color of these poems is detached and impersonal. I tallied the following frequent topics, some present only in allusion:

Triumphalism; confidence of victory; invincibility of the cause; resolution in hardship; locative-historical musings; transience of worldly things; present superior to past in understanding and sensibility; nostalgia for old friendships.

At least two of those themes owe more, I am sure, to a desire to imitate the sentiments of classical poetry than to anything in Mao himself.

These poems fall into two chronological clusters. The first cluster covers the period 1925–1936, the poet then aged thirty-two to forty-three, building his movement while fighting continuously for its survival. The second cluster is from 1949–1961, the poet then aged fifty-six to sixty-eight and in supreme power.

All Mao's poems follow classical forms belonging to two large families of forms, *ci* and *shi*. The *ci-shi* distinction is entirely formal; a form from either family can be adapted to any mood or topic.

Ci poems (this word is pronounced "tsz") follow the more rigid prescriptions, more rigid than our sonnet or villanelle forms. There are, though, far more varieties of *ci*—over six hundred—so that the poet can select from a large menu. Having selected his *ci* form, he is then severely constrained in matters of line length, tone pattern, rhyme (most Chinese poetry rhymes), and placement of caesuras.

A *shi* poem (the pronunciation is "shr") usually has lines all the same length, and there are fewer choices of overall pattern. *Shi* forms give the poet more freedom but within a narrower range. The Chinese regard *shi* as more difficult to write than *ci*, the catch-phrase being *xie shi, tian ci*—"you write *shi*, but you fill in *ci*." And of course, being more difficult for the writer, *shi* poems are easier on the reader—easier to read off the first time, easier to memorize. (Harder to write, easier to read: when is this *not* true, of any writing in any language?)

Practically all of the earlier cluster of Mao's poems are in *ci* forms; most of the later ones are *shi*. The common opinion, which seems to me correct, is that the earlier poems are better overall. To revert, perhaps not altogether fairly, to that catch-phrase: Mao was better at filling in than he was at writing.

The few examples of *ci* in the later cluster show Mao at his poetic best. His 1957 poem "The Gods," the last he ever wrote (or at any rate published) in a *ci* style, is at the summit, proof that even a mediocre artist can create something halfway memorable. "The Gods" is far from perfect as a poem, marred by at least one weary cliché—the "lonely and silent" goddess Chang E—and one unhappy image—the "ten-thousand-mile great void" (an allusion to the Great Wall: but voids are not linear, and the Great Wall is anyway a cliché in stone).

Somehow it comes off though, the turn of thought between the last two lines closing the poet-reader deal decisively. Various deceased and immortal souls are disporting themselves in heaven, when

> Down on earth a sudden report of the
> tiger's defeat.
> Tears fly down from a great upturned bowl
> of rain.

The Chinese is:

> *Hu bao ren jian . . . ceng fu hu.*
> *Lei fei dun zuo . . . qing pen yu.*

I have used ellipses to indicate the caesuras. These lines actually sound quite lovely, even when you know that the tiger is supposed to be Chiang Kai-shek, who, with all his numerous faults, would have left China a much better place than Mao did. (They died within a year and a half of each other.)

Putting down this book of poems, I pick up the latest issue of *China Journal*, a very useful twice-yearly compendium of China scholarship published by Australian National University. Page 142 discusses some village records from south China in the 1950s: "At this meeting two peasants expressed opposition to the new grain procurement system, saying that they wanted more food for their ducks. They were both sent to labor camps in Heilongjiang [in Chinese Siberia] for 15 years."

Food for their ducks! *Fifteen years!* Mao Tse-tung was not much of a poet. If he had been the greatest that ever lived, though, it would still have been better for his countrymen, and for the world at large, if he had been strangled in his cradle.

Guerrillas in the midst

David Kilcullen
The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One.
Oxford University Press, 384 pages, $27.95

reviewed by Jay Nordlinger

Last fall, an army of brass in Iraq briefed a few journalists in a windowless room. These were Coalition brass—men from a variety of

Western countries. And around the table were about ten generals; behind them were about fifteen officers supporting them. For two hours they held forth: on how they were bolstering the Iraqi government, and how they were combating the enemy. Our men were impressively bright, experienced, shrewd, well organized, and well funded. Their briefing was something like a shock-and-awe performance.

After they were done, I posed a peculiar question: "How does the enemy stand a chance? I mean, how can they possibly hope to prevail against you? Al Qaeda doesn't have a room like this. I assume the Shiite militias do not. Why are these people so hard to put down?" And the commanding general said, "Don't underestimate them: They are sophisticated, resilient, and absolutely ruthless."

So they are. And one man who knows this very well is David Kilcullen, an Australian officer and military intellectual. A few years ago, he was seconded to the United States: as a counterterrorism and counterinsurgency adviser to the State Department, and then to General Petraeus. This reminds us of the unusually—almost uniquely—close relationship between Australia and the United States, for many generations. You may have noticed that one of the last things George W. Bush did as president was hang the Medal of Freedom around the neck of John Howard, the former prime minister of Australia. (At the same time, with the same medal, he honored Britain's Tony Blair and Colombia's Álvaro Uribe.)

Kilcullen has written a book called *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. And, as you remember, the Cold War featured many small wars—and less-small wars—in the midst of that big, overarching one. What of "the accidental guerrilla"?

That is Kilcullen's term for the fighter who does not really wish to harm the West or subjugate other people, but who gets caught up in the current global conflict anyway—and on the wrong side. What happens is this: Al Qaeda moves into his environs and establishes its hideous presence. Then it provokes some kind of intervention by the West. This, our man resents, and he winds up fighting alongside al Qaeda—"accidentally." Our task is to wean him away or prevent him from joining up in the first place.

Kilcullen's book is about more than the accidental guerrilla—it is about a global insurgency and how to deal with it—but the term makes a handy title. Kilcullen says, "This book . . . is the result of my wanderings, physical and intellectual, over the past several years." It is part memoir, part treatise, part anthropology textbook. And it is highly interesting. There are brilliant things and questionable things, and they all make you think.

Much of the book is devoted to two "small wars" within the "big one": Afghanistan and Iraq. Kilcullen points out that people have seen Afghanistan as "the good war," a war truly of necessity. They also take for granted that we will win there. The media have given the impression that Afghanistan is going well while Iraq is going badly. In fact, the opposite may be true. Kilcullen says that the Afghan war is "winnable," but requires a "concerted long-term effort," lasting "five to ten years at least."

And he emphasizes that many of the enemy fighters—the great majority of them—are co-optable and reformable. They can be persuaded to put down their arms and live normal, nonviolent lives. I have heard two presidents, Karzai and Musharraf, say this on many occasions. The problem is that the extremists—the to-the-death jihadists—are absolutely diabolical in their tactics. For example, they terrorize farmers into growing poppy: not because the extremists want more opium, but because the growing of poppy separates the farmers from legitimate society. When this happens, al Qaeda or the Taliban can own them.

What can the Coalition do (besides kill the extremists, which, although insufficient, is not unimportant)? Kilcullen gives the ex-

ample of building a road. And what matters most is, not the road, but the process by which it is built. Anything that separates the insurgents from the people—that clutches the people to society—is helpful. Kilcullen speaks of a "political maneuver," with "the road as a means to a political end."

He further counsels a "population-centric approach to security": "We must focus on providing human security to the Afghan population, where they live, twenty-four hours a day." Is that all? "This, rather than destroying the enemy, is the central task in counterinsurgency." I was amazed, in Iraq, to discover all that our militaries are doing there. One general told our group how hard he had worked to get Baghdadis to reopen a particular amusement park: "It was a return-to-normalcy issue." I said, "Is that what you went to West Point for?" He grinned and replied, "We're a full-service military."

Kilcullen was opposed to the Iraq War, resolutely. He regards it as "an extremely severe strategic error." What he does not address, in this book, is the issue of weapons of mass destruction: the main purpose of our going in. The civilized world was blind to what Saddam Hussein was doing; when we went in, we saw. In any case, Kilcullen believes that, once in, you must win. And he provides an explanation of the "surge" of 2007.

Later in the book, he turns to Europe, a special theater in the War on Terror. Muslims on the continent, and in the United Kingdom, are ripe for exploitation by al Qaeda. And Kilcullen says that a new radicalization among Muslims "has brought a backlash from nonimmigrant populations." Some might argue that there has not been backlash enough. If I have read him correctly, Kilcullen favors a more gingerly approach to Muslim radicalism in Europe. I myself am not sure how the authorities, and society at large, could be more gingerly. Not long ago, London police ran—literally ran—from Islamist demonstrators who were throwing things at them.

In a final chapter, Kilcullen gives us his bedrock views. He is of the school that says we have turned a mouse into an elephant: The mouse is terrorism, and the elephant is what we have caused it to become. We have overreacted, says Kilcullen, making the terrorists bigger and therefore more dangerous than they should be. We have played a "zero tolerance" game—insisting on no terrorism—rather than practicing a more grown-up "risk management." Kilcullen quotes John Kerry with approval on this score. And it seems to me he pooh-poohs the threats against us, sometimes sarcastically—for example, "[T]he 2001 anthrax attacks in the United States killed a grand total of five."

Reading Kilcullen, I was reminded of a clear lesson from the Cold War: Finland was "Finlandized" instead of Sovietized only because it fought like hell against being Sovietized. Finland did not set Finlandization as a goal; it resisted Sovietization with all its might—and wound up, best-case scenario, being Finlandized (that is, retaining national sovereignty while having to toe the Soviet line in foreign policy and some other respects). Perhaps only by trying for no terrorism can we achieve an "acceptable level" (shudder-making phrase) of terrorism.

Kilcullen is also of the school that says we are in danger of losing our soul as we fight the War on Terror. Our efforts to combat terrorists will turn us into monsters, and cost us our democratic liberties. I must say, I have always thought this concern unfounded; Kilcullen did not budge that thought. And he leans on that cherished quote of John Quincy Adams, more than once: America "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy." But as Richard Brookhiser and others said on 9/11 and after: The monsters have come to us. And some of us think that they have not come back to us in similar fashion in part because of our furious efforts abroad.

To me, there are many annoying and objectionable things in this book: I will cite just a few of them. Throughout, Kilcullen puts the term "war on terrorism" in quotes, and those quotes are sneering. Sometimes he says

"so-called war on terrorism." Okay, he doesn't like this term, thinking it stupid. What would he like to say instead? He comes up with no substitute—he just keeps sneering. He is also capable of writing such sentences as "[I]n invading Iraq, we set out to re-make the Middle East in our own image . . ." I doubt a single human being had this intent; the sentence is unworthy of Kilcullen.

Sometimes there is a mood of "I told you so," which is always unbecoming (even if true). And the author likes to paint himself as the one native-knower—the Malinowski of the warrior class—amid oafish and insensitive palefaces. This, too, is unbecoming (even if occasionally—occasionally—true).

Yet this is a fine book, and, what's more, a contribution to what Kilcullen hates to call the War on Terror. He is a smart, smart guy. There are other smart guys—and they should all be taken into account, as we proceed in a vexingly difficult war.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Notebook

Boxing with Mailer

by Anthony Daniels

Professional boxing has not played a large part in my life, and I don't expect that it ever will. I have attended two bouts, the first in Africa (in Zimbabwe when it was still Rhodesia), and the second, more than twenty years later, in England.

I was the doctor at the first bout, which was held in the open air on a sunny Saturday afternoon. I was young and inexperienced and had very little idea of what my responsibilities (which I accepted without a second thought because I was so flattered to be asked) were. I supposed I might be expected to pronounce on the difficult question, unaddressed at medical school, of whether a man being battered by another man was fit to continue being battered by him. I supposed also that I might be expected to revive or resuscitate a man who had met with one blow too many; in which case, my incompetence would be exposed to the gaze of thousands.

I needn't have worried. The boxers were only semi-professional, with normal jobs during the week; they were trying to earn a few extra dollars on the weekends, but the money wasn't worth risking their lives for, so they spent most of their energy in keeping out of each other's way. I remember one rather gangling boxer in particular, who fought (if that is the word for his performance) under the nom de guerre of Bright Spider, and who kept at such a distance from his opponent that one might have been forgiven for wondering whether boxing was a contact sport at all. Even in the severely restricted world of Rhodesian boxing, I doubt that he ever made much of a mark.

When it was all over, I was grateful that there had been so little violence. My taste for violence, never very great, had been somewhat extinguished by working in an emergency department that smelled, much of the time, of drying blood and stale alcohol. There is nothing quite like the sensation of slipping on a hospital floor on blood that comes from scalps split open by knobkerries for turning one pacific and wishing not to see any more of it spilt.

The second bout that I attended was in England. I was writing a series of articles about popular entertainments for a now-defunct medical magazine, my idea being that doctors should know about every phase of their patients' lives and not just their symptomatology. I had been to a variety of resorts of entertainment that had persuaded me that the preservation of health was not always uppermost in the population's mind (thank God); the boxing was held in a dismal hall in an even more dismal industrial town.

The main attraction of the evening was a world championship fight, the world champion being a local hero; but one had to wait for his fight like they had to wait for the arrival of Hitler at a Nuremberg Rally. There was what is known in the trade as a long undercard: that is to say of fights be-

tween lesser fry. They had to be endured first.

It was clear from the first that these men meant to do each other harm; there were no Bright Spiders among them. I admit to a rush of excitement to see such raw yet formalized violence (though no doubt those who talk of the Noble Art and the Science of Pugilism would deny that violence has anything to do with their enthusiasm). But the excitement soon palled, on me at any rate; there was a lot of grunting and sweating and clinching and pawing, and it bored me. I began to find the audience more interesting than the spectacle.

The man on my right, for example, suddenly got up and shouted, by way of encouragement to the man in the ring who already appeared to be winning, "Kill him! Kill him!" I am told that this was by no means an unusual sentiment in the circumstances, and I had no impression that it was meant metaphorically: The man who shouted would have been perfectly content if the loser had lost not only the fight, but also his life.

I could not help but think of Macaulay's famous and contemptuous remark, that the Puritans hated bear-baiting not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators. Here I think Macaulay was wrong, not factually perhaps, but morally, and the Puritans were right. No doubt they were a miserable lot of killjoys, who hated pleasure *qua* pleasure, but it does not follow from this that there is no such thing as illicit or dishonorable pleasure, and the enjoyment of the torturing of bears is surely one such. I also suspect that pleasure at the sight of a man's face being punched into mush is another such, even if he has volunteered for the treatment and is only trying to do the same to his opponent.

By the time of the main fight, I was very tired. The hyperbole of the master of ceremonies irritated me, and the public address system was an assault on the ears; but even I could see at once that the world champion was a cut above the others, for his movements had a smoothness, even a grace, that theirs lacked. By then, however, I was concerned only to avoid the inevitable traffic jam at the end of the proceedings, and so left early.

Altogether, the spectacle did not impress me very favorably. There is no doubt that the men, even or perhaps especially the losers, were brave; who but a brave man would court predictable pain and danger in such a way? Even if a boxer believes himself invincibly superior to his opponent, the untoward or unexpected can always happen: He is never quite safe. And there is undoubtedly a savage nobility, a primitive magnificence, a barbarian splendor, to the sight of two men slugging it out dangerously when neither is allowed any advantage other than that conferred by skill and speed. Boxing appeals to the Dionysian in man.

But courage is one of those moral qualities that is not a virtue in itself. There is an asymmetry between courage and its opposite, cowardice: for it does not follow from the fact that cowardice is always a vice that courage is always a virtue. Because men can be courageous in the pursuit of the ignoblest of ends, and often have been, courage needs to be united with something else to become a virtue: that is to say, a noble, or at least a worthwhile, end. Whether the self-mastery entailed in boxing, the gory entertainment of others, self-enrichment, and glory constitute either individually or collectively a noble or a worthwhile end is, perhaps, not a question susceptible of a definitive answer.

There is a long history of literary fellow-traveling with boxing, and it continues to the present day. Joyce Carol Oates published a book on boxing, and a fan has constructed an entire website devoted to it. To me such literary fellow-traveling smacks of bad faith, or at least of bad conscience, as if an illicit pleasure were being justified ex post facto, as it were. It rings with the unmistakable sound of special pleading. For example, the following entry about the

heavyweight Floyd Patterson appears on Joyce Carol Oates's fan site:

> Boxing critics who argue for the abolition of the sport should consider Floyd Patterson. He is living proof that boxing is not invariably injurious to a boxer's well-being and that, under proper instruction, it builds character through the rigorous discipline of training and, if pursued into maturity, an almost mystical sense of one's identity. On its highest levels boxing, like any sport, or art, or vocation in life, is about character; it resolves to being, not merely doing.

It is worth lingering over this passage a little. It suggests, for example, that Floyd Patterson's good character was the result of his boxing. Now it is true that he certainly developed into a good character, and it is also true that, like many other boxers, he started out on a delinquent path as a youngster. He was taught to box while detained as a juvenile delinquent, and this set him on the route to fame and fortune. Boxing, therefore, may be said to have rescued him from a life of crime. It is certainly not uncommon to hear boxers who have made good say the same of themselves.

But the question is a little more difficult to decide than Patterson's individual biography might suggest. Are those who take up boxing a self-selected group, less likely in the first place to become recidivists than others? Does teaching boxing to delinquents reduce their levels of offending? It would certainly not be difficult to find cases of boxers who continued to commit crimes in both the presence and absence of success. A different life history—that, say, of Mike Tyson or Sonny Liston—would point to quite a different moral. It is hardly any secret that the worlds of criminality and boxing are not entirely alien to one another. The idea of boxing, especially professional boxing, as redemption is questionable, to say the least.

Moreover, the passage is oddly agnostic, or at least silent, as to whether the ends of activities differ in their intrinsic value. Almost any human activity can be carried out to the highest or the most skillful level, and therefore (apparently) resolve into being: pickpocketing, for example, or insurance fraud. I once met a determined, skillful, and brave arsonist who started fires to order so that his clients might collect insurance payouts (moreover, he had scruples—he went to some lengths not to endanger life). His "work" (for such he called it) required, apart from skill in starting fires without being detected, patience, determination, and courage, all qualities of character; and his fire-setting resolved into being, not merely doing, in as much as he would not, I think, have given it up for some other equally remunerative, but boringly legal, activity. As one man said when I suggested that perhaps the time had come for him to stop breaking into people's houses, "But I'm a burglar. Burgling's what I do." His doing resolved, long ago, into being as well.

This neutrality about the intrinsic value of activities, with its implication that one thing is as good as another, has insinuated itself far and wide into the way we speak. At one time, only people like Mozart and Einstein were properly called geniuses; but then it became de rigueur to call the boxer Cassius Clay a genius. At one time, not very long ago, if any American intellectual wanted to illustrate the word "genius" by examples, he paired Mozart with Michael Jordan, a basketball player. Again the sound of special pleading seemed loud and clear: It grated like the progress of a fingernail down a blackboard.

This passage also ignores the fact that Floyd Patterson began to suffer from the effects of Alzheimer's disease from the comparatively early age of sixty-three. True, it was written before then, but that it should still be posted without correction or retraction is surely odd. It is possible, of course, that Patterson would have suffered Alzheimer's anyway: but Alzheimer's is very rare at age sixty-three and very common among boxers (about 15 percent of profes-

sional boxers eventually suffer from some sort of chronic traumatic brain damage). It is therefore vastly more likely than not that Patterson's Alzheimer's was caused by his boxing. It does not follow from the harmfulness of any activity that it should be banned; no doubt mountaineering claims many lives, proportional to the number of mountaineers, every year. But neither should one defend the lawfulness of an activity by claiming that it is safer than it is. As Pascal put it, "Let us labor, then, to think well; for such is the beginning of morality."

One who did not think very well was another enthusiast of boxing, Norman Mailer. He went one better than Joyce Carol Oates, and wrote an entire book ostensibly about a single fight, called *The Fight*. I say ostensibly because Mailer obtrudes himself so much into the book that a better title might have been *The Fight and I*. The occasion of the book was the famous bout in 1974 between Muhammad Ali (formerly Cassius Clay) and the reigning world heavyweight champion George Foreman. It took place in Zaire, as the Congo was then called, a gift of Marshal Mobutu Sese Seko to his people: a gift, needless to say, paid for with their own money. The book tells us quite a lot about Mailer but not much about Zaire, a country of some significance and interest, as anyone who has been there will attest. But Mailer was not the kind of man to be bowled over by his surroundings: for what could their interest be by comparison with that of his own fascinating, coruscating personality?

The key to this personality (character is perhaps too strong a word for it) seems to be as follows: He loved himself dearly, but at the same time wanted to be, or at least made a great show of wanting to be, someone or something other than he was. This was because intellectuals, of whom he was one, wrestle with dilemmas because that is what intellectuals do, just as the burglar burgles because he is a burglar. Dissatisfaction over and above that which inevitably attends human existence is one of the marks of the intellectual, and Mailer chose himself as the subject and object of his dilemmas and dissatisfactions.

An urban intellectual, he wanted to be a frontiersman—without, of course, giving up the comforts and privileges of urban intellectual life. An inauthentic sophisticate, he wanted to be an authentic primitive. Bookish, he wanted to be an athlete. Where Marie Antoinette played shepherdess, he played at wanting to be a black boxer, which he supposed was the opposite of what he really was. "They had the good fortune to be born Black," he said.

From this strange desire or envy stems his gush, which can only be described as girlish and hysterical, about Muhammad Ali. If one can imagine Barbara Cartland in love with Al Capone, that is what the opening paragraph of *The Fight* conjures up:

> There is always a shock in seeing him again. Not live as in television but standing before you, looking his best. Then the World's Greatest Athlete is in danger of being our most beautiful man. . . . Women draw audible breath. Men look down. They are reminded again of their lack of worth. . . . For he is the Prince of Heaven—so says the silence around his body when he is luminous.

As a member of the intellectual caste, however, Mailer has still to invest the fight with a significance beyond that of two men trying to bash the living daylights out of one another for a large sum of money. So for Mailer, it is a clash between Black and White, the good and the bad, the real and the fake, the rich and the poor, genius and stupidity, Muslim and Christian, Africa and the West, with Muhammad Ali representing the former of all these opposites and Foreman the latter. Again, the sound of special pleading, of self-exculpation for a guilty pleasure at something unworthy to be celebrated or much thought about, is loud and clear.

Mailer's view is both deeply racist and oddly non-racial at once. Ali is much paler-skinned than Foreman, and is surrounded

by a much more racially heterogeneous camp of followers than Foreman, who is surrounded by pure blacks in the racial sense. But Foreman is really white because, when he won his Olympic title, he waved the American flag, whereas Muhammad Ali refused to serve in Vietnam, uttering the memorable, but morally irrelevant, words, "No Vietcong ever called me nigger."

For Mailer, then, blackness is not so much a racial category as a cultural one: a view supported by Muhammed Ali, when he shouted at Foreman, "I'm going to beat your Christian ass, you white flag-waving bitch, you." He also composed a couplet about Floyd Patterson, another man darker-skinned than he, with a similar sentiment:

> I'm going to put him flat on his back
> So that he will start acting black.

But what is acting black? Here, Mailer had not really change his opinion since he had written *The White Negro* in 1957:

> The Negro can rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body. . . .

It is instructive to compare this with the writings of Europeans about Africans during the colonial era, which played their part in justifying colonialism. Diedrich Hermann Westermann said in 1939:

> With the Negro emotional, momentary, and explosive thinking predominates . . . dependence on excitement is a characteristic sign of primitive mentality. . . . The Negro has but few gifts for work which aims at a distant goal and requires tenacity, independence, and foresight.

The French neuropsychiatrists, Gillais and Planques, wrote as follows in 1951:

> The best known traits of the normal psychology of the African are, above all, the importance of physical needs (nutrition, sexuality); and a liveliness of the emotions which is counter-balanced by their poor duration. Sensations and movements comprise the chief part of his existence. Intellectual life, evocation of the past, and projects for the future preoccupy him but little.
>
> Separated from these influences, he lives essentially in the present (in this sense like a child), and his conduct submits to influences and impulses of the passing moment and thus appears explosive and chaotic . . .

The main difference between Mailer and these writers is that while they ascribe no merit to the characteristics that they outline, quite the reverse, he ascribes supreme merit to them. But the stereotype is the same. The reason that Foreman displeases Mailer (apart from his American patriotism) is that he is taciturn and methodical, and therefore not authentically "Black."

For Mailer, the authentic Black man (he always capitalizes the word "black," investing it with significance) is childishly selfish, sexually incontinent, thoughtlessly violent, and utterly spontaneous. That is what he admires and claims he would like to be himself. At the end of his life, in an interview with *The Paris Review*, Mailer was asked whether he believed in reincarnation. He said that he did, and was asked as what, then, or as whom he would like to come back. "A black athlete," he replied. Not eternal youth, but eternal adolescence was his dream.

What would Macaulay have said of the literary vogue for boxing? That the writers loved boxing, not because it was an art, but because it was savage and brutal, and they had tired of being civilized men.